

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Spying on Miss Muller

by  
Eve Bunting

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### Book Information

Eve Bunting, Spying on Miss Muller  
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Book Level: 4.4  
Interest Level: MG

At Alveara boarding school in Belfast at the start of World War II, thirteen-year-old Jessie must deal with her suspicions about a teacher whose father was German and with her worries about her own father's drinking problem.

**Award:** American Bookseller Pick of the List;  
Booklist Editors' Choice; Misc./Other;  
Society of School Libr. International  
Best/Honor; State Award

**Topics:** Community Life, School;  
Countries/Regions, Ireland;  
Diseases/Disorders, Alcohol  
Abuse/Addiction; Family Life, Daughters;  
Family Life, Fathers; Wars, World War II

### Main Characters

Ada one of Jessie's friends

Boots the deaf caretaker Miss Muller claimed to be fetching when she wasn't in her room at the beginning of the first air raid

Greta Ludowski the only Jewish student at Alveara; she was sent out of Poland for her safety

Ian McManus the boy Jessie likes best

Jessie narrator of the book and student at Alveara

Lizzie Mag Jessie's kindly friend whose parents live in India

Maureen Jessie's vain friend

Miss Gaynor the domestic economy teacher

Miss Hardcastle the gym teacher

Miss Muller the German teacher at Alveara whose father was a German

Mr. Atkinson the headmaster of the boys' school

Mr. Bolton the Latin teacher who loves Miss Muller

Mr. Guy the English teacher

Old Rose Rose Hazelton, the headmistress of Alveara

Stinky Larrimer the chemistry teacher

### Vocabulary

**contaminated** corrupted by contact

**crystal set** an early radio

**cubicle** a small partitioned space

**declaim** to speak rhetorically

**nymph** one of the inferior divinities of nature represented as a beautiful maiden dwelling in mountains, forests, meadows, waters, etc.

**prefect** a student monitor

**shenanigans** in the context of this book, it means disgraceful behavior

**verruucas** wartlike elevations

### Synopsis

This story takes place in a boarding school in Ireland during World War II. It is told in the first person by Jessie, one of the students. When the story begins, Jessie and her friends Maureen, Ada, and Lizzie Mag are discussing how they now feel about Miss Muller, the German teacher who is half German. As the book progresses, events occur that make Jessie wonder if Miss Muller is a spy. First, when Jessie is in the bathroom one night, she sees Miss Muller leave her room, and she follows her to a stairway that leads to Marjorie's room and the roof. Marjorie was a student who had committed suicide and now her room is kept locked. That night, the school has its first air raid. In the confusion in the basement shelter, the boys and girls mingle and Jessie and her favorite boy, Ian McManus, kiss. The next day, while Jessie is waiting to see the school nurse, she learns from another student that Miss Muller has a hidden photo of her father in a Nazi uniform. She also learns that a ghost dressed in black was seen the night of St. Patrick's Day. Coincidentally, there had been a fire and explosions in the town that same night. She wonders if the ghost was Miss Muller. She returns to the dorm after seeing the nurse, slips into Miss Muller's room and finds the photograph. Then she heads for assembly. She is too late to go in, so sits down and talks to Greta

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Ludowski. In the course of the conversation, Jessie mentions that she thinks Miss Muller may be a spy. She instantly regrets this when Greta talks of killing Miss Muller.

Several things happen to Miss Muller. The students hiss at her as she is leaving the dining room. The boys bring ball bearings to her class and drop them on the floor. Someone sets up a booby trap so that a dead chicken embryo will fall on Miss Muller's head when she opens the door to her room. On the night of the chicken incident, the girls follow Miss Muller and go up to the roof, only to find no one there. When the girls return down the stairs, Lizzie Mag notices the door to Marjorie's room is unlocked. They enter, only to find Miss Muller there with Mr. Bolton.

Greta reports Miss Muller, and she is fired. Mr. Bolton is not, but he resigns and joins the army.

When confronted about the photo of her father, Miss Muller had said she was ashamed of her father, and ashamed of being ashamed, because love should be stronger. Jessie's father is an alcoholic; she has lied to everyone and told them he was sick. Miss Muller's words give her the courage to invite Lizzie Mag to her home for the summer holidays.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Events happened in a sequence that took Jessie from liking Miss Muller (though being ashamed to admit it) to really suspecting she is a spy. Describe these events.

*First, she follows Miss Muller to the stairway and assumes Miss Muller has gone up to the roof. That night the first air raid occurs. The following day, she learns that Miss Muller has a hidden photo of her father dressed in a Nazi uniform, and finds the photo. She also learns that Miss Muller was probably on the roof the night there was a big fire on the docks. Finally, Miss Muller refers to the Germans as "us" and the Royal Air Force as "them."*

### Literary Analysis

How does the author's tone emphasize the theme of the book?

*The theme involves what happens when we draw conclusions without enough evidence. Everyone loses: Miss Muller is fired, Mr. Bolton resigns, the girls are ashamed and unhappy. Even Greta says she's not expecting to be happy. The book's serious tone is alleviated only by a few moments such as the events in the study hall--and even they are serious.*

### Inferential Comprehension

Even though Old Rose "declaims," we can tell she really cares about her students. How can we tell?

*When Jessie learns that her cousin Bryan has been captured by the Germans, Old Rose lets Jessie cry in her arms, gives her cocoa and biscuits, and generally comforts her. Old Rose knows how to do this and obviously cares.*

### Constructing Meaning

Jessie responded to peer pressure and her own erroneous evidence. Additionally, her cousin, to whom she was very close, had been captured by the Germans. Use personal experiences to answer whether you would react as Jessie did. Why or why not?

*Answers will vary.*

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## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Jessie's father is an alcoholic of whom she is greatly ashamed until Miss Muller teaches her the importance of love in a family. Have the students do some research on alcoholism. How does it affect the alcoholic's children? What, if anything, can a child do to help? What, if anything, can a child do to cope?

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The story takes place in a private school near Belfast, Ireland, during World War II. Have the students do research into the treatment of British citizens of German descent during World War II. Were they well treated? Ostracized? Interned? Have the students study about German bombing runs in Great Britain. Did the Germans bomb Ireland? What were their targets?

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The story is told by Jessie, a girl boarding student at Alveara, the private school. Have the students tell some part of the story from the perspective of Greta Ludowski, the Jewish student. How would her perspective of the war differ from the other students? Why would she feel that way?