

# MY BROTHER'S SECRET BY DAN SMITH

## SYNOPSIS

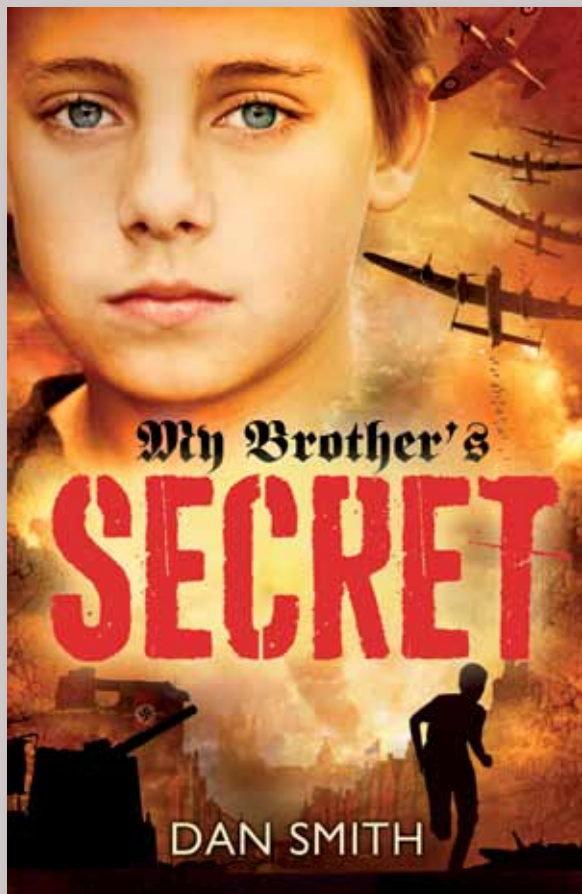
Germany, 1941. 12-year-old Karl Friedmann is looking forward to joining the Hitler Youth, like all boys his age.

But when his father is killed fighting in the war, his rebellious older brother Stefan shows him things that leave his faith in the Führer shaken. Who is the real enemy? What is the meaning of the flower sewn inside his brother's jacket? Karl soon finds out, as he becomes involved in a dangerous rebellion.


The 'Edelweiss Pirates', under suspicion from the Gestapo Kriminalinspektor Gerhard Wolff, attempt to undermine Nazi propaganda by spreading a different message: 'Hitler is killing your fathers'. As he becomes aware of the punishments meted out to those who fail to adhere to the Nazi ideal, Karl realises he must help the Pirates; particularly after his own mother is beaten by Wolff and his brother is abducted. Together with his new friend, Lisa, Karl resolves to spread the Pirates' message and free his brother.


## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*Brothers often fight, and feel that parents just don't understand or take unfair sides. But when taking sides becomes a matter of life and death, then the brothers in Dan Smith's war-time Germany have to make some tough decisions together. Based on real Second World War events, this brilliant story gives a feeling of what life was like when children*



[www.doublecluck.com](http://www.doublecluck.com)

 Chicken House UK

 @Chickenhsebooks



*were faced with real evil and conflict. Fighting for our freedom – who knows if it may be something we have to choose again one day!*

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## **AUTHOR BACKGROUND**

Growing up, Dan Smith led three lives. In one he survived the day-to-day humdrum of boarding school, while in another he travelled the world, finding adventure in the padi fields of Asia and the jungles of Brazil. But the third life he lived was in a world of his own, making up stories ... Which is where some people say he still lives most of the time.

Dan has lived in many places that inspire his writing – including Sierra Leone, Sumatra, Northern and central Brazil. He's even lived in Spain and in the Soviet Union.

Past jobs have varied from dishwasher extraordinaire (or, perhaps, just ordinaire) and social security fraud (detecting it, not committing it), to working on giant-sized Christmas decorations and a fistful of mundane office jobs, but throughout all of those things, he's always kept writing.

Now settled in Newcastle with his wife and two children, Dan writes books to share with both adults and children.

## **AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*“Imagine if everything you learned at school turned out to be lies. Would you then dare to stand up for what you believe is right? Even if it meant you might never see your family again? I'm not sure I'd be brave enough for that, but in Nazi Germany, some people were. I wrote this story to remind us of their courage.”* **DAN SMITH, AUTHOR**



# THEMES

- War
- Friendship
- Loyalty
- Trust
- Propaganda
- Bullying

# WRITING STYLE

*My Brother's Secret* is an exciting historical adventure story, set against the backdrop of the Second World War. The writing is richly descriptive and reflective, and depicts the historical and cultural environment of Nazi Germany in the early 1940's. There is a strong emphasis on the development of friendships and trust, and the drama is played out at a domestic level, with the relationships between family, friends and neighbours forming a significant part of the novel. The main characters face moral dilemmas and intimidation, and there is particular focus on the struggle to perceive the truth and 'do the right thing'. 43 chapters, 309 pages, age 10+.

