

A 2012 NEWBERY HONOR BOOK

A Discussion Guide to
**BREAKING
STALIN'S
NOSE**



EUGENE VELCHIN

"An important book for all people living in free society."

—PETER SIS, AUTHOR OF *THE WALL*

BREAKING STALIN'S NOSE



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HENRY HOLT BOOKS
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Sasha Zaichik has known the laws of the Soviet Young Pioneers since the age of six:

The Young Pioneer is devoted to Comrade Stalin, the Communist Party, and Communism.

A Young Pioneer is a reliable comrade and always acts according to conscience.

A Young Pioneer has a right to criticize shortcomings.

But now that it is finally time to join the Young Pioneers, the day Sasha has awaited for so long, everything seems to go awry. He breaks a classmate's glasses with a snowball. He accidentally damages a bust of Stalin in the school hallway. And worst of all, his father, the best Communist he knows, was arrested just last night.

This moving story of a ten-year-old boy's world shattering is masterful in its simplicity, powerful in its message, and heartbreaking in its plausibility.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

HISTORICAL SETTING

Provide some background information on the setting and time period of this story.

Breaking Stalin's Nose takes place under the dictatorial regime of Josef Stalin, who ruled the Soviet Union from 1923 to 1953. Stalin's centralized control transformed Russia from an agrarian culture to one of high industrialization. However, to retain control, Stalin propagated fear and paranoia among its citizens, an environment that led to the imprisonment of millions of citizens. Political opponents, outspoken critics, and many innocent citizens were labeled enemies of the people simply through accusations or

hearsay, and they were often forced into false confessions through torture and imprisonment. Stalin's vision of Communism inspired other countries, and echoes of his methods can still be seen today in countries such as North Korea and China.

VOCABULARY

There are many terms in this story that may be new to middle-grade students. Have students define these words and review their uses and parts of speech.

aggravate	on principle
capitalist	scheming
communal	solemnly
Communist	suspicious
infiltrated	vermin
interrogating	vigilant
legion	wrench

EXPLORE THE BOOK'S WEB SITE

A companion site for the novel www.breakingstalinsnose.com invites readers to explore authentic photographs of Sasha's world. There are several areas for students to explore:

- Sasha's Moscow
- Komunalka: Living with Strangers
- Who Was Sasha's Dad?
- Sasha's Mom: From the USA to the USSR
- Who Were the Young Soviet Pioneers?
- Inside Sasha's School
- Comrade Stalin: Brilliant Genius of Humanity
- Enemies of the People
- Inside Lubyanka Prison

As an exploratory and introductory activity, have students search for answers to a list of questions you develop about the setting and characters of this story. The research can be done individually or in small groups. These questions should vary in depth and complexity based on the age-level of your students. An example of these questions might be:

For "*Sasha's Moscow*" link:

Why do you think the light in Stalin's office is left on all night?

For "*Inside Sasha's School*" link:

What is a *dnevnik*, and how is this different from the way your school communicates with our parents? How is it similar?

CHAPTER-BY CHAPTER COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

To check foundational and literal reading comprehension, have students answer each of the questions below in complete sentences. This can be done in a journal or on separate paper to hand in. You may also review grammar by requiring that each answer contain such elements of your lessons as compound/complex sentences, adverbial phrases, adjectives, and verb tenses.

1. Why is Sasha Zaichik excited to become a Young Pioneer? When will this occur?
2. How much privacy do the residents of the *komunalka* have? Explain.
3. What does Sasha's father do for a living?
4. Why is Sasha embarrassed to look at Stukachov? (page 14)
5. Why is Sasha's father coming to his school?
6. Why have the State Security come for Sasha's father?
7. What may be Stukachov's reason for "reporting" Sasha's father? How does Stukachov act toward Sasha?
8. Why does Sasha decide not to sleep near the stove in the *komunalka*? What does he decide to do instead?
9. How is Sasha greeted at the Kremlin?
10. Why won't Aunt Larisa and her husband allow Sasha to stay with them?
What prediction does the uncle make about Sasha becoming a member of the Young Pioneers?
11. Describe Sasha's memory of his mother's death. Why do you think his Aunt Larisa said that his father "looked guilty, not sad"? (page 44)
12. What do you think *Amerikanetz* means?
13. What does Vovka Sobakin mean when he says, "Who's not with us is against us"? (page 52)
14. Describe and give examples of how uncooperative students are treated in Sasha's classroom.
15. Describe Borka Finkelstein.

