The Wave
by Morton Rhue

SUMMARY

When Ben Ross, a history teacher at an American high school, shows his students a film about the Nazis of World War II, they are shocked. How did such a party become so powerful in a civilized country? Mr Ross cannot answer this question himself, but he decides to try an experiment that might answer it. Over the next few days he introduces his class to some new ideas: they are going to be part of a team called ‘the Wave’. The aim of the team is success, and for success you need discipline. To his amazement, the students like the Wave - it is as if it is what they have wanted all along. Soon almost everyone in the school wants to join. But there are darker sides to ‘teams’, and soon the Wave is out of control...

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

The Wave is a true story. History teacher Ron Jones started ‘the Wave’ in one of his lessons, and it turned into one of the most frightening things he ever saw in a school. He later wrote a short story about it; this was then written into a full-length novel by Morton Rhue and published in 1981.

The events in The Wave illustrate the powerful and frightening forces of group pressure. Throughout history these forces have created circumstances in which ordinary people have committed evils that they would never individually have set out to do. Like the history class in The Wave, many have looked back at the Nazi period in Europe and wondered how, after centuries of civilization, the large-scale murders they committed could ever have happened. There were many immediate, local causes which are of course well known. The Nazis came to power in Germany under Adolf Hitler in 1933, at a time when economic conditions were very bad. There was also great anger in the country over the conditions which had been forced on it by Britain, France and America in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, after the end of World War I. The Nazis offered to make the economy better, to create jobs, and to make Germany great again.

However, their policies went much further than this. Hitler told the Germans that they were members of a superior race, who were going to dominate the whole world. He said that he would join together all the German-speaking peoples of Europe in one Germanic super-state, which was to be the centre and purpose of everyone’s lives. He also told them that apart from the Treaty of Versailles, there were other things which had held the Germans back. These were Marxism, international capitalism and ‘inferior races’ within the country, such as the Jews. The Germanic state would have to be ‘purified’ (cleansed) of such people in order to succeed. The message that their problems had causes, and the idea of a bright, new future began to attract people. So did colourful meetings and marches, with flags, swastika symbols and salutes. Even so, in the election that finally brought Hitler to power as Chancellor in 1933, the Nazis only achieved 43.9 per cent of the total vote. Their message might have been one that many Germans wanted to hear, but certainly not all Germans.

After gaining power, the Nazis quickly took control of every aspect of German life. They took control of the newspapers and radio, banned all non-Nazi parties, and imprisoned opponents. All this was necessary, they said, for the future of the country. They used slogans to spread their ideas, such as: ‘Right is what serves the people’. They now also began their programme of excluding the Jews from the nation. This started in 1933 with anti-semitic laws, but from 1941, the horrible ‘final solution’, in which all Jews in Europe were to be killed, began. No one knows how many people knew what was happening, either in Germany or in the countries the Nazis conquered, where the programme was also carried out, sometimes with the help of locals. Everyone, including the victims themselves, was told that the Jews who disappeared were being taken to settlement camps in the east. By the end of the war the Nazis had murdered between five and six million European Jews. They also sent to the gas chambers other people whom they regarded as ‘impure’: the mentally ill and handicapped, the physically handicapped, people with incurable diseases, gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals and political opponents.

One of the most horrible aspects of this mass crime was that it was not simply the work of a few madmen. It was a complex operation that depended on thousands of
individuals each carrying out his or her own small job so that the overall purpose was fulfilled. In fact, after the war, when many Nazis were put on trial at Nuremberg before an international court, their most common defence was that they had simply been obeying orders. The world did not accept that ‘just obeying orders’ was a proper defence, and many Nazis were executed or imprisoned. Not everyone ‘obeyed orders’ either. There were brave resistance movements in Germany, as there were throughout occupied Europe.

The kind of psychological and social pressures that led to Nazism are found not only at a certain time in Germany or Europe. Even in the last few decades there have been murders of thousands or even millions of innocent people in Nazi-style ‘purification’ programmes, or for the sake of revenge. They have happened in Africa, in former Yugoslavia, in Cambodia, in South America and elsewhere, under governments or leaders of all types. A recent kind of ‘group madness’ is that of religious cults where large numbers of people obey their leaders whatever they ask them to do. Social science experiments have shown the frightening extent to which people will simply obey authority, whatever they are asked to do. They have also, however, shown that a minority will oppose the group and disagree when they think it is wrong.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Put students into pairs. Ask them to look up the word ‘wave’ in their dictionary. They will find more than one meaning of the word. Ask them to answer: Which meaning can also be used by students working in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1-4

1. Put students into pairs and ask them to discuss: Why is Robert Billings important at the beginning of the story? Then have a class discussion.

