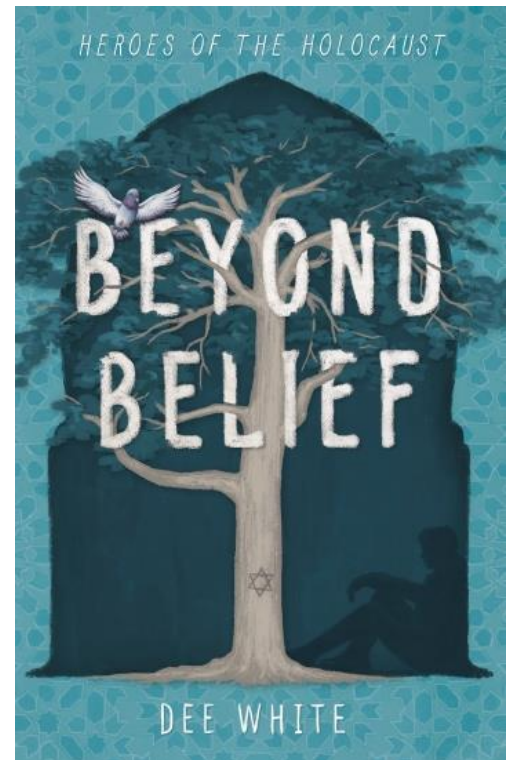


Beyond Belief

Author
Dee White



Synopsis

Paris in 1942 terrifies 11 year-old Ruben. He hasn't seen his sister Rosa in almost a year, and he and his parents are in hiding in a damp and dark basement. With the streets filled with German soldiers intent on locating and rounding up Jews, Ruben's terror is justified. He and his parents are forced to flee when their refuge is threatened, and while Ruben is taken in by the imam at the Grand Paris Mosque, his parents vanish. Wearing someone else's clothes, being called by someone else's name, and learning a religion and language not his own, Ruben feels safer than he has in a long time. But the safety is neither sufficient, nor more than illusory. While Ruben yearns to be reunited with his family and waits with growing impatience for the mysterious Fox to collect him and escort him to his father's homeland of Spain, the Mosque comes under suspicion. Nazi soldiers invade the serenity and once again Ruben and the other Jewish children sheltering there are forced to flee. A heartbreaking story of loss, hope, faith and terror, *Beyond Belief* is the fictional representation of a tale that was played out in reality for millions of Jewish children in Nazi-controlled Europe. How Ruben survives, and overcomes the challenges of living as a Jewish child in Nazi Europe while remaining strong in his own faith and true to his personal moral compass is a story that brings to life the human face of one of the darkest episodes in modern history.

About the Author

Dee White is the award-winning author of eighteen books for kids and teens, and will do just about anything for a story including jump out of a plane and ride in a hot air balloon. She recently walked the Paris sewers to research her historical fiction, *Beyond Belief*, due out in 2020. Dee loves inspiring and mentoring writers of all ages, and can tailor workshops to individual interests, ages, curriculum and teaching needs. She has a Professional Writing and Editing Diploma from Victoria University and her writing and teaching has taken her all over Australia and overseas.

Themes

WWII; Nazi-controlled Europe; the Holocaust; religious tolerance and understanding; personal faith; family; compassion; inner-strength; hope; love; despair; fear; morality; self-identity; and acceptance.

Writing Style

Written throughout in the third person, the story follows Ruben's point of view throughout and authorial omniscience is limited to his perspective. Background information is conveyed through a combination of Ruben's personal reflections and reminiscences, explanations given to him by other characters, and narrative exposition. Seen through Ruben's eyes, and filtered by his understanding of events, White conveys the fear, confusion, and distress that were the common denominator for so many children during the Holocaust. The action is fast-paced enough to engage the youthful reader and retain their attention, and the plot tension is deftly managed and increases gradually throughout. A powerful and moving narrative, White does not shy from addressing the more complicated moralities of the situation, and Ruben's gradually increasing awareness of the horror that surrounds him as well as the growth of his personal moral compass and inner bravery brings both hope and compassion to a tale that is at its core horrific in the reality of what occurred.

TEACHER NOTES

- 1) Before reading the story, as a class look closely at the cover and title, and discuss what you can infer and predict about the story based on the information present. Some things to include in your discussion might be:
 - What does the image on the cover show?
 - What does the phrase *Beyond Belief* mean?
 - When is the phrase *Beyond Belief* most commonly used - what sorts of events can and does it describe?
 - Written at the very top of the cover is the phrase *Heroes of the Holocaust*. What was the Holocaust, when did it occur, and who might be said to be its heroes?
 - When do you think the book is likely to be set?
 - Where is the book likely to be set?
 - On the spine of the novel are two symbols; a six pointed star and a five pointed star within a crescent moon. What might these two symbols represent/what are they commonly associated with?

