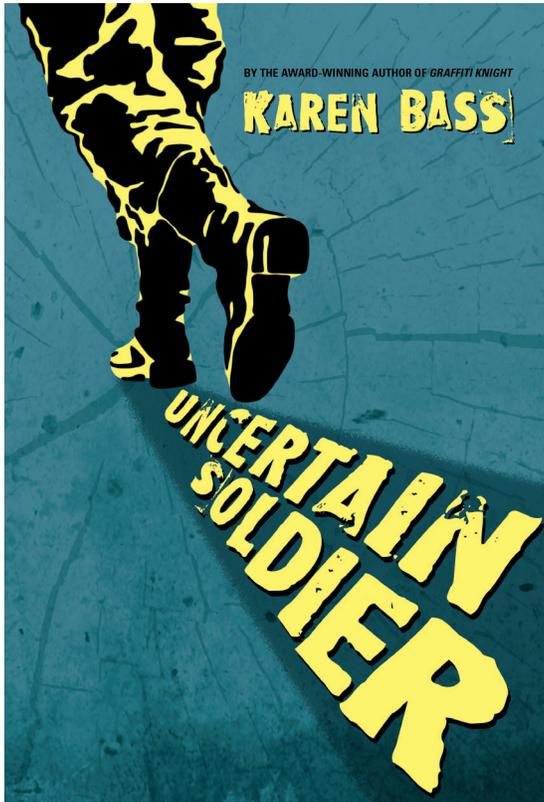


UNCERTAIN SOLDIER

Karen Bass

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Created by Erin Woods



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KEYWORDS

World War II, Historical Fiction, Young Adult, Alberta, Prisoners of War, Prejudice, Immigration, Friendship, Suspense, Mystery

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

RL.7.1, RL.7.2, RL.7.3, RL.7.4, RL.7.6, RL.7.9, RL.7.10, W.7.1, W.7.3, W.7.4, W.7.6, RL.8.1, RL.8.3, RL.8.4, RL.8.6, RL.8.10, W.8.3, W.8.4, W.8.6

FURTHER RESOURCES

Reviews of *Uncertain Soldier* http://pajamapress.ca/resource/uncertain_soldier_reviews/

Karen Bass Fact Sheet: http://pajamapress.ca/resource/uncertain_soldier_extra_content/

Legion Magazine article “The Happiest Prisoners” by Graham Chandler, March 15, 2012: <https://legionmagazine.com/en/2012/03/the-happiest-prisoners/>

CBC Digital Archives resources about prisoners of war in Canada: <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/war-conflict/prisoners-of-war/>

Goodbye Buffalo Bay by Larry Loyie (Theytus Books, 2008)
—YA novel about a teen’s first years after residential school

“...readers will likely find the two main characters’ journeys to safety and justice in a cruel world compelling.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Bass does a fantastic job building and releasing tension throughout the novel...[The characters’] feelings of helplessness and struggles with conflicted loyalties should be easy for any young reader to identify with.”—*Quill & Quire*

“This novel shows solid research...the visceral details and important themes make the journey compelling.”
—*Resource Links*

“Bass writes with a visceral power...Wrestling with complex issues of friendship, loyalty, politics and violence, *Uncertain Soldier* would be an excellent choice for a teen boys’ book club”—*Canadian Children’s Book News*

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KAREN BASS

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STORY SUMMARY

Seventeen-year-old Erich is a prisoner of war working at a northern Alberta logging camp. Twelve-year-old Max goes to school—reluctantly—in the nearby town. The two would be unlikely friends, except that neither has anyone else to turn to. At the height of World War II, nobody wants to befriend a German.

