

The Night War

AUTHOR

KIMBERLY BRUBAKER BRADLEY

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Lower Secondary
(Violence)



SYNOPSIS

'We don't choose how we feel, but we choose how we act. Choose courage.'

In 1942, much of France is occupied by the Nazis. Twelve-year-old Miri is Jewish, so she is not safe. Separated from her parents, she rescues her neighbours' two-year-old daughter Nora and escapes to a village, where she is given a new name and pretends to be Catholic to escape Nazi capture. Miri is at first wary of the convent school nuns, but soon learns that there is much more than meets the eye to these knowledgeable women. One night she is asked to undertake a terrifying task that could allow her to escape. But what about Nora? The person Miri meets that night could save her life. And the person Miri becomes that night could save the lives of many more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Brubaker Bradley is the author of eighteen previous books, including *Fighting Words* and, the Newbery Honor winners, *The War That Saved My Life* and *The War I Finally Won*.

The mother of two grown-up children, she lives with her husband on a fifty-two-acre horse farm in Tennessee, with three horses, two dogs and too many cats.

STUDY NOTES

BEFORE READING

- Research what happened on Kristallnacht in Germany, and discuss why people might still be afraid years later.
- Discuss the importance of historical novels. Why do we keep revisiting particular moments in history?
- Read aloud the Author's Note at the end of the novel and discuss your expectations of 'truth' in the story.

WHILE READING

- Miri believes that it was her fault the Nazis took Monsieur Rosenbaum. Is this true? Why/why not? How does this guilt shape Miri's actions throughout the novel?
- What happened in the summer of 1940? Why is there such a shortage of food in France? Where is the food going?
- What is Miri afraid of? Does this change throughout the book?
- What does Miri's imagined world look like? What would need to change in order for this world to become a reality?
- What are some of the things Miri misses about her old life?
- What does the red geranium represent to Miri? Discuss the way that plants connect Miri to Catherine.

- What is Miri's 'angel song'? What is its significance in the novel?
- Sister Felicité calls ignorance 'a kind of prejudice' (p 42). Do you agree? How did her own ignorance prevent her from acting prior to helping Miri?
- What are some of the misconceptions that Jacqueline has regarding Jewish people? Where did she get these ideas from?
- What do the students call Sister Annuciata? How do their perceptions of her prevent them from seeing her as she really is?
- Catherine tells Miri that everything is about money and power. How does the novel prove or disprove this statement?

AFTER READING

Character

- Beatrice asks Jacqueline, 'Who taught [her] to hate Jews' (p 239). What do you think the answer is? What do you think Jacqueline might have been thinking when she sent the police in the wrong direction?
- When she is saying goodbye to Miri, Catherine says 'perhaps I would choose differently now' (p 251). What is she referring to here? How have Miri's actions influenced the way that Catherine sees the world?

Style and Structure

- In her Author's Note, Kimberly Brubaker Bradley writes 'the first question everyone asks is, what parts of this story are true?' (p 274). Writers of historical fiction try to convey an historical and narrative 'truth' using both historical detail and fictional elements (such as character, setting and dialogue). Answer the following questions in relation to this idea:
 - What kind of details do you expect to be historically accurate in this kind of novel?
 - What kind of freedoms can a writer of historical fiction take?
 - In this novel, which parts are true?
 - Why do you think the author has chosen to give this book a happy ending when, as she says, so many people didn't have one?
 - What kind of research might writers of historical fiction need to do?
 - Where can you see the evidence of that research in this novel?
 - Catherine tells Miri that 'history is usually written by the winning side' (p 214). What does she mean? Do you think she is right?

Themes

Choice

- Monsieur Thireau tells Miri that he has 'no choice' (p 20). What other choices does he have? What might be consequences of one of these choices?
- Miri grapples with many choices throughout the book. Early on, as she hides in Sister Felicité's room in the convent with Nora, she struggles to decide whether to stay or go. What factors influence her decision? Do you think she made the right choice?
- Miri tells Sister Felicité that the nuns 'choose not to believe' the violence being inflicted on the Jewish people. Is ignorance a kind of choice? Who else chooses ignorance in the novel? Why do you think this is? What other contemporary examples can you think of where people choose to look away?
- Miri's Papa tells her that, 'We don't choose how we feel, but we choose how we act. Choose courage' (p 16). Why does he tell her this, and what does he mean? Describe some of the ways that Miri goes on to choose courage throughout the novel?

Identity

- Why does Sister Felicité call Miri 'Marie'? What are some of the things that Miri does to ensure that she holds onto her identity as more and more people come to know her under this new name?
- Sara Rosenbaum tells Miri that she will remember and tell Nora the details of who she is. Why is this so important to Sara?
 - Sara says to Miri, 'You will remember who you really are' (p 26). What makes us who we 'really are'?

- Catherine tells Miri that she and her daughters were 'currency' (p 215). In her own time, she is perceived only through her value to others. Later, she is the subject of Beatrice's 'scandalous' stories. How does the novel encourage us to think of Catherine's identity outside of this?

Bravery

- Sara asks Miri if she's brave enough to take Nora with her. What makes her decide she is?
- Bravery can look different for different people. For Miri, being brave is running away with Nora, and helping people cross the border into Vichy, France. But for Jacqueline, bravery is pointing the police in the wrong direction. How do other characters in the book demonstrate their bravery?
- We often assume that bravery is about power and force, but comparing Miri to the soldiers, who would you say is braver, and why? What does this make you think about bravery, and what it really means to be brave?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

- Miri wonders how she could choose courage, 'when I didn't know which direction it ran' (p 48). Come up with a response to Miri's thought here. What would you tell her?
- Unlike so many, Miri's story has a (mostly) happy ending. Write a scene set somewhere between the moment she escapes through the castle, and the moment she returns to sing her angel song to Catherine.
- What moment in history inspires you? What story would you tell if you were to write one? What research would you need to do?
- Draw a map of Miri's journey in the novel. How far does she travel? What do the places she describes look like today?
- Writing historical fiction encourages us to look at the things we think we know with fresh eyes. Apply this technique to someone you know. Interview them about their past, and write your interview as if it were a short story. Remember what Beatrice says: 'It just sounds interesting because I tell it like a story.' (p 202). Use what you know about storytelling to tell your subject's story.