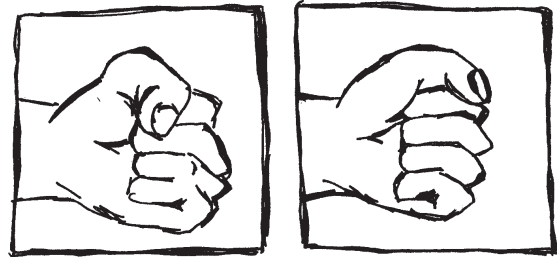


DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

In tumultuous 1930s Berlin, fourteen-year-old Karl Stern is coming to grips with what it means to be an outcast. Ostracized for being Jewish, Karl is in desperate need of an outlet to prove his self-worth. So when luck smiles upon Karl and delivers German boxing champ Max Schmeling as a coach, he has an opportunity he never dreamed of: to make something of himself in the boxing ring. But with the threat of all-out war inching ever closer, Karl's dream of becoming a champion boxer is far from certain—as is the very survival of his family.



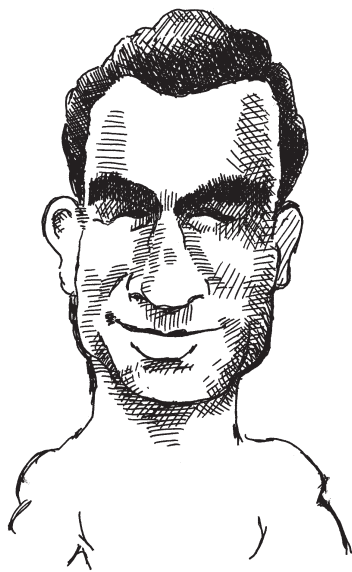
RIGHT

WRONG

RECORDING HISTORY

When describing his research for *The Berlin Boxing Club*, Robert Sharenow thanks the people he spoke with about their childhoods living in Nazi Germany, saying, “They made history come alive in a way that no book or film ever could” (page 404). As works of historical fiction like *The Berlin Boxing Club* remind readers, human beings must learn from the past as they move toward the future, and the most compelling means of learning history is firsthand, from the people who lived it.

Record history for yourself: Talk with a family member or friend about important events in his or her life. Remember, each person has a story, and those stories are gateways to a deeper understanding and appreciation of history. Not only will you enjoy an amazing conversation, but you can use your conversation to contribute to historical understanding for years to come. On the following page, you will find ideas and practical steps for recording your own piece of history.

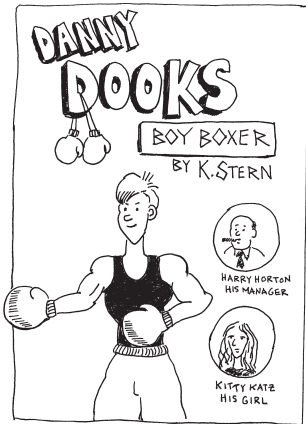


MAX

The Berlin xing Club

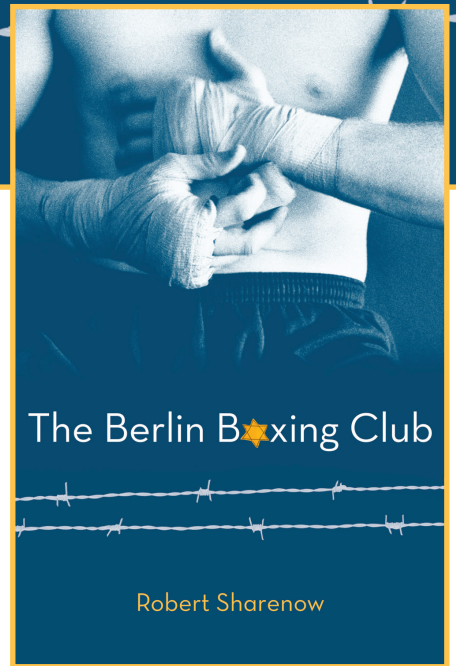
Robert Sharenow

DISCUSSION GUIDE



RECORDING HISTORY (continued)

Your interview with a family member or friend will ultimately be unique to you and your interviewee—a genuine, honest conversation is your most important goal. Taking time to plan ahead and consider the following practical steps can help the interview go smoothly and better aid a good conversation and a successful recording of history.



The Berlin **B**oxing Club

Robert Sharenow

Decide the form your interview will take.

