

Love to Read



The Silver Sword

1956

Ian Serraillier

Serraillier writes of an epic journey depicting the plight of four children during, and post, World War II. To enhance the enjoyment and understanding of the novel, some historical references will need explaining. Appealing to both boys and girls, the moving portrait of the chaotic post-war ramifications still has resonance today.

CONTENTS

Overview for teachers



Page

Context 3

- About the author
- What's the story about?
- Themes to look out for

Literary techniques 4–9

Characters

- | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| • Jan | • Margrit Beliki | • The Burgomaster |
| • Joseph Baliki | • Bronia Baliki | • Joe Wolski |
| • Ruth Baliki | • Ivan | |
| • Edek Baliki | • The Bavarian Couple | |

Setting

- Zakyna Prison Camp
- Warsaw
- On the road

Structure

Narrative techniques

Language

Special feature

- Use of historical fact

Activities for children



► Before reading 12–13

Ideas for getting started - Engaging with the world of the novel

- | | |
|-------------|------------------------|
| • War child | • Pictures and objects |
| • Debate | • About the author |

► During reading 14–21

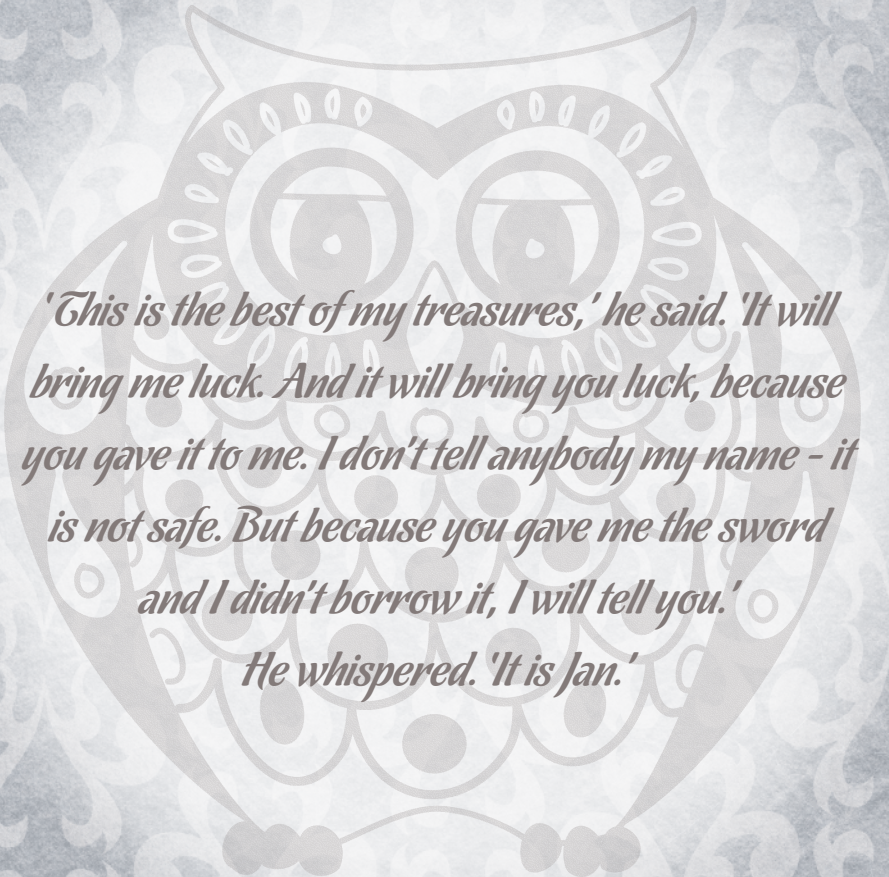
Stopping places - Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques

- 1 End of Chapter 3 *The Hiding Place*
- 2 End of Chapter 5 *The Goods Train*
- 3 End of Chapter 8 *The Newcomer*
- 4 End of Chapter 11 *The Road to Posen*
- 5 End of Chapter 14 *The City of the Lost*
- 6 End of Chapter 18 *Captain Greenwood*
- 7 End of Chapter 23 *Dangerous Waters*
- 8 The end of the novel

► After reading 22–23

Create and imagine - Developing a personal response to the novel

- | | |
|--------------------|---------------|
| • Fact and fiction | • Jan's story |
| • News report | • Symbolism |



'This is the best of my treasures,' he said. 'It will bring me luck. And it will bring you luck, because you gave it to me. I don't tell anybody my name - it is not safe. But because you gave me the sword and I didn't borrow it, I will tell you.'

