

★ “An important work that is immensely personal, powerful, and heart-wrenching.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

Michael Rosen



The Missing

The True Story of
My Family in World War II

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Ages 10–14



***THE MISSING* by Michael Rosen**

About the Author

Michael Rosen is one of the most popular contemporary poets and authors of books for children. He received the Eleanor Farjeon Award for services to children's literature in 1997 and served as Children's Laureate in the UK from 2007 to 2009. His books include the worldwide bestseller *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* and the award-winning *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* as well as *What's So Special About Shakespeare?*, *What's So Special About Dickens?*, and *What Is Poetry?* He lives in London.



Photograph © Wiener Library
At the Wiener Library in 2018

About the Book

The Missing is an account of Michael's search for his great-aunts and great-uncles who were there before the war but not afterward. For thirty years Michael tried to find out exactly what happened: he interviewed family members, scoured the internet, pored over books, and traveled to America and France.

The book documents the horror of Nazi occupation and the human cost of the Holocaust.

This firsthand account of his search includes personal reflection, letters, and documents and is interspersed with poems that express his feelings and capture the "pictures in his mind."



Michael Rosen aged ten, in Pinner



Chapter 1

Michael was born and grew up just after the Second World War. There may be elements about his childhood that are familiar to the children and some that will be unfamiliar or strange. Encourage the children to compare their experiences with the ones described in this chapter.

- Does anything about Michael's story remind you of things you do or things that have happened to you?
- Is there anything about Michael's childhood that is very different from your experience?

"Skeletons"

This short poem shows how memories can be passed down from one generation to another as stories. Even though Michael didn't see the dinosaur skeletons, he can imagine them in his mind's eye.

Discuss this idea:

- Is it possible to have pictures in your head of things that you have never seen?
- Where do these pictures come from?
- What pictures do you have in your head from the stories that you have been told?

Chapter 2, "Bagel," and Chapter 3

In these chapters we learn a little bit about Michael's family, particularly his grandparents. We learn about different kinds of families and family relationships. Families are unique but they also have things in common.

After reading these chapters, make connections by talking about family experiences. It is likely that in the class you have a huge range of different family structures. Grandparents are referred to in different ways in different cultures and even within cultural groups. Simply by talking about the names given to grandparents, you can stimulate a rich discussion about cultural similarity and difference.

- What impression do you have of Michael's zeyde from the poem "Bagel"?
- Does he remind you of any of your relatives?



“The Absentees,” “Counting,” and Chapter 4

After reading “The Absentees,” talk about who is absent.

- How did the poem make you feel?
- Did you get a sense of Michael’s feelings from reading the poem?
- Do we know who is absent and why?
- Do the words at the end of the poem give us a clue?

At this point, it would be good to elicit the children’s existing level of knowledge about the Second World War. Gather information and record their suggestions. This will help you establish their level of understanding and highlight any misconceptions that will need addressing. *The Missing* includes succinct and clear exposition, so some misconceptions can be dealt with in the course of reading. Others may require further research and reading.

Invite the children to ask questions.

- Is there anything that you would like to know or find out?

Read chapter 4 and the poem “Counting.” Allow time for the children to respond and ask questions.

Chapters 5–7

Michael’s family history research starts with a visit to France.

At the end of chapter 7 he writes, “I felt so angry and sad that I hadn’t found a way to remember Oscar and Martin. No one in my family knew anything about them, and this frustrated me beyond words. It meant the Nazis had succeeded. And the last thing I wanted was for them to have won.”

- Officially Germany lost the war, so why does Michael feel that the Nazis have won?

Discuss the concept of memory, remembrance, and memorial:

- Is it important to remember the Holocaust? Why?
- What are the different ways in which we commemorate events like the Holocaust? (You might talk about commemoration days, memorials, memoirs, fiction, poetry, and drama.)
- Michael is making the point that it is important to remember missing relatives; are there other things we need to remember?



Chapters 8–9

To help with the family relationships, you might find it useful to display the family tree from pages x–xi.

The letters from Oscar and Stella are what historians call primary sources. They are documents that were created by the actual people who experienced a historical event. Primary sources can include diaries, letters, interviews, photographs, documents, newspaper articles, and novels, and there are several that have been reproduced in *The Missing*.

Michael is using **primary sources** in his research, to help him piece together what happened to his relatives.

- Why might primary sources be important for historians?
- Could primary sources have limitations?
- What do you learn about the situations in Poland and France from the letters that were sent to Max Rosen?
- Can you tell what Oscar and Stella were thinking and feeling when they wrote these letters?
- Do you think there might be things left unsaid that they were not putting in their letters? Why might that be?

Allow time for children to ask questions and talk about the things that concern them.

Chapters 10–11

Michael describes efforts to get members of his family to safety. Olga had filled out the official forms to get Oscar out of danger in France and to safety in America. Michael explains that the reason that this was not followed through is uncertain, but it is true that many people were refused entry and were denied a haven.

The children may be aware of current crises in the world where people are trying to flee persecution and war and get themselves and their families to safety.

Clarify terminology. People forced to leave their country to escape war, persecution, or natural disasters are refugees. Refugees seeking to enter a country to escape political persecution are called asylum seekers. There are often misconceptions about refugees and asylum seekers.

Make the point that *refugee* is derived from *refuge*—a place of safety.



Chapters 12–14

Michael ends his story, “We can’t live on in despair: we always have to find reason for hope. Because the world doesn’t have to be this way.”

One source of hope is the actions of individuals, from brave acts that help others in dire circumstances to small acts of kindness.

Reread the poem “Today; One Day” aloud.

- What can we do to bring hope for a better future into the world?

Further Reading

A list of books and other resources is included in the end matter. Make a collection of books for children to read and extend their knowledge, taking account of the age guidance.

Family History

We don’t all have stories like Michael’s, but we do all have family stories. Start a family history project. You could have a class project or, for a more extensive experience, set up an extracurricular club. Conduct your own research alongside the children.

- Perhaps *The Missing* has inspired you to write your own stories. You could start by interviewing relatives (or family friends or advocates) about their childhood experiences. Talk to them about their siblings, parents, and grandparents.
- How far back can you go within the living memory?
- To research further, you could start by looking at some of the ancestry websites. There will be stories to be discovered. Some might be ordinary, and some might amaze or even shock you.

