



Peggy's Letters

Jacqueline Halsey

Interest level: ages 8–11

978-1-55143-363-X

128 pages

AR Quiz # 102843

Consider the following question as you read *Peggy's Letters*:

How important is it to have a feeling of belonging?

Story

In the final months of World War II, ten-year-old Peggy shelters with her mother and baby brother in a London butcher shop during an air raid. They survive, but their home and everything in it are lost, including Peggy's most treasured possession: a biscuit tin of letters from her father.

Author

Jacqueline Halsey grew up in England. As a young adult she lived for five years on a sugar mill in Natal, South Africa. In recent years, as she watched images of war on television, she realized that her mother and older brother were living in a war zone in London back in the 1940s. *Peggy's Letters* is her way of weaving her mother's wartime memories into a book for today's children. Jacqueline lives in Beaver Bank, Nova Scotia.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- There are many sets of signs and symbols that visually represent meaning. For example: road signs, semaphore, sign language for the deaf, Braille for the blind and international signs and symbols. Divide students into small groups. Assign each group a category of signs. Have them do research to find out how their particular assigned style of communication works and what the signs and symbols mean. Have each group share their findings with the class. Use this as an opportunity for students to practice their note-taking skills.
- Postcards are one form of visual communication. Have students create postcards by selecting a chapter or part of *Peggy's Letters* to illustrate. On the other side have them write a message that connects with the picture they have drawn. For example: in chapter 8, Peggy goes with Spud to see his shrapnel shed. Students could have Peggy write to her father and describe how she felt about the experience.
- *Peggy's Letters* contains many war-related words. Have students create a picture dictionary which will provide meanings for these words. Here is a selected word list: *blackout curtain, gas mask, ration book, rocket bomb* and *torpedo*. A further list of words can be found in the glossary at the back of the book.
- Letter writing plays an important role in *Peggy's Letters*. Peggy keeps her father's letters in a biscuit tin. During the war years, these tins often showed scenes of life from that time. Ask students to bring in a shoebox to decorate as their own letterbox. Have them use pictures and scenes that depict their lives today. Peggy writes her letters as diary entries. You may want to use this format or teach the friendly letter format to your students.
- For this activity, students will write letters to various people: a member of their family; someone in their community; and a person who has made a great contribution to the world.
 - ◆ Have students write a letter to someone in their family to share information about themselves.
 - ◆ Have them select someone in their community—a coach, community leader, salesperson in a local store or a neighbor. Assign students to write a letter asking about that person's job.
 - ◆ Brainstorm important people in the world, for example: Alexander Graham Bell, Terry Fox, Mother Teresa, J.K. Rowling, Helen Keller, Eleanor Roosevelt. Have students choose an influential person and research him or her. Then have them write a letter to one of these people about the contribution he or she has made to the world.

- Have students create poetry to help bring *Peggy's Letters* to life. Use a form that has students write their poem in the shape of its topic (concrete poems), as in the book *Outside the Lines: Poetry at Play*. For example: when Peggy's house is hit by a bomb; when Peggy and her family go to live with Grandad; or when Spud puts shrapnel in the pram.
- Mrs. Bottomly has Peggy and her class write a newspaper about their families during the war. Have students research this time in history to use in a newspaper article. Have them place themselves in the time and write from that perspective.

Social Studies

- World War II was an important milestone in the history of our world. Prior to constructing the letterboxes suggested above, have students read about World War II. Brainstorm a list of the most important events and people of the time. Students will then research one or two of these to gain background information about the war and the people who were affected by it. Students can then use this information to create the scenes on boxes.
- While World War II ended over six decades ago, war and conflict continue to affect children in our world. As well, natural disasters and famine impact the world's children. Provide students with some information in one or more of these areas, or guide them in going online to research it. Have them read about Ryan's Well to find out how one Canadian youngster set out to provide fresh water for people in Africa.
- When Peggy finishes writing her lines, Mrs. Bottomly tells her she used to be a reporter. She says it wasn't a job that was appropriate for a marriageable woman in her day. She adds that times are changing for women. Discuss with students how women's opportunities have evolved since Mrs. Bottomly was a girl. What about since Peggy was a girl? What kinds of things are still holding girls and women back from reaching their fullest potential?
- Mrs. Bottomly tells the class that, as they're living through the Second World War, they're part of history. Invite students to think about how they are part of history too. What kinds of significant global or national events have occurred in their lifetimes? Have one student record ideas on the whiteboard or on chart paper. When all the ideas are recorded, assign students to write a paragraph summarizing one historically significant event.

