

Andi's War Short Guide

Andi's War by Billi Rosen

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Overview

Andi's War recounts the story of a Greek family torn apart during the civil war that broke out in Greece between communist partisans and loyalists following World War II. The novel not only details the war going on around Andi, but also within Andi. A war which she has to fight with herself, a complicated situation she has to understand, a fear she has to come to terms with and overcome, a life she has to live no matter what obstacles lie before her. Andi's War is the first part of Billi Rosen's trilogy based around Andi's life. The reality and harshness of life during the Greek civil war is told with objectivity and sensitivity, with a real understanding of the events. Life is portrayed factually, and conveyed through the eyes of a heroine who could be in any country going through civil war, coping with adolescent fears and thoughts while trying to understand and cope with the situation at hand.

About the Author

Billi Rosen was born in 1942 in Greece, where she spent the first years of her childhood. She was educated in Sweden and then moved to the United Kingdom in her late teens. She subsequently traveled extensively in Europe, living in Italy, Switzerland and on the Greek island of Corfu. Today, she divides her time between Portsmouth (United Kingdom) and Corfu.

She has three children.

Rosen is a multi-talented woman, and in addition to her career as a notable author of children's and young adult books, she has worked in education, in television, and also as a freelance photographer and journalist.

Rosen's first book for children, *Andi's War*, won the Faber/Guardian/Jackanory Children's Competition for unpublished authors for children in 1987 as well as the Prix Enfance du Monde Natha Caputo (UNICEF) in 1993. Furthermore, *Andi's War* was serialized for the BBC television program *Jackanory*. Since its first publication in the United Kingdom, the work has been translated into fourteen languages.

Following the publication of this book, Rosen issued four more children's/young adult books, including *The Other Side of the Mountain* and *A Swallow In Winter*. Combined with *Andi's War*, these books form a trilogy that tells the story of Antigone. The Greek translation of *A Swallow in Winter* received an honorable mention at the award of the 1999 UNESCO Prize for Children's and Young People's Literature in the Service of Tolerance. This prize is awarded every two years in recognition of works for the young that best embody the concepts and ideals of tolerance and peace, and promote understanding based on mutual respect for other people and their cultures.

In addition to her trilogy, Billi Rosen has written two children's picture books: *Sophie's Cat*, 1993 and *Catch Me A Godzilla*, 1994.



Setting

Andi's War is set in Greece, realistically portraying a country in the midst of a civil war. The action is set against a backdrop of deep unrest, a politically harsh time during which families are torn apart based on political beliefs and ideologies. Setting the action of the novel in Greece during a civil war is integral to the plot and also serves to make readers aware of a war that is not very well known. It is also quite unique as there are very few English-language books which use Greece during this historical period as a setting. In terms of plot, the era is further important since the themes of war and politics are fundamental to Andi's War: political discussions and explanations are rife, thus the use of a historical setting aids in the dialogue and explanation of political ideologies.

Although the natural setting is not very prominent throughout the novel, it is distinctively Greece. The description of the Peloponnesian village and its surroundings in the first chapter as seen by someone arriving by sea is spectacular and the aromas drift stealthily off the page. The village looks as if it has been built on water, and thyme, olive trees, pine and oleander cover its surrounding hills. The houses, pink, white and blue, are covered with jasmine and canopies of vine shade their courtyards whilst their gardens are planted generously with orange trees, pomegranates and figs.

The "Sleeper," a majestic mountain behind the village is described as "guarding" the village. It is animated figuratively through personification, depicted as a female who has "thrown her head back like someone laughing at a hilarious private joke." Her "head" is described clearly, right down to her "thyme-covered cheeks." The descriptions of the countryside are paintings; paintings being brushed in gently worded strokes straight into the reader's imagination.

