

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

INCLUDES A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES, AND RESOURCES

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Debut author Brita Sandstrom arrives with a sweeping, unforgettable historical ghost story of the darkness around and inside us, and the courage it takes to keep hope alive.

Charlie has been having nightmares. Eyes watching him in the night, claws on his chest, holding him down. His dreams have been haunted for years, ever since German bombs rained down on London, taking his father's life, taking his city's spirit, taking his beloved brother, Theo, off to war in France.

Now Charlie is left to take care of his grandpa Fitz while his mother works, waiting for the day when Theo will come home. And with World War II nearly won, that day is almost here. Grandpa Fitz warns Charlie that soldiers sometimes come back missing a piece of themselves, but Charlie isn't worried. Whatever Theo has lost, Charlie will help him find it.

When Theo finally does return, though, he is cold and distant. But Charlie refuses to accept that the brother he knew is gone, and soon, he discovers the reason for his brother's change: war wolves. These are terrifying ancient beasts who consume the hearts of those broken by grief.

The wolves have followed soldiers back home from the front. And if Charlie truly wants to save Theo, he's going to have to find them and get his brother's heart back. But can a heart that's been eaten ever be replaced?

★ "War-ravaged London and its battered inhabitants spring vividly to life in Sandstrom's exceptional debut, which skillfully balances hopefulness and horror.... It's a both wrenching and wondrous world."

— *Booklist*

"*Hollow Chest* is remarkable on so many levels—its exquisite writing, its startling originality, its deep empathy. An astonishing debut."

— *Anne Ursu, award-winning author of The Lost Girl*



## DEAR READER,

I started writing *Hollow Chest* as a way to process my own fears and anxieties, but in many ways it turned into a love letter to my family—in particular my grandfather, Perry, who served in World War II. My grandpa almost never spoke about his experiences in the war, and what he did share was almost exclusively the bare-bones facts of what happened, not how he felt about it.

What we bring to a story is just as important as what we take away from it, and now you know some of what I bring with me. *Hollow Chest*'s main character Charlie's way of interacting with other people has been informed by the world he lives in—by living in London, by living through World War II, by surviving the loss of a parent, by the deep love he has for and receives from his family, just to name a few influences.

I think one of the hardest things we can go through is wanting desperately to talk about something with the people we love and the people who make up our individual communities—our families, friends, teachers, neighbors, even our pets—and not being able to say it, or not knowing how to say it. Like my grandpa and like myself, just about everyone has something in their life that is hard to talk about—a bad experience, a troubled relationship, a complicated feeling, something that they maybe feel no one else will understand.

Metaphors and allegories are often devices we use when we can't or won't talk about the thing itself. Sometimes a thing is just too big or too scary or too overwhelming to come right out and say. The war wolves that stalk Charlie through the city represent something bigger than their individual selves. Dark and gruesome as they may be, they still help Charlie come to better understand the people around him. One of my hopes for this book is that it will maybe help readers and their communities find a shared vocabulary to talk about those hard things, and in doing so to understand each other just a little better.

**Brita Sandstrom**



**Brita Sandstrom** is a graduate of Hamline University's MFA program in writing for children and young adults. *Hollow Chest* is her first book. She lives with her family and collection of cats in Minneapolis, Minnesota. You can visit her online at [www.britasandstrom.com](http://www.britasandstrom.com)



## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Have students write and share their thoughts about the following prompt: What does resilience mean to you? Look up the word if it's unfamiliar. Think about times you or people you know have been resilient. Why is resilience important? In what ways is resilience a positive trait? How might it be a negative trait? Is it always possible to be resilient?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**1** Like so many children during WWII, Charlie Merriweather has taken on a lot of responsibilities in his family since his father died and his brother left home to serve. His mother likes to comment that “eleven is too young to be such an old man.” [PAGE 4] What does she mean by this? What parts of Charlie’s behavior are “too old” for an eleven-year-old boy? How has Charlie’s childhood been impacted by his family’s needs?

