BOOK GUIDE

TAKE COVER

BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

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By Deborah Hopkinson
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The Story

Charlie "Sneak" Sawyer never wanted to leave London, despite his uneasy relationship with his grandfather. But when orders come for children to evacuate as the world teeters on the brink of World War II, Grandad insists Charlie leave with the rest. Months pass; the expected bombing of London doesn't happen, and kids begin drifting back from the countryside. After a year spent toiling for a grumpy farmer, Charlie's had enough. He decides to sneak home to London, whatever it takes. Shortly before he turns thirteen, Charlie does just that, only to be waylaid by Lucie Marie Meadows, a precocious girl with golden eyes. A girl who might be able to see ghosts. A girl who's keeping secrets.

Charlie and Lucie arrive in London the afternoon of September 7, 1940—the very afternoon when Nazi planes cross the sky and drop their first deadly loads. The Blitz has begun. Suddenly, London is a fiery, smoking maze of rubble, danger, and chaos. The explosions are so terrifying even the ghost of a WWI soldier roams the theater he haunts, unable to rest. Somehow, with a rescued dog called Smoke, Charlie and Lucie must search for answers—and the people they love.

Award-winning author Deborah Hopkinson weaves together a remarkable tale that is at once a rollicking, hair-raising adventure and a moving story about family, courage, and the heroism of everyday people during the devastating Blitz.

Reading Group Questions

1. What did you learn about the time period in which this book is set? Did you learn anything about the Blitz that surprised you, or that you didn't know before?
2. At the beginning of the story, Lucie is keeping a secret from Charlie. What is it? Why does she eventually decide to tell Charlie about it? What happens when she does?
3. What do you think is Charlie's secret strength?
4. What makes the ghosts feel so unsettled?
5. Now that you've finished the book, what are some of the things you remember the most about it? Are there certain scenes or images that you think really worked to help you understand the story?

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About the Author

Photo © Deborah Wiles

Deborah Hopkinson is the highly acclaimed author of thrilling, accessible, and compelling works of fiction and nonfiction for every reader. She has written over forty award-winning books, including *Titanic: Voices from the Disaster*, a YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award Finalist and Sibert Honor Book; *D-Day: The World War II Invasion That Changed History; We Had to Be Brave*, which was a Kids' Book Choice Award Nominee and a Sydney Taylor Notable Book; NCTE/Orbis Pictus Recommended Book *We Must Not Forget; Race Against Death*, which *School Library Journal* called "impactful" in a starred review; her series for Grades 2–5, *The Deadliest*, which are action-packed, photo-filled nonfiction titles about disasters throughout history; the rollicking novel *The Plot to Kill a Queen*; and her nonfiction World War II Close Up series. Deborah lives outside Portland, Oregon.

Author Q&A

You've written several books about World War II. What is it about this subject that you think continues to capture the imaginations of so many people?

We're all drawn to compelling stories, whether true or imagined. And it's no surprise that we're still discovering and creating stories set during World War II. After all, it was the most disruptive and cataclysmic event of the 20th century, killing eighty million people across the globe, more than half of them civilians, including six million Jewish men, women, and children murdered in the Holocaust.

I think reading about World War II is more important than ever for young people today. Stories about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events help us develop empathy. Also, we live in a news-filled world. Even if students don't follow current events closely, they're likely to encounter images of war and conflict; they may hear about "the postwar international order," but aren't sure what that means. Learning more about the past helps us understand the way major events like the Second World War have shaped our world today.

The more we delve into history, the more we can appreciate our own time. Recently, I heard an interview with Nobel laureate Joel Mokyr, who said, "History is an infinitely large ocean." I couldn't agree more!

What made you want to tell a story focusing specifically on the London Blitz?

Growing up, I read lots of historical fiction. Even now, I explore different time periods and imagine what it would like to live then. This curiosity underlies how I approach my writing too. My Scholastic books have delved into subjects including the Triangle fire, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the Galveston hurricane, and World War II.

Often my fascination with a subject begins with an oral history account or a photograph, and that's definitely the case with *Take Cover* and this story about the Blitz. It's hard not to look at photographs of this extraordinary time without being struck by the perseverance and resilience we see on the faces of adults and children.

Which part of this story came first—the characters, the setting, or the plot?

Before beginning a novel, I first do an outline that lays out a preliminary vision for the story, including characters, setting, and plot. Does the final book always follow this roadmap? Absolutely not!

I do many drafts of a book, even before sending it to my editor (who always has excellent questions, suggestions, and ideas for making the story better). Over the long months of research, writing, and revising the story begins to come alive; the characters evolve. The plot may change. As I learn more and delve deeper, I'm able to add details, make connections, and, I hope, tell a better story.

Often the things I discover along the way take me by surprise. Surprises are most definitely the most fun part of the writing process—and I hope they make *Take Cover* enjoyable to read too.

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Can you tell us about your research for *Take Cover*—where did you look, and what did you find? Did anything you discovered really surprise you or stand out?

I approach writing fiction the same way I do writing nonfiction: I read lots of books, look at photographs, and explore museum and archival sources. People often ask whether I find it easier to write fiction or nonfiction. For me, writing historical fiction like *Take Cover* is a lot more difficult.

Why? Well, when we put fictional characters into a historical setting, we need to convey what it was like from one moment to the next. What did an air raid siren sound like? What did people eat? How long does it take to walk from place to place?

That's where first person accounts, interviews, and oral histories come in. In *Take Cover,* for example, main characters Charlie and Lucie sleep in a backyard Anderson shelter at night during the Blitz. Thanks to photographs and accounts by people who were kids during World War II, it's possible to add details of what that was like.

One resource that stood out in writing *Take Cover* was the online archive for "The People's War." This is a BBC oral history project of 47,000 stories and photographs from the home front and the armed forces. I found an account by a boy who was injured in a devastating bomb attack at Columbia Market on the first night of the Blitz. His story was invaluable in helping me write about what Charlie's grandfather might have experienced.

When I speak to students in schools, I always encourage them to write their own stories. It's not just that I hope young people will try their hand at writing. I truly believe we can never fully understand history without the voices of ordinary people who were there.

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