



THE PLOT TO KILL HITLER

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: PASTOR, SPY, UNLIKELY HERO

BY PATRICIA McCORMICK **TEACHING GUIDE**

ABOUT THE BOOK

Millions of Jews and other innocent people were murdered by German dictator Adolf Hitler. But what if Hitler had been overthrown before he'd killed so many? Or what if he himself had been killed? A group of daring Germans did, in fact, try to destroy Hitler. Among them was a young clergyman named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In this suspenseful biography, Bonhoeffer speaks out against Hitler when many are silent and then becomes an international courier in the plot to kill Hitler. What made this thoughtful man risk his own life to try save others? Would you do the same? An inspiring true story about remarkable courage.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Analyze Dietrich Bonhoeffer's character, including how he changed as he grew older. What mattered to him? How did he treat other people? What motivated his important choices and how did those choices reflect his values?
2. Describe Bonhoeffer's family, including those related by marriage. What was his upbringing like? What values did his family have that continued to be important to him? How did others in his family also follow those values in their lives and work?
3. Who outside of his family positively influenced Bonhoeffer, and how? The examples can include people he never met but whose books or philosophies he respected. Name places that Bonhoeffer visited outside of Germany, explain his reasons for going, and discuss the impact that different places had on him.
4. Identify some of the ways that Bonhoeffer's life intersected with African-Americans. What influence did African-Americans and their culture have on him? What impact did he have on them?
5. Give examples of how Nazis persecuted Jews and tried to turn Germans against Jews, even before the start of the death camps. Discuss how targeting a group of people this way can solidify the power of a dictator. How did Hitler use the fire at the Reichstag to expand his powers?
6. Why did so many people around Bonhoeffer accept Hitler and his persecution of Jews without protest? Discuss the reactions to Hitler especially among Bonhoeffer's fellow clergy and how Bonhoeffer tried to change their minds. Why did Bonhoeffer believe that clergy have a higher obligation than others to protest against evil?
7. Explain the various aspects of the plans to overthrow and kill Hitler. Who was involved and how did they become part of the plan? What was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's role? Why didn't their plans succeed? Describe the consequences for Dietrich and his fellow conspirators.
8. How did Bonhoeffer, a clergyman and a pacifist, justify the plot to kill Hitler? Find his explanations in the text and discuss his reasoning. What are other ways of looking at the same moral question?
9. The author uses foreshadowing extensively in the narrative. Find at least five examples in the text, and explain what impact each example of foreshadowing might have on the reader. Connect each example of foreshadowing to the event that it hints at later in the story.
10. The narrative focuses on Bonhoeffer, his life, and his deeds, set against historical events. The author supplies a timeline at the back and inserts short timelines into chapters. Explain the purpose of the short timelines and evaluate their effectiveness. What are some other ways the author could have provided the same information?
11. Talk about the prologue and epilogue, why the author included them, and what each contributes to the narrative as a whole. Why open the book by letting readers know that Dietrich was taken away by Hitler's secret police? What was the emotional impact on you of the last chapter and the epilogue?
12. Choose four of the photographs and discuss what they add to the narrative. How does each one make you feel? What insight does it give you into Bonhoeffer and the time in which he lived?

Common Core State Standards (Reading Standards for Informational Text): *RI.5-8.1, RI.5-8.2, RI.5-8.5, RI.6-8.7*

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- A WAY TO REMEMBER** Memorials are one way society remembers people who have shown courage and especially those who died doing so. Have students do research on memorials, find photographic examples, and discuss as a class what elements make an effective memorial. Then have them work in small groups to sketch out a memorial for Bonhoeffer that reflects his life and courage. These lesson plans offers tips for such a project: <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/628>
http://smithsonianeducation.org/educators/lesson_plans/memorials/index.html
- DIGGING DEEPER** McCormick uses some of the book’s sidebars to expand briefly on topics in the narrative that help put the story in historical context. Have pairs of students each choose one such sidebar and research its topic using print and digital resources. The students should present their results to the whole class, extending their spoken presentation with images, music, or other multimedia elements.
- SILENCE IN THE FACE OF EVIL** Have students consider the epigraph from Dr. King and Bonhoeffer’s words, “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil” (p. 85). Hold a discussion about different ways people speak out for their beliefs. Have students collect examples in the media and online of speaking out such as protests, boycotts, editorials, blog entries, political art, and so on. Have students share their examples and brainstorm about ways they might speak out on important issues.
- WHAT IS COURAGE?** As a class, talk about the meaning of courage and different types of courage. Have students name well-known people, past and present, who showed courage. Each student should take three names and learn more about the person. Have students meet in small groups and each give an overview of their findings. The groups should analyze the examples of courage, including Bonhoeffer, and come up with a definition of courage to share with the class.
- JUSTIFYING VIOLENCE** Give students the following quotes, and have them compose a response to the question: When is violence justified?
“Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon. Indeed, it is a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it.”—Martin Luther King Jr.
“If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can’t, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Common Core State Standards (Speaking and Listening): *SL.5-8.1, SL.5-8.4, SL.5-8.5*

Common Core State Standards (Writing): *W.5-8.7*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia McCormick is a former journalist and a two-time National Book Award Finalist whose books include *Cut, Sold, Never Fall Down*, and the young readers edition of *I Am Malala*. *Sold* was made into a feature film. Patty lives in New York. You can visit her online at www.pattymccormick.com.



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