16. Why does Borka want help getting inside Lubyanka prison? What is Sasha's reaction to this request?
17. What is Sasha's fantasy in the main hall, and how does this cause damage to the bust of Stalin?
18. What does Sasha predict will happen to him for damaging the statue?
19. Who knows that Sasha damaged the statue? What does he say will happen to Sasha?
20. What are the students forced to do upon learning about the damage to the statue?
21. Who does Principal Sergei Ivanych say caused the damage? Search for and use a direct quote from the book. Why does Sasha feel "this time he's gone too far"?
22. Who confesses to the crime? Why does he wink at Sasha?
23. What was Borka's plan for seeing his parents?
24. What happened to Vovka's father, and how does Vovka react to Nina Petrovna telling the class? (page 100) What kind of student was Vovka before this event? What was it like for him afterward? Refer to chapter 13 if needed.
25. Where is Principal Ivanych sending Vovka and Sasha? What is the "deal" Vovka tries to make with Principal Ivanych?
26. Why is Sasha now an enemy of the state? Why is this ironic?
27. Based on the joke told by Stalin's nose, what can you infer about the interrogation of prisoners? (chapter 25)
28. Who did Vovka blame for damaging the statue? What evidence was found and where was it?
29. What does the State Security senior lieutenant want from Sasha? What does the lieutenant suggest happened to Sasha's mother? His father?
30. What prompted the lieutenant to make Sasha an offer? What is Sasha's decision about the lieutenant's offer?

DISCUSSION / SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

Discussion questions are intended to stretch students beyond literal comprehension and to require them to support their opinions with evidence from the book. Highlight a student's ability to reinforce his/her viewpoint by citing specific lines or phrases from the story. This can be accomplished in writing or in small discussion groups. This is also an excellent time to teach or review the correct use of quotation marks. Examples of discussion questions are below. Students can practice developing discussion questions of their own to share with the class.

1. The Stalinist propaganda machine helped establish a belief that children in capitalist societies were less fortunate than those in Russia. Find and describe at least one instance of this in the story. Why would Stalin want to spread this belief?
2. The author, Eugene Yelchin, vividly describes the harsh winter conditions of Moscow. How do these descriptions act as a metaphor for the political system under which Sasha lives?
3. In chapter 12, how does the snowball fight reinforce patriotism to Russia?
4. Based on what you now know about Stalinist Russia, what do think will happen to Sasha in the near future? Compose your answer on evidence from the book rather than what you wish for Sasha.
5. How does fear motivate the characters' decisions throughout this story? Give at least three examples.

ESSAY TOPICS (for older students)

Breaking Stalin's Nose offers many areas for students to examine through a comprehensive essay. A literary essay is an excellent opportunity for students to analyze a text and to practice critical writing skills. Areas that are important to review or teach include the following:

- Thesis development. Students should be able to construct a single, arguable statement around which their entire essay will be developed.
- Paragraph development. Review topic sentences, supporting details, proper quotation citation, transitional sentences, and closing paragraphs.
- Analysis of evidence. Remind students not to assume the evidence speaks for itself. Be sure they specifically address why a quotation or passage supports the thesis.
- Transitional sentences. These help organize the essay and keep it flowing smoothly.

The following link is an excellent teacher and student source for these skills:
www.gmc.edu/students/arc/documents/Literary%20analysis.pdf

POSSIBLE ESSAY TOPICS

Expository Essay (Lower Level)

Describe and explain Moscow under Stalinist rule using only the novel as evidence. What was life like for its citizens? Who was favored and who was outcast? Choose three areas to examine such as setting, occupations, hopes or fears of citizens, and relationships between characters. Use quotations or passages from the book to support your opinion.

Cause and Effect (Middle Level)

Stalinist tactics of control created fear and paranoia among its citizens. Choose at least three instances in the book of behavior directed by fear or paranoia. Analyze why the characters chose to act the way they did and what consequences came of their actions. What are the dangers of this system? What was the purpose?

