

The Author's Study Guide – *Liberty Girl*

About the Author

Robert A. Black was born and raised in Indianapolis IN, and is the grandson of the *real* Eleanor Blizzard Black, the person who inspired the main character of *Liberty Girl*. In junior high and high school, he often went on "library trips" with his grandmother, where he would research various subjects while she researched their family's history. As a student, he majored in engineering and mathematics, but also loved studying history.

Mr. Black began his writing career in the mid-1980s, when he wrote nine episodes of the Nickelodeon cable series *You Can't Do That On Television* and contributed to six other episodes while working on the set as the "script doctor." He later switched to writing books, and *Liberty Girl* is his first published novel.

About the Inspiration

When Mr. Black's grandmother passed away in 1996, she left behind approximately 100 pages of an autobiography, which Mr. Black's father copied and distributed to the family. It was while reading his grandmother's story that Mr. Black first learned about her family's move from Indianapolis to Baltimore so that her father could work for the Emergency Fleet Corporation during World War I. When he read his grandmother's description of adjusting to life in Baltimore, and especially about her friendship with Maggie, the African-American girl who cleaned their apartment house, he knew he had found a story to write.

Many of the events in the book, such as the Liberty Bond rally and the launching of the cargo ship *Arundel*, were developed from actual events described in Eleanor's autobiography (although highly fictionalized). Other parts of the story, such as the Spanish influenza pandemic and Maggie's interest in bandleader James Reese Europe, were developed through Mr. Black's historical research.

About the Story

Liberty Girl is the story of 11-year-old Eleanor Blizzard, whose father has taken a job working for the US shipbuilding effort during World War I. To Eleanor, moving to Baltimore from their home in Indianapolis is a grand adventure at first, but she soon becomes homesick and lonely. Looking for something to do, she begins helping Maggie Buell, an African-American girl who cleans her family's apartment house. They soon become friends, and Eleanor learns about the hardships Maggie endures in Baltimore's segregated society.

Once school starts, Eleanor's new classmates treat her as a novelty at first, but then she falls under suspicion when they discover she can speak German. Fortunately, Maggie is there to teach her about responding to prejudice. The war finally ends, but a new threat appears when Spanish influenza breaks out across the globe. Eleanor finds herself struggling with death and loss, which takes a very real turn when Maggie falls victim to the influenza pandemic. In the end, though, Eleanor's persistence helps life to score a victory over death.

Questions for Discussion

1. Compare the way Eleanor and her family traveled from Indianapolis to Baltimore with the way your family would make such a journey today. How do you think the longer time Eleanor's family had to spend traveling affects the way they feel about moving to a new city?
2. Compare Eleanor's life in Baltimore to the things she describes about her life in Indianapolis. In what ways is her life in Baltimore better? In what ways is it worse?
3. List some of the ways that being African-American affects Maggie and her family. What would you do if you had to face the same kind of discrimination?
4. What do you think of Maggie's reasons for keeping a positive attitude, even in the face of the discrimination she faces? What does she plan to do about it? Do you agree with her, or would you handle her situation differently?
5. How can you tell that Eleanor's Baltimore classmates don't know much about Indiana? If they know that little about another state in the USA, how much do you think they know about another country like Germany? How would that affect the way they think about German people?
6. Does the German-speaking old man seem very threatening to you? Why do you think everyone is afraid of him?
7. If you were in Eleanor's place, watching the German-speaking old man, would you try to help him, even if it meant revealing something about yourself that you were trying to hide? Why or why not?
8. Why doesn't Maggie want to let Eleanor help after she's sent home from school? Do you agree with her reasons? Why or why not?
9. Eleanor is so excited by the idea of meeting John Philip Sousa that she goes along with Georgie's plan to sneak her backstage, even though it sounds suspicious. Have you ever had the chance to meet someone famous? How did you feel about it? Would you have done the same thing as Eleanor if you had been in her place?
10. Vice President Marshall compares Eleanor's move to Baltimore with the soldiers going overseas to fight in the war. In what ways do you think he's right? In what ways do you think he's exaggerating?
11. During the first victory celebration, Eleanor sees the lady who had come out of her house to help the old German man. They don't speak, but they still manage to communicate. What do you think they told each other?

12. Compare the way people in Eleanor's time got the news with the ways people can get it today. Do you think something like the mistaken report of an armistice could happen again? Why or why not?
13. For weeks, Gail Jasper had made fun of Eleanor's Uncle Alvin because he was a medic instead of a soldier, but once her father went missing, she turned to him as a symbol of hope. How does that make Eleanor feel? How would that make you feel in Eleanor's place?
14. Why doesn't Gail want Eleanor to tell anyone about her father? Is that what you would want?
15. Compare the way Eleanor acts after her Grandpa Syerup dies to the way Gail reacts after learning that her father is missing. In what ways are they alike? In what ways are they different?
16. Why do you think Billy Blake continues to harass Eleanor, even after the war ends? Do you think he really believes she's a risk because she's from Indiana, or is he just making up an excuse? What makes you think that way?
17. How does the unfolding story of *Maytime* make Eleanor think about the events in her own life? How do the events in her life affect her reaction to the play?
18. List the things that Billy Blake and the other Boy Scouts did that were helpful, and the things they did that were hurtful. Are they "good guys" or "bad guys?" Why do you think that?
19. List the ways that characters in the story tried to cure Spanish influenza. Do you think any of them worked? Why do you think people came up with so many strange remedies?
20. Why do you think Maggie is so interested in Jim Europe and his regimental band? What do you think the 369th Regiment's exploits in the war represent to her?
21. Do you think Eleanor really did anything that helped Maggie get better? Why or why not?
22. Eleanor, Maggie and Gail all have somewhere to go as the story ends. What do you think each of them will find?

Topics for Research and Discussion

1. *Liberty Girl* is based on the experiences of the author's grandmother and her family during World War I. Are there any stories in your family of what your relatives did during a war or other major historical event? Ask a relative about his or her experiences, and see if your family has any photographs or other mementos from that time period. Would your relatives' experiences make a good story?
2. Several actual historical figures appear or are mentioned in *Liberty Girl*. Research one of the following people and report what you learned to the class.
 - a. Jules Goux
 - b. Lieutenant James Reese "Jim" Europe
 - c. Noble Sissle
 - d. Vice President Thomas R. Marshall
 - e. John Philip Sousa
 - f. Maryland Governor Emerson C. Harrington
 - g. Kaiser Wilhelm II
 - h. Eugene V. Debs
3. Maggie and other African-Americans in Baltimore during World War I had to live with a system of racial discrimination known as "Jim Crow" laws. Research the history of these laws in America. Where were they the most extreme? Was there any part of America where discrimination was less severe? How did the "Jim Crow" laws eventually come to an end?
4. When Eleanor reveals that she can speak German, she has to endure the anti-German prejudice that was common in America at the time. Was this the only time that foreign immigrants or their descendants faced prejudice in America during a time of war? Choose a war from American history and find out what kinds of prejudices Americans held. Were those feelings justified? Why or why not?
5. There were no soldiers in Eleanor's family, but her father kept accounts for the Emergency Fleet Corporation and her uncle was in the Medical Corps. What other non-military jobs did Americans do to help the war effort? What contributions did children like Eleanor make?
6. Research the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic. Who did it affect the worst? How did the war affect the spread of the disease and the number of people who died? How much did doctors know about the disease and how to fight it? If a similar pandemic started today, do you think it would be more or less severe than it was in 1918?