The File on Fraulein Berg Short Guide

The File on Fraulein Berg by Joan Lingard

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Kate and her two best friends, Sally and Harriet, attend classes at Belfast School in 1944 Ireland. Ireland is in the midst of World War II, and like many people of Northern Ireland, the girls are bored with the war and depressed by wartime concerns, but impassioned by their hatred for the Germans. Bombings no longer occur in Belfast, yet the people must live with the destruction and the rationing, and they must accept living in a world where religious and political conflicts restrict their actions and mold their beliefs. Kate and her friends experience the typical restlessness of adolescence and they long to find an outlet for their energies. When Fraulein Berg comes to Belfast School as a substitute teacher, the three girls find that outlet. Combining characteristic girlhood drama with the desperation unique to young people living with the situation in wartime Belfast, the three girls convince themselves that the new teacher is a German spy and they set their sites on tracking her whereabouts and making trouble for her. Lingard tells the story as a flashback, from Kate's point of view. As Kate relives the events more than twenty years later, she considers their escapades that year as a personal "crime" against an innocent woman, not as the game of adventure the girls considered it to be at the time.

About the Author

Joan Lingard was born in Edinburgh in 11932 and was raised in Belfast, the setting of several of her novels, including The File on Fraulein Berg. Lingard herself attended school in Belfast, as do the characters in the novel, and she too dealt with the pressures and concerns of living in Northern Ireland during World War II. From childhood, Lingard aspired to be a writer, and she began writing at age eleven. She lived in Belfast until the age of eighteen, then enjoyed a career as both a schoolteacher and a writer.

Lingard has written more than thirty books, most of them for young adults, and she succeeds in creating realistic young characters and conveying the mixture of excitement and tension that characterizes adolescent life. Most of Lingard's writings revolve around experiences she had growing up in Northern Ireland during wartime turmoil, and with the conflicts of the war as well as the conflicts of adolescence. Lingard has become internationally recognized for her young adult novels and has won awards that include the West German Buxtehuder Bulle award and the Federationo Children's Book Group award. She also was shortlisted for the Sheffield Book Award, runner up in the Lancashire Children's Book Club, and shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal. In addition to writing books, Lingard has written television scripts for Scottish television and British Broadcasting Corporation. She has raised three daughters, and today lives in Edinburgh with her husband.

Setting

Lingard makes setting crucial to her plots, and in The File of Fraulein Berg, Northern Ireland, with its political and religious conflicts, spurs the girls' restlessness. The story begins in 1944, after the bombings and "excitement" have dwindled in Belfast, and the girls' boredom typifies the drab, dreary life of many young people in the city. Everyone seems to be trapped in a dismal world, waiting for the fighting to end. Growing up as a child in Northern Ireland, Lingard experienced this life herself, and her descriptions of Kate and her friends reveal that she knows firsthand just how deeply Irish children of the war were affected by their social situation.

As in her other books, Lingard's characters are molded by their environment, and Kate, Sally, and Harriet cannot help but be molded by theirs; Lingard makes clear that the melancholy that existed in that place and time permeated every aspect of these people's lives. Kate, as narrator, describes Belfast as cold, dark, and quiet, "like a graveyard at 2:00 in the morning." The children are discontented at settling into the life of boredom that the adults of the area seem to have accepted. Not only do they feel imprisoned by the wartime rules and rations, but they feel imprisoned in the rigid girls school they attend. Lingard's descriptions of the damp, dark climate, and the dull, lifeless headmistress and the school she runs fuel the girl's natural adolescent restlessness. It is clear that the drab setting leads these girls to resort to fantasy as an outlet for their energies. They long to break free of the rigid rules imposed on them, and they believe that by engaging in something exciting and dangerous they can create excitement in their dark and dreary world.

Lingard has a flare for using time and place to drive home universal themes, and she recognizes that all adolescents find the notion of secrecy captivating. The life that Kate and the girls imagine for themselves becomes a secret mission—an opportunity any adolescent should find exciting, but an opportunity children in Northern Ireland might find particularly so because they believe it might do some good for their country. Europe is at a turning point of social change, and Lingard draws parallels between the need to break free from wartime Belfast and the need to break free from the bonds of adolescence.

