

SONG OF A BLACKBIRD

TEACHERS GUIDE

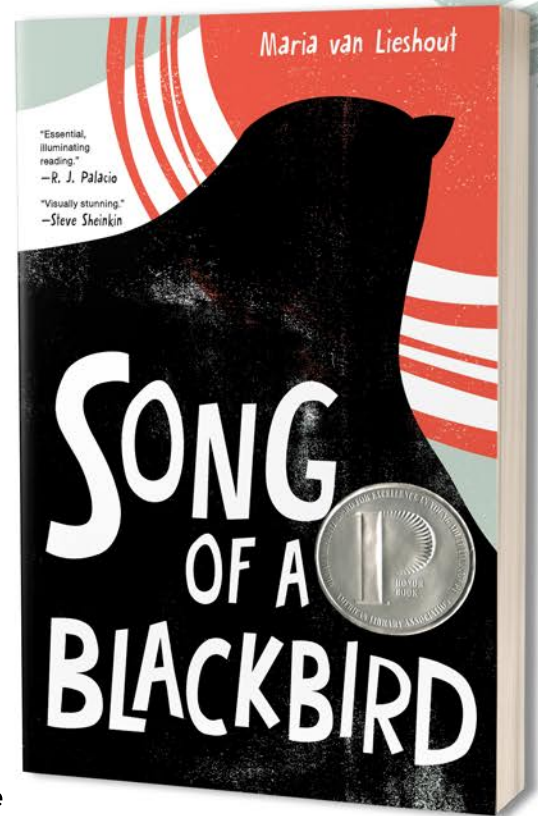
ABOUT THE BOOK

Fight hate. Make art.

In 1943 Amsterdam, Emma Bergsma's world changes when she witnesses Jewish families being forcibly deported to concentration camps. That pivotal moment lights a fire within her, and she decides to join the Dutch Resistance. Before long, Emma is drawn into a clandestine world of printing presses and counterfeiters, with thousands of lives on the line.

In 2011 Amsterdam, teenage Annick's world has changed as well. A search for a bone marrow donor for her beloved oma leads to a shocking revelation: Her grandmother was secretly adopted as a child. The only clues to finding their lost family are a series of art prints hanging on the wall—each signed by a mysterious "Emma B."

This timely graphic novel weaves together two timelines to reveal how art, in the face of political upheaval and nearly insurmountable adversity, can become our greatest lifeline.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Maria van Lieshout was born and raised near Amsterdam, where she spent many weekends in the Museum Quarter row house where her grandparents lived with her artist aunt and metalsmith uncle.

Drawing while her aunt painted and pecking stories on a typewriter while her uncle soldered metals inspired her love for drawing, creating and writing.

After high school in the Netherlands, Maria studied Visual Communications at GWU in DC, and worked in design and innovation at Coca-Cola.

In 2000, Maria became an illustrator full-time. She has illustrated/written several picture books. *Song of a Blackbird* is Maria's first graphic novel.



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES



1. Before you begin reading *Song of a Blackbird*, study your copy of the book. Based on details of the front and back cover art, what clues do you have about the story's setting and potential plot points? Note questions that your observations raise which you hope to have answered as you read the book.
2. *Song of a Blackbird* is a fictional story loosely based on real historical events and takes place in Amsterdam during two different time periods, 1943 and 2011. Find Amsterdam on a world map. It might help to understand that people from the Netherlands are called Dutch, if that's more familiar to you. To give yourself some helpful context about the earlier time period, spend a few minutes researching Amsterdam's history of neutrality in European conflicts and the German occupation of the country in the early 1940s. Then familiarize yourself with the Dutch Resistance efforts during World War II to orient you to this time and place and to the protagonist, Emma's, mentality. (We'll come back to the Dutch Resistance movement.)
3. Study the maps of Amsterdam found on the front and back endpapers of the book. What stayed the same in the city between the two time periods, and what changed? Given what you learn in your research about Amsterdam in the 1940s, what predictions can you make about why certain changes may have occurred over those nearly seventy years?
4. Van Lieshout both wrote the words and created the artwork for this graphic novel about family, courage, and the power of art to fight hate. As you're reading, look for examples of these themes and add sticky notes to moments where you feel a particularly strong connection to the central ideas or storyline.