The countryside setting is further used symbolically by the author. On the one hand, the countryside is a place of escape from Andi's problems, a place where she finds peace away from the everyday squabbles and strife of the village. It is where old Stammo lives, far from the village, looking down at the beauty of nature from his safe heights. It is also where she can be closest to her parents, although she does not know exactly where they are. They are somewhere in the mountains and the mountains in turn, like "The Sleeper," guard her village and her family. The countryside is a place of refuge and safety. On the other hand, however, the country is filled with war and darkness. The mountains are the mysterious source of war, which is "making its way down the hills like an unstoppable disease." It is where the guns and rifles lie, where old Stammo is finally murdered, where battles are fought. After old Stammo's murder, the children never go back to the hills. The countryside no longer is a place of refuge, but a place which has trapped the children's mother and become a place of death. When spring comes, however, Andi is delighted to see that "there was life in everything, good and bad, ugly and beautiful. It was good to know that war had not been able to stop spring from coming."

Language is important in creating a realistic setting and this is accomplished with the scattering of Greek words throughout the text. Finally, mention of traditions, everyday



customs in a Greek village of the time, religion and superstitions are other small elements which complement the authentic and realistic setting in which Andi's War takes place. The superstitious concept of the evil eye and its traditional safeguard, the blue bead, which are important elements of Greek superstition, are referred to, just as Rosen refers to the everyday custom of baking one's food and bread at the local bakery. Religious customs include the Holy Easter week (the most important religious event in Greece) along with its important liturgies and smaller traditional components, from following the Epitafio on Good Friday, to saying "Christ is Risen" at midnight on the Saturday and finally receiving the blood-red dyed Easter eggs.



Social Sensitivity

Andi's War is a text which can be used to discuss a number of different social issues that may be of interest to young adults.

These include political issues, ideologies, and bullies, as well as the illogical rationale of war.

Political commentary is integral to the plot of this novel due to the political nature of the civil war. This novel is valuable because it can be used to portray the difficulty of political ideology and its comprehension at a young age. It can also be used to discuss the various ways in which politics can be explained to young adults. Furthermore, it is useful in terms of its portrayal of the influence that a parent's political ideologies and beliefs may have on a child. Peer problems may also be discussed with regards to this work, for as it is portrayed, Andi is tarred by her parents' Communist ideologies and thus ends up fighting her and Aristo's parents' war with him. Although she is not personally involved in the situation, her parents' political beliefs cause her to have to fight on their behalf, just as Aristo does on behalf of his parents.

Another interesting theme for discussion is that of the illogical rationale of war and the difficulty in understanding it. This is especially acute in times of civil war when the enemy is no longer a foreigner, but a next door neighbor, or even worse, one's brother or relative. How does this affect young adults, and what can they do to straighten out their confusion? Andi's War promotes peace and the uselessness of war by showing clearly that war only brings death, broken homes and grief to one's home. The children's ultimate wish is that the war will end so that their family can be together again.

Finally, the novel can be used as a different portrayal of bullies in school. Aristo and his Warriors harass the children based on the ideologies of their parents (not their own). Aristo is an accurate caricature of the classic bully and this is portrayed through all his mannerisms, from his attitude towards Andi, when he swears at her using words that he has most certainly heard from his parents, to trying to mask his cowardice through the bullroarer on his kite. Bullies are shown to be stronger in certain cases and ready to make other peers afraid; however they are not always as strong and brave as they make out to be. For example, they only go and beat up the Skylarks when Andi is not able to be with them and they are also frightened at the cemetery when the Skylarks frighten them with their "ghoul" (Dimitri dressed up in a white sheet). The supposedly brave thugs run off whimpering and sobbing with fright and Andi bets that they probably did not stop to look back or think that they had been tricked until they were safely tucked in their beds with their blankets over their heads. Sometimes bullies are not as brave as they seem and are just like other children; however due to other ideas and to peer pressure, they frighten everyone else until they are frightened themselves. When they lose face, they have to do something in order to show that they are still in charge, and as Andi says, "of course he picked on those younger and smaller and hungrier than himself." Bullies exist everywhere, all over the world, and in all periods of history.