**2** What does Charlie mean when he describes his worry as “a thin little dark thread that was sewn up into the fabric of everything” and that “stitched the pieces of his life together”? [PAGE 18]? How is worry or anxiety an inextricable part of Charlie’s life, his decision-making, and his perspective? Support your answers with examples in the text.

Think about some of the things you worry about. In what ways do you find relief and reassurance?

**3** Thousands of British children were evacuated to safer rural areas during WWII, particularly when the Germans invaded France and the Blitz attacks began in 1940. What do you think of Mrs. Merriweather’s decision not to send Charlie away and to keep him with her through the Blitz? What are her reasons for keeping him in London through four more years of war? What might you have done in her place?

**4** Charlie is excited for his brother Theo to come home, but he’s also nervous in part because the family hasn’t heard from Theo for months. When trying to explain why Theo may have stopped

writing, Charlie’s new friend Reggie, who has been a soldier himself, says “hard things are difficult to speak about...but sometimes it’s as if the more you don’t talk about that thing, the worse it becomes.” [PAGE 44] Describe what Reggie means in your own words. If you had a bad experience that you knew would upset the people who care about you, would you share it? Why or why not?



Children of an eastern suburb of London, who have been made homeless by the random bombs of the Nazi night raiders, waiting outside the wreckage of what was their home. September 1940. New Times Paris Bureau Collection. (USIA)



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

**5** When Charlie talks to his friend Sean about his fears about Theo coming home, Sean says “I don’t really know which is worse, the being afraid or the knowing.” [PAGES 45-46] What does he mean by this? Which do you think is worse for Charlie and why?



Illustration from “Bearskin” from *Grimm’s Household Tales*, by Marian Edwardes, illustrated by Ranning Bell.

**6** The story that Charlie’s mom tells him a week before Theo arrives is her version of a Brothers Grimm fairy tale called “Bearskin.” Do you know it? If not, look it up online or visit your school library and read it. How does the fairy tale relate to the story? To Theo? To Charlie? [CHAPTER 5]



**7** Write out some of your thoughts about the war wolves. Consider the vital role that real-life wolves play in their ecosystems or the roles they play in fairy tale narratives. With these in mind, how do you understand the role of war wolves in this novel? Consider the war wolves’ names, their mythology, and their hierarchy, at the top of which are the wolves holding council in the War Room.

**8** After confronting a war wolf for the first time, Charlie asks why the war wolves are in London, given that the war is over. The wolf Dishonor tells him that the soldiers who have returned have the war inside them. [PAGE 145] What does this mean?

In what ways do Reggie and Theo, for instance, carry the war inside them? Are soldiers the only characters who have internalized the war they’ve lived through?

**9** Dishonor also tells Charlie that the war wolves do not take hearts, they accept them. He says “an eaten heart is a heart freely given.” [PAGE 149] What do you think about this distinction? Why is it important? Why does Charlie react so negatively to the idea that Theo gave his heart to the wolves?

**10** Despite a setting and other story elements based on real historical events, Charlie’s story also has much in common with fairy tales. List some of the aspects of the story (characters, settings, plot, etc.) that you think are also fairy tale elements. Explain your thinking.



Dishonor, a war wolf



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

**11** Consider the unsent letters that Charlie finds in Theo's coat. What do you think Theo is saying or trying to say in them? How do the letters' contents connect back to what Reggie says about difficult, unspoken things getting bigger and poisoning everything else? Why are all the letters addressed to Charlie? **[PAGE 287]**

**12** The Blitz took place over eight months from September 1940 to May 1941, but as bombs rained down on Britain's major cities with little warning, it felt like the violent destruction would never end. Many people were unable to stay brave

Charlie and the war wolf Wrath walk through a bombed-out neighborhood.



or hopeful in the face of it, and some even thought Britain should surrender to make the bombings stop. What connections can you draw between those feelings and Theo's struggle that ends with him giving his heart to the wolves? How are the feelings connected to Charlie's persistent nightmares about the air raid sirens?

