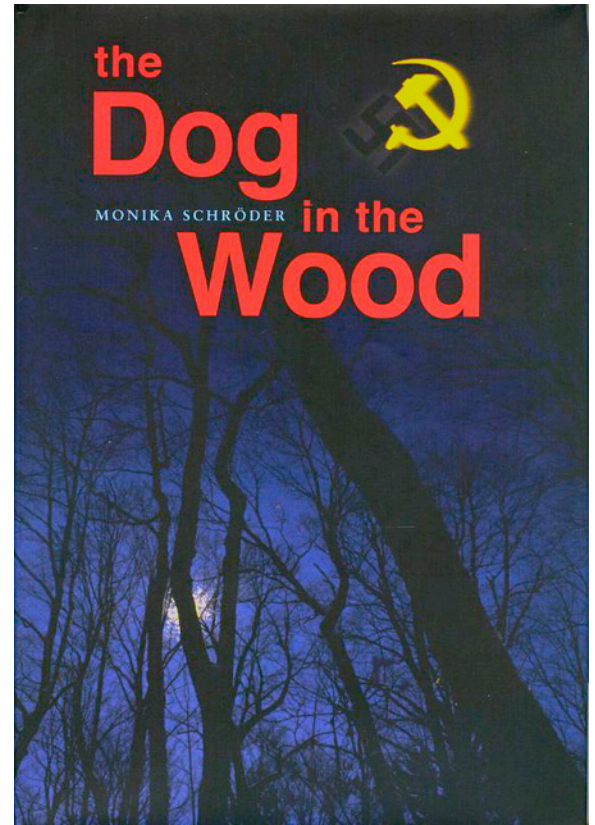


# Discussion Guide for *The Dog in the Wood*

by Monika Schröder



## About the Book

When we study history, we learn about the big events: the discoveries and inventions that changed the way people worked and lived; the leaders who impacted the course of human events; the conflicts between people and nations that led to wars. But when we read historical fiction, we get a closer, more intimate look, and we can see how historical events affected the everyday lives of people. In this way, we can begin to understand what the big events were really all about.

In *The Dog in the Wood*, Monika Schröder introduces us to a family whose every aspect of life was altered by World War II. The Friedrichs are a farm family, living in Eastern Germany. We meet them in 1945, at the end of the war in Europe, living close to the conflict between Germany and the allies. Germany is losing the war and the Russians are sweeping across the country from the east. The front is closing in on their small town of Schwartz. As the Russians occupy eastern Germany, nothing will ever be the same for the Friedrichs.

Ten-year-old Fritz probably cannot remember when his country was not at war. It is through his eyes that we view the events and feel the horrors of what war and its aftermath are.

It is an unusual focus for American teen readers, for Fritz's grandfather is a Nazi – the head of the Nazi leadership in their small town. When defeat comes to Germany, Americans and the Allies cheered. *The Dog in the Woods* points the camera at how the war and this defeat affected Fritz and his family.

You and your classmates or the members of your book group will find many things to talk about in this novel. This guide is meant to help you get those discussions going.

## Pre-Reading Activities

While the events in *The Dog in the Wood* take place as the war is ending, it will be useful for you to get some background. Go to the website below and you'll find a map of Europe during World War II. You can click any date in the "Year by Year Progression Box," and view Germany's conquest of Europe from 1939 through 1945. If you move the cursor over a country, the map will reveal specific information on how the war affected that country. Clicking on the box: WWII Casualties by Countries will show the destruction in human terms.

[http://www.worldology.com/Europe/world\\_war\\_2\\_imap.htm](http://www.worldology.com/Europe/world_war_2_imap.htm)

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ages 10 and up

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Children's Author



## Discussion Questions

### War

“What good does that do?” Mama spoke up. “I’m not going to hide in the woods. How can you defend the village when the German army has been forced to retreat...?” (p. 20)

Fritz’s mother feels it is useless either to hide from or to fight against the advancing Russian army. His grandfather feels that it is their duty to defend Germany. What would your position be if you were in their place? Imagine a modern situation comparable to theirs. Would you continue to fight against the odds? Would you flee or hide? Would you simply wait and accept what comes?

