

I'M STILL SCARED: The War Years
A Teacher's Guide to Helping Your Class Understand War
Book by Tomie dePaola

A Discussion Guide by Kay Weisman

About the Guide:

Today's children can constantly be exposed to images of war and terrorism as a result of the Internet and unlimited access to media coverage. *I'm Still Scared: The War Years* chronicles some of author/illustrator Tomie dePaola's experiences, as a second grader, during the bombing of Pearl Harbor and World War II. Teachers and librarians can use this guide to help their students compare and contrast their own experiences and emotions with those of young Tomie's. The discussion questions and activities are designed to help students learn more about this period in history while allowing them to identify with the lead character. This book and guide are intended for children in grades 2 and up.

About the Book:

I'm Still Scared: The War Years is Tomie dePaola's sixth title in his ongoing autobiographical series, 26 Fairmount Avenue. It covers a very short span of time, from the bombing of Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, through New Year's Eve of the same year. In this book seven-year-old Tomie struggles with his fears about how the coming war will affect his family, his friends, and others in the world. Luckily he finds strong support from his family (especially his parents and his grandfather, Tom) who help to reassure him that ultimately, things will be okay, even if recent events seem to suggest otherwise. Readers of this book will probably want to peruse the earlier titles in this series, including:

- *26 Fairmount Avenue* (1999) After the "Big Hurricane of 1938," Tomie's family begins building a new house in Meridian, Connecticut, on Fairmount Avenue.
- *Here We All Are* (2000) Five-year old Tomie starts kindergarten and welcomes a new baby sister, Maureen.
- *On My Way* (2001) Tomie dances at his first recital, learns to read, and gets a library card.
- *What a Year* (2002) In first grade, Tomie goes trick-or-treating, gets chicken pox, and receives a brand new diary from Nana for Christmas.
- *Things Will Never Be the Same* (2003) Second grader Tomie enjoys sledding, the movie *Fantasia*, and relishes his first real art lessons. This story ends with the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

About the Author:

Tomie dePaola is the creator of over 200 books for children, including his autobiographical series, the 26 Fairmount Avenue stories. He grew up in Meriden, Connecticut, where at the age of four he announced to his family that he wanted to be "an artist and write stories and draw pictures for books and sing and dance on the stage." His first book was published in 1965; since that time he has written and illustrated folktales, nursery rhymes, board books, religious books, and more. The winner of numerous honors and awards for his art (as well as a Newbery honor for *26 Fairmount Avenue*), dePaola's distinctive style is popular with both children and adults.

Author Interview:

1. What parallels, if any, do you see between your life as a second grader with fears following Pearl Harbor and the experiences of today's second graders?

I'm not sure if I see too many parallels, unless they are emotional. The Pearl Harbor event was so shocking and devastating to everybody in America, very much on the scale of the 9-11 attack. The biggest difference was that almost immediately things got put into motion that would affect us for the next four years during the Second World War: the blackout curtains, air raid drills, and then, within several months, shortages of everything. New cars stopped being made on January 1, 1942; by May rationing was in place. It became very personal, especially hanging the blackout curtains, lights going off, air raid drills in school where we'd have to go down into the basement and sit until the all clear sounded. We didn't have the bombardment of media and news that children have today. Of course, I'm not a second grader, but my feeling is that life kind of is going on as usual with the war in Iraq and it certainly wasn't going on as usual during the Second World War. Teachers were very reluctant to tell us anything. That was very true for other adults, too. I just got a note from a former classmate who figures in the books, and she said she was "left out of the loop" and that was true for all of us.

2. In thinking about life at home in America, what differences do you see between your own experiences during World War II and the experiences of today's children during the current war?

The real difference was rationing. Suddenly, with all this abundance that we might have had--and you have to realize the Depression had just ended so the abundance wasn't the abundance that we have today--there were shortages. People lived a simpler life then than we do now. We had to close the blackout curtains every

night, huddle around the radio, lower the heat in the house to conserve coal, and suddenly things started disappearing off the table. We would have meat maybe twice a week because we had to use our ration cards and we were only allowed so many items per person per family. We were very lucky that my grandma and grandpa had a grocery store.

The war had seeped very deeply into our home life because of shortages and bundling up. One of the things that will come up in a future book was that my mother would save all the bacon fat...in fact, any grease. We had a big pot and all our extra grease went in because grease was used in making explosives. Who knew that? My father was a smoker and on the inside of the cigarette pack was tin foil. He would carefully pull that tin foil off because we had a great big ball of tin foil that we'd bring down once a month to the center. We had scrap drives and all the metal that wasn't being used was taken down to the center for scrap. My mother would cut the tops and bottoms off tin cans and flatten them and package them up and then bring them to the "retrievement" center. The war affected our daily life at home very much, even if you didn't have anyone in the service. My immediate family was not in the war, of course, but I did have cousins who were.