- ▶ Will interview notes contribute to a writing project of your own? Will you use film footage to make a documentary? Will you mix sound bites to post online?
- ▶ Consider contributing your recorded piece of history through one of these important organizations:
 - **Storycorps** is a nonprofit organization that provides all the necessary tools for people to record their interviews. If you choose to record at one of their locations, Storycorps will give you a CD of your recorded interview and also store a copy at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. Visit www.storycorps.org for more information.
 - **Veterans History Project** collects video and audio interviews from veterans and stores them in the Library of Congress. Visit www.loc.gov/vets/kit.html to find out how to participate.

Approach someone you would like to interview.

- ▶ Explain that you care about the interviewee and his or her own unique story.
- ▶ Arrange a time and a comfortable place to talk.
- ▶ Be clear with your interviewee about how you will be conducting the interview (video camera, audio recorder, etc.). It's essential that the interviewee be well-informed so that he or she is at ease and more receptive to the idea of sharing personal stories and memories.

Conduct the interview.

- ▶ If you are using recording equipment, make sure ahead of time that it's ready; you don't want technical glitches to disrupt the conversation. Remember, technology is only a means of facilitating a genuine person-to-person conversation.
- ▶ Allow plenty of time; you don't want to rush the interviewee. The best stories will come when someone is relaxed and feels comfortable in his or her surroundings.
- ▶ Have water available.
- ▶ Have a list of questions prepared, but let the conversation flow organically.
- ▶ Make sure the interviewee states his or her name, age, and the current year at the beginning of the interview so that the footage can stand alone as a resource to others.

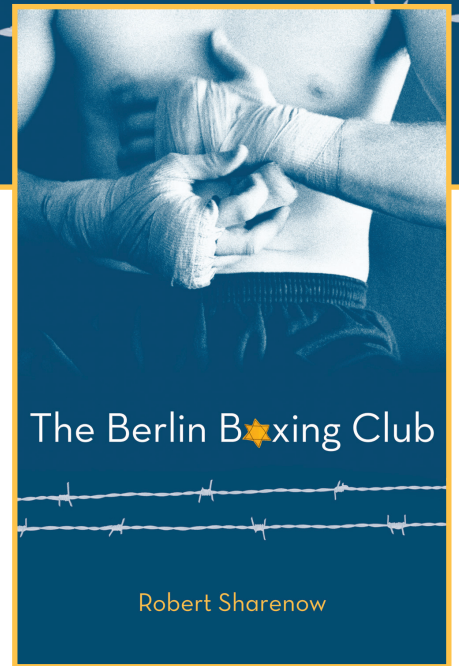
Save your piece of history.

- ▶ Publish it, share it, pass it down!
- ▶ As Robert Sharenow tells us at the end of the book, people themselves are our most valuable sources of history. By taking the time to record and share those histories, you make an important contribution to your and others' understandings of the world.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