“From the living room they could hear the sound of the radio... Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, began a speech ... Dramatically, he affirmed Germany’s final victory...”

“They don’t know what they are saying anymore, “ [Mama said]. The Nazis have lost. They just don’t know it yet.” (p.22-23)

We no longer rely on just a radio and newspapers to keep up with the news. We get not only information, but photographs and videos immediately, as events are unfurling on television, on our computers, and on our cell phones. Mama didn’t believe what she heard on the radio. How much of what you see and hear do you believe? Do you think that our government controls the flow of news and information? Do you feel that under certain circumstances the government should control information that reaches its citizens? What are those circumstances?

When the Russians come to Schwartz, they barge into the Friedrich home taking food from the pantry and some of the livestock. They trample the garden, and menace the family. But when Fritz wakes up the next morning, “the house was quiet. Now it had finally happened. The Russians had come and left. The worst was over.” (p. 49)

You know, of course, that the worst was just beginning for Fritz and his family. Make a list of all the things the Russians do, and talk about how each impacted the family. Which actions do you think were the hardest for them to endure?

### Friends

The importance of friendship to teens is a theme in many novels – whether historical, modern, fantasy, or mysteries. It is a key theme in *The Dog in the Wood* as well.

Fritz had one friend in Schwartz. When we first meet Paul, we discover that he’s adventurous, mischievous, and harbors a deep resentment for Fritz’s family. Later we learn more about his family and his character. Talk about the conflict that Paul has with Fritz.

“Let’s go to the main road!” he coaxed Fritz.

“My mother won’t let me go that far anymore,” Fritz answered....

“So we just don’t tell her where we’re going,” Paul answered. (p.28)

Paul’s adventuring puts the boys in terrible danger when they meet up with a Russian soldier. What kind of friend is Paul? Talk about a time you have been disappointed by a friend. How have they disappointed you? Have you ever disappointed your friends? Can people still be friends when dramatic events come between them?

When the Friedrichs get to Sempow, Oma Clara tells them that Johann Müller is the leader of the local Communists. “He went to school with me,” Oma Clara continued. (p.92)

How does her old schoolmate treat Oma Clara’s family when they need his help? Talk to your parents and other adults about friendship and betrayal.

“My name is Konrad, and yours is Fritz. I saw it on the cover of your notebook.” Fritz wanted to say something mean, like “Oh, so you can read” just to make him go away. (p.127)

It’s not surprising, after his experience with Paul, that Fritz is wary of a new friend. How is Konrad different from Paul? How is their friendship different? What important role does Konrad play in the resolution of the novel?

## Family

In many novels for young adults, parents (and other adults) play small roles or are absent altogether. This is not the case with *The Dog in the Wood*. Family is key to the novel. The following questions will help you explore the theme of family in the book.

In wartime, many children have to grow up without their fathers, and fathers are absent from *The Dog in the Wood*. Talk about the different circumstances of Paul's, Konrad's and Fritz's fathers. What do you know about how these boys feel about their fathers?

With a two-man saw they began to cut through the trunk of a pine tree. Fritz wanted to do well and focused all his strength into the back-and-forth movement of the saw. (p.98)

In many ways, Lech is a father-figure for Fritz. Cite examples of ways Lech acts as the father he barely knew and a role model for Fritz.

At first he only saw their shoes. (p.37)  
Fritz's grandfather Karl and his beloved Oma Lou hang themselves in the barn when it becomes clear that Germany has lost the war. How does each member of the family respond? How did life change for the family?

Did you, as a reader, expect anything like this or did it take you by surprise? How did you feel about this action? Is there anything that you think is worth killing oneself about?

Compare Oma Lou and Oma Clara. Use specific examples to describe each woman.

