

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO



**"EVERYTHING YOU COULD HOPE FOR IN A BOOK:
A MAGICAL, HISTORICAL SPY THRILLER—
THAT'S ALSO SPECTACULARLY FUNNY."**

—R. J. PALACIO, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
Wonder, *White Bird*, and *Pony*



ABOUT THE BOOK

MAX BRETZFELD DOESN'T WANT TO MOVE TO LONDON.

Leaving home is hard and Max is alone for the first time in his life. But not for long. Max is surprised to discover that he's been joined by two unexpected traveling companions, one on each shoulder, a kobold and a dybbuk named Berg and Stein.

Germany is becoming more and more dangerous for Jewish families, but Max is determined to find a way back home, and back to his parents. He has a plan to return to Berlin. It merely involves accomplishing the impossible: becoming a British spy.

A NOTE TO EDUCATORS FROM THE GUIDE WRITERS

The activities and questions in this guide are meant to provide context to *Max in the House of Spies*. As this book deals with the experience of a Jewish child during WWII escaping Nazi Germany via the Kindertransport, it contains realistic depictions of topics like fascism, antisemitism, and more issues that may be challenging for some students. We as educators believe strongly that students should be exposed to this history through age-appropriate material, like this book and the links we provide, so that they can gain a deeper understanding of what happened and why.

This guide was written by Talya Sokoll and Angie Manfredi.

TALYA SOKOLL is a school librarian right outside of Boston. They love to read and have served on a number of award committees including the Stonewall Children's & Young Adult Literature Award, the Sydney Taylor Book Award, the Morris Award, and the Rainbow Book List. Never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined that they would get to write Resource Guides for children's literature. They are the faculty advisor to the Jewish affinity group at their school and are currently pursuing a Master's of Jewish Professional Studies at Gratz College so that they can continue their lifelong journey as a student. They are passionate about Jewish history, pickles, and the daily reminder that "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it." (Pirkei Avot 2:16)

★ **"HEARTFELT."**

— *Booklist*, starred review

★ **"ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING A READER COULD WANT IN A WORLD WAR II SPY NOVEL."**

— *School Library Journal*, starred review

★ **"AN EXCITING MIXTURE OF TRIUMPHS AND PERILS."**

— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ **"RIVETING."**

— *The Horn Book*, starred review

★ **"FILLED WITH HUMOR, HOPE, AND TENACITY."**

— *Shelf Awareness*, starred review

ANGIE MANFREDI is a middle school librarian in the Southwest. She has worked in public, special, and school libraries for 17 years. She has created educator guides for Penguin Random House, Scholastic, and HarperCollins and her writing has appeared in *Romper*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *American Libraries*, and *School Library Journal*. In librarianship, her strengths include reader's advisory and programming. She has a special interest in collection development with an equity focused lense and supporting the right of all youth to see the world accurately reflected in the books they read, especially those that empower and uplift their lived experiences. You can find her online at www.fatgirlreading.com and @misskubelik.

PRE-READING

INTRODUCTION TO WWII

AGE-APPROPRIATE INFORMATION ABOUT:

World War II is a big topic in history that kids might have varied knowledge about. For a big, broad overview for middle school–age students, consider this video: [World War II: Crash Course European History #38](#). Show the video to your students and ask them to write down what they think are the most important pieces of information in the video. Have them break into small groups and research 3–5 key dates, places, and/or people, and then share with the rest of the class. Please note: This video contains a lot of information but does not go into detail specifically about the Holocaust. To provide an introduction to the Holocaust, please consider showing this video as well: [The Holocaust, Genocides, and Mass Murder of WWII: Crash Course European History #40](#).

For younger students, consider starting with this [Britannica article](#) and/or [this one](#). Ask them to highlight or underline what they think are the most important pieces of information. You can also show them [this video](#) from Learn Bright. Have them make a list of the key facts and figures to share with the rest of the class.

Some or all of the below terms might come up. Make sure to highlight the ones that don't get mentioned. Alternatively, give each student 1–2 terms or figures from the list and the resources provided. Ask them to go through the resource and create a 1–2 slide presentation explaining what it is to the rest of the class and how it connects to WWII.