Details and situations might differ, but all bullies are cowards with no self confidence who frighten and harass their weaker peers in order to feel stronger and self assured and, if they are beaten by someone, they usually seek revenge in petty and dangerous manners.

Literary Qualities

Andi's War begins with a foreword that helps the reader understand the historical setting and plot. Although the information now appears dated, it is necessary because of the complexity of events described in the book. Billi Rosen also creates a sense of foreboding within her foreword when she concludes by saying: "Me, I look at the hills and keep my fingers crossed." Does this mean that this could happen again? All things are possible for people never change.

Foreshadowing and a sense of foreboding and darkness linger deeply within the atmosphere of the novel. The most exquisite example of this is the use of the folk tale at the beginning of the novel which creates the mood of the novel by stating that "this is a different kind of story." The tale outlines two of the most important themes, fear and betrayal, and ultimately prepares the reader of the finale of the book (that of death and separation due to one's ideals).

The narrative is conducted in the first person and it is clearly Andi's voice. Although it is in the past tense, the narrative does not spoil the effect of surprise that the reader experiences during the novel. There is no foreshadowing of Paul's or Cassie's death even though a sense of foreboding does appear within the book. One trusts the narrator and listens to her carefully. Furthermore, the dialogue that appears in the novel is natural and not stilted in any way. It flows, carries thoughts and opinions as would habitually appear in a normal dialogue and has no theatric pauses or set manners. It is unpredictable and yet is familiar. Greek words are also scattered throughout the text in order to enhance the setting and create an authentic sense of place.

Literary animation or personification is also used in descriptions of the countryside and the natural environment in order to bring the setting and description to life.

These range from "killing a conversation stone dead," to "mountains and their laughing heads," to "the war being like an unstoppable disease," to "small pots having big ears." Metaphors and similes are also used often in descriptions.

Another technique used in the novel is that of symbolism. The "war" between Aristo and Andi is most certainly a symbolic one. Although there are few descriptions of the actual war being waged between the communist partisans and the loyalists, the battles that are fought between the young children are a symbolic interpretation of the battles in the mountains.

From Chapter twenty-one and onwards, the narrative begins to build, chapter by chapter, towards the great climax of the ending. As the action builds, so the descriptions become faster and shorter in length.

Less detail is given and time seems to move swiftly until one reaches a long description of the night that Andi did not feel well.



When Paul is brought home in a coma, she is given a sleeping pill to relax her and allow her to sleep. Suddenly, just as her reflexes and reactions slow down, so does the description until Andi finds herself near the bed and next to Paul's dead body. Then, from one moment to the next, the reader is transported abruptly away from Paul to an epilogue that has skipped forward to Stockholm, Sweden, three months later, where Andi has gone with her father. It is there that Andi tells of the death of her mother.

The sudden ending leaves one gasping for breath, empty and contemplating.



Themes and Characters

Andi's War is a novel of themes and characters and the manner in which the characters are affected by the varying circumstances and ideologies revolving around them. The main characters, all women, are dynamic and independent, living in a time filled with fear, political strife, war, death and loss. It is these themes that are thus highlighted and kneaded skillfully into the story line and the lives of the characters.

The civil war in Greece was a very complex period of Greek history and thus very difficult to comprehend, as is portrayed in the case of Andi and her brother. Their questions about why there is a war after another war; how there can be war between family, neighbors and friends; and how there could be a war if no foreign soldiers had entered Greek borders are constant throughout the plot. The war is crucial not only as a setting and as a social question, but it is also the element that has caused the two children's family to be broken apart.

Although they not caught in any open warfare, the children are constantly reminded of the situation and this is evident in the home, with grandmother's secret notes and hidden gold sovereigns, as well as in the countryside, where they find the hidden guns and rifles in the cave, are caught by resistance fighters and find Old Stammos murdered. There is no escaping the war, however young and innocent one may be.

An interesting comparison is also made between the civil war and World War II, which had ended just a few years earlier.

