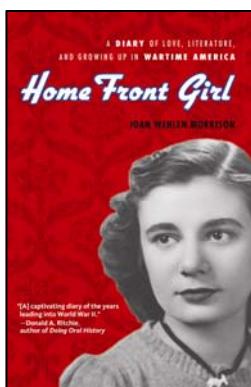


HOME FRONT GIRL DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK



Wednesday, December 10, 1941

"Hitler speaks to Reichstag tomorrow. We just heard the first casualty lists over the radio. Lots of boys from Michigan and Illinois. Oh my God! Life goes on though. We read our books in the library and eat lunch, bridge, etc. Phy Sci and Calculus. Darn Descartes. Reading Walt Whitman now."

This diary of a smart, astute, and funny teenager provides a fascinating record of what an everyday American girl thought and felt during the Depression and the lead-up to World War II. Young Chicagoan Joan Wehlen describes her daily life growing up in the city and ruminates about the impending war, daily headlines, and major touchstones of the era—FDR's radio addresses; the Lindbergh kidnapping; *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *Citizen Kane*; Churchill and Hitler; war work and Red Cross meetings. Joan's original hand-drawn doodles of her latest dress or haircut infuse the pages with whimsy and period flavor.

Home Front Girl is not only an entertaining and delightful read but also an important primary source on the late 1930s and early 1940s—a vivid account of a real American girl's lived experiences.

Learn more at www.homefrontgirldiary.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & EDITOR



Joan Wehlen Morrison (1922–2010) grew up in Chicago and attended the University of Chicago before moving to New York and later New Jersey. The author of two books of oral history, she was adjunct professor of history at the New School for Social Research.

Susan Signe Morrison, Joan's daughter, is a professor of English literature at Texas State University–San Marcos and the author of two books on the Middle Ages.

REVIEWS of HOME FRONT GIRL

"Absolutely fascinating. . . . These diaries are a treasure on a scale with Anne Frank's. They tell the remarkable story of a real girl in a momentous time in history, from a unique viewpoint full of humor, insight, and emotional highs and lows on both a personal and an international level. Anyone with an interest in cultural or world history, from teenagers to adults, will enjoy and be enriched by this book." —*Blogcritics*

"[B]etter than fiction." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"If you have ever questioned how the American people stood by while Europe was torn apart, this book will answer some of those questions. . . . The diary provides a window into the 1940s, a time so different than today, technologically, but strikingly similar as well. . . . The diary could be used to encourage students to write their own memoirs or as a conversation starter for intergenerational programs. . . . The book is an excellent addition to an American history course to understand what the average citizen was experiencing while war unfolded." —*YOYA* (Voice of Youth Advocates)

"*Home Front Girl* reveals the perceptions of a creative, brilliant, and hopeful yet genuine teenage girl in an uncertain and perilous era. Joan's charm, naiveté, curiosity, and philosophies (reminiscent of Anne Frank) revealed in her journals left me with the hope that such depth of thought, creativity, sweetness, and forgiveness—as well as her sense of wonder—may still be found in today's generation of young people." —Joan Hiatt Harlow, author of *Star in the Storm* and *Thunder from the Sea*

"An important and refreshingly engaging word painting of a far more innocent time in US history. *Home Front Girl* is all about the thrill of being young, of questioning, and dreaming . . . and how those dreams can so easily begin to shatter under the crush of impending world events. The perspective here could not be more pure. Recommended!" —Graham Salisbury, author of *Under the Blood-Red Sun* and *Eyes of the Emperor*

"This Chicago teenager's journal—riveting and real—recalls an era when adolescence was preparation for adult life." —Richard Peck, author of *Fair Weather*, *A Long Way from Chicago*, and *A Year Down Yonder*

