

Discussion Guide

for *My Brother's Shadow*

by **Monika Schröder**

Monika Schröder
Children's Author

About the Book

As World War I draws to a close in 1918, German citizens are starving and suffering under a repressive regime. Sixteen-year-old Moritz is torn. His father died in the war and his older brother still risks his life in the trenches, but his mother does not support the patriotic cause and attends subversive socialist meetings. While his mother participates in the revolution to sweep away the monarchy, Moritz falls in love with a Jewish girl who is also a socialist. When Moritz's brother returns home a bitter, maimed war veteran, ready to blame Germany's defeat on everything but the old order, Moritz must choose between his allegiance to his dangerously radicalized brother and those who usher in the new democracy.

Praise

"A good choice for sharing across the curriculum, this is a novel readers will want to discuss."

Booklist

"In this nuanced and realistic work of historical fiction, Schröder (*Saraswati's Way*) immerses readers in her setting with meticulous details and dynamic characters that contribute to a palpable sense of tension. Moritz's intimate narration captures the conflicts, divided loyalties, and everyday horrors of the period." -**Publishers Weekly**

"The sorrow and the pity of World War I haunt every page of this unsparing coming-of-age story set in Berlin during the war's final days. ... This is a memorable and instructive novel."

Russell Freedman, Newbery-award winning author of *The War to End All Wars: World War I*



Pre-Reading Activities

There are names and terms in the story with which readers are unlikely to be familiar. Have students use print and electronic resources to research the following: abdication, armistice, Bolshevik, Hugo Haase, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Reichstag, Social Democratic Party, Spartacus Group, and Weimar Republic.

Ask students what facts they know about World War I. Fill in whatever gaps they have in their knowledge in order to have a basic understanding of the who, when, where, why, and how of the conflict.

Locate maps of Europe before and after the war and compare and contrast them with contemporary maps of the continent.



Discussion Questions

How has the British blockade of German harbors affected civilians like Moritz and his family?

What has become of Moritz's father? Where is his brother Hans?

Why does Moritz want to win the patriotic poem contest?

How did the war affect Moritz's career plans?

What secret does Moritz keep from Herr Goldmann?

How does Moritz's view of the war contrast with those of his mother and Hedwig?

How does Moritz feel about stealing food with Robert and Otto?

What is Moritz's response when Herr Goldmann says he believes Germany will lose the war? Do you think it's cowardly or unpatriotic for Herr Goldmann to speak that way? Why do you think it's so difficult for Moritz to accept the possibility of Germany's defeat?

What happened to Herr Goldmann's brother in the war? What might be a contemporary diagnosis for the "nerve condition" doctors say Herr Goldmann's brother has?

Why is Moritz's mother accused of treason? Do you think her actions are treasonous?

Do you agree with Moritz when he tells his mother she is "betraying Hans and Papa by not believing in our victory"? (p. 45)

What do Moritz, Otto, and Robert find when they break into the villa? What does Otto observe about rich people?

How does what Moritz sees on the food line and at the Food Administration office affect his view of the war?

What is Moritz's response to Herr Goldmann's comment that he should be proud of his mother?

What is the reaction of Moritz's mother and aunt to his buying back the sewing machine? What do their reactions make Moritz realize about himself?

On the train to Metz when Moritz and Rebecca are talking about Karl May's books, Moritz says he doesn't "want to read anything right now that takes place in America." (p. 92) Why does he immediately regret saying that to Rebecca?

In what condition does Moritz find Hans at the army hospital?

What do Otto and Robert want Moritz to do for them? Why does Moritz choose not to help them?

Why does Moritz warn Rebecca about Otto's threat? How is this an example of how he has changed?

Why is Moritz embarrassed at what Herr Goldmann says about his mother?

How is Hans's homecoming different from how Moritz imagined it would be?

Who does Hans say are responsible for the downfall of Germany?

Why does Hans accuse Moritz of betraying him?

What does Hans say about the conditions of the armistice? Do you agree with him?

What prompts Moritz's outburst at Hans?

What does Moritz see Hans doing in the street with the major he met at the hospital?

When Moritz sees Hans plastering posters, why do you think he chooses not to acknowledge him?

What do you think will become of Moritz and Rebecca? What do you think will become of Hans?

What are some examples in the story of how the German government was oppressive to its citizens?

There are several discussions of what constitutes patriotism and treason in the story. Do you think it's unpatriotic to not support a war your country is fighting? What do you think are actions a person would have to do to be considered treasonous to his or her country?

Discuss the meaning of the book's title.

Post-Reading Activities

In the story, mention is made of two weapons never before used in warfare: flame throwers and tanks. The First World War is known for the first use of barbed wire and many new weapons, including airplanes, dirigibles, long range artillery, grenades, machine guns, and poison gas. In pairs or small groups, use online and print resources to research and report who invented these weapons, how they were developed, and how they were used in World War I.

Many historians believe the harsh terms against Germany in the Treaty of Versailles directly led to the rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II. In pairs or small groups, have students research what conditions Germany had to meet in the treaty and decide whether or not they were unfair.

Before becoming dictator of Germany in 1933, Adolf Hitler served in the German Army during World War I. Ask readers to research what Hitler did in the war and what his reaction was to signing of the Treaty of Versailles. An excellent source on Hitler's life is James Cross Giblin's *The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler* (Clarion, 2002).

When Hans returns home, he makes many disparaging remarks about Jews. Aunt Martha remarks that "the Jews are now scapegoats for everything." (p. 183) In pairs or small groups, have students research how Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party used anti-Semitism in their rise to power and how it eventually led to the Holocaust during World War II.



The Great War inspired writers of all generations and classes, most notably among combatants. Particularly memorable is the poetry written by soldiers who served in the war. John McCrae's *In Flanders Fields* is perhaps the best known example of World War I poetry, but other poets such as Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon are notable. World War I poetry is included in many literature anthologies. Two good anthologies are *The Penguin Book of World War I Poetry* and *First World War Poems* (Faber & Faber). Another anthology that includes World War I poetry is Neil Philip's *War and the Pity of War* (Clarion, 1998).

Online sources of World War I poems include <http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/> and <http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/>. Ask readers to research these sources, select a poem that resonates with them, and share it with the group.

Web Sites on World War I

First World War.com: *A Multimedia History of World War I*
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/>

World War I
<http://www.teacheroz.com/wwi.htm>

World War I Document Archive
<http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/>

Recommended Further Reading on World War I



About the Author

Monika Schröder grew up in Germany and has worked as an elementary school teacher and librarian in American international schools in Egypt, Oman, Chile, and India. She now lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina with her husband and their dog, Frank.

My Brother's Shadow is her third novel.

Also by Monika Schröder:

Saraswati's Way. Farrar Straus, Giroux, 2010.

The Dog in the Wood. Front Street, 2009.

My Brother's Shadow

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ages 12 and up

This guide was created by Edward T. Sullivan, a librarian and author who has written many articles about and reviews of children's and young adult books. Visit his web site at www.sully-writer.com



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Nonfiction

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