The novel reminds the reader that although everything is different now that the war with the Germans is over, it is also true that nothing has changed at all. Neighbors have replaced foreigners as the enemy, and Old Cyclops is clearly compared to the Nazi Gestapo when he and his policemen thugs barge into Andi's home. Old Cyclops clicks his heels like a German and salutes Aunt Dina, and then proceeds to threaten and harass the children and the old grandmother.

Everything is the same; the only difference is that this time the enemy speaks the same language.

Due to the political nature of the civil war in Greece, political commentary and the explanation of such ideologies are prevalent. Grandmother Leila tries to explain politics and Communist ideology to the children. And while the children cannot understand everything, Grandmother provides a very clear description of Communism, declaring that ideology cannot be forced on either people or a country, and that a country has to be ready to undertake such a major change in political ideology: "To be a communist is to want all good things for all people.... At least that's the idea," [Grandmother] "added as a kind of afterthought; The concept, the idea, is a good one but it is something that one must arrive at of one's own free will. To run before one can walk only leads to trouble; and Communism is an ideal—not a workable reality. Not yet anyway." Objectivity is retained within the text by portraying all sides of the argument to the



reader. However, since the story is that of the daughter of a resistance fighter, the narrator is sympathetic to the cause of her parents. Yet the truth can be found among the differing opinions portrayed and the reader is left to make up his own mind.

The importance of "sides," whose side one is on, and whether one is on the right or the wrong side is a fundamental theme of *Andi's War*. The civil war in Greece was a war about political beliefs and the inhabitants were separated into factions because of these beliefs. The protagonists of the novel often have discussions about which side they are on and why. Regardless of the points of view expressed by various characters, Rosen attempts to maintain an objective viewpoint throughout the novel. Subjectivity and objectivity are two sharp sides of a knife and are often difficult to distinguish, especially when a country's history is not known to a reader. However the author balances opinions and "sides" brilliantly both through narration as well as dialogue. For example, although it is clear that a chief of police would not necessarily be balanced in terms of his beliefs and is required to attend to events in his jurisdiction in the manner dictated by the ruling government, it is also made clear that Old Cyclops is probably a cruel man anyway, and would misuse his power whatever the political or situational circumstances. Finally, "sides" are also substantial in portraying the characteristic image of the traitor. The "traitor" in Greek history has always been a word that has brought disgust to its speaker. The traitor and the theme of betrayal has been permeated Greek history for many years, and is rooted in tales such as that of Ephialtes ("nightmare" in English translation), who led King Leonidas and 300 Spartan soldiers through Thermopylae and into a trap set by the Persians. Since then the term traitor and "nightmare" have come to mean almost the same thing. This theme is also highlighted and foreshadowed in the folk-tale that Grandmother tells Andi at the beginning of the book, whereupon Ailan the court dancer prefers to be put to death rather than betray the hideout of Mahmet the Rebel and his band of fighters. Thus, even from the first page of the novel, the theme of sides and the traitor are prevalent.

Another important theme linked to the theme of war and its brutality, is that of humanity, which resides hidden in the hearts of fighters, even when they have become hardened by war. For example, when the young children go to the cave that they have found in the mountains filled with hidden rifles, they are caught by Communist freedom fighters. The freedom fighters turn to each other discussing what they should do with the children and, although one says that they should most certainly be killed in order for them not to disclose what they have found, another hesitates. He has children as well and has never killed a child before, "not in cold blood anyway." While he is admonished for being sentimental, it is not sentimentality, but humanity and consideration for life even in war. Not all soldiers are cruel and cold-blooded; they are fighting for a cause that they believe in, not for the simple pleasure of murder and death.

Finally, the emotion of fear and overcoming that feeling is developed throughout the novel. This is portrayed not only through the story of Ailan and the Sultan, but also through Grandmother's quotation of Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." As the plot develops, Andi is able to overcome her fear when she realizes what it really is—that fear is nothing but an emotion exaggerated by the



imagination. She comes to realize that what frightens her is nothing but the idea of being frightened.