**13** The war wolves are both allegory (a narrative device that uses a character/place/event to deliver a broader message about real-world issues) and fabulism (when fantastical elements are placed into everyday settings). Describe what you think the war wolves represent. As an allegory, what do they tell you about the real-world war? Consider also the role of wolves in fairy tales. How do the wolves and other fairy tale aspects shape your understanding of Charlie and his quest?

**14** Tales, stories, and storytelling feature largely in this novel. Consider the story about the baker that Theo tells Charlie. **[CHAPTER 21]** What is Theo trying to say? What does a story allow him to express that he seems unwilling to otherwise share? How does Theo's story relate to the larger narrative and the choice Charlie eventually makes?

**15** The story is told through Charlie's point of view and so much of it focuses on his determination to "fix" what the war has broken for his family. Do you think he succeeds? Think about the story's conclusion: is it a happy ending? Does a happy ending for Charlie and his family require their brokenness to be fixed? Why or why not?



## ACTIVITIES

### Filling in History

The valiant efforts of the homing pigeons Bertie and Pudge cannot be overstated, and it's time they made the news. Write a front page newspaper article about their exploits and service (don't forget an eye-grabbing headline). You can use examples from the text and look up info about homing pigeons' roles in WWII. If you need inspiration, take a look at some historical newspaper clippings to get some ideas.

### The Makings of a War Wolf

There are several visceral descriptions of the war wolves in the text—not just what they look like but how they make the human characters feel. Create a new war wolf that we don't meet in the text. You can draw or write the wolf's introduction. What is its name? Think about the emotions it savors and how those connect to the experience of war. If someone saw this wolf, what would it look like and how would that person feel looking at it?

### Radio Broadcast

During WWII, the average person kept informed by listening to the radio. Now's your chance to be a radio announcer! In groups or on your own, pick an event for which you'll provide on-scene reporting—

you could choose to report on the Blitz from the perspective of those hiding in the shelters, you can research one of the big battles and report on it, or you could offer a play-by-play of the fiasco when Pudge and Biscuits meet the matron of the Mary, Queen of Peace Convalescent Hospital. The choice is yours! The broadcast can simply be read aloud or recorded to make a class podcast.



Mellie and her  
pigeon friends

### Letters from the Heart

Pick any two of Theo's unsent letters, and write him responses from Charlie's

perspective. What does it seem like Theo needs to hear? What might Charlie need to share about life and home—the good and the bad? Don't forget to mention Biscuits!

### Toothsome Tales

Write or draw your own fairy tale about the war wolves. You can use one of the untold wolf encounters from the novel (e.g. Reggie, Grandpa Fitz, Theo, etc.) or you can come up with an original story about any of the war wolves we meet in the novel or a new wolf that you create.





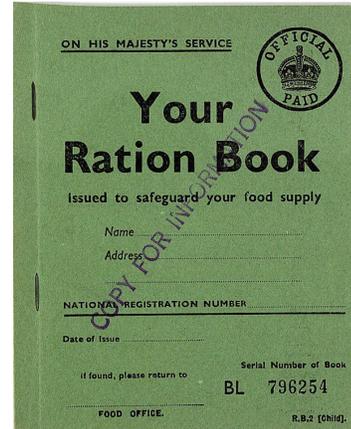
# RESOURCES

## THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II ON LONDONERS

The [Imperial War Museums](#) (IWM) is the world’s leading museum of war and conflict. Founded while the First World War was raging, it gives voice to the extraordinary experiences of ordinary people forced to live their lives in a world torn apart by conflict. The IWM has five locations in England, three of which are in London. It tells the story of all conflicts in which British or Commonwealth forces have been involved since 1914. The IWM’s collections include archives of personal and official documents, photographs, film and video material, oral history recordings, a comprehensive library, a large art collection, and examples of military vehicles and aircraft, equipment, as well as other artifacts.

The IWM also operates an extensive website that features many films, articles, and other information. For more background on what life was like in London for Charlie and his family the period in which *Hollow Chest* takes place you may want to invite students to view some selected films from the IWM’s collection, described on this page and the

next. They were created by the British government during the war, and were shown in movie theaters before feature films. In those days before television, people got their news both via the radio and via short films such as these.