READING ACTIVITIES and DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Song of a Blackbird* begins with an epigraph from the author and a prologue titled "Right Here, Right Now." What is an epigraph? What is a prologue? What tone do these particular pieces of text set for the reader as the story begins?
2. Chapters in this book are identified with art prints, rather than with traditional chapter titles or numbers. Why might the author have chosen to format the chapters this way? Study the art prints. What observations can you make about the specific details in each of those images, and what questions do they raise? Did the images help you predict key events in each chapter as you read? Think about your day today. If you think about each day as a chapter in the book of your life, what image would you choose to represent today?
3. *Song of a Blackbird* has a somewhat unusual narrator, the Blackbird. How would you describe the Blackbird's narrative voice? How does it compare with the voices of the human characters? As an omniscient narrator, the Blackbird can flit between the story's two timelines. Whose behavior would you say the Blackbird influences, and how? The Blackbird is elusive. Is its enigmatic nature pleasing to you, as a reader, or frustrating for you? Why? Have you read other novels with an omniscient, nonhuman narrator to which you might compare the Blackbird?

4. Let's take a closer look at the writing style and visual mechanics of this novel.
 - a. Emma, Oma, Annick, and other characters interact through dialogue using the first-person point of view, a particularly intimate approach. How is human speech shown in this graphic novel? In what ways do speech bubbles and text vary to convey shifts in the tone or emotion of the dialogue? Find examples in the story that show a range of the volume, mood, tone, and emotional states of the speaker.
 - b. Why do you think the author might've chosen to tell this story using dialogue alone, without the internal monologue we usually find in thought bubbles of graphic novels?
 - c. How do Emma's and Annick's word choices (diction) and the story's sentence structure (syntax) reflect their personalities? Their moments in history? Their relationships with the people around them?
 - d. How are the Blackbird's observations visually distinguished from human dialogue? What do the shape and layout of the Blackbird's speech balloons remind you of?
5. This graphic novel has a limited color palette. How is color used to cue characterization and emotional state in the book? Why do you think these particular colors were chosen to represent this story? Identify story beats where black, orange, and red each play a particularly impactful role in the visual storytelling.
6. Take a closer look at the spread on pages 144-45. Make a graphic organizer with the following headers, or make a copy of the image and add these elements around the edges of that page: color, lettering, posture, facial expression, angle and perspective, and framing. Be specific in describing each design element. How do these artistic choices combine to express the emotional state of the character? If this process is constructive for you, repeat the analysis with other spreads, such as those on pages 90-91 or 202-203.



7. Notice how mixed media, particularly photographs, are incorporated seamlessly into artwork throughout the book.
 - a. Why might van Lieshout have used actual images in her artwork? How do you think the photographs and mixed-media elements (such as letters) contribute to the storytelling? If you're curious about where these images came from, look at the photographic bibliography at the back of the book.
 - b. Select a spread with multimodal artwork, such as pages 20-21, 50-51, 66-67, or 148-49. Make a copy of the pages if you're able to and annotate them with your observations about the composition, strategic use of color, and how notable visual design elements serve the storytelling.