It doesn't matter that Erich was forced into the military by his father, or that Max was proudly born in Canada. They are both easy targets for the locals' grief and anger against the Nazis. The other prisoners are no more welcoming, distrustful of Erich's perfect English and his dislike for Nazism. Still, when a series of accidents shake the logging camp, they pressure Erich to question the Canadians and find the saboteur—even if his questions get him into trouble. Caught between angry prisoners and suspicious captors, Erich is afraid to take any action at all. It is only when Max's schoolyard tormentors cross a dangerous line that Erich realizes that his real loyalties lie not with a regime or a country, but with his friend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Bass is the multi-award-winning author of four previous novels for young adult readers. *Graffiti Knight* won the CLA Young Adult Book Award, the Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Young People, the R. Ross Annett Award, and the CAA Exporting Alberta Award. Karen lives in Hythe, Alberta, where she was the public library manager for sixteen years before turning to full-time writing.

PRE-READING LESSON

PRISONERS OF WAR

(RESEARCH; HISTORY; PRIMARY, SECONDARY, AND TERTIARY SOURCES)

Materials: Chalk- or whiteboard, Internet

Directions:

1. As a class, brainstorm any information you know about German prisoners of war in Canada during World War II. If little is known, have students make predictions about how they think they were housed and treated. Ask students to share how they would manage enemy prisoners of war if they were put in charge during a conflict.
2. Sort the class' ideas into categories relating to food, housing, free time, weapons, etc.
3. Organize your notes by category into a four-column chart with the headings "I know," "I think," "I would," and "I learned." To fill in the "I learned" category, have students conduct research online. Some good resources are:

Legion Magazine article "The Happiest Prisoners" by Graham Chandler, March 15, 2012: legionmagazine.com/en/2012/03/the-happiest-prisoners/

Multimedia resources in the CBC Digital Archives, under the category "Prisoners of War": www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/war-conflict/prisoners-of-war/

4. Discuss:

Were you surprised by any of the things you learned during your research?

Why do you think the Canadian government made the decisions it did about how to manage the prisoners of war?

Do you think every government made similar decisions? Why or why not?

What kind of sources did you find in your research (first-person accounts, newspaper articles written at the time of the event, articles written about past events, photographs, etc.)? How does the kind of source affect the information it delivers?

WHILE READING**(METACOGNITION, PREDICTION)**

Materials: One pad of sticky notes per student

Directions:

Give each student a pad of sticky notes. While they read, have them write down questions and reactions and stick them to relevant pages. The notes could relate to:

- New vocabulary
- Predictions about what will happen next
- Things that surprise you
- Things you don't understand

If you have students who find it disruptive to stop in the middle of reading, suggest that they pause between each chapter instead and think back on what they have just read.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about the research you did before reading. Does the author's account of the prisoners of war match the information you learned? Did she change or add anything? Why do you think that is?
2. We are used to viewing World War II from the perspective of the Allied nations and considering Germany, which started the conflict, as an enemy. How does the author build the reader's sympathy for Erich, who is a member of the German navy?
3. Have you ever hidden a skill or talent in order to fit in with a group? Was it easy? Hard? Why?
4. Erich's mail, like everyone's during World War II, was opened by censors before it was sent on to him. The censors' job was to black out or cut out any information—addresses, troop movements, news about battles—that could be dangerous if it fell into the enemy's hands. How do you think this affected people trying to communicate with loved ones overseas? What kind of letters could they safely write?
5. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story through the perspectives of two characters instead of one? How would the book be different through just Erich's eyes? Through just Max's?
6. How do you feel about the restrictions placed on German-Canadian families during the war, such as the ban on owning guns? Can you make any connections to restrictions placed on certain groups of people today? Why do you think these restrictions are in place?
7. Max feels caught between two identities: German and Canadian. This was particularly problematic for him at a time when Germany and Canada were at war. What similar struggles might modern immigrants or first-generation Canadians face?
8. Who did you suspect was the saboteur? Did your suspicions change throughout the novel?
9. What clues does the author give the reader about the saboteur's identity?
10. Have you had personal experiences that affect how you relate to Erich or to Max? Do you think you would feel differently about the book if you had not had those experiences?
11. Thinking about what you know of early North American settlers' relationships with First Nations, later land treaties, and issues today between First Nations communities and the federal government, what can you infer about the other characters' treatment of the Cree teenager Christmas?
12. Think about which characters have power over others (consider, for example, Henry Lane vs. Bechtel). How do they get power? How do they use it?
13. Why was it significant that the Canadians told Christmas to line up for food ahead of the German prisoners of war?
14. Why was it important to Erich that he learn to pronounce Christmas' true name?
15. What impact did the Author's Note have on your reflections about the story?
16. How is the subject of a novel different from its theme? Can you suggest a subject and theme for *Uncertain Soldier*?