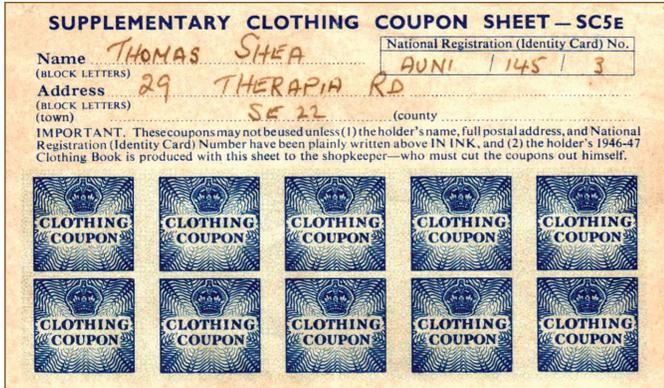
**FOOD RATIONING** — “Charlie remembered Mum’s shock-slack face, the first time she had seen their rations for the week laid out on the kitchen table, how she had not been able to hide it quite fast enough before Charlie got the idea that maybe he ought to be worried. He had never really thought about food before, to wonder what would happen if there wasn’t enough. “You can make do with anything, if anything is all you have,” Grandpa Fitz had said firmly, squeezing Mum’s hand tight in his own, under the table where he thought Charlie couldn’t see. But Charlie had seen. And he had worried. And he had never been able to figure out how to stop.” **[PAGE 16]**

### Newsreel: [Choose Cheese](#)

With rationing introduced early in 1940 in Britain, this public information film was created to advocate the advantages of eating cheese over meat. The film explains not only the health benefits of cheese with some (unverified) experiments, but also its versatility in cooking, from grilled cheese to cauliflower cheese, “a meal in itself.”



## RESOURCES CONTINUED



**CLOTHES RATIONING** — “There were only so many clothing tickets allowed per person every year, but Charlie kept growing. He’d been excited as the marks for his height got higher and higher on his door frame, so excited that it had been months before he’d noticed that Mum’s dresses had new darns and places where the fabric was worn thin and shiny. Charlie, in turn, kept trying to stretch his clothes to fit.” [PAGE 16]

### Newsreel: [Make Do and Mend](#)

From June 1941 until 1949, buying new clothes was rationed in Britain. This newsreel trailer, made by the Ministry of Information in 1943, was part of the Government’s campaign urging people to repair, reuse and reimagine their existing clothes during WWII.



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This Discussion Guide was written by Anastasia Collins (she/her/hers) who holds an M.S. in LIS and an M.A. in Children’s Literature. She is the Research & Instruction Librarian for Children’s

Literature at the Simmons University Library. She is also the author of the Simmons Anti-Oppression Guide. Outside of librarianship, Stacy is a children’s literature scholar and reviewer with Kirkus Reviews and Horn Book Magazine as well as a trauma-informed facilitator with the Anti-Racism Collaborative of Massachusetts. You can follow her online at [@DarkLiterata](#).

**CARING FOR EACH OTHER** — “Somewhere outside, a dog sounded, toneless and droning, more of a wail than a howl, really. That was why he’d had the nightmare. Instead of a silly old dog’s howl, he’d heard an air raid siren, and his sleeping mind had tried to protect him as best it could by putting him back into the depths of the Goodge Street shelter during the Blitz, sweating in the dark with too many other people and no Biscuits—

No. That time was gone. He would not think of it. He would not go back.

He stroked his cat’s soft fur again and Biscuits purred groggily.

Safe as houses.” [PAGE 5]

### Newsreel: [Neighbors Under Fire](#)

This short film commemorates the (primarily voluntary) efforts by which Londoners coped with the start of the Blitz when, the commentary says, 1200 people were made homeless in one night. The neighborhood that was bombed and is depicted in this film is near to the docks on the Thames where Charlie’s family lived and where Charlie’s father worked and died.

