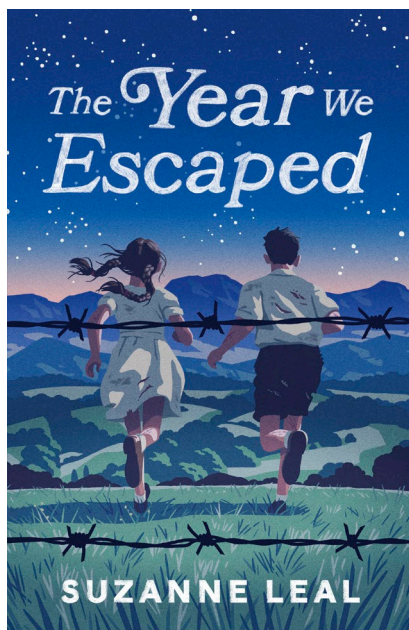


Classroom Resources



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NOTES BY:
Sue Warren and Jemma Myers

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The Year We Escaped Suzanne Leal

BOOK SUMMARY

For fans of Jackie French and Katrina Nannestad, *The Year We Escaped* is a heart-stopping and remarkable World War II story by talented author Suzanne Leal.

Europe, 1940

With war on their doorstep, German classmates, Klara and Rachel, and French brothers, Lucien and Paul, are forced to leave their homes. They are taken to Gurs, a detention camp in the south-west of France. It's a crowded place, with little comfort and even less food.

When Klara and Rachel are promised safe refuge in a remote French village, Lucien and Paul are anxious to join them – and will risk their own lives to get there.

Filled with adventure, danger and intrigue, this is the story of four unlikely friends desperate to escape from a war that keeps coming closer.

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

- AC9HH7S06
- AC9E7LE01
- AC9E7LE05

THEMES

- Families
- Grief/Loss
- WWII
- Resilience

Recommended Reading Ages: 12+

Resources Created For: Lower Secondary

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Classroom Resources

Before Reading

1. Consider the title and front cover art:
 - a) Can readers predict setting – both place and time?
 - b) What do they think is implied by the strands of barbed wire?
 - c) Why would children be escaping? From what or whom?
2. Establish a class learning wall to record reflections, questions and answers, relevant information, quotes, examples of writing techniques and speculations.
3. As a class, brainstorm what students already know about World War II in Europe. Record key points on the learning wall.
 - a) Narrow this down to information about life under the Nazi Occupation and those groups persecuted during the war.
 - b) What do they know about:
 - Paris during the Occupation, the Vichy government/collaborators
 - Jewish people, including those who were German
 - Events in Germany leading up to the war, e.g. Kristallnacht.
 - c) Use a map to show students countries that were Nazi-occupied and add it to the learning wall.
4. In pairs or small groups, allocate students one of the topics below to research and share their findings with the class.
 - a) Paris under the Occupation
 - b) The Hitler Youth
 - c) The Resistance/Underground
 - d) The Vichy government
 - e) Internment camps
 - f) Scouts in World War II
 - g) The Vivarais-Lignon Plateau and sheltering villages
 - h) Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE)
5. The narrative opens at the outset of World War II, in Paris and rural Germany. Further into the novel the narrative moves to the internment camp, Gurs. Use Google Earth to explore these places now and find images or film of them at the time, e.g. Paris in 1939, Germany in 1939, and Gurs in 1939.
 - a) Add a map of Europe to the class learning wall and plot key places and events as you read the novel.
6. Introduce or revise relevant literary terms such as foreshadowing, voice, motif.

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During Reading

1. Write brief chapter summaries as you read, keeping them short and including only key plot/character development points.
 - Include important quotes that reflect these key points.
2. Klara's journal and her writing become very important to her. Students could keep a journal throughout the novel study to record their reflections, writing and activities. They could choose to write from the point of view of one of the characters or as themselves.
 - a) Encourage students to use a variety of ways to reflect on the novel, e.g. collage or draw images of scenes mentioned, a map, pieces of cloth or thread to represent clothes mentioned like Klara's yellow scarf.
3. Organise topic-specific vocabulary groupings on the class learning wall. One section might contain the language pertaining to the period, either specific words or phrases. Other sections might be around aspects of daily life mentioned, such as food or activities.