- [Causes and motivations](#)
- [German Depression](#)
- [Lebensraum](#)
- [Blitzkrieg](#)
- [Battle of Britain](#)
- [Ultra](#)
- [Radar](#)
- [Winston Churchill](#)
- [Axis Powers \(Japan, Italy, and Germany\)](#)
- [Allied Powers \(Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union\)](#)
- [Kindertransport](#)
- [Oral histories](#)
- [Nicholas Winton](#)
- [Kindertransport BBC](#)

DISCUSSION OF “ISMS”

There are many different concepts that end in “ism” that are deeply connected to WWII. Click on the links to learn more about each one.

- [Fascism](#)
- [Facism Explained video by Illustrate to Educate](#)
- [Antisemitism](#)
 - [For a definition](#)
 - [Lesson plans on antisemitism](#)
- [Communism](#)
 - [Judeo-Bolshevism and Antisemitism](#)
 - [The Enabling Act](#)
- [Nazism](#)



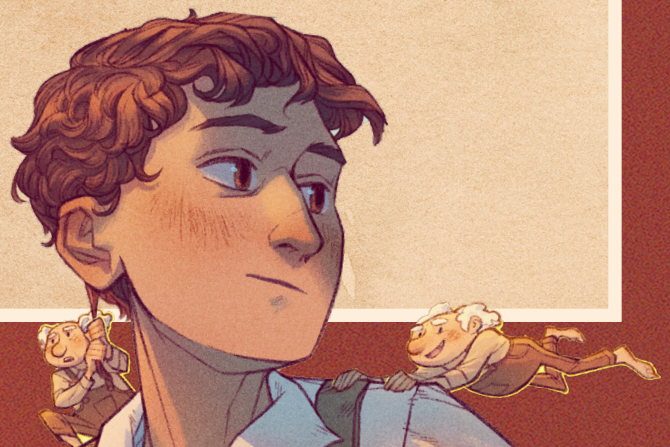
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE BOOK

- ❖ When Max first meets Berg and Stein, they say perhaps it was their “destiny” to find him and that they were “drawn” to him (p. 10). Why do you think they chose Max? How do they help Max? Stein and Berg reoccur throughout the book, especially when Max is in moments of high tension/risk/danger. How do they first appear to him? How does his relationship to them change over the course of the book? How do their goals shift? Why do you think that change happens?
- ❖ Like Max, the Montagus are Jewish. Yet when Max finds this out, he feels worse (p. 26). What about this makes Max feel more lonely or isolated? Do you think the Montagus might expect that?
- ❖ Max can’t resist showing up his racist teacher Professor Goldenshaft, even though it results in pain for him. Afterwards, he says it was “completely and totally worth it” (p. 52). What does this tell us about Max and what’s important to him?
- ❖ The moment Max finally falls in love with the Montagu family is also the moment he realizes he *must* get back to Berlin (p. 103). How are these two feelings connected?
- ❖ Uncle Ewen wonders “. . . how” in God’s name does Hitler get them all to go along with it?” (p. 106). There is no easy, single answer to this question. As a class, discuss some possible explanations and reasoning for how and why people might go along with horrible leaders. What are some reasons others will not go along, no matter what?
- ❖ What do you think about Max’s plan to get Admiral Godfrey’s attention? Is it worth the risk? What does it tell Admiral Godfrey about Max?
- ❖ Once Max arrives at Camp 020, he discovers several of the adults there have many of the same racist ideas as the Nazis. Max is confused by this. What did you think when you heard the supposed “good guys” say those things? What did you think about how Max responded?
- ❖ Uncle Ivor tells Max that a thing the British are good at is exploiting and using up resources (p. 152). This makes Max think about the stories and lies we often tell. For older readers: This is a good chance to discuss concepts of propaganda and mythmaking. For younger readers: Discuss how Max being viewed as a “resource” is harmful and part of a larger problem with not seeing people’s full humanity.
- ❖ Jean Leslie sets up quite an encounter with a kangaroo for Max, using it to teach three lessons (p. 172). Do you think this was a good way to learn? Which of these lessons do you think is the most useful?



