

MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LIZ KESSLER



**WHEN THE
WORLD
WAS
OURS**

*Three friends
Two sides
One memory*

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

**EXTRACTS AND NOTES FOR
KS3 & 4 TEACHERS**



INTRODUCTION

Suitable for: Ages 12+

Includes: Extracts from the text, discussion questions, follow up activities, discussion questions from the author and further resources.

Themes: Holocaust, Nazism, Second World War, History, Friendship, Family Relationships, Discrimination, Persecution, Human Rights

Subjects: Activities included in these Teachers' Resources support a range of subjects including – PSHE, English, History, Art & Design. Language & Literacy,

CONTENTS

- **About the Book**
- **Extract 1:** The Photograph (taken from Leo's Chapter p6/7)
Objectives: The photograph is a golden thread that connects Elsa, Leo and Max as children and then reconnects their lives and their memories of that wonderful moment at key stages of their life journey, helping them remember a time when they shared so much friendship and happiness.
- **Extract 2:** The Headteacher and the World Starts to Change (taken from Leo and Max's chapters p59 – 70)
Objectives: The extract highlights the first overt experience of the rise of Nazism and the persecution of Jews by Leo and Max
- **Extract 3:** Kindertransport (taken from Elsa's chapter p138/40)
Objectives: Like many other families Elsa's mother and father make the decision to send Elsa and her brother Otto away, to let them make the Kindertransport journey in the hope of keeping them safe.
- **Extract 4:** Leo (taken from Leo's chapter p66/8)
Objectives: This extract highlights one point in Leo's life as a starting point for exploring his journey through the story. It describes how on his way home from school after the public shaming of Jewish children in class and his bewilderment at the experience, he sees how his father is treated by Max's father and realises that what happened in his classroom was a small reflection of the much bigger changes.
- **Extract 5:** Elsa (taken from Elsa's chapter p196/8)
Objectives: This extract highlights one point in Elsa's life as a starting point for exploring her journey through the story. It describes the family's journey on the train to the Theresienstadt concentration camp.
- **Extract 6:** Max (taken from Max's chapter p40/41)
Objectives: This extract highlights one point in Max's life as a starting point for exploring his journey through the story. It tells Max's reaction to Elsa's news that her family is leaving Germany for Prague because of the danger of being Jewish.
- **Additional Discussion Questions**
- **Questions from the Author Liz Kessler**
- **Further Resources**

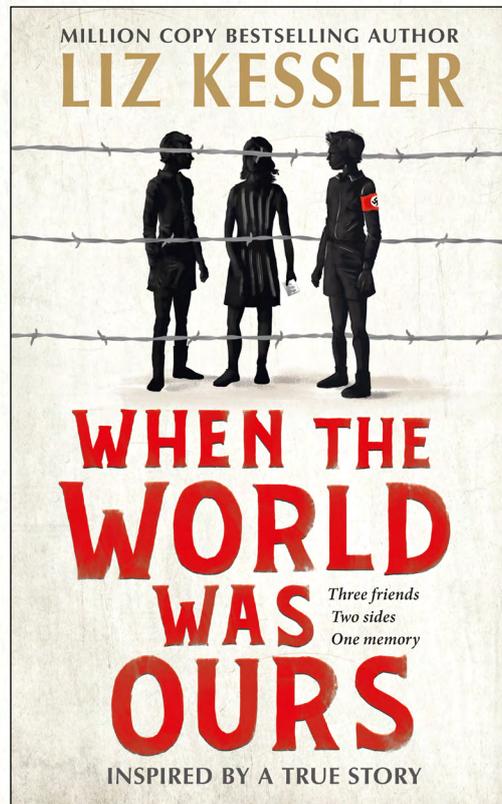
LIZ KESSLER



ABOUT THE BOOK

Three friends. Two sides. One memory.

VIENNA 1936



Three young friends – Leo, Elsa and Max – spend a perfect day together, unaware that around them Europe is descending into a growing darkness and that events soon mean that they will be cruelly ripped apart from each other. With their lives taking them across Europe – to Germany, England, Prague and Poland – will they ever find their way back to each other? Will they want to?

Inspired by the true story of Liz Kessler's father's escape from Nazi-occupied Europe, *When The World Was Ours* is an extraordinary novel which shows how the bonds of love, family and friendship allow glimmers of hope to flourish, even in the most hopeless of times.