All these intertwining themes, however, are nothing without the characters who live through them, experience them and are influenced by them. There are many characters in Andi's War; however the most important are Andi and Grandmother Leila.

It is important to note that the main characters are women; they are dynamic, matriarchal and independent. These contemporary images may surprise readers into believing that the novel is unrealistic; however these characterizations are important for reasons other than bringing about the appropriate atmosphere of the Greek setting.

Andi and her grandmother are very much alike and, from the little we know of her mother, Cassie, she is similar to them in character as well. Andi is a liberal and mature character around whom the novel revolves and it is her voice that narrates the story. She is a character coming to terms with her developing personality during a brutal war that has taken her parents away from her. She is also a young girl trying to understand the reasons why there is a war, why her parents have been taken away from her, and why she should be strong.

Her ties with her brother, Paul, are so close that she is almost a surrogate mother to him, caring for and protecting him. Her inner strength and independence is so powerful that one could almost say that she overshadows the other characters. Her protective nature is highlighted when at the end of the novel, the Warriors are given the opportunity they are waiting for, to attack and brutally beat young Paul and the other children. Had Andi been present, the Warriors would not have dared to attempt such an act.

Grandmother is also a very strong character, a wise and clever woman who is respected by all around her, even though some may not agree with her methods and beliefs. She helps the Communist freedom fighters even though she does not fully agree with their cause. She protects the children and is the pillar of strength in Andi's family. She is what keeps everything going properly in the home, a resistance fighter in her own right and the keeper of goodness, virtue and justice in the broken home. Her contemporary attitudes may surprise the reader as she avidly supports the idea of educated /independent women. She supports Andi's actions, to the dismay of Andi's aunt. Grandmother Leila's character is necessary in establishing the ground rules and in guiding Andi's personality through the most difficult period of her life. She is the most stable and objective character of the novel.

Besides Andi and Grandmother Lella, a myriad of other characters are included in the novel. These include all the family members: Aunt Hercules and Aunt Dina, Paul, Marko, Aki, Mother and Father. Aunt Hercules is a grumpy middle-aged woman who represents the traditional uneducated housewife and grass widow. She has two sons Aki and Marko. Marko is a spoilt, selfish little boy who looks up to Andi and Paul, and represents the lengths to which a person may go in times of war: stealing the family's eggs in order to satisfy his own hunger regardless of anyone else's well being. Aunt Dina is important



because she brings the concept of "sides" into the context of the family environment. It is through her marriage to an army captain, Uncle Tasso, who is described as "a devil in uniform" and around whom Andi and Paul have to be very careful so they do not divulge any information regarding their parents, that the "other side" is brought close to home. The differences in this family serve to highlight the larger differences in ideology that tore apart families during this war. Aunt Dina also has four sons. One of them, Mitso, is similar to his father in character and ends up becoming a key figure in Paul's death. He is a "traitor" in Andi's eyes, for it is he who informs the Warriors that Andi will not accompany Paul and Marko the night that he is attacked and brutally beaten. Finally, there are the Andi and Paul's parents—although they are not described and remain practically unknown to the reader, their mother in particular is portrayed as dynamic and independent, a revolutionary who is killed for her cause at the end of the novel.

In addition to the main characters, there are two others who are integral to the plot and the atmosphere. These are Aristo and his father "Old Cyclops." Aristo is a classic bully and coward who attacks Paul only when he is sure that Andi will not be there.

His father, Old Cyclops, is the chief of police and is compared to the Nazi Germans, not only because of his attitude but also through his mannerisms, such as the clicking of his heels when he salutes and gives his condolences to Aunt Dina for the death of her husband. Both he and his son are caricatures: the first of the classic bully, and the second of the classic opportunist who is also a bully and who thrives on power.



Topics for Discussion

1. "Someone once said that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." This someone mentioned by Andi's Grandmother was President Franklin D. Roosevelt who said, on March 4, 1933: "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Fear, understanding it and overcoming it, is an integral theme of Andi's War.

