

Teacher's Guide

Michael at the Invasion of France 1943

by Laurie Calkhoven

About the Book

The Nazi invasion of Paris turns Michael's world upside down. When Michael leaves his brother's army jacket out in the open, Georges is taken prisoner, proving once again why Michael is a disappointment to his father, who fights with the Free French movement in England. Hoping to redeem himself, Michael joins the French Resistance, helping downed pilots escape from the Nazis. But as the danger to his mother and sister increases, Michael no longer knows who to trust. When his friends are arrested and the Gestapo shows up, will he be brave enough to complete his mission?

About This Guide

This guide offers discussion questions and learning activities for students with diverse skills and a range of background knowledge. **Essential Questions** focus thinking on relevant themes and issues. **Before Reading** prompts engage students with central ideas of the book in order to improve comprehension. **For Discussion** questions check knowledge and understanding of what students have read; advanced questions challenge them to apply and evaluate ideas from the story. **Activities** for completion during and after reading promote cross-curricular learning and address multiple intelligences. Through the **Author Interview**, students explore the writer's perspective on her work.

Essential Questions

- Under what circumstances is resisting authority necessary and even desirable?
- How can you decide whom to trust?
- How can you decide which risks are necessary and which ones are too great?
- In what ways does a totalitarian regime get and keep power?
- What is the connection between confidence and proving yourself?
- How do misunderstandings arise between parents and their children?

Before Reading

- Individually or in a group, brainstorm a list of people who have resisted authority. Include both people you know personally and famous people. Examine your brainstorming. What patterns do you see? What conclusions can you draw?

- Either alone or as part of a group, fill a page by mapping all the ideas that come to mind when you think about trust. Consider what trust means, how it's earned, how trust is broken, and how you decide who to trust. Using an idea from your map, draft a letter asking advice from a columnist about trust in a fictional situation. Playing the part of the columnist, draft a response.
- Either alone or in a group, fill a page by mapping risks. Include different kinds of risks – physical, social, emotional, academic. On your map, use a plus sign (+) to mark risks you would take, a minus sign (-) to mark risks you would never take, and a question mark (?) to mark risks you would take only under certain circumstances. Compare maps with a partner. Where do you differ in your thinking on risks? Draft a brief summary of your comparisons and report to the class.
- What is confidence? How can you recognize it? Do you have to earn it? In what proportions should confidence come from yourself as opposed to coming from someone else? Free write on these questions, then exchange papers with a partner and comment on his or her thoughts.
- Write a journal entry about a misunderstanding that occurred between you and someone in your family, or between you and a teacher. Describe the setting where the misunderstanding occurred. Use dialogue to reconstruct what was said. Tell how you felt. Reflect on the misunderstanding. What might have prevented it? How was it resolved?
- Watch film footage of Hitler's rise to power. What tactics did he use? List and discuss.

For Discussion: Knowledge

- World War II began with the invasion of which country on Sept. 1, 1939?
- Under the armistice that Germany negotiated with France, where was the "Free Zone"?
- Where is Michael's father?
- How does Michael's family get news from Britain?
- Who is Monsieur Declos?
- Name something Michael does with the letter V, for victory.
- Who is Charlotte?
- What's a "boche"?
- What does Michael bring from his uncle's house in the country to their bathtub in Paris?
- Which classmate is also Michael's partner in the Resistance?
- Michael wears sabots. What are they?
- Who is Francois?
- What do Jacques and Michael find in the envelope that Michael is unable to deliver?
- What happens to Bluebird?
- Who watches the people coming and going from the building where Michael's family lives?
- What happens to Jacques and Francois?

- What does Uncle Henri do for a living?
- Who helps Michael get his mother and sister out of France?
- What is the punishment for helping downed pilots?
- What are the Pyrennees?
- Who is Florentino?
- What happens to Jerry?

For Discussion: Understanding

- What was the French Resistance?
- Who had to wear yellow stars?
- Why does Michael speak English so well?
- What happened to Michael's friend Pierre when he tried to escape Paris with his family?
- After his parents return, why does Pierre believe the Nazis?
- Why does Michael sometimes take Charlotte to the monkey house at the zoo?
- Why are Michael and his family always hungry?
- How does Michael get Sophie through the Nazi checkpoint?
- How does Michael discover that Jacques is working for the Resistance?
- Why do Jacques and Michael use animal names?
- How does Michael know that the man at the café table is a German instead of the Resistance worker he's expecting?
- Why are Michael and his family taken to 84 Avenue Foch?
- Why does Michael want to take revenge on Pierre?
- How does Michael help Steve Jones?
- Why would it be dangerous to ask Steve Jones to look out for Michael's father?
- Why can't Michael take an American pilot to a café when the Nazis are watching?
- Why does Michael have to bring Mack home?
- What convinces Michael that Bob Jackson is not really an American?
- Why does Michael write a postcard to Madame Cassou?
- What does "The green bicycle has a flat tire" mean for Michael?
- How does Michael get his mother and sister to safety?
- How does Michael find out he has misjudged Pierre?
- Why doesn't Mack like to talk about how his plane went down?
- What is Jerry's complaint about Michael?
- How does Michael save Jerry?
- How does Mack save Michael?
- What advice does Mack give Michael about his father?

For Discussion: Application and Evaluation

- What strategies did Hitler use to rise to power?
- Should Michael blame himself for Georges' arrest? Explain your answer.