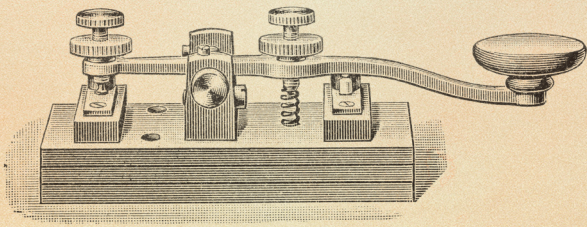
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE BOOK (CONTINUED)

- ❖ Sergeant Toby Thompson tells Max a story about a man named Uriah Butler (p. 209). This is a great chance to share more information about a historical movement and historical figure, including primary documents, with your class. [Start here.](#)
- ❖ Uncle Ewen tries to get Max to understand the difference between propaganda and information (p. 215). Are his lessons effective? How does Max reconcile Uncle Ewen's ideas with Uncle Ivor's? Who do you think is right? Why?
- ❖ What does Max's victory in poker teach the adults? Do they learn something about him that nothing else has taught them before this?
- ❖ Max is very clever and has lots of interesting and sometimes disruptive ideas. What schemes does he come up with and how do they help him or hurt him? How does his creative way of thinking support his ultimate goal of reuniting with and saving his parents?
- ❖ Max experiences a lot of antisemitism over the course of the book. What are some examples of this from his classmates when he moves to England? Why are these experiences so surprising to him? How does the intersection of his Jewish identity with his being from Germany cause tension within himself and those he interacts with? What is a time in your life when there have been competing parts of your identity? How did you handle that situation?
- ❖ At the end of the book, Max is alone, back in Germany, with no one to help him. What do you think his next steps should be? Write an epilogue where we see what happens to Max next.
- ❖ What do you think of Max's big plan to discover Chumley's name and pass his training? How does it incorporate all of Max's previous training and his skills?
- ❖ The book opens with a version of a famous quote from Albert Camus: "Between the truth and my mother, I choose my mother." Why do you think the author chose to open the book with this quote? What does it mean in the context of the rest of the text? Max promises early on that he will never betray Colonel Toby Thompson but he ultimately does. Why does he do this? How does this connect to the quote? Do you think Max is trustworthy? Do you think it matters? Why or why not?
- ❖ Under what circumstances (if ever) is it okay to break someone's trust? Think about what you might do if you were in Max's place and felt like you had to do anything to protect your parents or someone else that was close to you: How far would you go to help them? What would it be worth risking?



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

GET THE SIGNAL



Max is especially good at tinkering with radios and electronics. In fact, this is key to his success at getting recruited. Radio waves were often used to transmit codes, including Morse code. Morse code is yet another codebreaking activity you can introduce to your students. Set them up in small groups or with partners and challenge them to pass messages with Morse code.

Learn more and [find more Morse code examples](#).

([Here's another fun quick activity](#) to demonstrate how radio waves work, which can be a good introduction to radio waves.)

UNDERCOVER

Ask your whole class to describe what they think of when they think of a spy. Some guiding questions: What does a good spy look like? What qualities would a good spy have? How would a good spy act under pressure? Create a word cloud of the words associated with our conventional ideas of spies. Now take a look at some [Famous WWII Spies](#) whom you might not have expected to be spies.

CALM
COOL SPY
ESPIONAGE
GADGETS
SECRET

How does this change what you thought about spies? What things do these people have in common? What is different? What does this tell us about the work needed to be a spy and the kind of people who were spies?

After doing this, you can also have students answer some of these same questions about the book. In what ways is Max a perfect spy for the assignment in the book? How is Max a bad candidate for being a spy, regardless of the assignment?

Also helpful is the book *Surprising Spies: Unexpected Heroes of World War II* by Karen Gray Ruelle.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)



BREAK THE CODE

Codes and codebreaking were a huge part of WWII. There were so many different codebreakers and codes in this period. You can do a whole unit on this element of spycraft, focusing on what parts Max would have to learn and train in by also digging into the many elements of codes, who worked on them, and how they served the war effort.

[Watch and share this codebreaking activity starter video with Adam Gidwitz!](#)

In a way, the codebreaking and code work done during WWII has much in common with the code used to encrypt our websites and online information. [Code.org](#) has a great series of short videos explaining and introducing code for students, including one focusing on encryption (Episode 3). They come with activities and are short, engaging, and good tie-ins for discussion.