Language and narrative techniques

1. Read the first chapter.
 - a) How does the author set the scene and create the atmosphere? Identify words and phrases that do this.
 - (i) *Frau Richter spoke over me. 'You filthy Jews,' she said, louder this time, 'think you're a cut above the rest of us, don't you?'* (p. 9) How does this line change the tone of the scene in the bakery? What information does it give us about Klara and her mother?
 - b) What do students think has happened to Klara's father?
 - c) Are Klara and her mother happy?
 - d) What does Mama mean by 'It's getting worse'?
2. *The Year We Escaped* is set during World War II and includes real events that we generally know quite a bit about. This means that when characters in the novel make observations or predictions about what they think may happen, we have the benefit of knowing what takes place. This knowledge contributes to the foreshadowing that the author uses throughout the text.
 - a) *'Thank God we're not in the hands of that madman,' Papa muttered.* (p. 18) As readers, we know that much of France, including Paris, will be taken over by Germany during World War II. How does this knowledge influence the tone of this otherwise happy scene?
 - b) *Mama's face lit up when she told me. 'Perhaps the worst is behind us now,' she murmured. But it wasn't.* (p. 44). What do readers think is being foreshadowed here?
3. There are numerous German words used throughout the text.
 - a) Why do students think the author has included these words when most of the story is told in English?
 - b) Many of them are similar to the English counterpart. Find other examples.
 - c) For each one choose a synonym in English.
 - d) Explain in a short paragraph why there are similarities between the German and English words.

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Classroom Resources

German	Meaning based on context	English synonym
Guten Morgen p. 24		
Jungvolk p. 52		
Komm p. 83		
Schokolade p. 83		
Familie p. 84		

Characters

1. This narrative has a relatively small cast number of characters. Draw up lists of the most noteworthy characters and classify their importance in the text, for example:

Primary	Secondary	Incidental
Klara	Rachel	Frau Zimmerman
	Horst Rosenthal	Monsieur Dubois

- a) Construct a character web to show the connections between primary, secondary and incidental characters.
2. A character arc refers to the way a significant character changes across the course of a narrative. This happens through facing challenges, making mistakes and overcoming obstacles from which they learn and grow. Students should be able to identify this, particularly with Klara and Lucien.
 - a) Ask students to select either Klara or Lucien and plot their character arc across *The Year We Escaped*. This could be done in a number of ways. Encourage students to use quotes to reflect the ways in which their character is changing across the narrative as well as other written and visual signifiers.
 3. Despite the ordeals the characters experience, many of them are also incredibly kind, sometimes at great personal risk or sacrifice to themselves. For example, when Monsieur Fontaine tells Lucien's parents that the Germans are about to start rounding up Jewish people in Paris.
 - a) What are other examples of kindness in the novel?
 - b) In Gurs, many of the internees are generous with what they have, in spite of having very little of anything. Why do students think they are so willing to share, often with people they hardly know?
 - c) On the other hand, some characters like the Richters, who buy the shop from Mama, have a lot but are not willing to give up even a small amount and take advantage of other people's hardship. What do you think the author is trying to convey about the idea of kindness?

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After Reading

1. Introduce or review the word 'dichotomy'. Pose the question to students: are people wholly good or bad? Throughout this narrative, the difference between good people and bad people is for the most part definite, e.g. The Richters (both mother and son), and the policeman, Roland Moraud, can be considered bad, while Monsieur Dubois, Madam Cassin and Carlos are good.
 - a) Do students think this is true for all the characters in the novel? For example, Klara often breaks rules and does things she has been told not to do, but does this make her a bad person?
 - b) Consider the scene involving Monsieur Fontaine, the policeman (pp. 179–80). What can readers infer from this incident, firstly with the woman informing on her neighbour, but then letting Maman and Papa know that Paris is about to become very dangerous for Jews?
 - c) Are people in real life either entirely good or entirely bad?
 - d) How do circumstances influence our perception of what makes someone good or bad?
2. There are various incidents when characters bend or ignore rules, do not speak the whole truth or omit to tell all the details, for example, when Maman does not register as a Jewish person or when Klara and Rachel first break out of Block M in Gurs.
 - a) Are these actions justifiable in the circumstances?
 - b) Can students think of other circumstances when it would be acceptable to break or ignore rules?
 - c) Conduct a class debate on this topic.
3. Gurs was not a death camp like Auschwitz or Buchenwald, although many people did die there. As an internment camp, it held different people for a variety of reasons. Look at some of the information the class has gathered about the camp and discuss the following:
 - a) Why were people sent there?
 - b) Why did Vichy officials turn over Jews in the camp to the SS?
 - c) Other countries also had internment camps, including Australia. Look these up and compare the conditions for the people held in these camps.
4. *'It won't last forever. And until then, my suggestion is this: use the time wisely. Listen, watch, write, draw, then do it all over again to help you make sense of these very strange times.'* (p. 171). Herr Rosenthal gives this advice to Klara when she is feeling frustrated at being stuck in Gurs. He similarly encourages Lucien to draw, and he composes comics as a way of coping with the times they are living through.
 - a) What do students think he means by this?
 - b) How does reflecting on what is happening to us help us to understand and cope with our lives?

About the Author

SUZANNE LEAL is the author of novels *The Watchful Wife*, *The Teacher's Secret* and *The Deceptions*, winner of the Nib People's Choice Prize. Her debut novel for middle-grade readers, *Running with Ivan*, is on the Children's Book Council of Australia Notables List for Younger Readers and was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's History Awards and the ARA Historical Novel Prize. An experienced facilitator and interviewer, Suzanne is the founder of Thursday Book Club, a relaxed book club connecting readers online.
www.suzanneleal.com

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