

A true story of friendship, family, and farewells



THE YEAR
OF
GOODBYES



Debbie Levy

with a foreword by Tom Angleberger
New York Times Best-Selling Author

This guide is aligned with the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR) for Literature, Writing, Language, Speaking and Listening. The broad CCR standards are the foundation for the grade level-specific Common Core State Standards.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Disney • HYPERION BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

Like other twelve-year-old girls, Jutta Salzberg enjoyed going to school, playing outside, celebrating holidays with friends, and vacationing with relatives. In Germany in 1938, these and other everyday activities were dangerous for Jews. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party were in power, and the tide of anti-Semitism had risen to perilous levels. Jutta and her family tried their best to lead normal lives as they were systematically stripped of their rights. But when public persecution of Jews increased, and neighbors and friends began to disappear, they knew they had to escape—if, that is, they could find another country to take them before it was too late.

Throughout 1938, Jutta had her friends and relatives fill her *poesiealbum*—her autograph book—with inscriptions, verses, and drawings. Her daughter, Debbie Levy, has used these entries as a springboard for telling the true story of the Salzberg family's last year in Germany. It was a year of change and chance. It was a year of confusion and cruelty. It was, as the *poesie* writings make poignantly clear, a year of goodbyes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Have students refer to specific passages in Debbie Levy's *The Year of Goodbyes* as they answer the following questions in a class discussion or writing exercise.



- 1 Describe what a *poesiealbum* was used for in the 1930s in Europe. How were the pages filled? Who would you ask to write in yours? What would you hope they might include? Is this a tradition that girls today would enjoy? Why or why not?
- 2 Reconstruct the events that led the Salzbergs to seek asylum in America. Which events would convince you to leave your family and fortune behind? Why was it so difficult for Jewish families to leave Germany?
- 3 What joys have been stolen from Jutta's family and childhood? How have things changed in her neighborhood and school? How have Jutta's parents also been affected? Are her worries typical of a twelve-year-old?

- 4 Even when families were finally granted permission to leave Germany, what did they have to leave behind? How was this enforced? How did foreign governments also make it difficult to leave? Did you realize that America had the fate of so many Jewish families in its hands?
- 5 Why does Jutta's father decide to purchase tickets on the *Aquitania*? Why is this a risk? How do things become too intense to wait for the departure of the ship?
- 6 Why does Jutta's mother decide to visit Poland one last time with the children, despite the grave risks that the Nazis might not let them return? Can you imagine visiting your extended family for very likely the last time? Who would you miss most? What meals and traditions would you be homesick for?
- 7 How does Father reveal his desperation at the American consulate? How would it feel to see one of your parents act so rashly? How does it, in fact, save the family?
- 8 Create a list of things that Jutta will miss about her life in Germany and the things she will be relieved to leave behind. Circle the things on the list that would be the same for you today if you had to leave behind all that you knew.
- 9 Why do you think the author decided to tell the story in free verse? Which poem in the book is your favorite? Why? What can you apply to your own writing?
- 10 After reading the Afterword, what did you find most surprising to learn about the rest of Jutta's story? How were several of the girls eventually reunited? Which of your friends do you think you'll still see sixty years from now?



Correlates to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts in Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details, R.L.5.1–8.1, R.L.5.2–8.2, and R.L.5.5–8.5; Reading Literature: Craft and Structure, R.L. 5.4–8.4 and R.L. 5.5–8.5; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration, S.L.5.1–8.1; and Writing: Text Types and Purposes, WHST.5.2–8.2.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

READING

Create a character web about Jutta as you read the story. What do you learn about Jutta as the poems progress? Be sure to add both internal and external qualities to your character map. Discuss your choices of what to include after reading the book with a partner.

WRITING

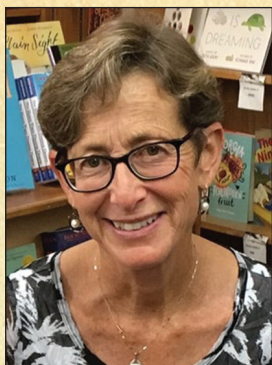
Create your own *poesiealbums* to share with friends and family. Include a short written introduction that describes how you learned about these memory and autograph albums from reading about Jutta's true story. In addition, you could contribute a page to a collective, online poesiealbum created by author Debbie Levy. Visit this website to learn more: <http://theyearofgoodbyes.blogspot.com>

HISTORY

Conduct a short research project to continue the time line that Debbie Levy began in the back matter of the book. Expand the time line by at least five years and include at least five important events.

