

The Silver Sword Short Guide

The Silver Sword by Ian Serrailier

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Overview

The *Silver Sword* realistically presents the problems of war as seen through the eyes of a Polish family torn apart by World War II. The novel's main characters include three children—Ruth, Edek, and Bronia Balicki—who are left to live as best they can in the streets of Warsaw when their father is sent to a prison camp and their mother is taken away to do forced labor in Germany.

Serrailier explores the meaning of courage, unselfishness, loyalty, and honesty as the children try to survive in a world made brutal by war. Violence is never depicted graphically, however, and more than half the novel takes place immediately after the war. The hardships the children endure arise from the deprivations war imposes on all members of their society. The feelings of hatred that result from the war must be overcome in order to produce a society in which people from once-hostile countries can live together in peace.

Serrailier stresses that peaceful societies must be founded upon love and trust and demonstrates this theme most concretely in the relationship between Ruth, the model of "courage, self-sacrifice, and greatness of heart," and Jan, an orphan who has learned that he can survive and remain self-sufficient only by stealing. Ruth's love gradually brings Jan from a state of selfishness to one of loyalty and self-sacrifice. The *Silver Sword* is a story of hope and love in which the children undertake a journey of discovery in search of their parents that brings out the essential qualities in each of them.

About the Author

Ian Serrailier was born on September 24, 1912, in London, England. He received his master's degree from St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, in 1935, and then taught at Wycliffe College in Stonehouse, Gloucestershire from 1936 to 1939. He continued his teaching career at Dudley Grammar School in Dudley, Worcestershire, from 1939 to 1946, and at Midhurst Grammar School in Midhurst, Sussex, from 1946 to 1961.

Serrailier has published many books for young adults and children, including numerous works of poetry. He has retold the myths and legends of classical and medieval times, often in the form of narrative verse, and most of his stories demonstrate his taste for tales of high adventure. He received the Boys' Clubs of America Junior Book Award for *The Silver Sword* in 1960.

Setting

The story is set against a backdrop of destruction in Europe during and after World War II. Much of the early action takes place in Warsaw and other areas of Poland. The opening chapters describe the South Polish prison camp where the children's father, Joseph Balicki, has been sent. The novel then switches to Warsaw under the Nazi occupation, where Joseph has returned to hunt in vain for his splintered family.

The children's experiences living on their own in Warsaw provide further glimpses of the war-torn city. The Warsaw uprising of 1944 and the virtual destruction of the old city are vividly described. The locale shifts during the last two thirds of the book as the children journey to Switzerland to find their parents. As the book progresses, Serrailier paints a vivid portrait of western Poland, Berlin, and rural Germany in the aftermath of the war, depicting the long lines of migrating refugees, refugee camps, soup kitchens, cities devastated by bombing, and finally the beauty of Switzerland unscarred by the war, where the family's reunion finally occurs.



Social Sensitivity

As a novel about the effects of war, *The Silver Sword* confronts the effects of violence on a large scale and depicts a great deal of suffering. Although Serrailier never minimizes the hardship the family endures, he never graphically depicts the worst violence of the war.

The novel shows that goodness and courage continue to exist in individuals, despite the evils of war. Jan is a special example of this theme; he is an attractive and sympathetic character, particularly in his special touch with animals, but his various misdeeds often create added difficulties for the other children. His good intentions and genuine repentance make him forgivable even when he breaks the law. The final promise of a new society with peaceful ideals brings the book to a hopeful conclusion.



Literary Qualities

The *Silver Sword* is a realistic novel about war that depends heavily on description for its literary effect. Because the setting of war-torn Europe shapes the children's experiences, Serrailier gives detailed and vivid descriptions of the ravaged countries and of the hardships the children endure. The role these problems play in building the children's characters is revealed several times by biblical parallels. Ruth tells Bible stories to the children in her school, and their favorite is the one which most inspires her as well: Daniel in the lions' den. She sees the hardships she faces every day as the lions, and she believes that if she is patient and trusting like Daniel, she too will be delivered.

Switzerland, as the children's destination, becomes the promised land that they reach after long wandering in the desert of the war.

The silver sword itself provides a recurring symbol of hope. The only vestige of the Balickis' home, the sword symbolizes the family's unity before the war. Joseph offers the sword to Jan as a pledge, and through Jan the sword serves as the crucial connection between Joseph and his children. It inspires Ruth to undertake the journey to look for her parents, and it spurs the children on as they travel. When the sword gets left behind at the Wolffs' farm, the children's luck changes for the worse; when the sword is returned, it cuts through the red tape of Swiss immigration and leads to the children's reunion with their parents. Jan firmly believes that the sword is responsible for the group's survival in the storm on the lake at the climax of the book. When his treasure box, symbolizing all the secrets of his past, finally sinks to the bottom of the lake, the sword alone remains, hanging from a string around his neck. He offers it, the most precious of his treasures, to Joseph's wife, Margrit, if she will be his mother. And so the pledge between Joseph and Jan is redeemed, and the sword brings the family back together.