Comparative (Higher Level)

In Stalinist Russia, the anonymous accusation of a crime was enough to get someone imprisoned, perhaps forever. How does this process of law differ from that of the United States? Refer specifically to the sixth amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the concepts of a public trial, an impartial jury of one's peers, the right to confront one's accuser, and the right to counsel. Based on what you learned in *Breaking Stalin's Nose*, compare your rights with those of Russians under Stalin's rule.

LANGUAGE ARTS CONNECTIONS

Breaking Stalin's Nose is an excellent opportunity to review the elements of a story with students. Have students understand and identify the elements below as they read. The use of a large graphic organizer in class can help students recognize and understand the elements as the story is read. Flipchart or butcher paper is a good method of making this information visually available to students throughout the unit. Some elements will be immediately apparent while others may be revealed slowly. For example, the characterization of Sasha may be an on-going discussion as Sasha is confronted with various situations.

Setting

The setting is the time and place in which a story takes place.

Have students be as detailed as possible about Sasha's world. Use both quotations and the author's illustrations as support.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere is established by the setting and is an emotional feeling or coloring of the story. A story may feel gloomy, hopeful, or oppressive.

Have students describe the atmosphere of the story and have them find specific phrases or words to support their opinion.

Plot

This is the plan of the story—the arrangement and sequence of incidents and details. It often starts with a situation or problem that is vital to the main character. The main character struggles with these conflicts creating a growing or rising action towards the **climax**, or highest dramatic point of the story. Following the climax comes the **denouement**, which is the final unraveling or solution of the plot.

Have students map the plot as it occurs. Have them identify the climax and the denouement.

Conflict

This is the struggle between two opposing forces, usually the main character and another element. Conflict can be of four main types:

1. man vs. man—the main character is in conflict with another person or persons
2. man vs. nature—the main character is in conflict with a force of nature (storms, drought, disease, etc.)
3. man vs. him/herself—the main character is in conflict with him/herself (shame, fear, temptation, etc.)
4. man vs. society—the main character is in conflict with acceptable societal rules/values (government, etc.)

Conflict can also be **internal** or **external**. External conflict is usually physical and easy to recognize. Internal conflict is represented by a character's struggle with herself or her conscience, or between what is and what should be.

Have students identify and provide evidence for the many conflicts in this story. Remind students that a story may have more than one type of conflict.

Theme

The theme is the central idea on which the story is based. Sometimes this is explicit and sometimes it is only implied. Themes can often be stated in one or two sentences and often gives a comment about life from the author's point of view. Examples of themes are

1. Honesty is the best policy.
2. All that glitters is not gold.
3. People must ultimately be responsible for their own actions.

Have students identify possible themes of Breaking Stalin's Nose. Possibilities include the power of fear, the dangers of blind allegiance and group-think, and the limits of family loyalty.

Suspense

Suspense is created when there is a feeling of uncertainty in a story. This is usually accompanied by a feeling of anxiety, apprehension, or excitement. The author increases the suspense by withholding information that would satisfy the reader's curiosity.

Ask students to identify suspenseful moments in the story and to explain the reasons for the suspense.

Symbol

A symbol is something that represents or suggests a relationship or association. For example, a flag represents patriotism; a lamp represents knowledge; a cross stands for the church.

Have students identify symbols throughout the story. Possible symbols in Breaking Stalin's Nose are the Young Pioneer banner, the statue of Stalin, or the gloomy weather in Moscow.

Foreshadowing

This is a hint of things to come—a word, a phrase, or a sentence that contains an important clue purposely inserted by the author to prepare the reader for a later event.

Have students identify moments of foreshadowing in the story such as the reaction of Sasha's aunt upon hearing of his mother's death.

Point of View

Point of view is the viewpoint from which a story is told. Point of view is almost always one of two types

- First-person narrative: A character tells the story in his or her own words. The author can reveal only what the narrator might be expected to know or think.
- Third-person narrative: The author tells the story from an all-knowing, omniscient point of view. The reader may know what is happening to many characters in many locations at once.

Have students identify the point of view, but also discuss how the story would be different if it were told from a different viewpoint.

Tone

Tone is the writer's attitude toward his subject and characters. It may be sad or sorrowful, sentimental, angry, sympathetic, hopeless, humorous, or objective.

Have students identify words or phrases that reveal Mr. Yelchin's tone throughout the book.