This story of three childhood friends, three lives caught up in three different pathways under the Nazi regime in Germany during the second world war, is powerful, heartbreaking and a totally compelling read. The knowledge that it is based in part on Liz Kessler's own family history adds to its impact. It is an extraordinary novel and one that needs to be read and discussed in every school across the UK.

LIZ KESSLER



EXTRACT 1: THE PHOTOGRAPH

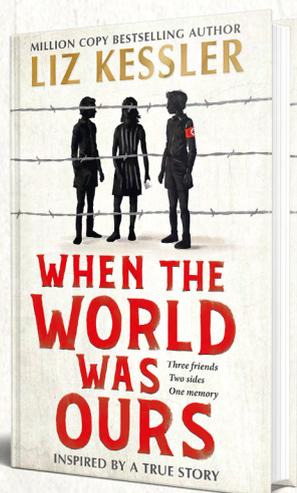
The photograph is a golden thread that connects Elsa, Leo and Max as children and then reconnects their lives and their memories of that wonderful moment at key stages of their life journeys, helping them remember a time when they shared so much friendship and happiness.

“COME ON, LET’S TAKE YOUR PICTURE WHILE YOU’RE ON TOP OF THE WORLD, EH?’ HE SAID. THE THREE OF US SQUASHED TOGETHER IN FRONT OF THE WINDOW. PAPA LOWERED HIS CAMERA AND FROWNE.” THROUGH TO “I’LL CHOOSE THE BEST PHOTO AND GIVE EACH OF YOU A COPY, SO YOU’LL ALWAYS HAVE A MEMORY OF THIS DAY. HOW DOES THAT SOUND?”

(Leo’s chapter p6/7)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: The Photograph

- What do you think is meant by the phrase ‘because a picture paints a thousand words’?
- If a picture paints a thousand words, how might those words differ between the original message intended by Leo’s father when he takes the photograph and the thoughts in Leo’s head when he looks at it and remembers at the end of the book?
- The photo has a significant symbolism for Leo, Elsa and Max throughout the book – How is its significance different for each of them? There are many instances throughout the story where Leo, Max and Elsa look at or think about the photo and remember – how do their thoughts and memories differ? What does the photo come to mean to each of them as the story progresses? (p86, p173, p238)
- At the beginning of the story, Max says that *‘the bonds of their friendship felt as deep and as wide as the Danube itself’* (p20). What is it about their friendship that creates that bond, and do you think the bonds are still the same at the end of the story? How does Max’s friendship with Erich, Elsa’s friendship with Greta and Leo’s friendship with Daniel differ from the friendship Leo, Max and Elsa have?
- When Leo receives a letter from his father, it is a reference to the quote about the picture that helps him separate the truth from the lies in his father’s message. What did that mean for Leo and his mother? (p118)



- Why do you think Elsa, Greta and Leo’s father risk their lives to protect the photo? (p194, p260)
- On his 14th birthday, when he looks at the photo, Max has a realisation that all he has done since that time in his life has been to fit in and to gain

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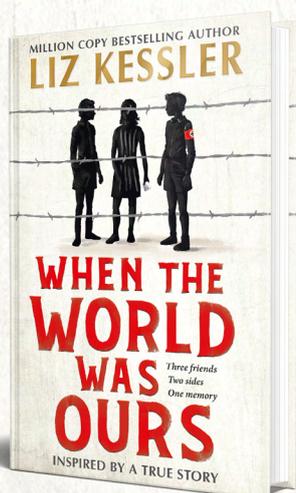


his father's approval, that his life is a fake and Nazism an illusion. But his father makes him choose – to destroy the photo and the letters from Leo that he had never been allowed to see, to prove that he is loyal and obedient to Hitler. Why did Max make that choice, did he really have a choice and what might have happened if he had refused? (p204)

- It is the photo that connects Max and Elsa on their final meeting – what does the photograph mean to them both at this point and what effect does its presence have on each of them in this moment? (p272/83)

ACTIVITY: The Photograph

- Max's father made him destroy Leo's letters unread. Using your knowledge of the story, write a letter to Max from Leo's perspective.
- Photography is a big love for the book's author, Liz Kessler. Two of her favourite 'people' photographers are Annie Leibovitz and Vivian Maier. Look up both of these photographers. Choose a photograph from each of them and discuss how, in your opinion, each of these photographs tells a story.
- Research the fashion from 1936 – 1945. Use your research to recreate your own version of the photograph treasured by Elsa, Max and Leo and then recreate it again in current fashion.



