
A LESSON IN POWER AND POLITICS: ALAN GRATZ'S *WAR GAMES*

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Abstract: Alan Gratz's 2025 novel *War Games* follows a 13-year-old Evie as she competes in gymnastics in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and becomes involved in a plan to rob the German central bank. Gratz explores power and politics as Evie learns the truth of the Nazi Regime, in a way that draws uncomfortable but undeniable comparisons to 2025 United States.

Keywords: Alan Gratz, 1936 Berlin Olympics, World War 2, Nazi Germany, power, race

Alan Gratz's 2025 young adult novel *War Games* follows 13-year-old Evie as she competes in gymnastics in the 1936 Berlin Olympics for Team USA. As Evie competes for fame and money to help her family in California displaced by the Dust Bowl, she is approached by a journalist with a plan to rob the *Reichsbank*, the central bank where gold and jewels stolen from Jewish-German citizens were stored, with two other athletes. However, as the story progresses, Evie learns about the evil and dark secrets of the Nazi regime in Berlin and begins to question if Berlin is really the shiny, advanced city that it appears to be.

On the surface, this book appears to present an outlandish heist to rob a heavily secured vault with a mismatched team of friends to earn gold for the resistance against Nazis. However, I would argue that Gratz really presents the reader with a study in the power dynamics of a fascist state. As the book progresses and Evie learns more about the "real" Germany, she begins to realize that the people she meets in Berlin are either trying to win back power that has been taken from them or holding onto the power that has been bestowed upon them. She struggles to make sense of the conflicting power dynamics around her; someone tells her that the Nazis are neither good nor bad but are simply "takers" in a world in which power must be taken or lost. However, as Evie realizes the Nazis have imprisoned, robbed, or killed the so-called "undesirables," she understands that power is more than a simple binary concept, but instead involves money, history, race, and emotion, among other things.

Although Gratz's lesson in power should appeal to all readers, I believe the book would primarily appeal to middle school readers; it is straightforward, entertaining, and to be frank, at some points rather corny. Still, the story ends with a happy ending for all involved and allows students to study a setting which may strike some readers (in a way that is quite frightening) as quite similar to the modern political climate of the United States. That being said, this very element of the book could pose a challenge for an educator that decides to teach this book in an ELA classroom. The comparisons Gratz makes between 1936 Berlin and 2025 United States is undeniable; in fact, at one point, Evie wonders, "What I really don't understand is how a country elected a man to be their leader after he'd led an insurrection to overthrow the government" (Gratz, 2025, p. 77). This most certainly would lead to students asking questions that their teacher may have a hard time answering

in this political climate that leaves educators feeling as though they work in a panopticon. Still, although it may raise some difficult questions, I believe that *War Games* provides an ample opportunity for young adult readers to learn more about the 1936 Berlin Olympics and Nazi Germany, while realizing the fickle nature of power and politics.

Reference

Gratz, A. (2025). *War games*. Scholastic.

Author Biography

Sasha Joy is a senior Bachelor of Science Secondary Education English and Spanish Language & Culture double major at Emporia State University. She has written extensively about the relationship between masculinity, authority, and fascism in Federico García Lorca’s plays, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* and *Bodas de Sangre* and recently presented her work at the Midwest Modern Language Association Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and at the Kentucky Foreign Language Conference in Lexington, Kentucky. Sasha will graduate in December of 2026 and intends to pursue a PhD. She can be reached at sjoy@g.emporia.edu.

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