He whispered. 'It is Jan.'



Overview for teachers

Context

About the author

Moved by images he saw in the media of children struggling to survive in a European post-war environment, Ian Serraillier, a Quaker, conscientious objector and full-time school teacher, wrote *The Silver Sword* over a five year period during his school summer holidays.

Born in London in 1912, and the eldest of four children, his father died from the influenza epidemic which swept across Europe in 1918, killing more people than the First World War did. He began writing novels and poetry after the Second World War and *The Silver Sword* was his twentieth and most successful book, chosen as runner-up for the Carnegie Medal in 1956.

What's the story about?

After turning a picture of Hitler's face to the wall in his classroom, Joseph Baliki, the father of a Polish family, is taken away to a prison camp in early 1940 by the Nazis. After two years, he inventively manages to escape and is hidden and looked after, at great personal risk, by an elderly couple until he is well enough to journey back to Warsaw to be reunited with his family.

Upon his return, he finds an unrecognisable Warsaw devastatingly torn apart by the war. Discovering his house no longer exists, told that his Swiss wife was taken away by Nazis over a year ago and having no information on the whereabouts of his three children, he hopelessly searches for them amongst the Warsaw ruins. 'Poking among the rubble of his old home' he finds a tiny silver sword: a paperknife he had once given to his wife as a present. He is keenly observed by a young, ragged, pick-pocketing streetwise boy known only as Jan, who covets the silver sword found on 'his patch'. Joseph decides to give it to him on the condition that should Jan ever come across any of his children, Ruth or Edek or Bronia, he must tell them that he has headed to their grandparent's home in Switzerland.

Refusing to accompany Joseph to Switzerland, Jan nonetheless does all he can to help him leave Warsaw.

Two years pass and Jan is discovered in a collapsed, starved state by Ruth, the eldest of Joseph's three children, outside a make-shift school she has resourcefully created amongst the rubble and debris. Full of love and decency, she becomes a mother figure to Jan and is the only character he respects. Upon discovering the silver sword amongst Jan's possessions, she resolves to set off to Switzerland to be with her family. Along with Bronia and Jan, they journey first to find Edek, who had been arrested by the Secret Police for smuggling. When all the Baliki children are finally re-united they begin their haphazard, eventful journey to Switzerland through the ravaged landscapes of Poland and Germany, helped along the way by people who represent the many different faces of war.

Themes to look out for

- Survival
- The human spirit
- The Second World War
- Courage
- and its aftermath
- Hope

Literary techniques

Presentation of character is achieved through

- What the character says
- What the character does
- What other characters say about them
- How other characters react to them
- How they are described in the narrative



Characters

Jan

Orphaned by the war, Jan is one of Warsaw's 'lost children...dirty and starving'. His background remains a mystery, he discloses little about himself and even refuses to reveal his surname. Repercussions of war are seen not only on the battlefield: Serrailier uses Jan, a pitiful character, to symbolise the dehumanisation of war on the home front. He trusts no-one (except Ruth); compulsively steals - a legacy of survival during the war; is emotionally immature and unnaturally attached to his possessions. Made to grow up quickly and take responsibility for himself, he remains a child underneath his tough, streetwise veneer, bursting into tears when he thinks he has lost the silver sword. For all his learned bad habits, he is an inherently kind, decent and loving boy sharing a special affinity with animals - his only companions and form of love during the war.

Joseph Baliki

Intelligent, composed, determined, brave, moral and humane, Joseph publicly defies the cult of the Nazis, turning a picture of Hitler's face to the wall in his primary classroom. He is sent to a prison camp from which he ingeniously and audaciously escapes. He inspires love and trust from others, seen, first of all, in the old couple who hide him from the Nazis and treat him like a son, and then from Jan, who helps him to escape Warsaw. A man of action and authority, he overcomes his despair at not finding his children and quickly heads for Switzerland where, after the war, he and his family settle at the international children's village, teaching and helping war-orphaned Polish children heal 'their minds and bodies'.

Ruth Baliki

Ruth, the eldest of the Baliki children and the matriarchal figure in the novel, is brave, wise, selfless, unswervingly principled and full of love for those around her. In the desperate times of war, she resourcefully sets up a school bringing some order to the chaos surrounding them. She is firmly encouraging to all the children, holding them 'spellbound' by her teaching. Quite an exceptional character, she commands respect from those around her and is the only person in the novel who understands, and is able to manage, Jan.

