

“A richly layered, complex historical novel that poses important questions and provides a chilling lens into a dark period of history.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author **RUTA SEPETYS**

BEALINMERS

VESPER STAMPER

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

RHTeachersLibrarians.com



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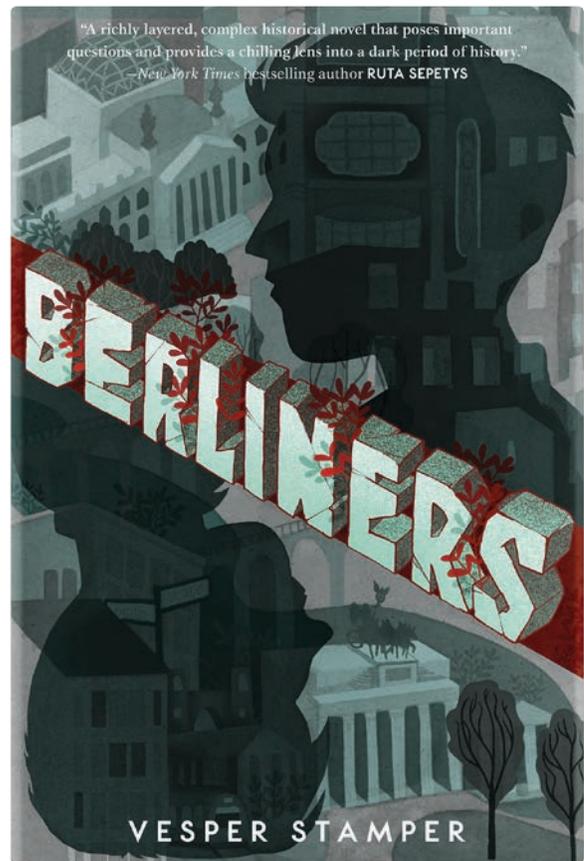
ABOUT THE BOOK

A riveting story about the rivalry between two brothers living on opposite sides of the Berlin Wall during its construction in the 1960s, and how their complicated legacy and dreams of greatness will determine their ultimate fate.

A city divided. A family fractured. Two brothers caught between past and present.

Berlin, 1961. Rudi Möser-Fleischmann is an aspiring photographer who dreams of greatness, but he can't hold a candle to his talented, charismatic twin brother Peter, an ambitious actor. With the sudden divorce of their parents, the brothers find themselves living in different sectors of a divided Berlin, the postwar partition strangely mirroring their broken family. But one night, as the city sleeps, the Berlin Wall is hurriedly built, dividing society further, and Rudi and Peter are forced to choose between playing by the rules and taking their dreams underground. That is, until the truth about their family history and the growing cracks in their relationship threaten to split them apart for good.

From National Book Award nominee and critically acclaimed author-illustrator Vesper Stamper comes a stark look at how resentment and denial can strain the bonds of brotherhood to the breaking point.



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Themes: Historical Fiction/Twentieth Century, Coming of Age, Family & Relationships, Art, Music & Theater, Betrayal

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: Ben Stamper

Born in Germany and raised in New York City, **Vesper Stamper** writes and illustrates novels that tell, through words and pictures, stories of history's rhymes. Her debut illustrated YA novel, *What the Night Sings*, about two teens emerging from the Holocaust, was a National Book Award nominee, National Jewish Book Award finalist, and Sydney Taylor Book Award winner. Vesper lives with her husband, filmmaker Ben Stamper, and her two teenagers in the Northeast. Follow her on Instagram and Facebook at @vesperillustration, and learn more at vesperillustration.com.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

First Impressions

Break into groups and discuss first impressions of *Berliners*. Ask students to share their first impressions of the book using these questions.

- What do you glean from the title and cover art?
- What do you learn about the story from the blurb?
- Read the author's dedication. Can any conclusions be drawn about the author from the dedication?
- Review the pages that follow the author's dedication. What has been included? Why? How do you think this information will impact the story and your understanding of it?
- Based on this assessment, what is the book going to be about? How do you know?
- Discuss prior knowledge of the setting of the story. What do students expect the characters to be confronted with? What themes should they expect to see?