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The title of this book includes the words “home front.” Did you know what the home front during World War II was when you picked up this book?
- Look at the epigraph (quote) after the dedication. It is dated Saturday, December 28, 1940. What do you think Joan’s attitude to the war is given this passage? What is common about London, Paris, Berlin, and Troy? Who is Helen?
- Why do you think “Readers have an abiding interest in normal people’s lives during extraordinary times” (p. xi)?
- Listen to the famous radio report describing the Hindenburg disaster:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herbert_Morrison_%28announcer%29. How do you think your understanding of contemporary events differs if you hear about them on the radio rather than on television?
- What is Joan’s family situation? How would you describe Joan’s relationship with her parents? Is her relationship with her father different from the relationship she has with her mother? Look especially at December 29, 1940, and March 16, 1941.
- How would this journal be different if Joan had been John (or Ted or Billy)? Does her being a girl change how she reacts to WWII?
- Do you identify with Joan? Why or why not? What is different about Joan than you? How is she similar?
- How would you describe Joan’s voice? Is she a reliable narrator?
- Given what Joan tells us, how involved was the US in World War II before the US actually entered the war?
- Is Joan a pacifist? What are her views towards war?
- Joan uses a lot of ellipses in her writing. Why does she do this? What kind of effect does it have on the reader?
- Joan often sees things from someone else’s point of view—for example, her cat (p. 41) and the Germans (p. 114). How does that affect your reading and understanding of history?
- In September 1938, Joan writes, “I would rather think men are good and err, than think them evil and be right” (p. 66). Does that seem to be a true attitude for Joan throughout the diary? Can you give examples of where she enacts that desire?
- Joan’s journal from August 5, 1939, to December 6, 1940, is missing. Only her creative writing journal exists. How does the writing from that period, when the war starts in Europe, affect what we read about that time period? How does it differ from the daily entries previously given in the book?
- Joan is sometimes angry at politicians: for example, see her comments about Versailles (p. 118). What makes her angry at Churchill, whom she calls “pigface,” or FDR?
- Joan’s friend Betty is an important character in her life. Discuss their relationship, including their talks about boys and even their disagreements about politics (p. 158). How would you describe their friendship?
- Joan discusses boys and dates a fair amount. Are the interactions between young men and women similar to those of young people today? What is different? Does the time period mean that certain aspects of male–female relations are totally contrary to today’s morals or are there some ways that they appear quite familiar?
- Joan often records her dreams into which current political events have entered. Read about some of these dreams, including those featuring the Japanese (p. 39 and p. 235) and Hitler (p. 71–72). How are the dreams integral to Joan’s narrative? Do they develop her understanding of the political situation at the time?
- Discuss Joan’s writing tone. Sometimes she is very serious; sometimes she is very funny. Can you always tell when she is trying to be self-mocking? How does her humor make you feel toward her character?

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- Watch a movie Joan mentions seeing, particularly *Idiot's Delight*; *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; *Arise, My Love*; *Cheers for Miss Bishop*; or *Night Train to Munich*. Compare your reaction to hers. What was happening in the world politically at the time Joan saw it? How might that have affected her interpretation of the film?
- Discuss Joan's romantic situations at camp and school. Does she ever really fall in love?
- Joan often mentions 1940 as the year that will be crucial in history and for the war. Was it? How?
- What is Joan trying to suggest about her generation in her essay "To Those of My Time"? What dates constitute "her" generation? What makes her generation special? What is the connection between her generation and the World Wars?
- Literature is incredibly important for Joan: she wants to be a writer or journalist, she reads many books, she wants books as gifts, and she uses literature to make connections between her present situation and literature. See, for example, in December 28, 1940, how she compares London and Berlin with Homer's Troy from *The Iliad*. Or look at the scene in May 1941 with Joe Harmon, whose leg has been amputated, and her memory of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. How does literature help her to understand her life better? How does literature help you to understand your life better?
- Joan writes, on October 19, 1941, that "to understand one's story is to weep with pity" (p. 206). What does this mean? How does it affect her interpretation of the war and of school?
- What is the significance of battles in the war for Joan? Which events does she mention? How does this affect the pacing of the book? Do they give it more excitement or tension?
- Who is Charles Lindbergh? Why he is considered an "enemy of the people"? What is Joan's assessment of him?
- What happens in the week immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor? How does Joan's diary supplement a history textbook's recitation of the facts?
- Joan hears a lecture about the role of diaries in history. Read that passage (p. 229) and discuss. What do you learn from diaries that you do not learn from history textbooks?
- In January 1942, Joan mentions the book *Moll Flanders* and comments, "no matter how you pity a man before, once you yield to him, he no longer pursues you, and you are the one to be pitied, which seems, sadly enuf, to put man and woman forever on fighting terms." Does this seem true in her experience as she writes it here?
- It seems that Joan reads very different books than teenagers today do. Not one mention of a vampire novel anywhere! What do you think of her reading life? How would it affect a teenager's life to have a different set of books in her mind than *Harry Potter* or the *Twilight* series?
- There's a lot of humor in Joan's diary. See her description of seeing *Citizen Kane* (p. 213–214) or when the Beautiful Blue-eyed Boy in Biology almost asks her out (p. 44–45). What else in the diary did you find funny? Is it comic, tragic, or something in between?
- What did you learn about the actual daily life of the home front during World War II from this book?
- Compare Joan's diary with that of Anne Frank, whose tragic fate is well known. How do the girls react to the events of war given their extremely different circumstances? Are they similar in some ways? How? In what ways do they reveal common concerns of girls of their age? What special circumstances in Anne's and Joan's lives cause them to view the world differently?