Edek Baliki

Like his father, Edek is a cheerful, brave character of action and great determination. He is very much the active character in the novel, 'climbing like a monkey', scavenging furniture from bombed out buildings and the 'chief smuggler' of food to feed the family. The 'War had made Edek sharp and self-reliant...' and his determined will, rather than be tempered by his tuberculosis, was spurred on further. He is set up as something of a rival to Jan at the beginning of the novel: a device to add tension and to contrast the effects of war on two similar aged boys.

Margrit Baliki

The reader learns very little of Margrit, only that she is Joseph's Swiss wife and was taken away during the war by Nazi stormtroopers. At the end of the novel, her premature ageing is described as a consequence of her experiences of war.

Bronia Baliki

The youngest of the children and the least sketched out. She is good at drawing and sleeping!

Ivan

The Russian face of the novel, depicted as a jovial saviour providing food, clothing and bedding for the children and according to Ruth 'come to set us free'.

The Bavarian Couple

To balance the cold, brutal depiction of the Nazis and to highlight that Nazism was a dogma not all German people sympathised with, Serrailier presents the reader with the sympathetic characters of the Bavarian farmer and his wife who are kind to the children and have lost two sons themselves. In the conversations the farmer and his wife have with the children, Serrailier highlights the stupidity and senselessness of war.

The Burgomaster

Apart from the shadowy references to the Nazis, the Burgomaster is the only 'villain' introduced in the novel. His job is to repatriate refugees and therefore he poses a threat to the children's plans. Depicted as a tired, self-pitying middle-aged man disliked by all (including the dog, Ludwig), he is another device used by the author to show the impact of post-war relations, in this case highlighting the resentment felt by many German people by the Allied Occupation's anti-fraternisation laws.

Joe Wolski

Representing the American Occupation and the final adult to help the children, he is kindly and easy going, wants to help, but points out the chronic situation Europe is now in stating 'Everywhere's a mess, wherever you look'.

Setting

The setting can

- Be a backdrop to the action
- Reflect characters' experiences
- Symbolise ideas the author wishes to convey
- Have its own culture and values
- Cause conflict and distress

In order to conjure up a sense of the difficult conditions endured by many during and after the Second World War, Serrailier pays a lot of attention to describing the various settings in the novel, often in specific detail.

Zakyna Prison Camp

Although Zakyna is a fictional prison camp, its details are based on fact. The author subtly vilifies the inhumane Nazi culture through the description of the camp. A camp where you could freeze to death in winter, it is bleak, bare, overcrowded and battered by wind, an inhospitable, soulless place designed to quash the human soul. Prisoners squabble, huddle around tables and slowly starve to death on the ridiculously inadequate rations. It is the first setting described to the reader in the novel; a harsh, merciless and systematically organised regime. It indicates without a shadow of a doubt where the author's sympathies lie.

The surroundings of the camp are also described to create tension when Joseph escapes: it sits in a formidable, mountainous landscape with 'steep' or 'dark' valleys and a 'black shape of a mountain' and cliff edges highlighting the dangers around the prisoners and making the reader wonder if Joseph will manage to escape and survive.

Warsaw

To increase the dramatic impact of the devastation experienced in Warsaw, the author introduces the city to the reader through the eyes of Joseph. He witnesses a shocking change, an unrecognisable, chaotic 'wilderness' of rubble, crumbling buildings, dug out caves and holes for housing.

It is a dangerous place where the people are reduced to an animal-like subterranean existence, travelling through a warren of tunnels rather than face the dangers of the firing and bombing on the streets.

Later, the reader sees Warsaw through the experiences of Jan and the Baliki children. They are some of the many 'lost children', mentally and physically scarred by war. Although a scavenging, thieving culture emerges as people desperately try to survive, Serrailier also shows the resilience of the human spirit amongst such ruins when he describes the school Ruth made and a window box full of flowers beside a hole in the rubble.

On the Road

As the children journey from Poland to Switzerland, the author presents further catastrophes and debris of war: abandoned tanks, rusted barbed wire, derelict farms, smoking rubble, sprawling barracks, passing lorries packed with soldiers. The roads are crowded with refugees displaced from their homes and looking for new ones or, like the children, en route to try and be reunited with lost family.

Amongst the destruction, makeshift transit camps and field kitchens emerge, crowded but amazingly and eerily quiet and orderly – full of people famished and exhausted by war. As the novel progresses, the focus and detailed description of the setting diminishes, but is picked up again when the children arrive in Switzerland. Described as sunny, 'majestic', 'green' and 'beautiful', it is a symbol of hope and life and contrasts with the deplorable conditions presented earlier in the novel.