- Do you think Michael’s father really favors Georges, or is Michael misjudging their relationship? Use at least two examples from the book in explaining your response.
- General Charles DeGaulle says, “The flame of resistance must not and will not be extinguished.” Explain what this means and why it seems true for France during the Nazi occupation.
- What strategies did the Nazis use to maintain control over the French people? List at least five, then rank them from least to most effective. Defend your rankings.
- What strategies did Michael and others use to resist the Nazis? List at least five, then rank them from least to most effective. Defend your rankings. Discuss connections between this list and your list of Nazi tactics (above).
- Both Stefan and Pierre side with the Nazis. Tell what motivates each of them. Is one more wrong than the other, or do their reasons not matter? Explain.
- Give two examples to show that Michael is a creative thinker.
- What techniques do the Gestapo use in their interrogation to try to get Michael to talk? Name at least two.
- Does Jerry deserve to get caught? Explain, citing specific incidents from the story.
- How does the trek through the mountains change Michael’s thinking about his father?
- Does Michael make the right decision when he returns to France? Why or why not?

Activities

- Imagine that you are in charge of the French Resistance effort to smuggle downed pilots out of the country. Using examples from the book, write a top-secret manual with instructions for everyone involved in the operation, including instructions on how to avoid getting caught and how to handle Gestapo interrogations.
- Make a “trust map” for Michael, showing whom he can and can’t trust and why. Include at least eight characters from the story. Use illustrations and/or map locations to show where an encounter with each character takes place.
- Research another example of a resistance effort, such as the Underground Railroad, the American Civil Rights movement, the Boston Tea Party, the French storming of the Bastille, or the 21st century street protests in countries like Egypt and Syria. Prepare a visual and report to the class. Identify common elements of resistance, and explain which circumstances justify defiance of authority.
- Resistance can be an important force for change. Find examples of artistic efforts associated with resistance, such as poems, songs, posters, and books. Put them together in an audio-visual presentation that represents the importance of art in times of struggle.

- Write a series of letters between Michael and his father in which they work out their misunderstandings and differences. Include at least five letters.
- Map the risks Michael took in the book, evaluating them with the same symbols (plus, minus, question mark) that you used in the Prereading activity. Compare the maps and discuss.
- Re-visit your free writing on confidence and then write a journal entry as if you were Michael at the end of the book. Include at least three specific incidents from the book in your journal.

Author Interview

- **So many compelling stories can be fashioned from the dramatic events of World War II. How did you decide to tell a story of the French Resistance?**

I was always interested in the French Resistance. I grew up watching those old black and white movies about World War II, and I imagined myself forging documents, slipping around corners, and outwitting the Nazis. So I knew that my World War II story would be set in France. What I didn't know about were those escape lines for the Allied airmen who had been shot down. As soon as I stumbled across a mention of them in my research, I knew that's what my story would be about.

- **Michael struggles with confidence. As a writer, how do you strike a balance between confidence in your work and the affirmation of others, especially when it comes to revision?**

Confidence can be a struggle for me, too, which is probably why it's something my characters grapple with. When I start a new project, I'm very careful about who I show it to. A harsh word or comment can derail me when the story is just beginning to develop and grow. I have a trusted group of writers that I meet with every week, and we do our best to encourage each other, especially in the first draft stage when we're still trying to figure out what the story is about. Ultimately, I trust my characters to take the story where it needs to go.

When it comes to revision, I expect those same trusted friends to get tougher with me—to let me know where and how my story is going off course or when something is confusing. It's only after I've done a couple of revisions with my writing group that I send the book to my editor, who has even more comments and questions. I consider everyone's opinions carefully, but ultimately the book is mine. If I disagree with my editor or my group, I have to trust in my story and my characters. Some people, for instance, thought that the ending of this novel should be different—that Michael should go to England with Mack. But I knew that Michael would never do that. I knew that he would stay in France and keep fighting for freedom.

At some point, the novel is finished, and I have to send it out into the world. That can be scary, and bad reviews from critics or from readers can shake my confidence. But I know that I write the truest books that I can, and that's the best I can do.

- **Even after Michael helps him, Jerry refuses to accept Michael. What is the best response to people like Jerry?**

People like Jerry can be a challenge, especially in situations where their bad behavior can lead to real danger. Michael moves forward and does what's right no matter how mean and downright stupid Jerry acts, but at the same time, he knows not to trust him. If you can't get away from the Jerry's of the world, then the next best thing is to stay on your guard around them.

- **Everyone involved in the Resistance must take risks. How would you describe your own tolerance for risks? How do you decide what's worth a risk?**

Good question! I've never had to take the kinds of risks that Michael takes, but I have taken other kinds of risks. I was the first person in my family to go to college, and afterward I moved to New York City so that I could work in book publishing. Both of those things felt scary at the time, and I worried that I would fail. And then I took another big risk when I decided to leave my job in order to be a fulltime writer.

If a risk can lead to arrest or put your life in danger, like the risks Michael takes, then that's another story. People need to think VERY carefully about whether the risk is worth it. Freedom is worth it, of course, but if Michael had been fighting for something else, like a new bicycle or popularity, then putting his life in danger would have been just plain silly.

So I try to measure risks against the ultimate reward. For me, the reward of a college degree, a life in New York City, and a shelf of published books was worth the risk of possible failure. I like to think that if I was fighting for freedom, I would be brave and take the kinds of risks that Michael takes. I've never been tested in that way. I hope I never am.