What is Andi's greatest fear? Does she overcome it? If she does, how? If she does not, why not?

2. Against what and who is Andi's war fought? Is it a war she has waged within herself? Is it against Aristo and his Warriors? Or is it the adult war itself, being fought within the context of the children's lives?

3. Aki is the disabled son of Aunt Hercules. Discuss his role in Andi's War.

4. Describe the differences between the male and female characters in Andi's family. Are the women more dynamic and independent than the men? Discuss.

5. The importance of "sides" is an important theme in Andi's War. Why is this theme so important and how is it integrated into the story?

6. Andi's War is "a different kind of story." Why is this?

7. Is the countryside an integral part of the plot, and if it is what does it symbolize for Andi?

9. How would this story differ if it were to be narrated from Aristo's and the Warriors' point of view? Discuss your thoughts fully citing examples from the novel.

10. Discuss the author's technique of foreshadowing with reference to Marko.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. "Everything is the same, yet everything is so different." Excluding the historical and geographical setting in consideration, discuss the similarities and differences between Andi's world and teenage lives today.

2. What is the importance of the fairy tale narrated by Andi's grandmother at the beginning of the novel? And how is its presence relevant to the rest of the plot?

3. How is the geographical setting of the novel retained in the foreground? How is the country of Greece described in Andi's War?

4. The theme of the traitor is important in Andi's War. What makes a person a traitor?

5. There are different traditions in each country for each holiday. What are the unique elements of Christmas and New Year traditions in Greece?

6. Aristo and Andi engage in a kite fight.

Find out and write about the history of kites and kite flying.

7. Discuss the problems of bullies and gangs in today's schools. How can these problems be combated?

8. The explanation of politics to a young audience is a difficult theme which is brought up in Andi's War. The misunderstandings that can result if a child does not understand political ideology are both clearly and cleverly portrayed within the text. Do readers find this humorous? Do they understand the cause of the misunderstanding? How can politics be discussed in order for the general idea of it to be understood?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Andi's War is the first part of a trilogy by Billi Rosen which begins with the young Andi's life in Greece, moves on to *The Other Side of the Mountain* when she and her father have fled to Sweden and settle there as refugees, only to end with *A Swallow in Winter* whereupon Andi finally returns to her village in Greece and has to deal with all the elements that had forced her to flee from her homeland in the first place. The trilogy follows the trials and tribulations of this young heroine faithfully and is a realistic window into all the elements that make up the Greek world, history, politics, immigration and emigration, religion, culture. It is a virtually untainted window into Greek reality, past and present, as well as into issues that may exist in other cultures and countries as well. It is a trilogy which touches upon issues which are present throughout society and which, when read, portray to the audience how these issues may or may not be overcome, how they are dealt with and that they do exist in other countries, etc.

Two other books that explore the civil war in Greece are *The Lost Ones* by Robert Shaffer and *Ring the Judas Bell* by James Forman. The first novel tells of a young American boy living in Athens towards the end of the civil war and who meets Alex, a Greek boy in search of his sister who had been rounded up by the Communist partisans. The plot is simple and narration naive; however the authentic, visual images of the time that one comes away with after having read the novel are unique. *Ring the Judas Bell*, on the other hand is harsher and more raw than either *The Lost Ones* or Billi Rosen's trilogy. With distinctive directness it tells the story of Nicholas, a young boy who matures from a simple shepherd boy into a brave and strong leader. He lives during a bleak period of Greek history, and watches his family slain around him, after which he is taken away along with the surviving children of the village. He and the other children are forced to find a means to escape and Nicholas finally leads the children back to their homes.

Andi's War was also serialized for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television program *Jackanory*. *Jackanory* was, for twenty-five years, the United Kingdom's most popular children's television show since its first airing in December 1965. It signs up famous actors to appear and narrate the stories chosen. The program is aired as a fifteen-minute installment whereupon the art of story telling is put to the test.



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