2. In Chapter 2, Ben Ross says, ‘I have a plan.’ Put students into pairs. Ask them to look up imagine in their dictionaries. Tell them to imagine that Christy asks, ‘What is your plan?’. They then have a conversation. Ben tells her his plan and Christy asks, ‘Why?’ Students then write out the conversation.

3. Put students into small groups. They talk about the importance of discipline in a team, in a school, in a family. In which of these is discipline most important?

Chapters 5-8

1. Put students into pairs. They role-play a conversation between Laurie and Principal Owens. They are discussing the Wave.

2. In their pairs, students then role-play a conversation between David and Brian. They are discussing why they think the Wave is good.

3. Ask students to work in small groups. They write notes on Laurie’s story for The Grapevine. What does she write? Then one group joins another group. They compare information.

4. Put students into small groups. Ask them to think about this question: How could Ben Ross end the Wave?

Chapters 9-12

1. Put students into pairs. They are Laurie and David. It is the end of Chapter 9, when David pushed Laurie over. He is sorry and surprised. What do they say? Do they now feel the same about the Wave?

2. Put students into small groups. On page 35, Laurie says, ‘Do you remember that film about the Nazis, David?’ Ask students to look at page 1 again. What things in the film is she thinking about?

3. Ask students to look back at their answers to question 4 above, about how Ben Ross could end the Wave. Were any of their ideas better than Mr Ross’s idea?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Students discuss these questions in small groups.

Is The Wave a good title for this story. Why/Why not?

GLOSSARY

It will be useful for your students to know these new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-4

believe (v) to think that something is true (right)
card (n) thick, hard paper with words on
discipline (n) a lot of rules (‘You have to do this! Now! Don’t do that! Come here!’)
experiment (n) people do experiments when they want to see if something is true (right)
football (n) a game with two groups of people and a ball
history (n) the study of the past
lead (v) to be the most important person; other people follow
leader (n) the most important person; other people follow him/her
member (n) this person belongs to a club, group, etc
need (v) to have to do something because it is necessary (you feel you have to do this thing)
rule (n) this tells you what you have to do or have not to do
salute (n) to move your hand next to your head when you see somebody
strange (adj) hard to understand
surprised (adj) when something happens and you didn’t think it would happen, you are surprised
team (n) these people play a sport together. There are usually two teams in a game.
wave (n) this water in the sea goes up and down again

Chapters 5-8

principal (n) the most important teacher in the school
rally (n) this is when a lot of people meet to say: ‘We think this idea is good!’
Student's activities

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Students can do these activities alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book
1. Read the introduction at the front of the book. Then close the book and put the names on the left with the words on the right below.
   - Ben Ross (a) is one of Mr Ross's students.
   - Christy (b) is a teacher.
   - Laurie (c) is Mr Ross's wife.

2. Now answer these questions.
   (a) Is The Wave a true story?
   (b) Where did it happen? Near which big city, in which country?
   (c) In what year did it happen?
   (d) Who is Ron Jones?
   (e) What did Mr Jones teach?
   (f) Was 'the Wave' good for the school?
   (g) For how many years didn't anyone talk about it?

Activities while reading the book
CHAPTERS 1 - 4

Chapters 1 & 2
1. Put the names in (a) - (g) with the words in (i) - (vii).
   - Amy Smith
   - Laurie Saunders
   - Robert Billings
   - David Collins
   - Brian Amman
   - Eric
   - Brad
   - is in Mr Ross’s history class. He agrees with Brian - the lesson was great.
   - is Laurie's boyfriend.
   - is a boy in the history class. He says 'I don't like this' about the Wave.
   - is a girl in Mr Ross's class, and Laurie's friend.
   - is a strange boy in the class. He has no friends.
   - is a girl in the history class. She asks Mr Ross a lot of questions. She writes for the school newspaper.
   - is a boy in the history class, and on the football team. In Chapter One, he sits next to David in the school restaurant.

2. Right or wrong?
   (a) Mr Ross says that the Nazis killed about four million people.
   (b) The students see a film about the Nazis and Auschwitz.

(c) Mr Ross says he doesn't know why most Germans didn't try to stop the Nazis.
(d) Everyone likes Robert Billings.
(e) Laurie thinks a lot about the film.
(f) David thinks a lot about it too.
(g) Christy is not surprised when the students stayed at the end of the class.
(h) The school football team is very good.
(i) Robert is very good at Mr Ross's new discipline.
(j) A lot of the students like Mr Ross's discipline.