Brainstorming

Moderate a brainstorming session about the following questions.

- In the foreword of *Berliners*, readers are offered this quote by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn from *The Gulag Archipelago*, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts." Consider Solzhenitsyn's statement. What does it mean to you? Predict how it might relate to the novel you are about to experience.
- Based on what you know about history, what are some of the specific ways people respond in times of great moral crisis?
- How important are family and interpersonal relationships in helping us to overcome adverse events?

WHILE READING:

WRITING PROMPTS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions can be used as writing prompts or for discussion and reflection.



- In the foreword, the author lists these two German words: *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, meaning confronting or reckoning with the past, and *betriebsblindheit*, meaning selective blindness. Discuss why Stamper might have chosen to include and highlight these words and their definitions?
- As the novel opens, readers meet a young Rudolf Möser-Fleischmann. Reflect on his actions toward Gerta and her father. How would you describe him? Predict how his choices will continue to impact him and his family throughout their lifetime.
- After arguing with his wife when she presses him to allow his sons to join the Thälmann Young Pioneers, Rudolf tells her, "There's just something about kids and politics that doesn't mix, Ilse. I don't want to see my sons in government uniforms, making salutes. No matter what it stands for." (p. 56) Why does Rudolf

resist their participation? How is this related to what we know about him during the war?

- Peter tells Rudi, "You can't wait around for life to happen. . . . You have to reach into the air and grab it before it's gone." (p. 56) Consider this advice. What does this tell us about the differences between Peter and Rudi? Beyond being twins, how are they similar? How does their understanding of their realities capture the differences in their core belief systems?
- In your opinion, what does Stamper's art add to her story? Which illustrations did you find most powerful and why?
- Compare how Rudolf and Ilse deal with the consequences of choices they made in the past.
- Describe Oma. What makes her such a formidable person? How does her relationship with Charles help you better understand who she is?
- Describe the parent/child relationships in *Berliners*. To what extent are the relationships of these characters shaped by the world around them?

To what extent do their relationships shape that world? Consider Rudolf's choice to take Rudi with him to the Western sector rather than Peter. What is his motivation to do so, and do you think it's the correct choice? Why or why not?

- Discuss the role of music in *Berliners* and how it connects characters to one another. In what ways is music essential to Rudolf's story? Are there other characters that are impacted in a similar fashion?
- After learning more about the government's campaign of deception, Peter tells Renate, "I suspected that things weren't what they seemed. Now that I know, I can never unknow." (p. 173) In what ways is this a turning point for Peter? Do you feel he made the right choice? Explain your rationale.
- While listening to him making excuses and claiming to have had no role in the war, Charles tells Rudolf, "You know, Rudolf, I struggle with you. I like you and all, but I suggest you dig deep and start reckoning with the past." (pp. 299–300) How is Charles able to see what Rudolf doesn't or isn't willing to acknowledge?
- What role does Kabarett Zusammen, the secret open stage for creatives, play for people like Peter and Renate? How does this place become a symbol of resistance?
- Peter tells his brother, "I feel like I'm made to do something, something big and important. . . . I don't want to give up my soul just to fit into the machine, to be some invisible gear in a tangle of other gears." Rudi responds, "But you have to be part of *something*, Peter." (p. 178) How are these statements indicative of who each brother is as an individual? Why is belonging at all costs so important to Rudi? How does this ultimately ruin Rudi's relationship with Angelika?
- What are the character traits that allow the Peter and his girlfriend Renate to persevere? How are they similar to each other? In what ways are they different? Which character traits do you admire most in each of them?
- As Peter struggles with the reality of who his mother is, Oma tells him, "No, Peter, you can't blame her. She is not you, and you are more than a mere extension of her. What you must do is find compassion for her. Not only as your mother, but as a woman who is sick and doing the best with the little she has. That is what grown-ups do: forgive, learn and move into

their own future." (p. 203) Why is Oma's statement so generous and insightful? Do you believe Ilse is deserving of her son's forgiveness?