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## *1: Toeing the Party Line*

From what we learn about Nazi Germany in *My Brother's Secret*, it is clear that it was very difficult for people to express any views or feelings that were out of step with the regime. While we discover Stefan, and later Karl, hold ideas that are opposed to those of the Führer, we are made aware that it would be very dangerous for either of them to express these views. What seems to keep many people 'in line' is a deep-seated fear about what might happen to them if they are suspected of thinking or acting in a way that is not in keeping with the



Nazi ideal. In order to reinforce the way in which control is maintained through an unquestioning adherence to a set of strict rules, pupils could be faced with similar restrictions on their liberty. A set of rules could be drawn up that pupils must obey for a given period of time (perhaps one week at school). These rules need not be overly limiting, but they should force pupils to become aware of what they do or say, and whether or not this is in keeping with the 'rules' (obviously, this would be in addition to, and not at the expense of, the established school rules). For example, 'pupils must carry a copy of the dictionary at all times', 'all pupils must stand aside when a teacher passes', 'all pupils must be able to recite the three class nursery rhymes on demand' etc. These physical rules could also be added to with more general expectations in terms of pupils' attitude and demeanor. Where Hitler asked for 'a brutal, domineering, fearless, cruel youth', pupils might be expected to 'strive to be the first to finish set work', or 'show total concentration throughout the school day'. Furthermore, it would be interesting to impose some ideological 'givens' that pupils must respect, such as 'Justin Bieber is the greatest singer of all time', or 'Left-handed people have superior intellects'. This task should not be overly arduous or taken too seriously. It should really be done with a sense of fun! The onus is for pupils to experience what it might be like to have to live and work in a very restrictive environment. Throughout the time this activity is taking place pupils could also be encouraged to pass on information about their fellow pupils - those that break the new rules, or appear to eschew the new class ideology - by writing their names and their contraventions on pieces of paper and anonymously posting them in a collection box. This would, to some extent, help recreate the sense of fear that would have existed in Nazi Germany, and these contraventions could be revealed to the class at the end of the given time period. Following this, it might be enlightening for pupils to write about their experiences; how they coped with the rules imposed upon them, and how it made them feel about themselves and those around them. Finally, the class might consider what living in restricted ways indefinitely (as those in Nazi Germany would have done) might have on their happiness and relationships with other people.

## ***2: That's What I Heard***

When Karl and Lisa find themselves queuing up outside Herr Finkel's shop, they cannot help overhearing some of the conversations going on around them. On page 89, they overhear Frau Oster talking to her friend about



the lack of provisions in Germany and how they feel sure Hitler will win the war for Germany soon. After a while the two women move away and Karl is no longer able to follow their conversation. However, this short excerpt gives us an insight into what was happening in Germany at the time, and who was in charge (Hitler). It is often surprising how much information we can pick up through a short piece of dialogue. Using this passage of the novel as an example, pupils could be tasked with writing pieces of overhead dialogue between two or more people that reveal something about the time and setting of the piece. Pupils could research different historical periods, or different cultures, and devise a short script that gives clues as to the location and subject matter. These short scenes could be acted out, with other pupils being tasked with guessing where and when the piece is set, and what the people in conversation are talking about. This task could even be focussed solely on the Second World War, with pupils writing scenes that involve notable historical figures, or scenes that reveal the situation in different parts of the world at that time.

### ***3: Leaflet Drop***

In *My Brother's Secret*, the 'Edelweiss Pirates' attempt to subvert Nazi doctrine by distributing leaflets that resemble Nazi propaganda; but leaflets that put forward a very different message. For pupils that are unaware of the forms of propaganda prevalent in the Second World War, the novel provides an excellent opportunity to explore this phenomenon. Perhaps starting with the numerous examples on the internet, pupils could discuss how these posters and leaflets make us view the subject of the propaganda, and what it is that makes us hate one particular character (or type of character) and love another. Pupils could take one of these images and attempt to subvert it – in a similar way to the Edelweiss Pirates – by using similar imagery to tell a different story about the war. These could be directed at German or Allied audiences, and could target specific political figures (such as Hitler), or focus on picking holes in the argument for war in general.