Chapter 3
Which thing happened first? Which thing happened second? Put numbers 1-6 next to these sentences.
   (a) Mr Ross says, ‘Class, give our salute.’
   (b) David says, ‘We must be more disciplined.’
   (c) The class gives the salute again and again.
   (d) Mr Ross writes, ‘We are all in the same team.’
   (e) Eric says, ‘Tell them about the Wave.’
   (f) Mr Ross says, ‘We’ll call our team the Wave.’

Chapter 4
What do the different people in the story think about the Wave? Put the right name or words at the beginning of each sentence. Choose from:
   - Laurie’s father, Laurie’s mother, David, Robert, Christy

(a) ............................. thinks that the Wave can help the football team.
(b) ............................. is not happy and thinks Ben must be very careful.
(c) ............................. thinks the discipline of the Wave is dangerous.
(d) ............................. thinks it is good for the students to learn about discipline.
(e) ............................. thinks the Wave is great.

CHAPTERS 5 - 8

Chapters 5 & 6
1. Laurie talks to Robert and Alex. Her words show that she thinks the Wave is good. What does she say?
   (a) to Robert
   (b) to Alex

2. Principal Owens says two things to Mr Ross. His words show he thinks the Wave is bad. What does he say?
3 Later, Laurie thinks the Wave is bad. Two things make her think this. What are they?
4 Who do you think wrote the letter to Laurie?

Chapters 7 & 8

Who ... 
(a) wants Laurie to give the Wave salute before the football game?  
(b) wins the football game?  
(c) doesn’t like the Wave experiment?  
(d) thinks David is the best person to talk to Laurie?  
(e) wants to stop Laurie writing bad things about the Wave?  

After reading Laurie’s story, who ... 
(f) isn’t happy?  
(g) is surprised?  
(h) doesn’t understand?

CHAPTERS 9 - 12

Chapter 9

1 Why doesn’t Mr Ross want to end the Wave?  
2 Why doesn’t David want the Wave to end?  
3 What is going to happen now? Are any of these things going to happen? Decide ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘perhaps’:
   (a) David kills Laurie.  
   (b) Robert becomes the head of the Wave.  
   (c) The Wave starts in other schools too.  
   (d) Laurie and some other students fight the Wave.  
   (e) Laurie and some other students leave the school.  
   (f) Mr Ross stops the Wave.  
   (g) The police come to the school. They stop the Wave.

Chapters 10-12

1 Are these sentences right or wrong?
   (a) Mr Ross’s wife thinks he’s a bad teacher.  
   (b) Now David thinks the same as Laurie about the Wave.  
   (c) There really are Wave members all across the country.  
   (d) At the end, Mr Ross is not sorry about the Wave.  
   (e) At the end, Amy and Laurie are friends again.

2 Join these beginnings and ends of sentences:
   (a) Mr Ross wants to stop the Wave  
   (b) David says he pushed Laurie over  
   (c) Laurie and David think others stay in the Wave  
   (d) At the rally, one student thinks there is no Wave leader  
   (e) Laurie and David are not happy about the Wave  
   (f) Laurie thinks it is good that the Wave happened  
   (g) Robert cries when the last students leave  
   (i) because they are afraid.  
   (ii) when there are no pictures on the televisions.  
   (iii) so they go and see Mr Ross.  
   (iv) but at first he doesn’t know how.  
   (v) because everybody learned a lot.  
   (vi) so Mr Ross talks to him.  
   (vii) because of the Wave.

3 Answer these questions.
   (a) Why are Mr and Mrs Ross afraid when they hear somebody at their door?  
   (b) Why do Laurie and David go to the big rally?  
   (c) Why does Mr Ross show a picture of Hitler at the rally?  
   (d) Who helps Mr Ross with the televisions at the rally?  
   (e) Why does Mr Ross say it’s good that David and Laurie didn’t believe him?  
   (f) Why does Robert cry?

4 What do you think Mr Ross says to Robert after the end of the book? Write down what you think they say. Write 50-100 words.

Activities after reading the book

Talk with a student or write your answers.
1 What was bad about the Wave?
2 In what ways was the Wave like Nazism? Think about these things: the Wave picture, the salute, words like ‘WINNERS NEED DISCIPLINE’, fights between Wave students and others, Mr Ross, Robert, The Grapevine, football matches, the Principal.  
There are many other things too.
3 Was Mr Ross a good teacher? Why?/Why not?