8. How would you describe this book to a friend? Make a list of words that capture the tone of the book and the emotional experience you had while reading. Use your word list to create a playlist or a mood board that creatively conveys feelings you experience as a reader. Add to your creation as the book progresses.
9. When faced with the realities of Oma's test results, Annick's immediate response is to jump into action (page 14). How do you react when a friend shares their struggles? Are you a fixer, like Annick, someone quick to troubleshoot or problem-solve? Are you more inclined to offer a sympathetic or validating response, like focusing on being present for them? Or do you try to distract or redirect your loved one? What sort of approach do you prefer your friends to take with you when you're struggling? Think about various pressure points in this story and how different approaches to problem-solving might have changed the outcome of each situation.
10. Do you think Emma is brave to meet Mr. Nijholt after curfew (page 28)? Was it foolish of her to take that risk? Is there some other way you'd describe Emma's decision to get involved with the Resistance?
- Would you consider Emma's experience of joining the Resistance a traditional hero's journey? Why or why not?
 - What might you have done in Emma's situation? In Josie Sibelius's? In Father Theo's? If there is a spectrum of dissidence among the Dutch rebels, is there a point at which you'd draw the line? Journal privately about this self-reflection.
 - Emma is not Jewish, but she risks her own life, repeatedly, to protect Jews in her community against the German regime. There are deadly consequences for others in her sphere, like Erik and Frank. As a group, discuss the ethics of social justice and activism. What would motivate ordinary citizens like Emma to resist Nazi occupation?
11. *Song of a Blackbird* is an emotionally charged read, and a few particularly powerful statements during the story invite deeper consideration. Respond to your favorite of the following quotes, or choose another that gave you pause as you were reading:
- Page 34: "Fear is a powerful motivator."
 - Page 76: "The role of the artist is to BREAK rules."
 - Page 104: "'But nobody really knows what goes on behind the blackout shades.' Everybody knows what goes on behind the blackout shades."
 - Page 119: "'Doesn't this world have enough fighters? I thought you were an ARTIST.' 'Sometimes they're the same thing.'"
 - Page 161: "People tend to choose the less painful path over the right one."
 - Page 163: "Light is always on our side. But DARKNESS can be on our side too."



12. There are fleeting moments in the story during which characters find joy in the midst of their terror—think, for example, of flirty Erik (page 101) or Soli singing in the church choir (page 165). Is this happiness a coping mechanism? Its own form of resistance? In your own times of chaos, what are the small moments that keep you grounded and connected to your humanity? Reflect and journal privately.
13. The story ends with an epilogue, “Right Now, Right Here.” What is an epilogue? Revisit the prologue at the start of the book and consider how it works in conversation with this epilogue to bookend the story. How would you describe the Blackbird’s tone in the epilogue? What purpose might it serve for the Blackbird to identify the work as fictional, “IMPROVISED and IMAGINED,” at the end of the book, rather than at the beginning? How do you feel about the Blackbird claiming credit for the reader’s emotional reaction to “our flight back in time”? Do its parting words, “UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN, MY FRIEND,” strike you as ominous or reassuring?
14. Did you notice that many chapters of *Song of a Blackbird* include a large, decorative orange letter, or a “drop cap,” near their start? Aside from adding an elegant visual punch, these letters actually spell out a secret message for the reader. Find the thirty-two letters and string them together to discover van Lieshout’s inspiring message.

EXTENSION QUESTIONS



1. Reflect back on your pre-reading explorations. Was the story that unspooled in *Song of a Blackbird* what you had expected when you began reading? What surprised you about the text? About the illustrations? Which characters, events, or visual images from the book stood out to you the most? Looking back at the major themes and your sticky notes (Pre-Reading Activity 4), is there a common thread to the moments with which you connected most deeply in the story? Do you have any lingering questions?
2. Think again of Emma’s art prints. What five or six buildings or public spaces define you, the way those prints anchor Oma? Take photos or download images of the physical spaces and write a brief caption about your connection to each location. Make a classroom display of these images. Cue up Irving Berlin’s song “Always” (pages 217 and 225), popular music from 2011, or a song from your playlist (Discussion Question 8) to enjoy while you browse the gallery.
3. The Heidelberg and platen press play pivotal roles in Emma and her peers’ resistance efforts.
 - a. Research the historical role of the printing press in major resistance movements.
 - b. Few of us have access to large, industrial printing machines, but you can mimic their results in your classroom with some basic everyday materials. Ask an art teacher for guidance, or find a trusted adult to help you research tabletop printing methods, and try your hand at pulling an art print like Emma does.
 - c. Alternatively, the national museum of the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum, offers open digital access to its collection of more than a million pieces. Find a few items in their collection that speak to you, and use digital editing software or printouts of those pieces to make a collage.