Characterization

To be believable, a character in a story must act in a reasonable, consistent, and natural way. Characterization is the method used by a writer to develop a character.

The method includes the following:

1. describing the character's appearance
2. displaying the character's actions
3. revealing the character's thoughts
4. letting the character speak (dialogue)
5. getting the reactions of others toward the character

Have students gather, discuss, and provide evidence for the ways in which Sasha's character is revealed throughout the novel.

ADVANCED LITERARY TECHNIQUE: MAGICAL REALISM

In addition to the elements of a story discussed above, the author also uses the literary technique of magical realism with the appearance of Stalin's nose as a character. Magical realism is the use of fantasy or surreal elements in an otherwise rational world and story. Introduce this term to your students and have them identify where in this story it appears. Explore the genre by asking students why such a technique can be powerful. What is its purpose? In what other stories have they encountered magical realism? It's important to remind the students that this technique is different from the genre of fantasy or science fiction.

ADVANCED STUDY (for older students)

Gene Sharp, a professor at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, is the author of *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, a short manual used around the world to understand and overturn dictators. Dr. Sharp advocates nonviolent resistance and maintains that dictators derive their power from one or more of the following six areas:

1. Perceived authority—the feeling among the citizens that the dictator is correct in his objectives and that there is a moral obligation to obey.
2. Material resource—the control and distribution of money, food, housing, and other resources necessary for citizens to live.
3. Human resources—this may be two kinds: quality and quantity. A dictator must have sufficient followers to enforce his or her will. Additionally, a dictator must have qualified and powerful people who support his or her vision of the dictatorship.
4. Sanctions—punishment or the fear of punishment for not following the rules.
5. Skills and knowledge—the custody and use of specific skills, knowledge, or abilities to which the citizens do not have privilege.
6. Intangible factors this can be propaganda, idolatry, superstitions, or other beliefs held by the citizens that give the dictator a demigod status.

Have students look for Stalin's use of these sources of power throughout the book. How many can they find and support with evidence?

To read Professor Sharp's manual *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, visit www.acinstein.org/organizations/org/FDTD.pdf.

Praise for

BREAKING STALIN'S NOSE

A 2012 NEWBERY HONOR BOOK

A 2011 HORN BOOK BEST BOOK

★ “Although the story takes place over just two days, it is well paced, peeling off the layers of Sasha’s naiveté to show him—and young readers—the cynicism of the system he trusted.”

—*The Horn Book*, starred review

“Yelchin’s debut novel does a superb job of depicting the tyranny of the group, whether residents of a communal apartment, kids on the playground, students in the classroom or government officials. Yelchin’s graphite illustrations are an effective complement to his prose, which unfurls in Sasha’s steady, first-person voice, and together they tell an important tale.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Yelchin skillfully combines narrative with dramatic black-and-white illustrations to tell the story of life in the Soviet Union under Stalin. While the story was obviously created to shed light on the oppression, secrecy, and atrocities under Stalin’s regime, Sasha’s emotions ring true. This is an absorbing, quick, multilayered read. . . Yelchin clearly dramatizes the dangers of blindly believing in anything.”—*School Library Journal*

“In his first novel, Yelchin uses the child’s innocent viewpoint to dramatize the heartbreaking secrets and lies. The present-tense narrative is true to the young kid’s naive viewpoint. . .” —*Booklist*

“An impressive. . . compact novel. Through Sasha’s fresh and optimistic voice, Yelchin powerfully renders an atmosphere of fear that forces false confessions, even among schoolchildren . . . Readers will quickly pick up on the dichotomy between Sasha’s ardent beliefs and the reality of life under Stalinism, and be glad for his ultimate disillusion, even as they worry for his future.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene Yelchin is a Russian-born author and illustrator of children’s books. *Breaking Stalin’s Nose*, a middle-grade novel that he had written and illustrated, received a 2012 Newbery Honor award and was named a Best Book of 2011 by *Horn Book* magazine. In 2010, the picture book that he illustrated, *Rooster Prince of Breslov*, received the National Jewish Book Award. In 2006, he received the Tomie dePaola Illustrator Award from the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. His other books have received starred reviews and were on Children’s Choice booklists.

Visit Eugene at eugeneyelchinbooks.com.

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