SUSPENSE (WRITING, READING COMPREHENSION, ELEMENTS OF STYLE)

Directions:

1. The author uses many techniques to create tension and suspense in *Uncertain Soldier*. Help students define and find examples of foreshadowing, metaphor, and symbolism in the book.

2. Discuss:

How do these examples of foreshadowing, metaphor, and symbolism contribute to the book’s suspenseful mood?

How can your observations about the author’s use of these elements help you in your own writing?

Extension: Discuss the format of a novel’s plot and examine how the author uses the elements of style addressed above in relation to the exposition, rising action, climax, etc.

VOCABULARY AND CONTEXT (CRITICAL LITERACY, METACOGNITION)

Materials: Paper, pencils, rulers

Directions:

1. Have students choose ten words or phrases that were unfamiliar to them before reading *Uncertain Soldier*.

2. Discuss:

If you come across an unfamiliar word in a text, do you always have to look up its definition? Why or why not?

What clues did the author give you to help you understand the unfamiliar words?

3. Have students each create and complete a chart with the following headings: “Word/Phrase”, “Context”, “I think it means”, “Definition”.

TRACKING THE WEATHER (DATA MANAGEMENT, GEOGRAPHY)

Materials: chalk- or whiteboard; printed or projected examples of graphs; paper; pencils; graph paper and rulers or graphing software

Directions:

1. Weather plays an important part in the plot of *Uncertain Soldier*, and the author gives the date and temperature at the beginning of each chapter. Tell students that graphs and charts were invented so that information like this could be turned into a picture and understood at a glance. In this activity, they will work together to decide what kind of graph or chart would be most useful to represent the changes in temperature over time during *Uncertain Soldier*.

2. Create a chart with the headings “Graph Type,” “Advantages,” and “Disadvantages.” Invite students to suggest kinds of graph and come up with reasons why they would or would not be useful for showing this information (e.g. a pie chart could show the proportion of days above and below freezing, but it could not show daily variations in temperature). If your class has not yet learned about many types of graph, you can distribute examples and ask them to come up with advantages and disadvantages through small group discussion.

3. When the class has come to a decision about which graph type would be most useful in this instance, model the creation of the graph. Then, using weather data from your own region over a period of time, have students apply what they have learned by making their own graph.

MAKING CHOICES

(COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING, CRITICAL THINKING)

Materials: PMI Chart handout, pencils

Preparation: Photocopy the PMI Chart handout found at the end of this guide.

Directions:

The central characters of *Uncertain Soldier* face important choices: should Erich keep his head down or investigate the sabotage? Should he keep his promise to Max or tell someone about the near-hanging? Should Max keep quiet or seek revenge? To help students practice making informed decisions of their own, analyze one of these choices using a plus/minus/interesting chart. A template is available at the end of this guide.

A PMI chart goes beyond a typical pros-and-cons examination of a dilemma by providing a place for observations that are not obviously positive or negative. This is especially useful for recording the results of a group discussion. For example:

Should Erich try to find the saboteur?

Plus: If he is successful, he can stop the dangerous accidents from happening

Minus: He might be harmed if the Canadians get suspicious of his questions

Interesting: Erich is in a unique position as the only person involved who speaks both English and German

MYSTERY STORIES

(LITERACY, GENRE)

Materials: chalk- or whiteboard, paper, pencils

Directions:

Uncertain Soldier might be best classified as a thriller or a suspense story. In this activity, students will explore the mystery genre and identify the characteristics of its subgenres.