Structure

Structure is the order or pattern in which a novel is put together and should

- Maintain the interest of the reader
- Move the action from one episode to the next
- Arouse a reader's interest in character or situation
- Create a moment of crisis
- Create expectation or surprise



The Silver Sword is quite different to many war stories since it investigates the aftermath of war and presents the idea that the repercussions of war do not end once a peace treaty has been signed.

To put the writer's ideas and the children's situations into context, the first quarter of the novel is set during the war, quickly showing how cities became devastated, farm lands neglected, people displaced or imprisoned, families separated and orphaned children missing out on childhood, prematurely responsible for their own survival.

The focus on Joseph's experiences at the beginning helps to put the family in context and adds a very personal dimension to the story; seeing the loving, courageous and admirable person he is, encourages the reader to wish to see the family reunited. It is also a device to act as a catalyst for the children's journey, with Jan the structural link between the father and the children.

Serrailier is adept at using the 'cliffhanger' at the end of a chapter; frequently employing them as a structural device to highlight the many perils and uncertainties faced by the children as well as providing an element of suspense for the reader, and motivating them to find out what happens next.

Narrative techniques

The narrator begins the novel with an informative, summing up paragraph of the story the reader is about to read, indicating that it is a third person narrative. However, in the second and third paragraph, the first person 'I' is used and not seen again until the very last page in the novel, putting the writer in the role of storyteller, verifying the events of the story and therefore making the story more convincing to the reader.

Another narrative device to draw the reader into the story is the use of rhetorical questions. After confirmation has come through that the family are to be reunited in Chapter 26, the narrator directly asks the reader, 'Is that the end of the story?' forging a storytelling relationship between writer and reader and promoting further interest and excitement.

The narrator also uses questions to create mystery and suspense. In Chapter 23, as the children are canoeing down river at night, the narrator asks 'Were those dim shapes houses? Had they reached the village?'.

It is a narrative that shows a definite bias towards the victims of war - the old couple who hide Joseph are 'brave people', the Polish Underground are 'gallant defenders'. The narrator has a huge admiration for Ruth, 'Many other girls had to face difficulties as great as hers. But if there were any who faced them with as much courage, unselfishness, and common sense as she did, I have not heard of them'. She, and the principles she embodies, are the heroes of the novel.

Language

The author uses emotive language when recounting the repercussions of war, referring to Warsaw as a 'grim' place of 'terror' under the Nazi regime, where people had to 'endure' hardships.

A common language technique employed by Serrailier is the use of hyperbole. In Chapter 8, when describing the Warsaw uprising of 1944, he uses it to portray the furious action: '...thousands of windows in the city were flung open, and a hail of bullets struck the passing Germans. All traffic ceased as the Polish Underground rushed to the attack. Starving people streamed out of the cellars and flung themselves upon the Nazis...'. It is used again in Chapter 14, this time to heighten the sense of chaotic vastness and lack of individuality amongst the refugees in Berlin, ... 'a mob' that 'swarmed' and '...a wave of bodies...[that] stampede...'.

The language used to describe Zakyna prison camp uses words such as 'clung', 'bleak', 'thin' and 'bare' to highlight the desperate sparseness of the place.

The language of war is used to authenticate the novel and is discussed in the Special Feature section of this guide.

Serrailier's style is to use short, simple sentences that work either to create a sense of drama or emphasis. After Joseph knocks out the guard in his attempt to escape prison he needs to fish for the guard's keys, but 'Suddenly the line snapped... The hook was lost. Joseph had one spare hook, that was all. He tried again.'

His use of short sentences also means that he can convey information in a very direct, clear and uncluttered way, placing emphasis on the story and the message behind the story and ensuring it is understood by all.

The author uses short sentences on a line of their own to generate a sense of action, tension and suspense, increasing pace and placing equal weight and importance to each line:

"He [Joseph] walked straight through village.

Suddenly he was challenged in German. 'Karl, give me the cigarettes,' said a rough voice.

He took no notice and walked on.

'Karl, the cigarettes!' the voice shouted, threateningly.

He hurried on.

There were footsteps behind him.

He turned round to look..."

Chapter 2

Rhetorical questions are used by the narrator to show despair at the conditions. In response to the meagre rations issued by the Nazi guards in Zakyna prison camp he asks the reader, 'What use was this for keeping out the cold?' Rhetorical questions are also a device to add tension and suspense: when Joseph is planning to escape from the prison camp the narrator asks 'But how was he to get hold of the uniform?'.