Social Sensitivity

Lingard's belief in tolerance and social justice was difficult to acquire living in Europe during the war years, but it is a belief that young people today try hard to embrace. It is hard for today's teenagers to imagine what it was like to live in the midst of a wartime battlefield; World War II and the holocaust seem so far removed from present-day concerns. But World War II left indelible marks on society in many ways. In The File on Fraulein Berg, as in her other novels, Lingard helps young people realize that the war greatly impacted our value system.

In order to help teenagers put World War II in perspective, they need to gain an understanding of what else was going on in Europe besides the fighting. Lingard helps bring the picture into focus. Prejudice and social injustice threaten the very fabric of our society. Teenagers may understand that, and they may deal with prejudice and social injustice today. Lingard, by allowing them to see how these same issues affected other teenagers long ago, helps them recognize that history has relevance. Do people today make a distinction between Germans and Nazis? Do people today characterize people by race or religion and judge them by preconceived notions? People certainly did during World War II, and Kate and her friends made these judgements without realizing that they were conditioned to do so.

When Kate looks back on her adolescent years she realizes that she had been subjected to "a great deal of propaganda."

Propaganda, as such, may not be a term familiar to teenagers today, but Lingard makes us understand that the messages Kate and her friends received profoundly influenced their opinions. Propaganda is a systematic effort to influence opinions. It is based on manipulation and deception, and during World War II, European governments relied on propaganda to boost morale and stimulate country loyalty. British propaganda called for war against the Germans. German propaganda emphasized the supremacy of the Third Reich. Lingard makes us see how the constant slew of information influenced people to create dividing lines between different groups of people. She lived with wartime propaganda, and by highlighting its destructive effects, she forces us to consider the values she believes everyone should embrace: objectivity, tolerance, and freedom.

Literary Qualities

One of the themes Lingard advances in the novel is that of adolescents developing a moral conscience and social objectivity.

By using Kate as narrator, Lingard opens a window into the adolescent mind and allows us to watch this development. Kate is at a crossroads in life, caught between childhood and adulthood, and her world is at a crossroads of social and political change.

Telling the story from Kate's point of view allows Lingard to create sympathy for Kate; she needs to reconcile what she sees with what she feels, a need felt by any adolescent in any place and at any time in history.

Telling the story from Kate's point of view also allows Lingard to convey that the girls gain understanding by learning to decipher the confusing signals they receive from the world around them. Telling the story as a flashback allows us to see how adolescents living in wartime Belfast dealt with those confusing signals, and how Kate in particular found freedom from societal restraints.

"There is no strict dividing line between black and white, good and bad," Kate's mother explains to her after the girls return from their trip to Dublin. This statement refers directly to the act of Mrs. McCabe's smuggling clothes across the border, but it also alludes to the need of all young people to learn to reconcile injustice with tolerance, and it alludes to the necessity of people in wartime Belfast to stop dividing people into German or Jew, Protestant or Catholic.

Kate's mother's statement is but one example of how Lingard uses Kate's personal struggle for freedom to allude to everyone's struggle for freedom—freedom from prejudice and social injustice. When the girls are picked up by the police, for instance, Kate's mother says to her, "Sometimes not thinking can be a crime." Kate says she would remember her mother's words later, and she certainly does. Not only does she remember them when she is strip-searched on the Dublin trip, but she remembers them years later when she realizes that she never stopped to think that Fraulein Berg could be a German and not a Nazi. She also remembers them when she realizes that she never once considered that Fraulein Berg may have been Jewish.

Kate's mother makes another statement that helps Lingard draw parallels between Kate's development and wartime change.