- Given what Charles has experienced as a Black American, both at home and abroad, how does his past and his life as a soldier influence his outlook and understanding?
- Oma tells Charles and Rudi, "I have been through two world wars, the Spanish Flu, a depression, a king, four occupying armies and two dictators. And I'm sorry to say this, I know she's your mother, Rudi—I even survived all these years with Ilse. There's not much I haven't lived through. I'm resilient. I can figure out how to live in any circumstances. But I felt the straitjacket tightening." (p. 250) After defecting and leaving everything behind, why does Oma's declaration to "fight for her own peace" seem so profound? What can be gleaned from this lesson?
- After Peter bombs during his first stand-up routine using unoriginal and "safe" material, Renate tells him, "A comedian's only job is to tell the truth." (p. 216) Do you agree? In what ways should art always be true? Given what you know about his life up to this point, why is failing for the first time so difficult for Peter? What does he learn from this experience, and how does it make him more willing to speak his truths?
- Peter declares, "We always pay for the stupidity of adults." (p. 243) Is his assessment fair? Why or why not?
- After finding his father's Nazi armband, Rudi finds Rudolf slumped over in the bathroom, where he has attempted to slash his wrists. Though he had previously kept this part of his past hidden, he let go of his earlier sins. Why? In what ways do we see him try to atone for his past?
- What does Rudi discover by developing film from his parents' past? Why is he so traumatized by learning that his mother was also affiliated with the Nazis in her youth? Are there ways in which his strong reaction is ironic?



- Uncle Martin tells Rudi, “Rudi, the Wall is called the Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier. Why do you think that is? It’s because the fascists are on the *other* side. We’re not trapped. We’re containing them. . . . The fight for peace is hard, and it takes sacrifice. And you’re part of that, Rudi.” (pp. 348–349) How does this speech reinforce Rudi’s developing ideology? In your opinion, what makes Uncle Martin such a deplorable character? Why is Charles’s recognition of Martin so important? Does it feel like justice will finally be served?

- What’s the significance of the Möser-Fleischmann family watching the Eichmann trial? How do each of them react to Eichmann’s rationales for his behavior and the consequences of his actions?
- Consider Peter’s final choice at the closing of the novel. What’s the significance of it? Do you believe it to be the right choice? How and why does Rudi’s bearing witness to Peter’s actions seem important?



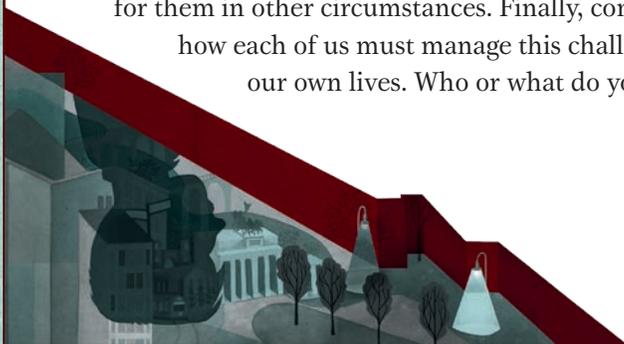
HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- In the novel, readers learn that while post-World War II Berlin originally had four sectors belonging to the Allies, the American and Russian sectors are described as the ones “that matter.” Using the library and vetted internet resources, research the division of Berlin, focusing on the following questions:
 - What were the agreements made at the Potsdam Conference that led to the partition of Germany and Berlin? Which agreements were ultimately not followed?
 - When was Berlin sectored off?
 - Why did the French and British governments give up their sectors?
 - What motivated the German Democratic Republic to build the wall and make the division of sectors more controlled?

Compare what you’ve learned with a classmate.

- Acts of resistance can take many forms. Using the examples highlighted in *Berliners*, learn more about acts of resistance. What are they? What forms do they most often take? Who or what is most commonly resisted? What does this tell you about human nature? Reflect on and analyze how the characters in *Berliners* resist. Think about how their resistance affects their interpersonal relationships, how it causes them to change and adapt as the story unfolds, and how things might have been different for them in other circumstances. Finally, consider how each of us must manage this challenge in our own lives. Who or what do you resist?