- 2) Before reading the novel, as a class discuss what you already know about WWII and the Holocaust. Some points to include in your discussion might be:
 - What was the Holocaust?
 - Where did the Holocaust occur and when did it happen?
 - What does the word *Holocaust* mean?
 - Why is the word *Holocaust* used to describe the persecution and slaughter of millions of European Jews by the Nazis?
 - How was the Holocaust stopped, and by whom?
 - When did WWII start?
 - Who were the participants?
 - Which countries saw active fighting?
 - How long did WWII last - when did it end?
 - Which countries were invaded and occupied by the Nazis and their allies?

- 3) After reading the first chapter, as a class discuss what you have learnt about the characters and setting from this opening scene. Some things to include in your discussion might be:
 - In which city and country is this novel set?
 - Where specifically is the current action taking place?
 - When is the novel set?
 - Who is the main character?
 - Who are the other characters in the first scene and how are they related to the protagonist?
 - What is happening to the general population of the protagonist's country, and to his community and family in particular?
 - What emotions are the characters experiencing in the first chapter, and why?
- 4) After reading the first chapter, in small groups use the information discussed in activity 3 to help you create a brief summary of the original setting, and a short character outline for each character who appears in the scene. Be sure in your summaries to address not only what is happening, as well as when, where, and to whom, but also to include commentary on the physical, social, and emotional impacts of the events on the main characters.
- 5) After reading the novel, in pairs or small groups choose one of the points discussed in activity 2. and research further on that specific topic. Create a slideshow presentation and share your research findings with the class. Accompany your information points with relevant passages from the text and copies of original photographs or artwork from the time.
- 6) On an online map of France, attempt to locate the main places described in the novel. Print out the map and mark Ruben's journey across France on it, as described in the novel. Where possible, utilise the street-view feature to look at as many of the places from the novel as they appear today as you can. In pairs or small groups, research one of the key landmarks mentioned in the novel, and create a slideshow presentation or poster sharing your findings with the class.
- 7) Why were the Jewish people targeted by the Nazi regime before and during WWII? What is the value to a fascist leader of inciting hatred against a minority? As a class discuss the progression of anti-Semitic practices and laws in Nazi Germany, and their culmination in genocide. In your discussion consider the fact that humans are a social species, with a strong need to belong to a group, and how Hitler's hate-speech and discriminatory laws fed the feeling of belonging to a superior group in his followers and in the non-jewish German population.
- 8) How do Ruben and his family feel about the lies and hate-speech spread by the Nazis? How does it affect them personally? Write a brief analysis of the effects of such hate-speech and disinformation on the targeted population as shown in the novel, and speculate as to the motivations and behaviours of the general population. Include evidence from the text to support your assertions.
- 9) When Ruben was in hiding in the Mosque, he had to change his name to Abdul. As a class discuss how it might feel to have to change your name and pretend to be someone else for your own safety. Some things to include in your conversation might be:
 - What does it feel like when someone accidentally calls you by the wrong name?
 - How much do you think being separated from his family contributed to Ruben's difficulties with being known by a new name?
 - Why would Ruben's protectors have changed his name?
 - How integral do you feel that your name is to your personal identity?

- 10) Individually, write a brief analysis (approx 300 to 500 words) of the effect of changing his name on Ruben's mental state while in hiding. Be sure to consider how he was already feeling at the time, and the different stresses and fears he was having to cope with in your analysis. Support your arguments using evidence from the text.
- 11) What is the relevance of the story of Tsagone to the plot line of the novel as a whole? In small groups discuss any parallels you can see between this story as told within the novel, and to Ruben's story overall.
- 12) When Ruben discovered the identity of the Fox, he was confused, distressed, and didn't know how to deal with this information and its potential impact on his life. What are the conflicting emotions that you think he might have felt? Write a brief exploration of Ruben's potential emotional state and mixed emotions upon finding out that the hero he had hoped would come and save him was actually his beloved big sister who would continue to risk her life saving others. Use evidence from the text to support your arguments.
- 13) If you live near enough to one, go on a class trip to visit a Jewish Museum or Holocaust Memorial.
- 14) As a class, learn more about the two religious festivals, Rosh Hashanah and Ramadan, which Ruben mentions in the story. In small groups choose one of these festivals and prepare a poster or other visual aid to display what you have learnt.
- 15) How satisfied were you with the ending of the story? Write a brief personal reaction piece sharing your emotional response to the story as a whole, and your thoughts and feelings surrounding the ending in particular. Be sure to include specific examples of text, events, or expressed opinions that have influenced your feelings and emotional response.