She says that the smuggling Mrs. McCabe did was illegal, but that "times were hard when there was a war on and people often resorted to doing things they might not do in peacetime." Would the girls have acted the way they did had they not been affected by the war and influenced by wartime propaganda? Would they have condemned Fraulein Berg simply because she was German? Twenty years later Kate tells Sally that they "persecuted" Fraulein Berg during the time they followed her. Clearly, what the girls did to Fraulein Berg was wrong and they did not stop to think before they acted. But though

"not thinking" may be typical of adolescence, Lingard knows that wartime skews judgment. By the end of the novel, Kate recognizes the role propaganda has played in her actions. As Sally says in the epilogue, "And we had been subjected to a great deal of propaganda. We had been told to hate the Germans, and so we had, regardless." Kate had to learn for herself her true error in judgment. She had to learn that "good and evil were kind of mixed up and the choice between them was not .. . straightforward." She had to learn how to develop a moral conscience in the face of injustice.

As Kate's mother tries to help her daughter put the events of the Dublin trip in perspective, she offers her opinion of why Harriet's mother condemns Mrs. McCabe for her act of smuggling and forbids Harriet to associate with Sally after the incident. "It isn't the end of the world as Mrs. Linton seems to think it is. The trouble with her is that she has no sense of humour," Kate's mother says. This appears to be another of Lingard's allusions to wartime strife. What is more important than a sense of humor when times are rough?

Much of what Kate and her friends have learned by the end of the novel is understood through Lingard's subtle use of allusion. All adolescents, as indeed all people, face the choice between good and evil, and feel restless and weak when stripped of basic freedoms. The strip search in general alludes to the stripping of freedom that occurs through prejudicial actions. Did the girls, in essence, not strip search Fraulein Berg? Did they not assume her to be guilty, invade her privacy, and humiliate her?

Typical of adolescent girls, Kate admits that she and her friends "got fantasy mixed up with reality," but this is not surprising in their case considering the information the government has chosen to give them.

Lingard uses the girls' pursuit of Fraulein Berg to illustrate how easily perceptions are skewed by governmental controls. The girls have Fraulein Berg confused; they do not understand her at all, nor do they understand the war itself or the world they live in.

"We had a very confused idea of the whole war, the way it started." Kate admits. No one explained it to them, she said. They simply believed that Germany had invaded their allied countries, so Ireland had to go in and save them. In this way of thinking, Kate says, "It's us against them."

Lingard uses Kate's development to mirror the development of a social conscience in the face of prejudice, and she uses the confusion of adolescence to explain the confusion of war. She also uses the adolescent struggle for freedom to illustrate the larger struggle for freedom that everyone faces.

Young adults seek freedom from childhood restraints, and everyone influenced by the war seeks freedom from government and societal restrictions. People seek freedom to think their own thoughts and form their own opinions. Clearly adolescence and war both represent crucial turning points, and in The File on Fraulein Berg, Kate navigates across both of them. Kate, in relating how she overcomes the destructive effects of religious

and racial prejudice and intolerance, echoes Lingard's avid belief in objectivity and social justice.

Themes and Characters

Critics have praised Lingard's ability to delve into the adolescent mind and reveal truths we recognize from that time in our own lives. We identify with her characters, even though we have not experienced Northern Ireland during the war, because her characters epitomize the adolescent experience. Kate and her friends are restless and bored, insensitive and self-centered, and unaware that their "game" of espionage and intrigue could lead to serious trouble.

The girls get caught up in their own fantasy; they inflate the importance of their mission, and they never stop to think that they might be "persecuting" an innocent woman.

"Sometimes not thinking can be a crime," Kate's mother tells her early in the novel, after the girls get caught roaming the streets after curfew and are picked up by the police. But the girls do not think, not then and not later; they continue to pursue Fraulein Berg and intrude on her private affairs. It is not surprising that they do this, given the fact that they have little else to think about— at least little else exciting to think about.

The idea of German spies arouses excitement because the girls know that spies embody the notions of danger and intrigue.

Kate is preoccupied with spies; she dreams of them, and she devours books about spies, immersing herself in these fictional dramas all the more because she knows that true spies exist in and around her own city.

Kate, Sally, and Harriet are intent on discovering for themselves that this kind of intrigue exists, so they create intrigue given the slightest provocation. "Give us a molehill and we could raise a mountain within minutes," Kate says as narrator. This is exactly what they do when they open their file on Fraulein Berg.