LIZ KESSLER



EXTRACT 2: THE HEAD TEACHER AND THE WORLD STARTS TO CHANGE

This extract highlights the first overt experience of the rise of Nazism and the persecution of Jews by Leo and Max:

**“WE WELCOME OUR LEADER, THE FÜHRER” THROUGH
TO “YOU WILL PRETEND THEY DO NOT EXIST.”**

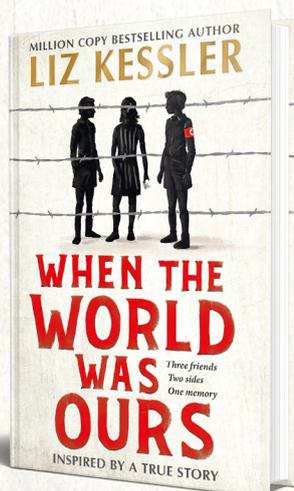
(P59 - 70 Leo, Max)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: The Head Teacher and the World Starts to Change

- It is the Head Teacher at the school making this announcement and these comments – why do you think he acted in this way?
- How did his behaviour fit or go against what you would expect from a Head Teacher and in what ways was it a terrible thing to do?
- Think about the responses of Leo and Max – why did they react in the ways they did?
- Why did other children respond in the ways they did and was Leo able to draw any comfort from the responses of his classmates?
- Put yourself in Leo and Max’s shoes – how do you think you would have felt and responded in each case?
- How does the fear that this incident created in Leo impact on his life when he is living in England?

ACTIVITY: The Head Teacher and the World Starts to Change

- The Head Teacher tells the Jewish children in the school ‘*You dogs no longer have the same rights as everyone else in the school.*’ Up until this incident, Leo and Max had felt their Head was really kind and funny. It demonstrates that the perpetrators were not beasts but rather human beings. They made their moral and ethical choices. They chose to commit evil and violate human rights. Do you believe the Head Teacher had a choice, even under the Nazi racist regime? Imagine you are a parent, and this happened to your child in school. Write a letter to the Governing Body expressing what you feel about the incident and what action you would expect to see taken.



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EXTRACT 3: KINDERTRANSPORT

Elsa's mother and father make the decision to send Elsa and Otto away, to let them make the Kindertransport journey in the hope of keeping them safe.

“AND THEN WE ARE THERE. WE CAN SEE THE CROWDS AT PRAGUE’S MAIN STATION” THROUGH TO “WE MOVE APART TO SEE A MAN RUNNING TOWARDS US. I RECOGNIZE HIM AS MR JANEK, ONE OF VATI’S FRIENDS.” ALSO FROM “MR JANEK HAD REACHED US” THROUGH TO “BECAUSE WAR HAS BEEN DECLARED.”

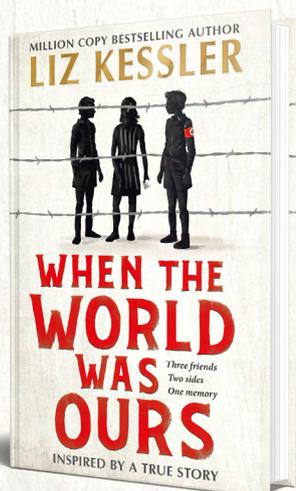
(P138 - 40)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Kindertransport

- The train was stopped because war had been declared, in an attempt to defeat Hitler, Nazism and the persecution and murder that was taking place. But the actions taken to ‘save the world’ prevented lives like Elsa’s and Otto’s being saved. What do you think it would have felt like for Elsa and Otto, waiting to get on that train, knowing it was taking them away from their parents, not knowing if or when they would see them again, where they were going or what would happen to them?
- What do you think Elsa’s and Otto’s reactions and emotions were when they weren’t able to get on the train – were their reactions different from those of their parents and why might that have been?
- Many of the children who came to England as refugees from the Nazis have made a significant contribution to this country, for example Sir Alf Dubbs, Ben Helfgott. Are there modern-day parallels where children are being forced to flee their countries because of war and persecution? Does the UK have any responsibility to help and if so how?