Health/Personal Planning

- In small groups, have students write some phrases that describe Peggy's relationship with her mother. Ask them to provide examples from the book. Gather together as a group and share some of the students' observations. What are some of the things that make for a strong and healthy relationship between a parent and child? Are these the same kinds of things that would make for a strong relationship between friends?
- Spud gets the strap from Mrs. Mashman for skipping school. It wasn't so long ago that some principals still gave the strap. For what reasons has this changed? Do you think the strap is a good discipline measure or not? Explain. Have students break into small groups and devise a few disciplinary measures that are more appropriate for misbehaviour.

Art

- Food product tins have been used to show scenes and events that have occurred throughout history. If you have access to some of these, bring them in to share with your class. If not, you may find some online, using the sites listed below. Have each student select an event or person from World War II and, using that as a guide, create a mural on a box to create a replica of these tins. You may select a shoebox, a toothpick box or a larger ready-made box. Paint the box a solid color before creating the scenes. Display them with a sign stating their place in history.
- Peggy's nine letters to her father are rich with visual images. Have students select one to illustrate in detail. Display these pictures with a copy of the letter alongside the drawings.
- Posters of World War II provide visual information about life during the war. Have students look at these online and then create their own poster in the same style, depicting a present-day world conflict.

Drama

- Using only gestures and actions, have students act out parts of *Peggy's Letters*. For example: the feelings the family has when their house is on fire, or when Spud is caught trying to take the pram out the church hall door.
- Have students take on the persona of one the characters in *Peggy's Letters* and act out situations from the story.
- War is a conflict between groups of people. Children also experience conflict in their daily lives. Brainstorm some situations with students and then have them create short skits where they demonstrate the conflict and a positive resolution.

Connecting to the Text

- The language in *Peggy's Letters* is different than the way we speak here in North America. The author incorporates many British words—and a British tone—in her narrative and dialogue. Here are a few examples of words or expressions that we don't often use on this side of the water: nappy, right-oh, cor blimey and the "lav." These and many others can be found in the glossary. Can students track down a few phrases that aren't in the glossary? What do they think they mean? Can they think of any expressions that are unique to our country or region?
- Jacqueline Halsey chooses words carefully to create vivid images in the reader's mind. From chapter 1: "My legs turn to jelly and my heart feels like it's going to jump out of my body." From chapter 2: "Now everyone can see my house in its underwear." Have students work in pairs to write a paragraph explaining what they like about this kind of description. Challenge them to find other examples from the story.
- An author will sometimes use idioms to get an idea across. *Idioms* often mean something different than the words they're actually composed of. For example, at the end of chapter 1, Mr. Keddy tells Peggy's mum to keep a "stiff upper lip." Ask students to brainstorm a number of idioms, such as *it's a tough pill to swallow*, *it's raining cats and dogs*, *having a frog in your throat* or to make a *mountain out of a molehill*. Have the students illustrate or make models of the images these idioms conjure up.
- Have students create a timeline to show the major events in *Peggy's Letters*.
- Ask students to define *setting*, and to describe the setting of *Peggy's Letters*. How important is the setting to the story in this case? Is setting always this important to a story? Invite students to think of other stories that do and do not depend on setting to the same extent. Can they think of any stories that lack a setting?
- Assign pairs or small groups to complete character outlines for the characters in *Peggy's Letters*. They can choose between Peggy, Spud, Grandad or Peggy's mother. Have groups share their character sketches with the class, adding in any elements they may have missed.
- Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is also an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life that's revealed in a work of literature. It's not really a moral, but it's kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *Peggy's Letters*.

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. When Peggy's house is hit by a bomb, she and her mum go to the shelter with baby Tommy for an evening. Peggy wishes Maud would stop calling her a "poor dear." Why does she feel this way? Have you ever felt pitied? Did it bother you?
2. In a matter of hours, Peggy's life is turned upside down. Her house burns, she's left with nothing, and her family has to go and live with her grandfather, whom she is afraid of. How is it that Peggy is able to find the courage to just keep going on? Do you think you could dig deep for that kind of courage in a crisis? Why or why not?
3. In one of Peggy's letters to her dad, she says it's scary to not belong anywhere. Do you agree? Why does belonging matter so much to us? Explain.
4. After skipping school and going with him to see his shrapnel shed, Peggy immediately feels a deep trust in Spud. What causes this shift in her feelings? Have you ever been able to trust someone like this?
5. As you see it, why does skipping school—and getting into trouble for it—make Peggy so popular?
6. Why does Spud lie when Mrs. Bottomly asks about his family? Have you ever been tempted to lie about your parents or other family members? Why?
7. Peggy feels guilty that she and Spud put Tommy in danger with the bomb. But were the children really to blame? Explain. Have you ever felt badly about doing something that wasn't really your fault?
8. Mrs. Mashman says: "Everyone makes mistakes. The important thing is putting things right again." What is wise about her words? Can you think of a time in your life where you made a mistake and put it right again? Did fixing the problem help?
9. Does the ending of the book surprise you? Where did you think Peggy's father might have been?