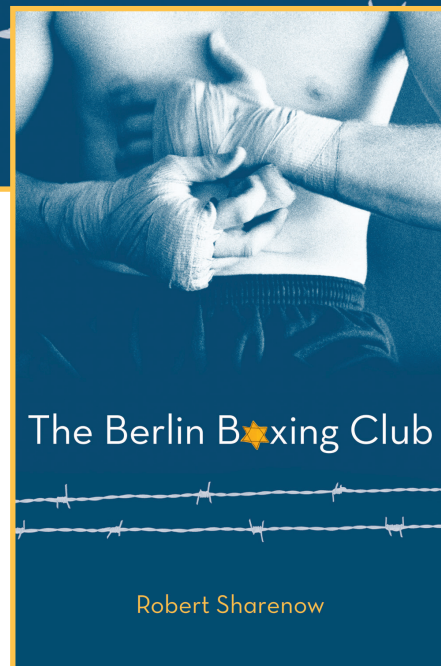
1. At the beginning of the novel, “Hitler and the Nazis” rank only fifth on Karl’s list of “biggest concerns in life” (page 21). Why are other matters more pressing for Karl? How does Hitler’s regime become a more significant problem in Karl’s life as the story progresses?
2. How are people classified into particular religious and ethnic groups? Why is Karl categorized as being Jewish, even though his family is secular and doesn’t practice the religion?
3. What Jewish stereotypes does the novel examine? What stereotypes about other groups of people are also explored? How can subscribing to stereotypes be misguided and even dangerous?
4. According to Karl’s father, “Art should elevate humanity” (page 59). What do you think he means? What other purposes do you think art should serve?
5. Do you, like Karl, think boxing is “a noble sport,” or are you more of Greta’s mind that it’s “pretty dumb” (page 115)? Explain.
6. How does Karl initially react to the Countess, and how does his impression change over time? Why do you think Karl is uncomfortable with homosexuality? How can being afraid or unsure of something different develop into hatred?
7. Why can Karl and Greta not be together? Once their relationship is exposed and consequently forbidden, how does the memory of it help Karl? How does seeing Greta with another boy affect Karl?
8. What happened at Dachau? Do you think Uncle Jacob really died of dysentery? Why or why not?
9. Describe Karl and Hildy’s relationship. How do you know they care for each other? How does each experience Nazi Germany differently, particularly because of their looks?
10. What afflicts Karl’s mother? Though often shown as weak, how does she demonstrate strength?
11. How does Karl’s understanding of his father change over the course of the novel? How does Karl’s opinion of Max Schmeling change?
12. How is Karl a “misunderstood outsider” like his comic-book hero Superman (page 313)? How does Karl act heroically?
13. Max Schmeling says, “As long as you fight back, there’s no shame” (page 36). How does this statement act as a motif for the novel? Which characters fight back and which do not? Does Max Schmeling always live by his own words? Why is it sometimes difficult—or even impossible—to fight back? Is there necessarily shame in being passive—or feinting—instead of fighting? Explain.
14. How do the illustrations and comics interspersed throughout contribute to your reading of the novel? How can you “read” art?
15. Karl’s mother tells her son, “One of your father’s modern ideas about parenting is to leave you alone and let you become the man you want to be, not the man he wants you to be” (page 302). What kind of man does Karl want to be? What kind of man does he become by the novel’s end? How does his father help Karl become this man?



DISCUSSION GUIDE

RESEARCH AND EXTENSION PROJECTS

- 1. Fighting Back.** What were the Nuremburg Laws, and what effects—both immediate and long-term—did they have on German Jews? Research other anti-Semitic laws and periods of Jewish persecution in history. How does anti-Semitism still exist today, and what religious, ethnic, racial, or other groups are faced with discrimination? What can you do personally to combat discrimination? Fight back by creating your own antidiscrimination slogan. Post your slogan to your online profiles and encourage your friends to adopt the slogan as their own.
- 2. History: Live.** At the end of the novel, Robert Sharenow describes how YouTube was an invaluable resource in his research. Use YouTube to watch newsreels of 1930s Berlin, the Max Schmeling and Joe Louis fights, and clips of Max Schmeling and Anny Ondra's film, *Knockout* (note that some videos might not always be available). How do these live pieces of history affect your reading of *The Berlin Boxing Club*?
- 3. Funny Papers.** Karl and Neblig share a love of comic strips, and Karl even creates his own cartoons. Look up examples of the American comic strips mentioned in the novel, including *Mutt and Jeff*, *The Katzenjammer Kids*, *Joe Palooka*, and *Superman*. How do these early-twentieth-century comics compare to today's? Draw your own comic, either portraying a funny situation or making a political or personal statement.
- 4. State of the Art.** Research some of the artists mentioned in *The Berlin Boxing Club*, such as Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Marcel Duchamp, Albrecht Dürer, George Grosz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Auguste Rodin, and Rembrandt van Rijn. What styles did these artists work in, and what are their most famous works? If a nearby art museum houses any works by these artists, plan a visit to view them in person.
- 5. Boxing Ring.** Delve deeper into the history of boxing, using some of the resources Robert Sharenow mentions at the end of the book. Focus your research on the careers of Henry Armstrong, Jimmy Braddock, Tony Canzoneri, Joe Louis, Barney Ross, and Max Schmeling. What were these boxers' various backgrounds? How did these backgrounds play roles both in and out of the boxing ring? Should a person's race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, etc., matter in the world of sports? Why or why not? How do boxing and other sports serve as equalizers?



Amy Psaila

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Sharenow is an award-winning writer whose first novel, *My Mother the Cheerleader*, was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, and a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age. Julia Roberts' production company, Red Om, is currently developing the book into a feature film. Robert Sharenow is also an Emmy Award-winning television producer and senior vice president of nonfiction and alternative programming for A&E Network and Bio Channel. He lives in New York with his wife, two daughters, and their dog, Lucy.

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