[National Geographic Kids](#) has a fun codebreaking game, which would make an excellent independent or early-finisher activity and serves as a good intro to ciphers.

Here are some resources to expand the conversations:

RESOURCES

- ❖ Code Talkers
 - ❖ [Learn about American Indian Code Talkers](#)
 - ❖ [Navajo Code Talkers](#)
- ❖ Enigma and Bletchley Park
 - ❖ [Enigma Machine Video](#)
 - ❖ [Alan Turing and Bletchley Park](#)

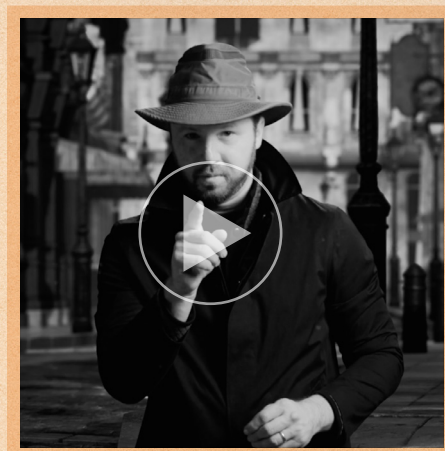
OTHER BOOKS TO PAIR

The Dark Game: True Spy Stories from Invisible Ink to CIA Moles by Paul B. Janeczko

Spies, Code Breakers and Secret Agents: A World War II Book for Kids by Carole P. Roman

Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers by Lee Francis III, Lee Francis IV, Roy Boney Jr., Arigon Starr, and Jonathan Nelson

Code Cracking for Kids: Secret Communications Throughout History, with 21 Codes and Ciphers by Jean Daigneu



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

CREATE YOUR OWN MYTHOLOGICAL CREATURE

The book tells us “the fourth most interesting thing” about Max is that he has two immortal creatures living on his shoulders, but your readers might find that very interesting! In this activity, you can research immortal creatures from folklore and myth and encourage students to create their own versions. Take this opportunity to get creative! Bring a variety of material for students to design with: colored pencils, clay, string, fabric, markers, blocks, colored paper, glue sticks, pipe cleaners, beads, anything you can dig up to give your students a chance to make something of their own.

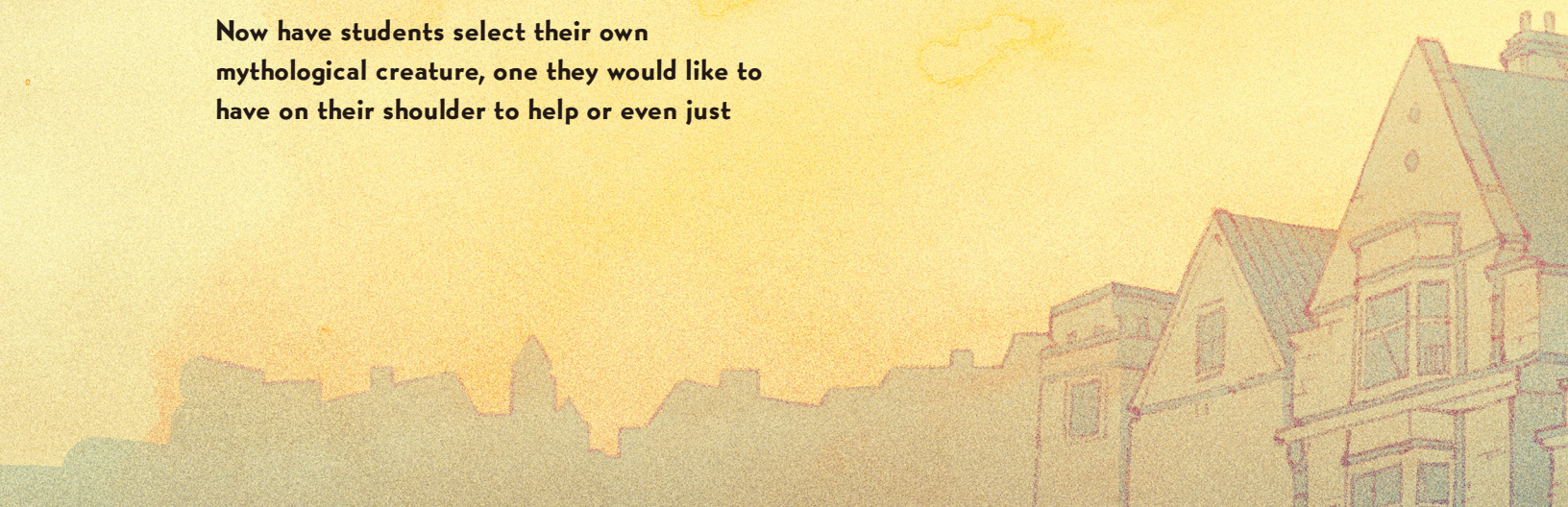
Wikipedia has an [amazing and comprehensive list of mythological creatures](#). To begin the project, choose a few types and put students in small groups. First, have them all work on the design of the same creature. What is it named? What does it do? What does it look like? Then have them compare what’s similar and what’s different in their designs.