- Barriers like the Berlin Wall often inspire creative efforts to overcome. Using vetted resources like the Checkpoint Charlie exhibition at the Mauermuseum (mauermuseum.de/en/exhibition) to research escape attempts and learn more about the great lengths individuals went to to reach the other side of the wall.
- Stamper gives us the opportunity to consider the experiences of young people in a major historical event. Research at least one of the below to learn more about the roles that young people have played through the course of history.
 - Youth in Occupied Berlin
 - Youth in resistance movements
 - Affiliated political youth groups
 - Youth in occupied territories
- In *Berliners*, Peter tells his brother, “I’m a comedian because I can’t escape the darkness, Rudi. But you—you can’t escape your utopia. Your fantasy thinking.” Consider what you’ve learned throughout the novel, and write a character analysis of the brothers.
- Food plays an important role in *Berliners*. Using textual evidence from the novel as support, write a brief journal entry about the ways characters relate to each and connect through food or about the effect that creating food has on them.
- Stamper details the role music plays in the lives of Rudi, Peter, Rudolf, and Charles. Examine and explore the role of music throughout the book, being sure to focus on how music ties characters to each other and how their individual musical preferences help readers better understand them. To what degree does music connect, save, curse, and bind each of them to one another and to their world at large?



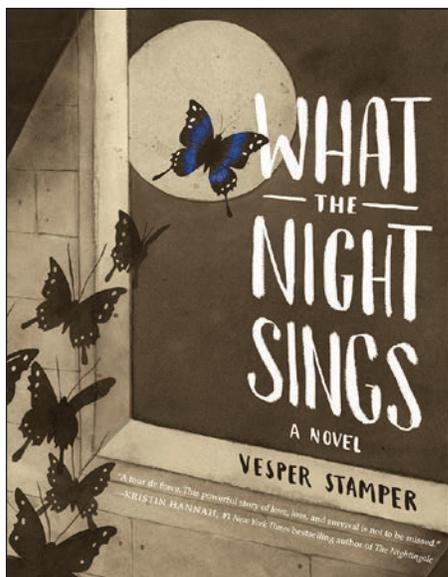
- To what extent are our lives a product of the times we live in? For young people, what are the circumstances of history and daily life that are most challenging to endure? How do they do it? Think about these questions in relation to *Berliners* and your own life. Write at least two pages in response.
- Throughout *Berliners*, Stamper’s illustrations offer readers insight into the events of the novel.
 - In your opinion, what does Stamper’s art add to the story?
 - What do you believe would be lost if the art weren’t included?

- How does the art tell a story the text doesn’t?
- Are there any scenes that weren’t illustrated that you wish were?



Upon completion of the novel, have students either discuss how Stamper’s art impacts the story using the above prompts or write an essay evaluating the role the art plays in the storytelling.

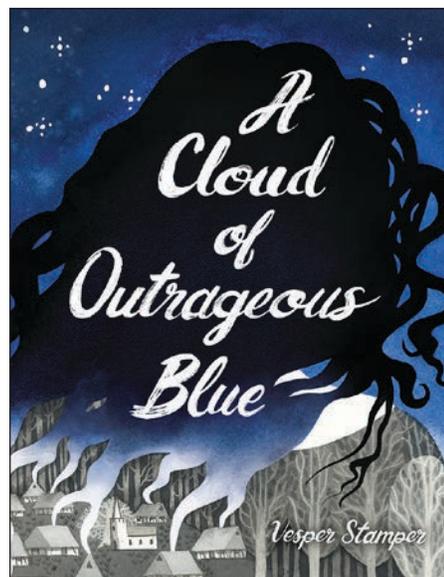
ALSO BY VESPER STAMPER



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EL: 978-1-5247-0040-9

A Morris Award Finalist
Longlisted for the National Book Award

- ★ *Kirkus Reviews*
- ★ *Publishers Weekly*
- ★ *School Library Journal*



HC: 978-1-5247-0041-6
GLB: 978-1-5247-0042-3
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★ “A feast for fans of historical fiction with a magic twist.”
—*Booklist*, starred review

This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock, an associate professor of library science at Sam Houston State University. She specializes in children’s and young adult literature. Dr. Brock was selected by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a national teaching fellow and is a member of a national corps of educators who serve as the core of the museum’s efforts to ensure quality Holocaust education in secondary schools.



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