Correlates to Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts in Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details, R.L.5.1–8.1, R.L.5.3–8.3, R.L.5.4–8.4, and R.L.5.6–8.6; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration, S.L.5.1–8.1, and Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, S.L.5.5–8.5; and Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge, WHST.5.7–8.7





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DEBBIE LEVY is the award-winning author of nonfiction and fiction books for young people, including *New York Times* best-selling *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark*, winner of the 2017 Sydney Taylor Book Award and 2016 National Jewish Book Award; *This Promise of Change* (with Jo Ann Allen Boyce), winner of the 2019 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Nonfiction; and

We Shall Overcome: The Story of a Song, a 2014 Jane Addams Award Honor Book and Bank Street College Best Book. *The Year of Goodbyes* is a 2010 Sydney Taylor Honor Book, *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book, and VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates) Nonfiction Honor book. Debbie is a former lawyer and newspaper editor, and lives in Maryland with her husband. They have two grown sons.

www.debbielevybooks.com.

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

- 1 Was it difficult to bring a twelve-year-old's voice to the mom you had always known?

It was not terribly difficult. By the time I started writing, I had thought about my mom's story for a long time. In the years leading up to writing the book, I spent hours with her in the presence of six of her classmates who also escaped from Nazi Germany, at the reunions they started having in 2000. They were in their seventies by then, but you know all of us adults carry around inside of us the young girls or boys we used to be. Together in someone's living room or around a dining table, these women chattered about their teachers, friends, and homes from 1930s-era Germany. Occasionally, someone would break into a song from those days. Their 11- and 12-year-old selves came out for a romp, and gave me a sense of who and how they were as girls—especially my mother. I also was able to tune into my mother's

younger, non-Mom voice from the diaries that she kept beginning in September 1938. There are only a few diary excerpts in the book (because most of the diaries date from after the time period covered by the story), but there are many, many diary pages that my mother wrote from the time she was twelve on into her teens. Finally, I have to add that my mother was by nature fun-loving, curious, social, and talkative—like a lot of 11- and 12-year-olds! So although she was in her eighties when I was working on the book, it really didn't take a great leap of imagination to see her as a girl. She died in 2013, just before her eighty-seventh birthday. I miss her every day, but am so glad she was alive when *The Year of Goodbyes* first came out in 2010. We did many school visits and other events presenting the book together.

2 Did this project change your relationship with your mom?



We always had a close relationship and this project did not change that. The book gave us the opportunity to spend a lot of time together. We took two overnight train trips while I was in the research and drafting stages, which gave us long, uninterrupted hours of conversation about her past.

Although I would not say our relationship changed as a result of this book, the project did let me see my mother in a new light. When I was growing up in the 1960s and early 1970s, there was almost no talk in our home about her childhood in Nazi Germany. I think it's fair to say that my mother scrubbed herself of her German childhood; she didn't have even a trace of a German accent, unlike most of her surviving classmates. She cooked no typical German dishes. Probably the only tip-off to my mom's history in our house was a void: the absolute absence of any products from Germany. My mother would never buy a German-made automobile or kitchen appliance, nor even a set of knives or pair of sunglasses. It wasn't until many years later, when I was an adult, that my mother became more open about her childhood in Germany. Even then, we did not have deep conversations about what her life was like and how she felt as a child in Germany—not until this book. Through interviews, and in the photographs and documents I examined for this project, my mother gradually emerged to me as I have tried to portray her in the book—a typical European girl with the tastes and habits of her

native Germany, who loved her home and neighborhood in Hamburg, and who grew as angry as she was fearful about the changes wrought by the rise of Nazism.

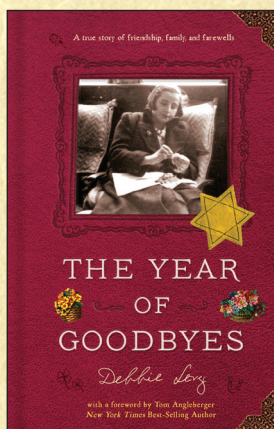
3 How did you decide on the format for the story? Why did you choose free verse to tell it?

I started writing the book in prose, as a straight narrative—for about three pages. But the story seemed to have a will of its own, and practically insisted on channeling itself into a poetic format. There's no doubt in my mind this was because of the central role played by the brief entries from my mother's *poesiealbum* that open nearly all the chapters. Those little verses that my mother's friends and relatives wrote created an atmosphere that I wanted to carry through the book. The *poesies* also underscored for me how much expression can be packed into poetry—each word matters so much! I wanted to write my mother's story in that way—where each word mattered, the way each friend and relative mattered to her. Also, as you know, the story is told in the first person—with my mother as the narrator. And although people, including preteen people like my mother at the time of the story, don't walk around talking and thinking in poetry, I do think that free verse is good at capturing something essential about the way we think and react, especially under stressful conditions. It's urgent and attentive. It creates rhythms, and then changes the rhythms, like a heartbeat that quickens, and then calms, in the face of danger.



Tracie Vaughn Zimmer, author of *Disney's Second Guard* and an English teacher, created this guide.

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