The girls' avid desire to escape from the rigid structures imposed by the war influ ences them to pursue Fraulein Berg with a total disregard for the teacher's privacy.

But the political environment of wartime Belfast influences them just as much. The girls know nothing about Fraulein Berg except that she is German, and in 1944 Belfast, that is enough to arouse suspicion—especially in naive thirteen-year-olds. These girls have been conditioned to believe that they must support their country above all else, and that anyone German poses a threat to their country's freedom. Embracing the patriotic loyalty they have been taught to embrace and believing that all Germans are enemies, the girls quickly condemn the new teacher. Harriet takes the condemnation a step further and labels her a spy.

Kate and Sally quickly accept Harriet's theory. Harriet's father is a lawyer, and she is privy to information the other girls are not. She knows about secret dug-outs, for instance, the hideaways where the important people go in case of invasions, and she knows that German spies sometimes slip across the border from Eire. The girls learn

that Fraulein Berg indeed did come from Dublin, and they know that she speaks perfect English. This, they decide, must be a requirement of German spies. They also decide that Fraulein Berg has "a strange power in her eyes," the way she stares at them. They decide that if she were a spy, she might have been trained to hypnotize people this way.

Though Lingard never reveals too much about Fraulein Berg's character, the reader has no reason to believe she actually might be a spy. The spy fantasy is simply a fabrication on the girls' part. Fraulein Berg appears to lead a lonely life. She is introverted and vulnerable, and the girls recognize her vulnerability instantly. They know that she will not be strong enough to keep control of the class, for instance, and they condemn her for this. "Weakness is seldom appealing, at least not when you're young," Kate says as she narrates the events years later.

So she and her friends seize the opportunity to prey on Fraulein Berg, much like any school bully today would taunt a child believed to be a "nerd." They begin to follow the teacher and track her whereabouts. This may at first seem like a simple case of schoolgirls playing Harriet the Spy, but it becomes clear as the novel progresses that Lingard intends to use the girls' "game" to emphasize the mindset wartime Belfast imposed on young people. These girls love adventure and intrigue, as do young people anywhere, but the lifestyle of Northern Ireland made the idea of spies and the secrecy they embody all the more appealing.

By following Fraulein Berg, Kate and her friends cast themselves in the role of spies.

They embark on a secret mission, sneaking around town knocking on doors and asking questions. They hurt their feet walking the streets all night, but consider their bleeding feet war wounds, and they convince themselves that their deception is for the good of their country. At their private school for girls, run by a strict headmistress and spinster teachers who impose rules Kate later refers to as "archaic," the girls feel stifled, and breaking the rules is exhilarating. At the time, the girls do not realize what the reader realizes as the novel progresses: not only are the girls physically stifled, but mentally so. The war has instilled in them a mentality that affects their view of life and their ability to accept foreign concepts.

The girls never come to understand Fraulein Berg, at least not while they are pursuing her, and revealing this is one way Lingard conveys the intolerant attitude of the times. Simply knowing that Fraulein Berg is German leads the girls to dislike her, and it leads them to quickly jump to the conclusion that she is up to no good. Lingard implies that the girls have learned their intolerance and distrust; because they have been conditioned to regard all Germans as Nazis, they fail to give their new teacher the opportunity to reveal her true self. They ignore her kindness and they disregard her insecurity. Because they have been influenced by wartime propaganda just as were many people of Northern Ireland, the girls cannot help but condemn their teacher.

Prejudice and intolerance defined the times, and it influenced the actions of many adolescents struggling to form their own opinions and make their own decisions.

If the girls had given themselves an opportunity to know Fraulein Berg, they may have seen that she was more tolerant than the other teachers at Belfast School. While most of the teachers appeared not to like men, for example, Fraulein Berg begins to keep the company of Mr. McGuffie (nicknamed High Doh), the music teacher and the only male teacher in the school. But when the girls see Fraulein Berg with Mr. McGuffie, they decide that they must warn him about Fraulein Berg. They send Mr. McGuffie an anonymous note, without mentioning Fraulein Berg's name: "Take care with whom you associate. Your country relies on you." They sign the note "A well wisher." As the letter disappears into the mailbox, Kate alone feels a great sense of guilt. The letter is a catalyst for the breakup of the two teachers, but convinced that they must expose traitorous behavior of any kind, the girls continue to interfere in Fraulein Berg's affairs.