ACTIVITY: Kindertransport

- Elsa’s life would have been very different had she been able to leave on the Kindertransport train – write an alternative version of Elsa’s life.
- Sir Nicholas Winton was a British stockbroker and humanitarian who set up an organization to help rescue children from Nazi Germany. He was called the ‘British Schindler’ and was responsible for rescuing 669 children. Find out more about his life, and what he achieved.
- Find out more about the lives and achievements of Sir Alf Dubbs, Ben Helfgott and other children from the Kindertransport. Prepare a case to persuade a Government to help child refugees.



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EXTRACT 4: LEO

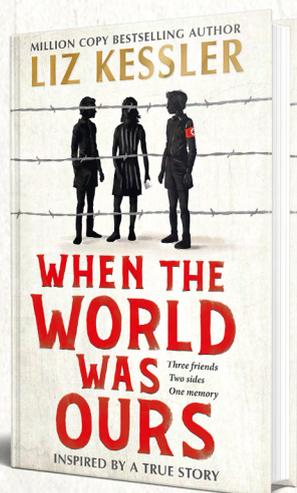
This extract highlights one point in Leo's life as a starting point for exploring his journey through the story. It describes how on his way home from school after the public shaming of Jewish children in class and his bewilderment at the experience, he sees how his father is treated by Max's father and realises that what happened in his classroom was a small reflection of the much bigger changes that were happening within Germany.

“FINALLY, AFTER WANDERING FOR A WHILE, IT WAS FOUR O’CLOCK AND I COULD GO HOME WITHOUT HAVING TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS.” THROUGH TO “EVEN SO, THE PAIN WAS NOTHING TO THE ACHE IN MY HEART.”

(P66/68)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Leo

- After the incident with his father scrubbing the streets, why is it that Leo and his father don't talk about what happened?
- After what happened, Leo makes a list of all the new laws and the things he can no longer do because he is Jewish. He constantly repeats them to himself so that he doesn't accidentally break them and get punished. What must it have been like living with that kind of fear and those kinds of restrictions? (p88/90)
- When Leo receives the letter from Mr. & Mrs Stewart agreeing to help Leo and his mother escape, how does it change his life? (p130)
- When Leo and his mother are on the train out of Germany, they still experience the pain and humiliation of persecution. They are made to vacate their seats, get off and go to the back of the train to the carriage marked 'Dogs, Jews and Gypsies' What effect does that and the subsequent humiliations that they have to endure on their way to England have on them? (p143/149)
- Why does Leo decide to tell his mother about his girlfriend Annie and when he does so why do you think she is so happy? (p229/132)
- When Leo was living in Germany, he was bullied for being Jewish and this makes him fearful that it will be the same in his new life in England. However, at his new school in England he was bullied for being German and having a 'funny' accent. Are there any differences in the bullying and if so, what are they? Why do you think he doesn't let on to his mum that he isn't happy at school and why is he so shocked when he discovers that Daniel is Jewish? (p167/70)

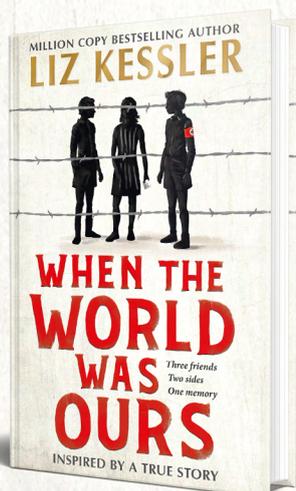


LIZ KESSLER



ACTIVITY: Leo

- Research what Kristallnacht was and describe what its impact might have been on families like Leo's.
- Write a diary entry from Leo's perspective explaining his reaction to receiving the letter from the Stewarts, agreeing to help them escape.
- Investigate the similarities and differences between the persecution of the Jews in Germany and the way that African Americans were treated in the USA during the Civil Rights era. How did the Montgomery Bus Boycott come about and what was its outcome?
- Compare Jewish refugees of the 1930s with Syrian refugees today. Considering the emotions that Leo felt about making friends and starting a new school in a foreign country, how would you make a refugee child feel welcome and valued in your class?