### ***4: On the Run***

In the chapter 'Chase' (page 193), Karl, Stefan and Jana desperately try to escape from the boys of the Hitler



Youth. The first part of the chapter concentrates on the chase itself, with Karl describing in detail how he feels, both mentally and physically as he is pursued. At one point he explains, 'my chest was tight now, my breathing coming harder and harder. My legs started to tire. My heart was filled with a thousand needles, as if it would explode inside me' (page 194). This is a very comprehensive account of the actual experience of running until it actually hurts. Using this chapter as inspiration, pupils could be tasked with documenting their physical experience – as well as their mental experience – during a game of tag (or something similar). In order to ensure pupils have the best chance of realistically capturing their thoughts and feelings when involved in these types of running game, they could be encouraged to write about how they feel during pauses in the game. This could be in the form of bullet-pointed notes, but they must be of adequate detail in order that they can be written up as a full narrative; documenting exactly how it felt to take part. It would perhaps help pupils to think in terms of similes and metaphors when they take part in this activity. As Dan Smith demonstrates in his writing, it enhances the reading experience when Karl describes what being exhausted and exhilarated feels like as opposed to simply stating which parts of his body felt tired. After the activity, pupils could compile a list of similes and metaphors that relate to their experience of the running game. It would then be interesting to see if pupils felt they experienced similar sensations to those their classmates wrote about.

### ***5: The Blame Game***

On page 224, Karl arrives at the conclusion that 'it's all my fault'. Here he is referring to the fact that his brother, Stefan, has been taken away by the Gestapo and that his family is now being terrorised by Gerhard Wolff. On the next page, Lisa tells him, 'it isn't your fault, Karl Friedmann. If it wasn't for Wolff and the Hitler Youth and that horrible man Hitler, none of this would have happened.' The notions of blame and guilt are central to the novel, with Karl often questioning the morality of what he does. This provides an opportunity for pupils to think about the extent to which Karl should be held accountable for the things that happen. Can Stefan's capture be entirely due to Karl? Or, as Lisa suggests, is Karl blameless? These questions are not straightforward. When we start to consider to what extent Karl should be blamed for the Pirates' leaflet being found, we find ourselves weighing up whose



actions are most reprehensible: Karl's for leaving the leaflet in a place it might be found, Gerhard Wolff's for searching through Karl's room, or Adolf Hitler's for causing former friends and neighbours to become mistrusting of one another in the first place? Pupils could pick out specific moments in the novel to study in depth, moments at which a number of characters could potentially be held responsible for a particular event taking place. For example, the discovery of the Pirates' leaflet (and the subsequent arrest of Stefan), the arrest of Herr Finkel, or Stefan's arrest after the fight with the Hitler Youth boys. Pupils could assume the guise of different characters in each scenario, having to argue where the blame for the incident should lie. This could be done in front of the class, perhaps with the teacher cross-examining these 'characters' as though they were in a courtroom. The pupils observing this could be tasked with discussing on whom they think the blame should be placed (if, indeed, it can be placed solely on one character). Ultimately, the pupils would need to pass judgement on each of the characters, explaining why they have arrived at their point of view.

### ***6: If Things Had Been Different...***

Arguably, *My Brother's Secret* ends with some sort of victory for Karl and Stefan. With Gerhard Wolff dead, Karl's family are no longer under suspicion; and Stefan is safely home, having been released by the Gestapo. However, the ending would likely be very different had Karl, Stefan and Lisa decided not to return to Gestapo headquarters after Wolff is killed. Stefan would have been hunted as an escaped prisoner, and Karl would never have been able to steal the files the Gestapo were keeping on them and falsify Wolff's signature on Stefan's release order. The decision they make at this point in the story is therefore a pivotal moment. It would be a different story if the three had made a different decision here, and pupils could try to rewrite the ending of the novel based on their making a decision other than the one Dan Smith has written. After the class has had the opportunity to resolve their new endings in some way, it would be interesting to share these; comparing the various endings that could result from a choice made in a single moment of time.



# WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do we learn about the ideology of the Nazi regime from the lessons Karl attends (page 16)? How might other distinct ideologies be reflected in a school timetable? Devise a timetable that demonstrates an adherence to a particular ideology. Is this a 'healthy' education?
2. Re-read the Adolf Hitler quote at the start of the novel. Do you think Hitler would have considered Karl weak for helping Johann Weber up after the fight (page 21)? Do you consider him weak?
3. Do you think Karl was right to stop Jana from killing the Hitler Youth boy (page 198)? What would the likely consequences be for the characters in the novel if Jana had not been stopped?
4. Can you blame Karl for telling on Stefan to Axel Jung (page 227)? Give reasons for your answer.