4. Every family has a story, and Annick and Oma remind readers about the importance of storytelling and the oral tradition as a means of preserving family history (page 157). Using Annick as inspiration, ask an elder if they'll share a story with you about an impactful moment from their youth—starting a business, living through a significant political or cultural moment, etc.—that shaped them as an individual. Record the story using the format most comfortable for you: audio, visual, artistically, or simply with your own memory.
5. Although *Song of a Blackbird* is a fictional story, many of its characters and moments were inspired by real, incredibly brave people and actual events that van Lieshout meticulously documents in the book's back matter, including her own family's deep connections to the story (pages 246–49). Examine her research material and, if your library offers access, explore a few digitized resources connected to the Dutch Resistance offered by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Dutch National Holocaust Museum, the NIOD War Archive Image Bank, the Amsterdam City Archive Image Bank, or the Holocaust Resource Center of Yad Vashem. Use the real people and events—like Father Theodorus de Witte, the elaborate bank heist, or the work of De Spieghel—as a springboard to deepen your knowledge.
6. Koenji's street art gives Annick an unexpected point of connection with Sol. The street art at Amsterdam's NDSM Wharf (page 54–55), where Koenji takes Annick on their first date, is real. Research the Museum for Street Art and Graffiti (STRAAT) and then explore works by popular street artists in your region.

Educator's Guide by Kit Ballenger

Kit Ballenger, JD/MLIS, is a youth services librarian, literary consultant, and indie bookseller.

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Learn more about Maria van Lieshout at www.vanLIESHOUTstudio.com



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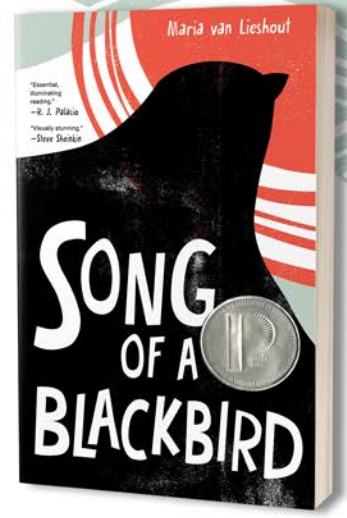
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AWARDS, ACCOLADES and ACCLAIM

Michael L. Printz Honor Book
Junior Library Guild selection
National Book Award long-list selection
Best Book of the Year selection by *Kirkus Reviews*, *School Library Journal*,
Publishers Weekly, *The Horn Book*, *The Bulletin for the Center of Children's Books*,
Book Riot, and more!

2026 Texas Maverick Graphic Novel Reading List
2026 Capitol Choices Noteworthy Books for Children and Teens—Ages Fifteen and Up
2026 Alabama Yellowhammer Young Adult Book Award
2026 California Book Award nominee
2026-2027 Missouri Denny O'Neil Award 9th-12th Grade Readers List
2026-27 Michigan Great Lakes Great Books Award nominee for grades 9-12
2026-2027 Vermont Green Mountain Book Award nominee
2026-2027 Maine's North Star YA Book Award nominee
2026-2027 Florida Teens Read Award nominee
2026-2027 Maryland Black-Eyed Susan Book Award Graphic Novel High School nominee
2027 Oklahoma Intermediate Sequoyah Award nominee



- ★ "Deeply compelling . . . while the story meaningfully evokes a specific historical situation, it could easily serve as a springboard for conversations around other stories of oppression, both contemporary and historical." —*Booklist*, starred review
- ★ "This work will claim its place beside graphic novel classics such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Powerful, moving, and utterly unforgettable." —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ "A touching and tender graphic novel exploration of grief, family, and the vital importance of artistic expression." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★ "Though not for the faint of heart, this touching, gripping, and heartbreaking historical graphic novel doesn't shy away from the dark sides of the true events it's based on, while still offering a ray of hope for the genuine good out there." —*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ "This deeply personal and poetic graphic novel illustrates the heroic actions of everyday Dutch people as they resisted the Nazi regime." —*The Horn Book*, starred review

"Celebrates the incredible bravery of everyday people living under impossible circumstances, as well as the lasting legacy of their actions." —*The Wall Street Journal*

"*Song of a Blackbird* illustrates, with great tenderness, how the past lives within us. This is essential, illuminating reading." —R. J. Palacio, bestselling author of *Wonder*, *White Bird*, and *Pony*

"A visually stunning dive into history, family, and the awesome power of art." —Steve Sheinkin, bestselling author of *Bomb*, *Most Dangerous*, and *The Port Chicago 50*