Interestingly, by judging people based on their race, the girls place themselves in a similar role to the Germans who pursue and persecute the Jews. The children of war see prejudice every day, so it becomes second nature to them, and their youthful naivete and adolescent insensitivity only add to their ignorance. Still, Lingard creates sympathy for Kate because, though she is undoubtedly influenced by wartime propaganda, she feels compassion. She feels guilty about infringing on Fraulein Berg's freedom, even though she continues to follow the teacher around Belfast.

The girls have lived all their lives in Northern Ireland, and in fact, have never left Belfast. Their view of life is skewed by their inexperience, the propaganda they receive, and the attitudes of the older people of Belfast who have a hatred of the German people ingrained in them. Kate and her friends need to have new experiences in order to gain perspective, and Lingard gives them this when they go to Dublin with Sally's mother and aunt to celebrate Sally's birthday. The girls are ecstatic at the idea of going to Dublin; the city is exciting and foreign—neutral territory where Germans are not the enemy—and where freedoms exist that the girls know nothing about.

Kate and her friends desperately desire freedom. They are captivated by America. They believe that life in America is glamorous and exciting, and Dublin is the closest to America and to their idea of freedom that they can imagine.

The girls see their trip to Dublin as an adventure, fraught with all the excitement they so desire to discover in life. They also learn that Sally's mother intends to buy clothes in Dublin and smuggle them back into Belfast. This in itself makes the trip a kind of secret mission. When the girls get to the train station and see Fraulein Berg in line for the train to Dublin, they realize the trip will be even more exciting than they imagined. Dublin is a place where Germans roam freely and where German spies sneak across the border into Belfast. They imagine their teacher on all sorts of secret assignments in Dublin, and they set their sights on finding out exactly what those secret assignments might be.

As it turns out, the trip does not disappoint. Kate, as narrator, tells us that Harriet's parents would live to regret the decision to let their daughter go on this trip, so Lingard confirms the reader's suspicions that the girls' "game" must escalate in Dublin, and one begins to wonder just how far the girls are willing to carry their game.

Thrusting themselves immediately into their spy roles, the girls keep going to the toilet on the train so they can pass Fraulein Berg's compartment and check up on her. They run into her once, coming out of the toilet, and she looks irritated with them. Once in the city, they look for her at the German Embassy, then they run into her at an Oriental cafe at lunch. It is obvious that Fraulein Berg knows the girls have been spying on her, yet she never confronts them directly.

She remains passive and withdrawn, and simply goes about her business without making waves.

Kate has a long way to go before she understands just how prejudicial her actions are or how they serve to strip the teacher of freedom and dignity. But Lingard reveals enough about Kate's character to indicate that she is capable of gaining new perspective. When the girls get off the train in Dublin, they are immediately thrust into a mob of "shawlies"—poor Roman Catholic women and children who beg for money, and the McCabes begin to sell suitcases full of tea to the beggars. Sally's mother and aunt have no pity for the shawlies, but Kate feels sorry for them and offers them money.

She is told that they are Catholics, and she is given the impression that this alone makes them contemptible. Kate, however, identifies with the shawlies; she sympathizes with their plight. "We had been used to dividing people into Protestants and Catholics in our minds," Kate narrates. Lingard uses Kate to convey the mix of emotions she believes all young people feel living with intolerance and social injustice. She knows from growing up in that environment herself that young people in wartime Belfast had to struggle to achieve objectivity.

After the McCabes sell all their tea to the shawlies, they use the clothing coupons they receive in exchange to buy clothes that they then plan to smuggle back across the border. With the items concealed under their clothes, Mrs. McCabe, Auntie Nellie, and the girls head for the train station, where they see Fraulein Berg again, waiting for the last train. When the girls see the woman who was with her in the Chinese cafe come and hand their teacher a package, their suspicions are confirmed. The girls know that they must find out what is in the package and then decide what to do about it.