Themes and Characters

The experiences of the Balicki family reflect those of many others caught up in the war, although their story admittedly ends unusually happily. The novel focuses briefly on Joseph Balicki, the father, but for the most part concentrates on the children and Jan, an orphan whom they make part of their family. Joseph Balicki is an idealistic, courageous, and resourceful man. The headmaster of a school, he is sent to prison for defying Nazi rule soon after the Germans take over Poland. His ingenuity helps him escape from the prison camp where he has been held for two years, and after making his way back to Warsaw, he hunts for his missing wife and children. During his search he encounters Jan, a ragged orphan boy. Joseph gives Jan the only trace of his home he has found, a silver paperknife shaped like a sword, on the condition that if Jan ever meets Joseph's missing wife and children he will tell them that Joseph has gone to Switzerland. Joseph's sympathy and willingness to trust Jan win over the usually reclusive boy. This meeting between Joseph and Jan sets up not only the plot line but also one of the novel's major themes: the need for mutual trust and its ability to heal the emotional ravages of war.

Ruth, Joseph's oldest daughter and the novel's main character, embodies the virtues necessary to survive the war with hope and dignity. At first bewildered by the difficulties of survival in Warsaw without her parents, she matures as she takes on the role of substitute mother—first to her siblings, and eventually to a larger group of children who come to a school she starts. When her students find Jan lying sick out in the street, Ruth takes him under her care; and love and discipline slowly begin to heal Jan's psychological wounds. Emotionally and morally strong, she inspires Jan's love and trust.

The war has twisted Jan's perceptions of human relationships, making him distrustful, hateful, and angry. Soldiers particularly symbolize the suffering he has undergone, and he fears and hates them all so much that he can make no distinction between soldiers of different armies. Because animals cannot betray trust the way humans do, they are the only creatures Jan can find any affection for until Joseph, and then Ruth, break through the barriers he has set up. Jan becomes fiercely loyal to Ruth, who tries to instill in him some of the moral values the war has extinguished.

As Jan becomes more attached to Ruth and Bronia, he becomes less self-centered. He continues to behave dishonestly toward other people, but his intentions improve. At the climax of the novel Jan finally puts the needs of others before his own. In the midst of a storm, he must choose between going after the dog he has adopted and helping Ruth save Edek from drowning. By deciding to help Ruth and Edek, Jan breaks free of his self-imposed isolation and puts his trust in human ties and responsibilities. Like Ruth, he too begins to mature when he accepts responsibility for others. As love and trust take root, Jan abandons his habits of stealing and violence.

The children receive help during their trip from people of many nationalities, illustrating the book's themes of reconciliation and the deeply rooted bonds among civilized peoples. Serrailier demonstrates the willingness of the victorious Allies to work toward



the restoration of Europe in his portraits of the Russian soldier, Ivan, who helps the children get started; the British officer who nearly runs over Jan but later saves the silver sword; the American Captain Greenwood, who is lenient with Jan after the boy has broken the law; and the Polish-American G.I. Joe, who gives the children a lift to the border of Switzerland at the end of their journey.

A less conventional and more touching episode is the children's experience with Herr and Frau Wolff, a German farmer and his wife whose son was killed in Warsaw fighting against the liberating Russian army. Jan has trouble connecting the couple that shows him so much kindness with the soldiers he has hated so much. This sympathetic portrait of the Germans is unusual for a World War II novel. It reflects Serrailier's commitment to showing that civilians on all sides of the conflict suffered, and that all people ought to work together in peace to repair the damage done by the war. This belief is illustrated by the building of the international children's village at the end of the novel.



Topics for Discussion

1. The Silver Sword has been published with a different title, Escape from Warsaw. Which title do you think fits the book better? Why?
2. Why is it important to Jan that Joseph gives him the sword? What function does the sword serve in the story?
3. The night that Mrs. Balicki is taken away by the Germans, Edek shoots at the soldiers. They come back later and blow up the house. Should Edek have shot at the soldiers? Why or why not?
4. Jan steals things throughout the book. He apparently feels justified in stealing, even when he gets caught. Why does he need to steal? Is he justified or not? Why?
5. The son of Herr and Frau Wolff was a German soldier in Warsaw, the sort of soldier Jan particularly hates. The young Wolff was killed trying to keep Warsaw under German control. Why do the Wolffs help the children? Why is Jan able to accept their help?
6. Why does Jan finally decide to help Ruth save Edek instead of going after Ludwig?
7. Why does Jan have trouble settling down after the war is over and life no longer presents as many struggles?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Silver Sword is set in Poland and Germany during and just after World War II. The author includes much description of the damage the war has done to the two countries. What effect do these descriptions have on the story?

2. Ruth, Edek, and Jan must all try to act like adults when their parents are no longer around to take care of them.

Where in the story do you see signs of how they are growing up? What adult qualities do they display?

3. Read the autobiographical book *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, written by a girl hiding from the Nazis with her family. How do Anne's experiences compare with those of the children in *The Silver Sword*? Why do you think Serrailier gave his book a happy ending? Do you feel that the ending of *The Silver Sword* makes light of the real tragedy suffered by millions of children, such as Anne?

4. Read one of the other books written about children's experiences during World War II (try *Summer of My German Soldier* by Bette Greene, *They Didn't Come Back* by Hans Peter Richter, *The Machine Gunners* by Robert Westall, or *I Am David* by Ann Holm.) How do these novels portray people from the different countries involved in the war, especially those on the "enemy" side? How do the experiences of the children in these books compare with those of the children in *The Silver Sword*?

5. Trace the development of the silver sword as a symbol in the novel. What does it represent thematically, and how does it function as a plot device?

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Taylor, Anne. "A Comparative Study of Juvenile Fiction Dealing with the Second World War." *Emergency Librarian* 11 (November 1983): 13-21.

Compares various books for young adults that are set during or otherwise examine the issue of World War II. *The Silver Sword* is discussed in the context of other works.



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