LIZ KESSLER



EXTRACT 5: ELSA

This extract highlights one point in Elsa's life as a starting point for exploring her journey through the story. It describes the family's journey on the train to the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

"I REMEMBER WHAT THE MAN FROM THE JEWISH COUNCIL SAID LAST NIGHT" THROUGH TO "BUT I CAN'T STOP MYSELF. I ALLOW MYSELF TO HOPE."

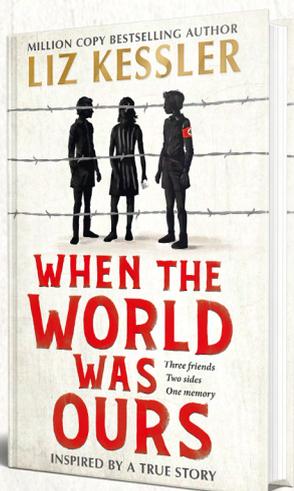
(P196-198)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Elsa

- Throughout the story, even in some of the darkest of times, Elsa tries to hold on to a tiny glimmer of hope. What do you think it is in her character that enables her to do this? At the darkest point in her journey when everything possible had been taken away from her, rather than despair and give up hope she makes a choice and is at peace. How would you describe the choice she made and how important was it for Elsa that she made this final choice?
- Several times throughout the story Elsa and her family are forced to leave their home, initially by Nazi soldiers and then by members of the Jewish Council, under instructions from the Nazis. Why do you think the 'Judenrat' as they were known became 'collaborators'? How do you think you would have responded if you have been in this situation? (p182/185)
- When the soldiers come to force them from their home in Prague, they are given 24 hours' notice and told they can only take one suitcase. Elsa finds it difficult to pack up her life into one suitcase and to choose what to take with her. As her life progresses and her possessions are stripped away, the one possession that remains essential to her survival is the childhood photograph of Leo, Max, and herself. Why do you think that is and what comfort does it give her? (p161/5)
- When Elsa is in Auschwitz, she remembers that as a child every day she would think about the one good thing that happened during that day. The only good thing for her every day in Auschwitz is her friendship with Greta. What does their friendship mean to each of them and in what ways does it give Elsa the strength to keep going?

ACTIVITY: Elsa

- If you could only keep three of your possessions, write a description of the ones you would choose and why.
- Complete a five senses chart for Elsa's train journey to Theresienstadt (p197/8). Write what you see, what you hear, smell, taste and touch. By 'stepping into the story' how do you gain an insight into Elsa's thoughts and feelings.
- Read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. How does Anne's experiences compare and differ with Elsa's story?



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EXTRACT 6: MAX

This extract highlights one point in Max's life as a starting point for exploring his journey through the story. It tells Max's reaction to Elsa's news that her family is leaving Germany for Prague because of the danger of being Jewish.

“BUT YOUR PARENTS ARE MAD!” THROUGH TO “BOYS HAD TO BE STRONGER.”

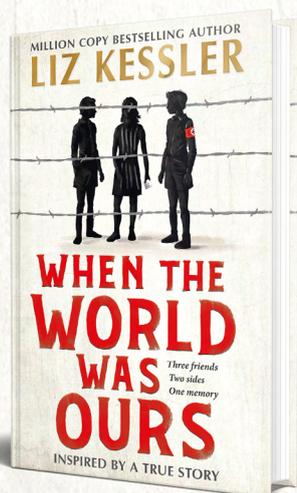
(P40-41)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Max

- Max's relationship with his father is a complex one. He spends his life seeking his father's approval. Do you think that this is something he would ever have achieved? How does Max's father view Max and what does that say about him as a human being and as a father? What is it in Mr. Fischer's nature that makes him embrace Nazism in the way that he does and do you think his perception of Max's flaws might be an excuse for his own weaknesses?
- When Max is about to start his new school in Munich, his father's advice to him is *“Don't stand out. Don't speak out. Do exactly what your teachers tell you and copy the other boys if you are unsure And don't let me down.”* (p83) Is it this advice that enables Max to respond so positively to the order and discipline of his new school? How is it that he is able to compartmentalise the fact that Leo and Elsa are Jewish and yet still strive to become a good soldier for Hitler and the Nazi party?
- When Max's father tells him that he has been promoted again and that they will be leaving Munich for Auschwitz, Max is initially upset but then becomes convinced that 'Auschwitz was his destiny'. What did he mean by this? Did those thoughts have a different connotation for him at the end of the story? (p236)
- At Max's last meeting with Elsa, he reaches the conclusion that 'It wasn't work that set you free, it was love' – what does he mean by that and what has led him to that conclusion? (p279)
- What do you think Max's father's reaction would have been when he heard the news about Max's behaviour at the end of the book? Do you think it would have been any different if he had been told the truth rather than the lie concocted by the two guards? (p282/3)