Special feature

Use of historical fact

In order to show the plight of children in a post-war world, it was essential for Serrailier to present as authentic a setting and story as possible. Even though the characters are fictitious, their experiences are not.



Written with the benefit of hindsight and access to documents and records, the author is able to describe the terror of the Nazi regime for the reader: the continual fear of arrest, the camp numbers burnt into prisoners' arms; the deliberate starvation of prisoners; stormtroopers taking people away in the middle of the night and so on.

In Chapter 8, *The Newcomer*, the author uses historical fact to highlight the forlorn predicament of the Polish during the war and affirm his sympathetic allegiance to them. It becomes less of a 'story' and more of a 'report', naming names - Stalin and Prime Minister Churchill; providing actual dates and specific times - 'At 5 p.m. on 1st August a bomb went off in the Nazi Gestapo Headquarters,' and quoting actual extracts - a message sent to the Pope and a radio broadcast appealing to the world for help. The historical accounts also serve another purpose - to speed up plot. Within two pages Serrailier is able to end the war and move on to the post-war occupation and its implications for the novel's characters.







Activities for children

Before reading

Ideas for getting started

Engaging with the world of the novel

War child

What is a refugee and what were conditions like for them after the Second World War?

What were the dangers for people who were discovered to have hidden people running away from or wanted by the Nazis?

What must it have been like to be a child during the war?

Debate

Do you think you would help someone you didn't know escape from the horrors of war? Even if it meant risking your own life? Why did some people do it when they knew they were putting their own life in danger? What do you think of those people?

Is war ever justified?

Who should pay for the rebuilding of cities and towns after a war? What action would you take if you didn't agree with the people in power?

Serrailier was a conscientious objector during World War Two.

Find out what this means. What do you think about this stance?



Pictures and objects

Look at a range of photos of Berlin and Warsaw before, and immediately after, World War Two. How does it make you feel about war?

Discuss how people may have managed to survive amongst the devastation. Where would you live? Sleep? Go for food?

What might your daily routine involve?

*Look at pictures of Hitler,
Churchill and Stalin.*

How would you describe them? What type of people do they appear to be?

Is there one you fear more than the others? Why?

Ask pupils to bring in or describe their most treasured possession and talk about why it has such emotional value.

Display a range of pictures showing refugees past and present and discuss any similarities and differences.

About the author

Find out about Ian Serraillier's life and work. What do you think inspired his writing?

Can you find any other children's novels with a theme of war? Make a list of authors and recommended reads from your research.

During reading

Stopping places

Developing understanding of narrative and literary techniques



Read to the end of Chapter 3 *The Hiding Place*

Focus on...

- Presentation of Joseph
- The use of short, simple sentences
- The setting
- The role of the narrator



Things to discuss

Structure: Why do you think the story starts with Joseph's capture and escape?

Character: What do you learn about Joseph from what he says, does and how people treat him? Are you on his side?

What did you think of the old couple? Would you put your own life at risk like they did for someone you barely knew? Why do you think they did?

What do you learn about the Nazi regime from the few chapters you have read so far?

Narrative: Whose side does the narrator want you to be on? How do you know?

Although the story is told in the third person, the narrator refers to himself as 'I'.

Who do you think 'I' is? What difference does it make to you as a reader?

How do you feel about the narrator as a result of this technique?

The narrator asks questions. How does this make you feel?

Language: Why does the writer use lots of short, simple sentences? How does it affect you as a reader?

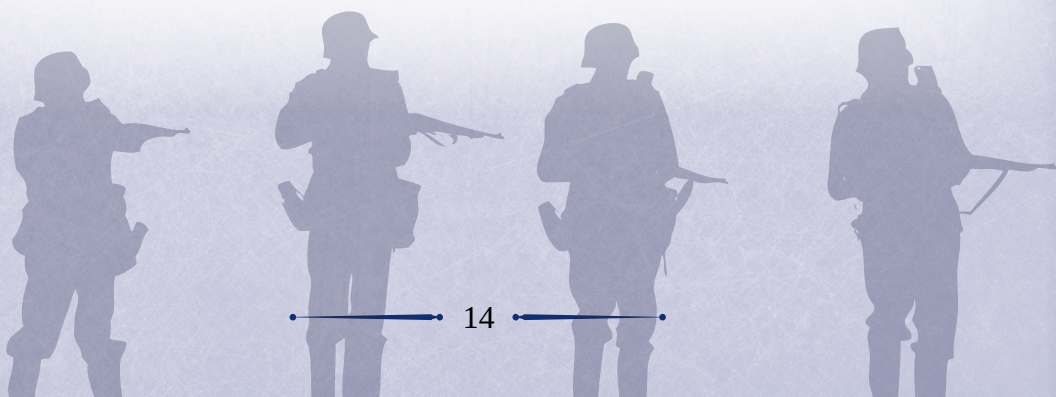
The reader 'hears' a lot of sounds in these chapters, why does the writer do this?

