

# Chase Me, Catch Nobody Short Guide

## Chase Me, Catch Nobody by Erik Christian Haugaard

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## Overview

Chase Me, Catch Nobody deals with questions of morality and social justice in an exciting and direct manner. Set primarily in Germany in 1937, just before Germany invades Poland to launch World War II, the novel focuses on one boy's initiation into a world where political issues intrude upon and warp matters of everyday life. Exposed to a society overrun by Nazism and anti-Semitism, fourteen-year-old Erik Hansen must decide whether passivity in the face of injustice is ultimately the equivalent of supporting injustice. During the course of a class trip to Germany, Erik struggles to define his sense of allegiance, questioning whether it should be directed toward his native Denmark, himself, or unknown people suffering for reasons he cannot completely understand.

## About the Author

Born in Frederiksberg, Denmark, on April 13, 1923, Erik Christian Haugaard began working as a farm laborer in Denmark when he was fifteen years old. Two years later he left the country, hoping to satisfy his curiosity about other cultures through extensive travel. In 1940 he entered Black Mountain College in North Carolina but soon enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he served from 1942 to 1945. After his discharge he attended the New School for Social Research in New York from 1945 to 1947. In 1947 he married fellow writer Myrna Seld. The couple has two children.

Haugaard's work often focuses on the imminent possibility of death and the attendant dearness of life, a theme the author traces to his military service in World War II. He considers his present story-telling an outgrowth of the fiction he told himself as a child.

Haugaard's work has won numerous awards, including honorable mention at the New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival for both Hakon of Rogen's Saga and The Little Fishes, as well as the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, Jane Addams Award, and Danish Cultural Minister's Prize, all for The Little Fishes. Fluent in English, Danish, and Norwegian, Haugaard has translated Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales from Danish to English.

## Setting

In 1937 Erik Hansen reluctantly joins about fifty other Danish boys on a school trip to Germany. In Lubeck and Hamburg he and his friends witness the oppression of Jews and meet Germans inspired by Adolf Hitler's strong leadership and declarations that Germany will rise to embrace its glorious past. Erik begins to understand that many Germans who subscribe to this false ideal willingly condone the needless suffering of others. The political environment of Nazi Germany forces all its citizens, and eventually citizens of nations worldwide, to take a position. Some rush without reflection into the mass movement, others stall or feign ignorance, others attempt to capitalize on the situation for personal gain, and still others try, often in vain, to resist. Erik, although just a visitor, must decide where in this spectrum he falls.



## Social Sensitivity

*Chase Me, Catch Nobody* is staunch in its criticism of Nazism and the horrors it engendered, and Haugaard demonstrates no sympathy for the movement itself or the people who supported it, whether actively or passively. Teachers may wish to place the novel in historical context by discussing the roots of National Socialism in Germany and the political environment that fostered Hitler's ascent to power. Set just before the outbreak of World War II—and thus before the Nazi's mass deportation and execution of "undesirables"—the book focuses on the inherent moral and political evils of Nazism rather than on the system's worst human rights abuses.

The possibility of death lurks in the back of Erik's mind at all times, but no characters actually die during the course of the narrative. Nobody's father's murder and her mother's desertion—both of which occur before the novel opens—may disturb some readers, but are fully consistent with the pre-World War II environment of Germany.

*Chase Me, Catch Nobody* also addresses the problems caused by strong nationalistic feelings. Haugaard clearly disapproves of 1937 Germany as a nation and of the people who will not stand up against Nazism. Individualism has been replaced by patriotism and a national pride that believes Germans are superior to all other races. The novel breeds contempt for social injustice rather than understanding of why it happens. While *Chase Me, Catch Nobody* admirably portrays a young man facing injustice for the first time, readers should recognize that the novel's strength is its character development, not its historical accuracy.

# Literary Qualities

Adolf Hitler has been called one of the greatest orators who ever lived; his speeches worked crowds into a nationalistic frenzy, and his rhetoric bonded elements of his audience's psyche to his own terrifying socio-political goals. In *Chase Me, Catch Nobody*, Haugaard explores language's potential to conceal or transform reality. Observing the Germany of 1937, Erik wonders if the country is not "a stage now...with all the audience rejoicing that for the first time they are being allowed behind the footlights." Actors in a play of universal significance, the characters in Haugaard's novel learn that language—whether spoken or written—has the power to shape human existence.

Erik and his schoolmates are tourists in a foreign country. They all study the German language in school but speak it with varying degrees of proficiency. The language barrier serves as both a source of humor—Erik answers the common salutation of "Heil Hitler" with nonsense phrases in Danish such as "Heil your mustache"—and as a chilling reminder of the characters' vulnerability. For example, one Danish-German phrasebook incorrectly translates the German "Schuhe," or "shoes," as "boots." "Such a book is almost like a schoolbook," Nikolai exclaims, "and when a schoolbook mistakes a shoe for a boot then the end of the world is near." The translator's use of "boot"—a word that carries distinct militaristic connotations—suggests a deliberate choice and reveals the extent to which subtleties in language can be used to manipulate those, such as Erik and his companions, who have been taught to respect and depend on schoolbooks, phrasebooks, newspapers, and "official" printed documents in general.