Now have students select their own mythological creature, one they would like to have on their shoulder to help or even just

listen as Max has Berg and Stein. (You can make a short list of selections or give them a certain amount of time to choose from the Wikipedia list.) Have them design and give a name to their creature. Let them draw, sculpt, sketch, and build.

Their creatures can have things in common with the traditional descriptions but can also show their own flair and imagination. If you have especially eager students who want to completely design their own original creatures, let them do so as long as they can fully describe their own creation.

Once you have a whole gallery, find a way to put their creatures on display for other classes or even your whole school. This is a good way to not only spotlight their work but invite students into the conversations about the book as a whole.



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

FOLLOW THEIR JOURNEYS

Much of Max's story is about the journey he takes, from Berlin to England and then back again. Students may not be as familiar with the locations and distances in the book, or the size and scope of them. Understanding this can give them a larger understanding of Max's emotions and the stakes. This is a good chance to explore the Kindertransport and the journey of refugees during WWII. This is another activity that can involve maximizing the use of primary sources.

The Weiner Holocaust Library has created an [interactive Refugee Map](#), which has a subsection specifically on the Kindertransport, involving maps as well as first person testimony from refugees. Divide your students into groups and assign each of them one of the survivors on the Kindertransport page. Encourage them to explore the primary source documents for each person. Depending on the age of your students and how intensive you want to make this lesson,

you can require each group to briefly present on their person's journey and life, using the primary sources as reference. If you have a smartboard in your classroom, you can explore [this](#) as a whole class, which gives a great broad view of Europe and the refugee situation at the time.

The British National Archives also has a full page on the Kindertransport, including a [download of images and transcripts](#) for use in the classroom.

[Teaching with Testimony](#) is another site that has lesson plans and primary sources that can encourage cross-curricular collaboration and study as well as tie in directly with Max's story. [The Willesden Project](#) specifically looks at the Kindertransport and has a wealth of resources.



FURTHER READING

If you liked Max, read:

The Good War
by Todd Strasser

The Bletchley Riddle
by Ruta Sepetys and
Steve Sheinkin

*White Bird: A Wonder
Story* by R. J. Palacio

The Night Diary
by Veera Hiranandani

Island of Spies
by Sheila Turnage

Aviva vs. the Dybbuk
by Mari Lowe

*We Had To Be Brave:
Escaping the Nazis on the
Kindertransport*
by Deborah Hopkinson

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



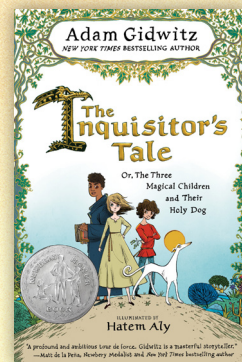
Bestselling author **ADAM GIDWITZ** was a teacher for eight years. He told countless stories to his students, who then demanded he write his first book, *A Tale Dark & Grimm*. Adam has since written two companion novels, *In a Glass Grimmly* and *The Grimm Conclusion*. He is also the author of *The Inquisitor's Tale*, which won the Newbery Honor, and the Unicorn Rescue Society series. Adam still tells creepy, funny fairy tales live to kids on his podcast *Grimm, Grimmer, Grimest*—and at schools around the world. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, daughter, and dog, Lucy Goosey.

DON'T MISS THESE BOOKS BY ADAM GIDWITZ

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