Setting: How is the prison camp presented?

Why does the writer devote time describing the various settings Joseph finds himself in?

You could...

Begin keeping a record of all the different settings in the novel and draw a map showing the route the children travelled, how the places were presented, who they met where and the distances, in kilometres and miles, travelled.



2

Read to the end of Chapter 5 *The Goods Train*

Focus on...

- The changes in Warsaw
- The presentation of Jan
- Atmospheric descriptions of setting



Things to discuss

Structure: It must have been difficult for Joseph to walk to Warsaw in four and a half weeks; why do you think the writer chose not to dwell on this, choosing to focus instead on Joseph's arrival in Warsaw and what he saw?

Setting: How does the writer present Warsaw?

What do you learn about the conditions?

How do you feel about the way people had to live?

Symbolism: How might the 'tiny silver sword' be important?

Character: Do you believe Joseph's children are dead? Why?

How is the boy, Jan, presented?

What's Jan's story?

How do you feel about him? Do you like him?

Tone: How would you describe the atmosphere of the novel in the last two chapters? How does it affect the way you feel about the characters?

Prediction: What do you think will happen next?

What do you want to happen next?

Does anything happen or is anything said that might provide clues as to future events or developments in the novel?

Is there anything you want to know?



Read to the end of Chapter 8 *The Newcomer*

Focus on...

- *Change of focus and the passage of time*
- *First impressions of the children*
- *Narrative technique*
- *Use of historical information*



Things to discuss

Structure: Why do you think the focus of the story changes from Joseph to his children at this point? Do you like the change?

Are you left wondering about the destinies of the other characters?

How quickly does time pass in the novel?

What effect does this have on pace? On you as a reader?

Two years pass in the first five chapters (1940-42), then the action goes back a year in Chapter 6 (1941) - why has the author done this? What is your opinion of this?

Character: What are your first impressions of the three children?

Were you surprised by Edek's disappearance?

What may have happened to him?

Do you think you will see him again in the novel? Why?

Language: Why do you think the narrator uses questions at the beginning of Chapter 6?

How does it make you feel about the story and the story telling?

Are the questions answered?

Narrative: How does the narrator feel about the Polish situation in the Second World War?

Theme: How do you feel about the effects of war after reading the novel so far?

You could...

Highlight the historical fact found in the novel so far and discuss what it adds to the novel.



4

Read to the end of Chapter 11 *The Road to Posen*

Focus on...

- Presentation of the Russians
- Presentation of Post-war Poland
- Use of cliffhangers



Things to discuss

Character: What do you think of the Russian soldiers?
Is Ivan a believable character? Do you like him? Why?
How did you feel when Ruth discovered the silver sword?
What did you think of Jan's attitude to Ivan? Was it justified?
Did he deserve to have his shoes confiscated by Ruth?

Do you like Jan? Why?

Are you angry or frustrated with anyone at the end of this section?

Structure: Was it an appropriate time in the novel for the author to reveal that Jan had the silver sword?

Chapter 11 ends with a cliffhanger - not the first in the novel. Why do you think the author makes great use of this technique? Do you like it? Why?

Prediction: Do you think the future is hopeful or hopeless for the children?
What do you think will happen to Edek now?
Do you think the family will ever be reunited?
Do you want them to be?
What difference would it make to you if they were/weren't reunited?