The disaster that occurs on the Dublin trip is of course brought on by the girls' determination to "catch" Fraulein Berg and expose her as a spy. They write a note about the suspicious package, and Harriet gives it to a Customs man. In handing over the note, they strip Fraulein Berg of her dignity, but they wind up losing their own as well.

All three of the girls, Mrs. McCabe, Auntie Nellie, and Fraulein Berg are strip-searched.

All the things they bought are confiscated, and they are sent back to Belfast barefoot and humiliated.

By the end of the novel, the war has ended. Harriet has moved to another school, the incident in Dublin has been buried but not forgotten, and a new school year has begun. Fraulein Berg is teaching geography now, and she begins talking about France, and about how wonderful it is that France is now liberated. Kate, at the time, is surprised

that the teacher is happy about France being liberated. She is German, after all, and therefore must be the enemy. Why would she want France to be liberated? A few years later, Kate learns the answer to that question. Mr. McGuffie tells Kate that Fraulein Berg has moved to Israel. Fraulein Berg, in fact, was a Jewish refugee, the only one of her entire family to escape the gas chambers.

Adolescent actions are often both foolish and cruel, and the actions of Kate, Harriet, and Sally seem especially so when we learn Fraulein Berg's true identity. But Lingard reveals in the epilogue that Fraulein Berg, although "a bit hurt at the time" realized that they were just "silly little girls," and compared to what she had been through, was barely touched by the incident. Perhaps she was passive because she learned to be passive. Everyone who lived through that time was in some sense a victim of social injustice. Perhaps Fraulein Berg learned to be invisible to survive the war.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think the girls did not recognize the seriousness of their actions at the time they committed them?

2. What are some of the ways the girls justified their actions against Fraulein Berg?

3. It is clear that the girls caused trouble for Fraulein Berg. Do you think the trouble they caused her was harmless?

Why or why not?

4. Why do you think Kate and her friends believe that loyalty to one's country must come before anything else?

5. At the end of the novel, Kate admits to herself that the girls "persecuted" Fraulein Berg. What is the significance of this statement? Did Fraulein Berg think she was being persecuted by the girls?

6. Do you believe that the girls' note to Mr. McGuffie actually did lead to his break up with Fraulein Berg? Was their note taken seriously?

7. Do you think Mrs. McCabe was wrong in attempting to smuggle clothes into Belfast? Why or why not?

8. Kate and her friends seem to connect weakness with lack of loyalty. Why do you suppose they do this?

9. Kate and her friends say that they "despised traitors," and that "loyalty to one's country must come before anything!" Do you think the girls believe that loyalty to country means that the Germans should support Hitler?

10. At one point, Kate tells us that they (the girls) hated weakness. Do you think the fact that the girls immediately recognized weakness in Fraulein Berg had anything to do with why they pursued her?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Define propaganda and write a paper explaining the effects of propaganda during World War II.

2. Write a paper that provides the historical background of the religious wars in Ireland, and explain how the rift between Protestants and Roman Catholics affected community relations.

3. Write a first-person narrative explaining what you believe life would be like for a young girl living in Belfast during World War II. Talk about things such as the bombings, the blackouts, and the rationing, and explain how you think this would affect a young girl's life.

4. Write a paper explaining how and why Kate and her friends confused fantasy with reality.

5. Lingard gives us much insight into the girls' characters, but little insight into Fraulein Berg's character. Write a character sketch of this woman and include a discussion of what influenced her to be the way you believe she was.

6. The reader finds out at the end of the book that Fraulein Berg is a Jewish refugee and that her entire family truly was persecuted. Using what you know about the plight of Jews under Hitler's regime, write a fictionalized account of what Fraulein Berg's experience might have been before she escaped the Nazis.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Lingard wrote other books about adolescents struggling to deal with the conflicts in Northern Ireland during World War II. The Twelfth Day of July begins Lingard's Kevin and Sadie series, which is set in Ulster and deals with the religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants. Across the Barricades, the second book in this series, won an award for its poignant depiction of Kevin and Sadie's struggle to find fulfillment in a city stifled by religious and social prejudice.

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