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

One morning, a long time ago, a young mother and her baby were coming back from a shopping trip. It was wartime and just as they were passing a butcher shop they heard the screaming shriek of a V1 rocket bomb. The butcher ran outside and pulled them into the back of his shop until the danger had passed. That young mother was my mum. The baby was my older brother and the story was one of many my mother told me about living in London during the Second World War.

Over the last few years the television news has been filled with horrific war images from various countries in the Middle East. I was particularly moved by the courage of women and children living in these war zones. No matter what horrors unfold, mothers still have to find food and shelter for their families, and children have to be braver than should ever be expected. As I watched these images, my mother's butcher shop story came back to me. It made me think that even a simple walk to the store can turn into a dangerous expedition in wartime.

I decided to write a picturebook about a wartime shopping trip. It was called *Three Sausages*. Orca Books shortlisted the story but it did not make the cut. My editor, Maggie de Vries, suggested I turn the story into the first two chapters of a novel. I took her advice and created some new characters, added a dollop of imagination and a year later, *Three Sausages* became *Peggy's Letters*.

This is my first book and it has been an exciting experience watching it progress from typewritten manuscript to book. I do hope you enjoy the story and get a feel for what it might have been like growing up in a war-torn country.

Take the time to talk to your parents and grandparents about their stories. You might hear some exciting adventures.

Best wishes,
Jacqueline

Resources**Books***Fiction*

- Ahlberg, Allan and Janet. *The Jolly Postman: or Other People's Letters*
 Bantock, Nick. *Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence*
 Brown, Jeff. *Flat Stanley*
 Cain, Janan. *The Way I Feel*
 Cooper, Susan. *Dawn of Fear* (war in London)
 Crew, Gary. *Memorial* (wartime memories)
 Giff, Patricia Reilly. *Lily's Crossing* (WWII)
 Innocenti, Roberto. *Rose Blanche*
 Keats, Ezra Jack. *A Letter to Amy*
 Little, Jean. *Listen for the Singing*
 Matas, Carol. *Turned Away: The World War II Diary of Deborah Bernstein*
 Pearson, Kit. *The Sky is Falling; Looking at the Moon; The Lights Go On Again*
 Sedgwick, Marcus. *Floodland* (set in a London of the future)
 Teague, Mark. *Detective LaRue: Letters from the Investigation*

Nonfiction

- Adams, Simon. *World War II* (940.53)
 Ames, Nancy. *The Orphans of Normandy* (940.53)
 Berg, Brad. *Outside the Lines: Poetry at Play* (811.6)
 Drez, Ronald J. *Remember D-Day: The Plan, the Invasion, Survival Stories* (940.54)
 Fox, Mem. *Whoever You Are* (305.8)
 Galloway, Priscilla, ed. *Too Young to Fight: Memories From our Youth During World War II* (940.53)
 Granfield, Linda. *Pier 21: Gateway to Hope* (325.71)
 Greer, Colin and Herbert, Kohl, eds. *A Call to Character* (808.8)
 Hacker, Carlotta. *The Kids Book of Canadian History* (971)
 Isaac, John. *Vietnam: The Boat People Search for a Home* (959.70)
 Holliday, Laurel. *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries* (940.53)
 Kristo, Janice V. and Rosemary A. Bamford. *Nonfiction in Focus* (372.6)
 Marx, Trish. *Echoes: World War Two* (940.53)
 Panchyk, Richard. *World War II for Kids: A History with 21 Activities* (940.53)
 Swartz, Larry. *The New Dramathemes* (372.6)
 Unicef. *I Dream of Peace: Images of War by Children of Former Yugoslavia* (305.24)
 Walters, Eric. *When Elephants Fight* (305.23)
 Wicks, Ben. *No Time to Wave Goodbye* (940.53)
 Wilson, Janet. *One Peace: True Stories of Young Activists* (327.172)

Online

The History Place: London During the Blitz

www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/london-blitz.htm

BBC One Day of War

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/one_day_of_war/default.stmB

BC Children of World War II

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2children/index.shtml

Holnet London at War 1939-1945

www.lgfl.net/lgfl/accounts/holnet/upload/learn_tea/index.htm

War Child International

www.warchild.org/links_resources/links_resources.html

World War II Webquest

<http://questgarden.com/58/32/8/071123120513/>

A Genre Study of Letters with the Jolly Postman

www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=322

Better Letters: Lesson Plans for Teaching Letter writing

www.education-world.com/a_lesson/lesson281.shtml

E-Pals Around the World

www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=178