Haugaard further explores the symbolic content of language with his choice of character names. Nobody's real name is Isolde; her mother named her after the female protagonist of Richard Wagner's opera "Tristan und Isolde." Nobody's mother, who is married to a Jew, thus chooses to emphasize her child's Germanic heritage with this tribute to an avowedly anti-Semitic composer.

Nikolai's parents, who are Communists, also choose to make a statement by selecting Karl and Leon as their son's middle names, after Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky. At the start of the narrative Erik complains about his unremarkable name: he is one of four Eriks in his class, and Hansen is the most common surname in Denmark. Since Erik's later acts are remarkable for their decency and courage, Haugaard suggests that the course of history is determined by the actions of quite ordinary human beings.



## Themes and Characters

The main character in *Chase Me, Catch Nobody* is Erik, a sensitive, reflective boy who likes to think of himself as a poet. Although he describes himself as a "middle-of-the-roader," he is not one to join a crowd. Raised in a family where "the weather was discussed with more interest than politics," Erik is initially ignorant of political realities and is something of a snob. But on the ferry crossing from Denmark to Germany, Erik encounters a mysterious man being shadowed by the police; before the Gestapo arrest him, this stranger hands Erik a package containing fifty blank Danish passports. Erik decides to complete the stranger's mission and deliver these passports—intended for smuggling Jews and other "undesirables" out of Germany—to an address in Hamburg.

The girl nodded... "But nobody," I protested, "could live here all the time and never go outside. " "Oh yes," the girl smiled faintly.

"Niemand... nobody can."

Quickly caught up in a web of intrigue and high suspense, Erik nonetheless pauses frequently to evaluate his actions and motivations. Cautious but willing to dedicate himself fully to causes he deems worthwhile, Erik understands that most issues are more complex than they appear on the surface and must often be filtered through many "layers of realization." His observations of and involvement in German affairs on the eve of World War II teach *Chase Me, Catch Nobody* Erik both the necessity of action in the face of inaction and the preferability of intelligent action to mindless reaction.

Nikolai Karl Leon Linde, who becomes Erik's best friend, is less reflective and more spontaneous than Erik. His parents are very involved in politics and Nikolai has absorbed many of their ideas, often judging people and situations solely on the basis of politics.

Creative in dealing with his negative feelings, Nikolai uses humor and tricks to communicate his hatred of prejudice and his opinion that most political systems are unjust. Nikolai often acts without thinking and is, self-admittedly, "the kind of person who insists upon discussing shoes with a man who has a wooden leg." Passionate in his opposition to Nazism, Nikolai inspires Erik with his political fervor and his belief that individuals can and must effect change in oppressive systems.

Two important female characters are Nobody, a thirteen-year-old girl whose Jewish father has been killed by the Nazis and whose mother has abandoned her, and the Sow, Nobody's overweight and alcoholic aunt. Hidden away in the Sow's dark attic for a year, Nobody gives voice to the book's frankest expressions of despair, for unlike Erik and Nikolai she has suffered the direct consequences of prejudice and oppression.

The Sow, a weak and pathetic woman, places self-interest above all other concerns. She first protects and later betrays Nobody and Erik, ignoring the evils of Nazism when her own safety is jeopardized. Other treacherous characters include Freiherr von Klein,





a seventeen-year-old Nazi; Felix, an easily-swayed hanger-on; and Twig, a Danish schoolboy who willingly absorbs Nazi propaganda. Erik learns to recognize these characters for what they are and to apply his knowledge toward the development of a stronger sense of self.

He wisely notes that "the fact that someone else is a fool does not make you into a genius," and comes to realize that even fools cannot easily be dismissed.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Erik divides the group of Danish boys into three subgroups: Fascists, anti-Fascists, and those unwilling to join either group. In what ways do the groups differ? Do you think the Danish boys would have divided into these groups had they not gone to Germany during the strong nationalist movement?
2. Erik thinks, "It is good to be with friends, but from the point of view of observing a strange place, it is better to be alone." Why is it better to explore a strange place alone? What do you learn by being alone in a strange place that you don't when you're with a friend?
3. Erik is pained to realize that anti-Semitism exists even in his native Denmark. What is anti-Semitism? Does the book portray other types of prejudice?
4. Nobody says that she "will never be a young girl again!" What does she mean by this statement?
5. During the course of his adventures, Erik steals a bike and a boat. Is he wrong to steal? Is it ever right to break a law or moral code, and if so, what factors should influence a person's decision to do so?
6. When Nikolai, Erik, and Nobody discuss Nazis, Nobody says, "Oh, they have always been there. They just called themselves something else." What does Nobody mean?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and report on post-World War II incidences of anti-Semitism.

2. Investigate the rise of the National Socialist party in Germany in the 1930s.

Why do ideas such as those advocated by the Nazis become popular? Can you think of any contemporary political or philosophical movements that are similar?

3. What groups of people did Germans oppress during World War II? Research resistance movements that sprung up to combat Nazi atrocities before and during the war.

4. Investigate the incarceration of U.S.

citizens of Japanese descent during World War II. Could this have led to atrocities similar to those committed in Germany?

5. Erik's friend Nikolai is named after both Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky. What happened to Trotsky? Why does Nikolai consider it ironic that he is named after both men?

6. Erik enjoys the poetry of Heinrich Heine, a German-language poet of Jewish descent. Read some of Heine's poetry and choose one poem and analyze it.

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Martin's, 1978. Provides a bibliography of Haugaard's books and a brief critical summary of his writings for young people.



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