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I Survived #9: I Survived the Nazi Invasion, 1944 BY LAUREN TARSHIS
Reviewed by Educator Mike Lewis in Goodreads, January 21, 2014

Mike rated it ★★★★★

I can't thank Lauren and Scholastic enough for the I Survived series. We ache for books that will help those students with discerning taste (in other words, the kids who struggle to find books they like enough to read).

I Survived the Nazi Invasion, 1944 is another triumph for reluctant readers everywhere. I work with kids who get dragged through the reading curriculum. So much of what's read in class is so unappealing to those reluctant readers that they approach any book that's not a graphic novel skeptically. The I Survived series is an invaluable resource for these upper middle grade readers. This is the time when the gap between interest and readability presents tremendous obstacle to most vulnerable students. They're given texts that they can decode but don't appeal, perpetuating their distaste for books and reading.

Lauren Tarshis has become the preeminent author



of high-interest, accessible text and doing justice to this format might be the most challenging feat a writer could undertake. Tarshis doesn't just master her style with this series, she's created an entirely new bar for what writing for this audience can look like.

Again, Nazi Invasion begins by throwing the reader right into an intense, action filled scene. This is so important. I was in a classroom when a student expressed his dislike for reading during a class discussion.

The teacher reminded him that he had previously expressed enjoyment about the texts they read in class. He responded that he did eventually like them. Here's a kid who, when prompted acknowledged that he liked to read but apparently it wasn't enough to change his perception. It's a common phenomena that needs to be addressed. It shouldn't come as a surprise that the negative portion of the experience is the one that sticks. If we keep telling these kids to

just give it thirty pages, we're not going to change the fundamental problem. The more they believe they don't like to read, the less they'll choose to.

Lauren's choice to open the scene in the middle of a fire fight, bombs exploding left and right, a kid trying to escape being murdered; that's what buys the street cred. While opening the story with action is a great strategy, what distinguishes so many of the I Surviveds is Lauren's ability to pace the backstory. While an engaging opening is a powerful strategy, many reluctant readers still haven't built the stamina or trust to work through the crucial events that will deepen their appreciation for the action. Nazi Invasion's pacing seems to drive the chronology through which the story's told.

While the first chapter is certainly gripping, Tarshis strategically withholds its context. Next, we flash back to a scene in the ghetto where the reader is given the context of Nazi occupied Poland through Max, our main character. Simply and straight forward, the Nazis are explained as Hitler's killer soldiers who came with their tanks, guns, and hatred of Jews. And like following a trail of breadcrumbs, Tarshis drops bites of context that begs her readers to ask for more. She explains that Hitler told hideous lies blaming the Jews for the world's problems before invading other countries, forcing them into ghettos. The chapter ends with Max being hit in the head by a Nazi's rifle after being caught climbing through a fence to gather berries.

Chapter after chapter follows this powerful format. Readers are thrown into a scene that begs their questions, they receive just enough context to want more, they're rewarded with a bit more story before ending the segment on an eye-widening cliffhanger. It's a great format. Tarshis plays with time to ensure that both the story and historical context continue to escalate. But to do this for three-quarters of the story; it's a pacing that does more than just keep her readers flipping pages, they become invested in the

subject matter through the story.

It's not possible to paint a fair and balanced picture of the Nazis, Lauren does take care to include a scene later in the story where Max encounters a soldier not too much older than himself. Max recognizes the lack of hatred in the boy's eyes and raises questions about their circumstances. It's a quick scene before the narrative moves on but as an adult, I appreciate that it opens the door for students ask questions about other perspectives. While more could have been made of the historical context in any number of instances. The narrative remains clean and straight forward, taking advantage of back matter sections that provide the author's connection to the story, answer important overarching questions, and provide suggestions for where readers can discover more information.

As a teacher, it's great to see the I Survived series breaks so much of our preconceived notions about text level characteristics. Tarshis presents compelling subject matter that doesn't traditionally arise until upwards of fifth grade with a readability that students as early as grade three can access. Be it structure, language, or content, this is a series that teachers everywhere should be using engage their reluctant readers. It certainly has all of the elements we look for to teach components of both high-quality fiction and non fiction texts.

Earlier this year I gave that fourth grader who confessed he didn't like to read one of the I Survived's. As expected he devoured it, passed it to a friend, devoured the next one, etc. until he got the majority of the fourth grade hooked. As a "treat," I put my advanced copy of Nazi Invasion in a manilla envelope and told him that as a thank you for spreading the word, I wanted him to be the first student to see the new book. When he brought it back to me the next day, he told me it was the first book he ever read in one night and then asked for more books about the Nazis.