

THE HOUSE OF ONE THOUSAND EYES

by Michelle Barker

Genre: Young adult historical fiction

Themes: abuse; Berlin Wall; Cold War; Communist Germany; courage/bravery; death/loss; dystopia; history; sexual assault; Stasi; totalitarian regime; war; conflict: character vs. character, character vs. society, character vs. self (internal conflict), and character vs. fate

Suitable for: Grades 9+

Guided Reading Level: Z+

Common Core standards: RL.11-12.1,2,3,4,5,6,10
W.11-12.2,3,4,6,7,8,9,9a,10
SL.11-12.1,1a,1c,1d,2,3,4,5,6
L.11-12.3,4,4a,4b,4d,5,5a,5b,6

Summary

Life in East Germany in the early 1980s is not easy for most people, but for Lena, it's particularly hard. After the death of her parents in a factory explosion and time spent in a psychiatric hospital recovering from the trauma, she is sent to live with her stern aunt, a devoted member of the ruling Communist Party. Visits with her beloved Uncle Erich, a best-selling author, are her only respite.

But one night, her uncle disappears without a trace. Gone also are all his belongings, his books, and even his birth records. Lena is desperate to know what happened to him, but it's as if he never existed.

There are government spies everywhere. But Lena is unafraid and refuses to give up her search, regardless of the consequences.

This powerful novel about defiance, courage, and determination takes readers into the chilling world of a society ruled by autocratic despots, where nothing is what it seems.

BEFORE STARTING THE BOOK

These activities build the context and introduce the topic of the book, and establish prior knowledge and interest.

1. What clues on the cover give you an idea of what the story is about? Does the cover illustration remind you of anything? Why do you think the illustrator only used black, red, and white?
2. Have you ever heard of the Cold War before? If so, what do you know about it?
3. What do you know about Germany's history, especially during the two world wars? What do you know about East Germany?
4. What stereotypes do people with mental illness face?
5. Think about the rules that govern your life. These could be home rules, school rules, or laws. What are they? How would you feel if it was against the law to read certain books, listen to certain music, or express certain opinions? How would you feel if you couldn't travel wherever you wanted to go?
6. Can you think of anything that has been banned in your country or home (books, music, etc.)?

WHILE READING THE BOOK

These activities check on comprehension, stimulate interest, involve readers in reflection as they read, and encourage consideration of other readers' reactions.

CHARACTER AND CONFLICT

1. Create a character map for one or more of the characters. The character map should include the character's looks, thoughts, actions, and attitudes toward others. Include quotes, phrases, or page numbers from the story to illustrate your points.
2. Chart the conflicts and changes in the story by drawing boxes or circles to represent a character's state at the beginning of the story, the important plot points that cause him or her to change, and who he or she ends up being at the end. When you are finished, connect the boxes or circles to make a flow chart.

HISTORICAL FICTION, DYSTOPIAN FICTION

3. Have you ever read a historical fiction book before? Do you think *The House of One Thousand Eyes* is fact or fiction? List examples or reasons behind your opinion. Why do you think the author has chosen to fictionalize this period of history?
4. What is dystopian fiction? Have you ever read a dystopian novel before? How is *The House of One Thousand Eyes* similar to other dystopian fiction and how is it different? Create a Venn diagram showing the similarities and the differences to other dystopian books.

MENTAL ILLNESS / ABUSE

5. Lena is afraid that she could be sent back to the mental hospital. How does this affect how she thinks and acts? How do others (Sausage Auntie, for example) keep her questioning her own sanity? Are they protecting Lena or harming her?
6. Why has Lena invented her *schrullig* (quirky, strange, whimsical) world? What purpose does the *schrullig* world serve?

EAST GERMANY, COMMUNIST GERMANY

7. Write two classified ads, or design two magazine ads, to sell an apartment. One ad is for Sausage Auntie's apartment and the other is for Uncle Erich's apartment. You want these apartments to sell, so describe them in the best and most attractive way possible.
8. You have been given a choice: If you inform on a friend or relative and turn them into the police, then you will be able to pursue your dream after high school (study at any university, apply for any job, etc.) If you don't turn in your friend or relative, then you won't be able to pursue your dream and you will have to work a menial job for the rest of your life. Write a persuasive argument that supports making first one decision, and then the other.
9. What was the ultimate goal of communism, the ideal society that communists hoped to create? What were some of the ways communists tried to change the society into this ideal? To many of the committed Communist Party members, the end justified the means. What do you know about the communist system of government?

AFTER READING THE BOOK

These activities inspire continued reflection and response to the text, bring conclusion to the experience of reading this particular text, and stimulate further extensions.

READER'S THEATER

1. In groups, select a key conversation or dialogue that you would like to bring to life through Reader's Theater. Practise reading the section aloud in "theater" style, i.e., with drama and feeling, as if you were on stage reading to an audience. Make sure to find a suitable segment that will take about two to three minutes to read. Photocopy the section you have selected. You can use a different color to highlight the direct speech of each character. The text that is not highlighted becomes narration, to be read by a narrator. You may choose to omit tags such as "he said" or "she said," once a different person reads aloud the words of the character.
2. Present your segment to the class individually, or work as a group to create a tableau from which each speaker emerges using background music, character masks that you have made, or simple props from home.