## Point of View

Reading a novel that's told from the vantage point of someone who lived in a country that was America's enemy and that calls forth sympathy for that person raises the question of perspective and point of view. Talk about:

How would an American teenager living in 1945 feel about the events that Fritz and his family face in the novel? Could a teen living in the United States at that time feel sympathy for Fritz and his family? Explain why or why not. You may want to do some research in contemporary newspaper, magazine and film reports to get an understanding of what U.S. citizens knew and how they were reacting.

Although the novel takes place more than sixty years ago in Germany, are you, as a 21st Century American, able to feel compassion for the Friedrich family? Explain.



Paul tells Fritz: "The German army invaded Russia without having been attacked. Now the Russians are defeating the Nazis. Their time has come.... You have to pay a price when you lose a war." (p.33)  
What does Paul mean by that? What is your perception of the Russian soldiers depicted in the novel? What were the motivations behind their actions? International agreements have set a standard of civility for the ways victors treat those they have defeated. How do the actions of the Russian army measure up to that expectation?

## Character Development

When we first meet Fritz, he acts like a young child. He is afraid of his grandfather. He is comforted by his Oma Lou and the foods she serves. The chores he has are those given to young children. In the course of the novel, Fritz matures. Keep track of these changes through various incidents in the novel. For example, at first Fritz seems only to wish to be able to help Mama out, and to feel sad and guilty when he fails to save the cows. Soon after that, he takes an independent action to solve a family problem and buries evidence that the family were Nazis in Grandpa's hole the woods. Keep a chart of various events where Fritz shows his increasing maturity.

Fritz is an even-tempered fellow. He takes things as they come, does what is expected of him, and keeps his feelings to himself for much of the novel. We begin to see that change when the family moves to Sempow. It is not until his mother tells him they are going to move in with Oma Clara that he voices a protest. Then, After his mother's arrest, he shows his anger and frustration, needing to place the blame somewhere.



"It's your fault!" he yelled. "You didn't do enough!"  
(p.113)

These two incidents prepare us for the brave actions and stalwart purpose we see in Fritz in the following chapters. Talk about Fritz's decisions to find Mama and Lech. Did you think it was likely that he could succeed? If you were his friend, would you have advised him to take the chance or to stay home and wait things out? Who were his helpers along the way? How did each contribute to his success?

Fritz has been a farm boy all his life. Monika Schröder uses many details to show how farming defines Fritz's experience and perception. As you read the book, take note of the way growing up on a farm influences Fritz's thinking. Discuss whether you think Fritz could be happy in another kind of life. Find specific incidents in the book to support your opinion.

We only know Fritz's Grandfather Karl briefly, but we know him well because of his strong personality. How does he rule his household? Discuss his single-mindedness and his bullying from the point of view of different characters: Fritz; Oma Lou; Fritz's mother; Paul's father; Oma Clara. Compare their ways of reacting to Karl.



### ***About the Title***

Fritz held the lump of wood in his hands. He would never be able to make it look like a dog. (p.27)

Lech encourages Fritz to work on his carving – to find the dog that is already inside the piece of wood. Fritz does not see it at the start of the book, but in the end, he renews his attempts to uncover it. Why did the author choose *The Dog in the Wood* as the title? Beyond the actual carving Fritz is working on, what other meaning does it have for Fritz?

### ***Fact and Fiction***

The author tells us that *The Dog in the Wood* is based on historical facts and events of her father's childhood in East Germany. When you read the note at the end of the novel, you discover that the reality was far worse than the fiction. Discuss why you think Ms. Schröder decided not to include all of the facts and details.

## **About the Author**

Monika Schröder grew up in Germany and has worked as an elementary school teacher and librarian in American international schools in Egypt, Oman, Chile, and India. She now lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina with her husband and their dog, Frank. *The Dog in the Wood* is her first novel.

### **Also by Monika Schröder:**

*My Brother's Shadow*. Farrar Straus Giroux, 2011.

*Saraswati's Way*. Farrar Straus, Giroux, 2010.

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