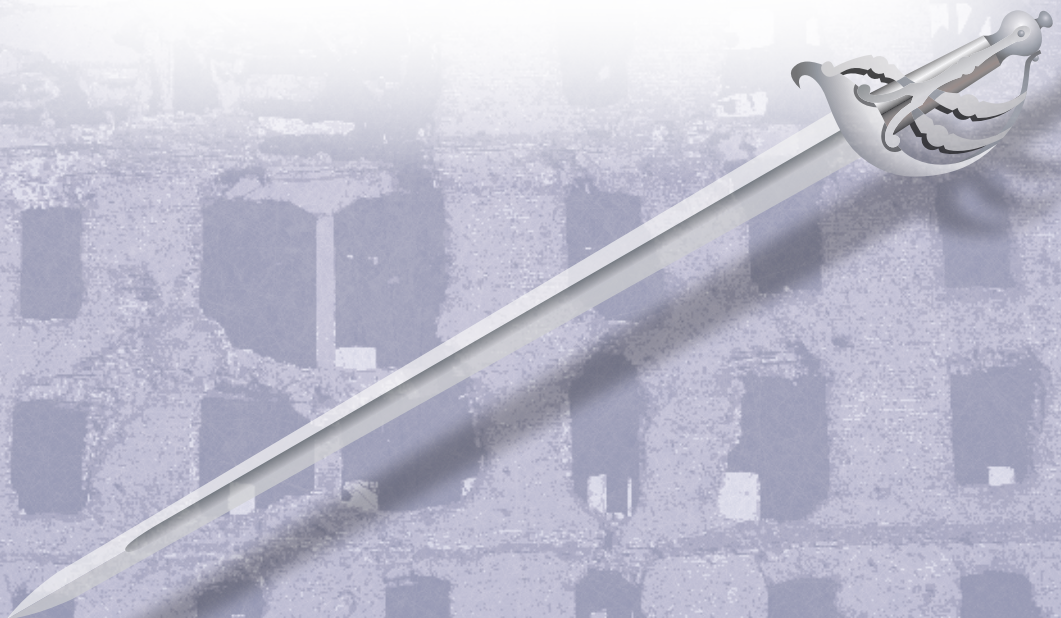
Language: Why does the author use the language of hope at the beginning of Chapter 11?

Setting: What are your impressions of post-war Poland?

Did it surprise you?

Why do you think the author spends time describing the surroundings?

Is it important?





Read to the end of Chapter 14 *City of the Lost*

Focus on...

- Jan and Edek's relationship
- The presentation of Berlin
- The presentation of the transit camp
- The language used to describe the refugees
- Narrative hooks
- The role of stories



Things to discuss

Character: How did you feel when Jimpy died in Chapter 12?

Did you expect it?

What more do we learn about the children?

Why do you think Jan and Edek do not have a friendly relationship?

How do you see the relationship developing?

Plot: What did you think of the ending to Chapter 12 - was it believable?

Does it matter if we believe the situation or not?

Does it make good storytelling?

What makes good storytelling?

Setting: How are Berlin and the Transit camp presented?

Narrative: How does the narrator feel about these conditions?

What is your opinion?

Theme: How important is hope? Is it better than medicine?

Ruth hopes Bronia is dreaming of fairy stories in Chapter 13. How far is the children's story a fairy tale?

Character: Is Edek's experience typical? Do you believe him?

Where do you think Jan has gone?

Why does Jan have such an affinity with animals?

Structure: The narrator fleetingly introduces a British officer in Chapter 14, stating that he and Jan '...were to meet again soon - and in the oddest of circumstances...'. Why do you think the narrator has done this?

How does it make you feel about the officer? Why doesn't the author tell the reader now? What questions does it raise?

What's the point of the chimpanzee story at the end of Chapter 14?

You could...

Pick out examples of language used by the writer to describe the refugees - how they moved, acted, looked. Do the words or phrases have anything in common? What images in your mind do they create? What do you learn about the conditions refugees had to endure?



Read to the end of Chapter 18 *Captain Greenwood*

Focus on...

- Use of the letter to report events
- The post-war world setting
- Presentation of Jan



Things to discuss

Structure: Why does the author use the form of a letter in Chapter 15 to report events? What other dimension does it add to the way the reader sees characters, settings and events?

Symbolism: What might the 'silver sword' symbolise?

What does it mean to Jan? Why is he so emotionally attached to it?

Character: What more do you learn about Jan?

Why do you think he does what Ruth asks him to do?

Was Jan right to steal? Is stealing ever ethical?

In Chapter 18, Captain Greenwood thinks that people like Jan are beyond remedy. What do you think?

Setting: What more do you learn about post-war conditions and events.

Were you surprised by anything?

Have you learnt anything?

What kind of world does it seem to you?

Did you imagine a post-war world being like this?

Language: Generally, Serrailier uses very simple, short sentences, but at the end of Chapter 16 he uses a complex sentence when describing the effects of war on different types of people. Why do you think he did that?

If you were to rewrite it in short sentences what would be lost and what would be gained?





Read to the end of Chapter 23

Dangerous Waters

Focus on...

- *Presentation of the farmer, his wife and the Burgomaster*
- *Different viewpoints of the War*
- *Creation of tension*



Things to discuss

Character: How is the farmer presented? And his wife?

Why do you think the writer presents the farmer as someone the children may need to worry about when they first meet him?