JOURNALISTIC REPORT

3. This book is set in a time and place that may be unfamiliar to you. Either alone or in a small group of two or three, select one historical or political aspect of the novel (the Stasi, the Berlin Wall, communism, East Germany, Cold War). Research this event, movement, or aspect. Write an online presentation, a PowerPoint presentation, or a short report that can be shared with the class, school and/or wider community.

COMMUNIST GERMANY: REAL VS. OFFICIAL STORIES

4. How does the reality of life in East Germany differ from the acceptable "official" version of life? Create a chart listing examples of "the real version" versus "the official version" of what happens in the story. Can you think of any similar examples in your own society?

LITERARY DEVICES

5. How would you describe Lena's character? What are some of the techniques or literary devices that the author uses to reveal what she's really like?

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS: GLOSSARY

A number of terms in *The House of One Thousand Eyes* are in German, or specific to East Germany and/or the time period of the novel. As some of these terms might be unfamiliar to readers, translations or definitions are provided here.

beziehungen: (German) plural of *beziehung*, meaning “relationship.” In the context of this book, *beziehungen* refers to connections to people who might be useful.

Bolsheviks: a Russian political party founded by Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Bodanov in 1905. The Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 during the Russian Revolution. The party later became the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

bratwurst: (German) a type of German sausage made from finely-chopped veal, beef, or most commonly pork

Citizen: a form of address used by revolutionaries to refer to each other (instead of “Mister” or “Missus” which were associated with titles used for nobility). First used during the French Revolution, as “Citoyen(ne)”.

Comrade: a form of address first used by the socialist movement in the mid-19th century. It was used by socialists or communists to address a fellow socialist/communist.

Eiscafé: (German) ice cream parlor

Frau: (German) literally “wife.” A title or form of address for a married or widowed German-speaking woman.

Fräulein: (German) a title or form of address for an unmarried German-speaking woman

glasnost: (Russian) literally “openness, transparency.” In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev, a Russian politician and former President of the Soviet Union, popularized the term as a political slogan to signal the government’s new policy to be more open to consultation and willing to spread information.

Hohenschönhausen: (German) an area in the north east of Berlin which existed from 1985–2001

Jugendweihe: (German) literally “youth consecrate.” A non-religious coming-of-age ceremony practiced in Germany for 13–14-year olds. Youth attend special events and courses before a formal ceremony. In East Germany, the *Jugendweihe* was used as a tool to indoctrinate children to the socialist cause and pledge their allegiance to the socialist State.

KaffeeMix: an East German brand that was a mixture of half coffee and half coffee substitute, produced when coffee—an expensive and precious import—was in short supply

Kneipe: (German) a pub or bar

Lada: a brand of cars manufactured in Russia, designed to be rugged, affordable and easy for owners to repair themselves

layabout: a person who is known for doing little or no work

Mein Gott: (German) the expression “my God”

Neues Deutschland: (German) literally “New Germany”

Oberschule: (German) high school

Oma: (German) grandma

Opa: (German) grandpa

perestroika: (Russian) literally “restructuring” or “rebuilding.” In the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev, a Russian politician and former President of the Soviet Union, popularized the term for the policy of reforming the economic and political system.

People’s Army: the National People’s Army (*Nationale Volksarmee* in German) was the name used for the armed forces in East Germany, established in 1956 and disbanded in 1990.

People’s Police: see entry for “Volkspolizei”

People’s Theatre: (the *Volksbühne* in German) a theater in Berlin that was built in 1913 and 1914 with the goal of presenting contemporary, realistic plays at prices that the common worker could afford

Politburo: the main policymaking committee for communist parties

Prost: (German) cheers (the exclamation, often used before drinking)

Purimix: an East German appliance that was a floor waxer, vacuum cleaner, and blender all in one

Sau: (German) sow (a female pig)

Scheisse: (German) shit

schrullig: (German) whimsical, odd, quirky

Skat: (German) a three-player card game, considered the national game of Germany

Solyanka: (German) a spicy and sour Russian soup containing pickles with brine, and often cabbage, salted mushrooms, potatoes, sour cream, dill, and meat or fish

The SS: (short for *Schutzstaffel*) The Nazi special police force founded by Adolf Hitler as his personal bodyguards. The SS also provided security forces and administered the concentration camps during World War II.

U-Bahn or **S-Bahn:** (*Utergrundbahn* or underground railway, and *Stadtschnellbahn* or city rapid railway) rapid transit systems in Germany

Volkspolizei, People's Police, or VoPo: the national police force for East Germany, though it was similar to a paramilitary as well as a civilian police force

Young Pioneers: an organization for children operated by a communist party, modelled on the Scout movement in some ways, though supported by the party