1. Have the class brainstorm a list of familiar mystery stories, novels, and films. Next, have them list as many kinds of mystery story as they can (whodunit, crime novel, hardboiled, suspense, thriller, true crime, caper, etc.). Using student input, develop a definition of each subgenre. Have students organize this information into charts with the headings “Subgenre,” “Definition,” and “Examples.”

2. Discuss:

In which subgenre did you place Uncertain Soldier? Why?

Are there any characteristics that are common to many or all kinds of mystery?

Which kind of mystery story do you enjoy the most? Why?

VOICE AND POINT OF VIEW

(READING, WRITING, NARRATION)

Materials: Paper, pencils, Word processing software

Directions:

Even when the characters are not speaking, the author uses distinct voices for the chapters told from Erich

and Max’s respective points of view (for example, Max’s chapters use words like “kid” and have frequent references to superheroes and Canadian pop culture). In this activity, students will learn to think critically about voice in writing and the ways an author crafts it.

1. Challenge students to identify which character uses the following comparisons:

“as smoothly as a waltzing couple” (10)

“like they were drawings in a comic book” (211)

“like a rotting log with the bark pulled off: bugs scurrying everywhere” (25)

“Clattering...became percussion accompaniment to quiet singing” (38)

“He...stirred his breakfast into a pool of quicksand” (40)

“a jewel-eyed serving girl” (69)

“Fear scratched like a mouse in the walls” (193)

“like a boy called into the headmaster’s office” (207)

“The half moon shone like theatre lights turned low” (261)

2. Discuss:

How could you guess which comparisons belong to which character?

Do you notice any other differences in the narration of Erich’s chapters vs. Max’s chapters?

What kind of information did the author need to know about her characters in order to write with an authentic voice for each of them?

How can the example of Uncertain Soldier help you to craft voice in your own writing?

3. Have students choose a scene in which both protagonists are present and rewrite it in the other character’s voice. Have them edit their own work, exchange it for peer editing, and produce a typed final draft.

Extension: Have students read examples of other kinds of writing with distinctive voice, such as a memoir, an editorial, a political pamphlet, and a dramatic monologue. Discuss how the writer’s voice affects how we identify with them, and how we perceive the information being given to us. Guide students to think critically about voice in relation to credibility.

DRAMATIC WRITING (SENTENCE FLUENCY, WRITING)

Materials: Pencils, paper

Directions:

1. Writers add interest and pacing to their writing by varying the length and complexity of sentences. Have students read the first two paragraphs on page 264, then re-write the passage using only simple, short sentences. Ask them to explain in writing how this affects the drama of the scene.

2. Next have students come up with an exciting scene of their own and write about it in short, simple sentences. Trading their work with a partner, have them re-write their partner's scene using a variety of simple and complex sentences.

3. Discuss:

How do the two versions compare?

How can you apply the strategies you learned in this exercise to your own writing?

SUPERHEROES (ART, WRITING, VISUAL LITERACY)

Materials: Pencils, paper, art materials or comic design software

Directions:

1. Max uses comic books as an escape from his difficult reality and dreams that Superman will come to rescue him from his tormentors. Give your class an opportunity to look at a variety of comic books (if possible, find samples from different eras).

2. Discuss:

What do you think is so appealing about comic books? Why did they appeal to Max in particular?

What are the similarities between comics and novels? What are the differences?

Are comic books today the same as comic books in Max's time? How have they changed or stayed the same?

3. Have students re-write the rescue scene at the end of *Uncertain Soldier* as a comic, casting Erich and Christmas as

superheroes. This activity could be expanded to include a lesson on art techniques that are important in comics, including figure drawing, shading, cartooning, and composition.

Extension: If you have access to comic design software or websites, have students create their comics digitally.