What do you think of the fact that the children always meet good and helpful people? Is it believable?

Why do you think the author has included a German couple? What might they symbolise?

What are your impressions of the Burgomaster?

How do you feel about him?

Can the reader rely on his depiction of refugees?

Narrative and Structure: In Chapter 22, the narrator reveals to the reader that the farmer deliberately decided not to inform the children about the dangers they would face on the river. Why didn't the farmer tell the children? Was he right to withhold the information? Why did the narrator decide to reveal this information to the reader? How does it make you feel about their journey?

How does the writer create tension in Chapter 23? Did you ever think they would be in danger? How did you feel when they were reunited at the end of the chapter?



Read to the end of the novel

Focus on...

- *How the novel ends*
- *Your response to the novel as a whole*



Things to discuss

Character: Why do you think Jan's background is never filled in?
Why is Jan included in the novel?
What do you imagine has happened to him?
Why does Jan hate Germans so much?
What did you think when Jan decided not to go after Ludwig?
Why does the author have Jan lose the animals he so obviously loves?
Which character do you most admire? Why?
Which of the children do you feel most sorry for and why?
Tell me who you thought was the most believable character and why?

Setting: How does Serrailier's description of the settings match photographs you have seen? Did he do them justice?
What role do the settings play in the novel?
Some of the place names are fictional and some real. Why do you think the author mixes the two?
Why do you think the author spends less time describing setting as the novel progresses?

Language: What words are associated with each character?
What does it reveal about them?
Find examples of language that show Serrailier has sympathy for the Polish situation and disagreed with the Nazi regime.
Pick out words and phrases used to describe the river in Chapter 23.
What do they have in common? How do they make the river appear?

Themes: What do you think are the themes of the novel?
Which is the most/least important?
How does the writer convey these themes?
Do you think the author presented war fairly?

Structure: What difference would it have made to the story, and to your enjoyment and understanding, if you didn't know about Joseph's ordeal at the beginning of the novel?
Did you like the way the novel ended?

After reading

Create & imagine

Developing a personal response to the novel

Fact and fiction

Find out some facts about a real event from any period in history that interests you: it could be a war, a major sporting event, a celebration or a catastrophe. Create a fictional character and write a section of a story about this event weaving some of the facts you have found into your story line. You could base your imaginary character on a real person seen in a photographic image from the time.

News report

Research modern refugees and produce a script for a radio news programme. Record your piece using the conventions of radio news bulletins. Try and include individual stories and interviews within your script, explain how people became refugees and what their life was like before they were forced to leave their home.

What is their life like now?



Jan's story

So in time even Jan grew up, and his bad ways began to drop from him

Hot seat the characters of Jan and Ruth. Make a list of questions to ask them about their journey and select members of the class to take on the characters and answer in role.

Now imagine you are Jan as an adult. Write and deliver a monologue explaining your feelings about your childhood experiences. Share your finished work with an audience.



Symbolism

The 'silver sword' becomes a powerful symbol of hope, courage and resilience. Explore symbols and their meaning. For example, a crown might symbolise power, a heart - love, a key - freedom, a candle - hope. Make a collection of simple items and discuss what they might symbolise to different people. What do you associate with them? Choose an object and include it in a poem or original art work demonstrating its symbolic power.



Memorable quotes

'You must walk behind me and hold on to the rifle. It doesn't matter if you slip, if you hold on to the rifle. And don't look down.'

A sheet of fire leapt up from their home into the frosty night sky. They fell flat in the snow and lay there. The roof shook, the whole city seemed to tremble.

The curtains made good sheets. On wet days they could be used over the hole in the wall to keep the rain out.

They saw nothing wrong in stealing from their enemies, but they were careful never to steal from their own people.

It was an ordeal before which the bravest spirit might quail.

The boy took the wooden box and smiled. Everyone wanted to look inside, but he wouldn't undo it.

'He's my friend,' said Jan indignantly. 'I don't eat my friends.'


Under the dark trees they could see the river only dimly, but the gently rushing sound of the water was music in their ears. On, on to the Danube. On to Switzerland, it sang.

Jan was quiet and sober, for he had kicked and shouted until he had no more kick or shout in him.

There was thunder in the air, but the black clouds held back their rain. They seemed to be saving it up for some grand and terrible occasion.

And what of Jan, that charming bundle of good intentions and atrocious deeds?





*During the war his mind had suffered more than
his body, and minds usually take longer to heal.
So in time even Jan grew up, and his bad ways
began to drop from him .*



‘Old-fashioned storytelling about courage at its best.’

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