3. How many more 26 Fairmount Avenue books can we look forward to? How old will Tomie be when the series ends?

There are going to be at least three more (and maybe as many as six) so there could end up being twelve books in the series. I will be ten years old when the series ends, because I know exactly when the last page of the last book ends. It will be VJ Day (Victory over Japan), August 15, 1945. In one month, September 15, 1945, I would be eleven years old, with a whole different life ahead of me with all kinds of other adventures.

4. What advice do you have for children who aspire to be writers or artists or tap dancers?

Practice, practice, practice, practice! The only way you are going to get to be a writer or an artist or a tap dancer or a baseball player is by really good hard practice and work. And then, of course, keep your fingers crossed and hope for a lot of luck.

Discussion Questions:

1. *I'm Still Scared* begins on the same day that *Things Will Never Be the Same* ends: December 7, 1941, the day that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Tomie is very frightened of what may happen if the United States goes to war. Have you ever been this scared? Can you remember what happened, how you felt, and what other people said? What are some things that frighten you?
2. When Tomie returns to school on the day after Pearl Harbor, he and his friends notice that a lot of grownups are whispering. What does he suspect they are talking about? Why does he think the adults don't want them to hear? Have you ever experienced this? How did it make you feel?
3. Tomie is a keen observer of the reactions of others to Pearl Harbor and the coming war. How does the nun at Mass react? Miss Burke, the school principal? Tomie's parents and grandparents? His Uncle Charles and Viva? How does Tomie react? How does Tomie's grandfather, Tom, explain things to him?
4. In Chapter 6, Tomie participates in his first air raid drill at school. Where do Tomie and his classmates go? How does Tomie feel? What does Miss Gardner say about the reasons for the drill? How does Tomie's mother explain the air raid drill? What kinds of drills have you taken part in? Why do we have them? How do they make you feel?
5. What are some of the things Tomie's family does in order to prepare for war? What is a brownout? What are blackout curtains?
6. Tomie is lucky to have other interests that help him to forget about the war for a time, such as music, dancing, movies, and Christmas. When you are afraid, what activities help you to forget about these problems?
7. In Chapter 9, an older child calls Tomie an enemy because his family is of Italian heritage and the United States is at war against Italy (as well as Germany and Japan). What is Tomie's reaction? How does his father explain the situation to him and what advice does he give Tomie?
8. Christmas is a very important holiday for Tomie. What things does his family do to celebrate this holiday? Why does Tomie decide to buy nylons for his mother instead of his usual gift of perfume? What presents does Tomie receive? How does Tomie think that the Christmases after this one may be different?

9. Tomie's father announces that he is going to begin working a second job—for New Departure, a company that makes ball bearings. Why does he take this second job? What is the graveyard shift? Why is this factory important to the war effort? How does this extra job affect Tomie's family?

10. During the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, Tomie goes to see two movies: *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* and Walt Disney's *Dumbo*. What is a newsreel? What is Tomie's reaction when he sees the scenes of the bombing in London? What was the Blitz?

Activities & Projects:

1. Invite someone who remembers the incident at Pearl Harbor to visit your class and tell about their experiences. What details in their account are the same as Tomie dePaola's memories? What different experiences did they have?
2. Keep a journal or diary for at least a week. Tell about things that happen to you during this set time period, and how you feel about these events. Then put the journal away for several weeks. When you read it again, does it help you to remember the things that happened and how they made you feel? Do you still feel the same way?
3. Think about some things that frightened you when you were younger. Draw or paint a picture that illustrates these fears, or create a collage of scary things.
4. Find out more about the events that led up to Pearl Harbor. Listen to a recording of President Roosevelt's speech, delivered to a joint session of Congress on December 8, 1941. (Numerous web links for this speech are available, including: <http://www.historychannel.com/broadband/clipview/index.jsp?id=v2t10>). Try to imagine how you would have felt listening to this speech on the radio with your family in 1941.

Additional Resources and Websites:

- Adults will find Barbara Elleman's *Tomie dePaola: His Art & His Stories* (Putnam, 1999) very useful for background information and art commentary.
- Children and adults will enjoy *A Visit With Tomie dePaola*, a 30 minute live-action video (Whitebird, Inc., 1996) in which dePaola opens his home and 200-year-old barn/studio for a guided tour and conversation about how he creates his books and art.
- The Official Website of Tomie dePaola (<http://www.tomie.com>) includes information about dePaola, his books, perspective on being an artist, and a calendar of events.
- Reading Rockets: A Video Interview with Tomie dePaola (<http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/depaola>) This site, maintained by WETA public television in Washington, D. C., includes a video interview and written transcript, a short biography, and a selected list of dePaola's books for children.
- National Geographic's Remembering Pearl Harbor website, (<http://plasma.nationalgeographic.com/pearlharbor/>) contains an interactive map with timeline, photos, footage, first hand accounts, and narration of the events of December 7, 1941.

Kay Weisman is a librarian at Willowbrook Elementary School in Glenview, IL. She also reviews children's books for *Booklist* and is a frequent contributor to *Book Links* magazine.