ACTIVITY: Max

- Find three examples in the story where Max's father belittles him and makes him feel a failure - what emotional conflict does Max experience because of his father's attitude and behaviour towards him? Describe what impact that has on his development from a child to a young man.
- Write a letter or diary entry from Max to his father telling him all the things he wanted to say to him but was never able to.



LIZ KESSLER



ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Holocaust Memorial Day is commemorated on 27th January. Why was that particular date chosen and why is it important that the Holocaust is still remembered like this?
- As well as telling the story through the three different viewpoints of Max, Elsa and Leo, the story also unfolds through the timeline of the war years and the present day. Why do you think Liz chose to approach the story in this way? How did that add to your understanding of the story?
- The cover design for the book is very striking – what did you think the book was about when you looked at the cover before you read it. Did the cover say anything different to you after you had read the book and why?
 - **Activity:** Design your own cover for the book and then write your own blurb for the book.
- Why do you think the book was given the title '*When The World Was Ours*'?
 - **Activity:** Write a review of the book.
- Do you think the world knew what was starting to happen in Germany before war was declared? If so, what could they have done to change things and what might the impact have been? Was any kind of intervention tried and if not, why not? Research this and find examples to support your answer. Can you think of any modern-day situations where people close their minds to what is happening in another country? If so, why do you think people do this?
- In 1961 at a speech he gave to the Canadian parliament, US President John F Kennedy refers to a quote he attributed to Edmund Burke (variations of it have been attributed to other people) saying "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing".
 - Does this phrase have a resonance within the context of the theme of *When The World Was Ours* and if so how?
 - Could 'good men and women' have done something to prevent the rise of Nazism and the ensuing Holocaust – if so what?
 - What difference might it have made, and do you think the outcome would have been different?
- Discuss the morals or messages of the novel. What new insights and understandings does Liz Kessler want the reader to gain from reading this story.
 - **Activity:** Write a letter to Liz Kessler telling her what your reaction to the book was.
- What is the message in the last scene of the book and how do you think we can each as individuals act upon it?

LIZ KESSLER



QUESTIONS FROM THE AUTHOR LIZ KESSLER

1. The story is told from three different narrative viewpoints. Leo's sections are told in the first person, past tense; Elsa's in the first person, present tense; Max's in the third person, past tense. Why do you think I made these decisions? What effect did the different narrative viewpoints have?

2. This is a passage from Elsa's story on page 197/8:

Slowly, the train clanks into movement. We settle into a jagged rhythm, swaying together, gripping arms of people we cannot even see, pressing feet and knees against people we hardly know. As we rock and sway and breathe each other's breath in and out, sharing the air as if it were a prize in a game of pass the parcel, I find myself noticing how easy it is for something absurd to become almost natural. How rapidly something unthinkable can become commonplace. How easily we let the inconceivable become a new normal. How quickly we learn to stop questioning these things.

Can you think of any examples from modern day experiences – either your own or in the news or the world around you – where the 'unthinkable' has become 'commonplace'? Can you talk about what this was and how you adapted to the 'new normal'?

3. Which aspects of each character's personality influenced their journey? For example, what enabled Elsa to cope with her experiences? What did Leo draw on to help him stay strong? What was it in Max's nature that meant he was attracted to the ideas of the Hitler Youth?

4. Who did you most identify with out of the three main characters? Why that person? If you had been in their position, is there anything you think you might have done differently?

5. This book was inspired by an experience that my dad had when he was a young boy. How much do you know about your own family's history? Choose a family member to interview and see if you can find a story from their own childhood. It doesn't have to be a big dramatic event, but just a story about their life that is interesting to share.

LIZ KESSLER