WHOSE NEWS? (CRITICAL LITERACY, ORAL COMMUNICATION, DRAMA)

Materials: Pencils, paper, film recording and editing technology (optional), costumes (optional)

Directions:

1. Have the class brainstorm a list of various sources from which they might get information and news (news-papers, Twitter, YouTube, television, etc.). Ask them to name factors (age, gender, sponsors, professional affiliations, education, etc.) that might influence a source's perspective on and delivery of the news.

2. In small groups, have students take on the different perspectives that residents in Horley might have had in *Uncertain Soldier*. Informally, have each group member improvise a retelling of Max's rescue and Erich's shooting for their groupmates. Perspectives could include:

- Someone who has lost family members to the German army
- Someone who knows and likes Max but is suspicious of the prisoners of war
- Someone who is completely neutral
- Someone who is pro-Nazi
- Someone who is prejudiced against First Nations peoples

3. Have students discuss in their small groups:

How did the story change with each retelling?

Imagine a news station wanted to present a completely neutral account of the story, but everyone they interviewed was biased in some way. How might they use the interview clips?

Are official news stations always unbiased?

How can you tell if a news source is biased?

How can you make sure your own perspective on the news is not biased?

4. Have each group cast one member as a news anchor and a second as a reporter. The remaining group members should refine their improvised retellings and establish their characters firmly. Have the groups write and perform a neutral newscast about the event, including an introduction and conclusion by the anchor and interviews with the characters.

Extension: Have students film each character's full retelling, then create a newscast using only certain clips of each. The final project should include both the original material and the edited newscast, along with a rationale for the editing.

CHOREOGRAPHY AND CHOICE (DANCE, PHYSICAL EDUCATION)

Materials: Paper, pencils, music player

Directions:

1. Have students choose a moment from the book during which a character has to make a difficult decision (e.g. Max deciding to take revenge, Erich deciding to go after Max, Cora deciding to trust Erich). Working with a small group, have them brainstorm songs that could express the emotions involved in that choice. They should brainstorm a list of physical movements that could convey those emotions.
2. Next, have each group choose a piece of music and use their brainstormed ideas to choreograph a dance that they will perform for the class.
3. As they refine their dance, have each group discuss, writing down their responses:

Can any of these movements be repeated in slightly different ways to convey the building or release of emotion in the dancer?

What effect would a repeated pattern of movements have? What effect would breaking the pattern have?

How can the movements be matched with the rise and fall of the music's phrases and dynamics to enhance their effect?

How can you use levels to add variety to your dance?

Would incorporating stillness into your dance make it more or less effective?

Would props or costumes be useful?

Think about a time when you have experienced the same emotions you are trying to convey in your dance. How do your own experiences help you to express someone else's through an artistic medium?

Describe your chosen music's timbre, tempo, and dynamics. Explain how each one contributes to the mood you wish to express.

CHRISTMAS' STORY (COMPARATIVE READING)

Materials: *Goodbye Buffalo Bay* by Larry Loyie

Directions:

Like Christmas, author Larry Loyie was removed from a traditional Cree childhood in northern Alberta and attended a residential school before spending part of his adolescence working on farms and logging camps. In *Goodbye Buffalo Bay* he draws on his own experiences to write about a teen boy making his own way after leaving residential school. Have students read this novel and write a comparison of Lawrence and Christmas' experiences. Visit www.firstnationswriter.com for more resources.

WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION (WRITING, RESEARCH)

Directions:

1. Have students interview an older family member or friend about a regionally or internationally significant event that took place before they were born (have them pick something that would have been recorded in newspapers). Remind students to ask questions about how things looked, tasted, smelled, sounded, felt. Suggest they also ask for examples of common slang words and pop culture references from the time.
2. Have students support the information gathered in their interviews by researching their chosen event in newspapers and Internet archives. Have them create a bibliography as they work.
3. Instruct students to create a fictional character and use the details they gathered to write about the event from that character's perspective.
4. Ask students to reread their drafts and decide if more historical details need to be added or taken out. They should also have their interview subject read it (as Hartmann Nagel read early drafts of *Uncertain Soldier*) to check for any inaccuracies.

NAME: _____

TOPIC: _____

