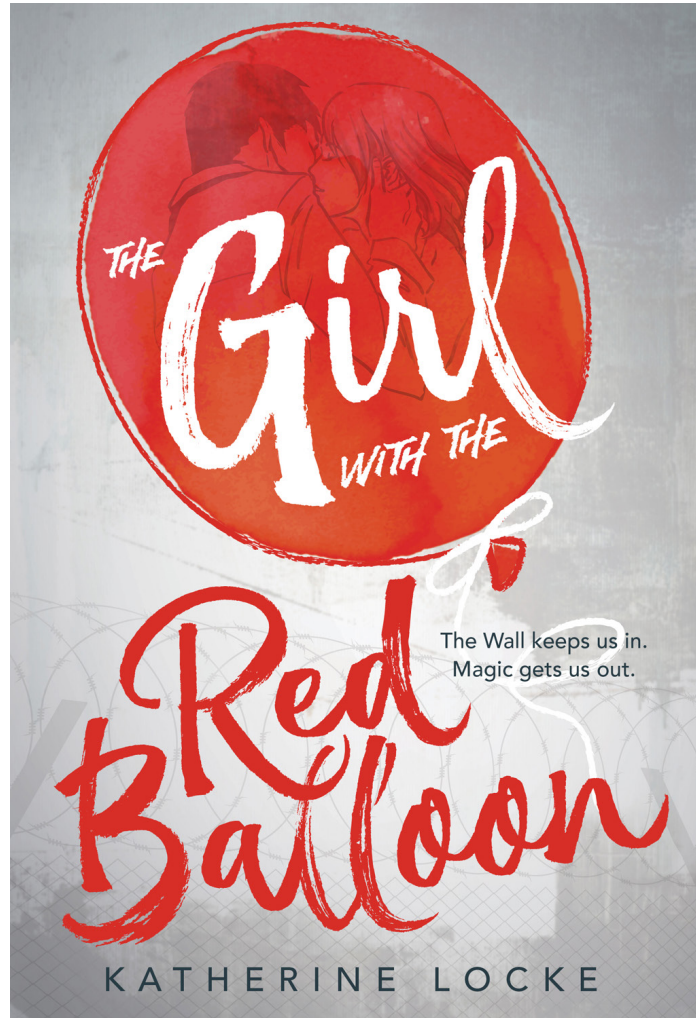


## A READER'S GUIDE TO



Katherine Locke

### *About The Girl with the Red Balloon*

When sixteen-year-old Ellie Baum accidentally time-travels via red balloon to 1988 East Berlin, she's caught up in a conspiracy of history and magic. She meets members of an underground guild in East Berlin who use balloons and magic to help people escape over the Wall—but even to the balloon makers, Ellie's time travel is a mystery. When it becomes clear that someone is using dark magic to change history, Ellie must risk everything—including her only way home—to stop the process.

*guide prepared by the author*



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR A BOOK CLUB OR CLASSROOM

1. *The Girl with the Red Balloon* is told from three points of view: Ellie, Benno, and Kai. What do each of these narrators contribute to the story? Why was it necessary to tell the story with all three of them? If one more character narrated the book, who would you choose and why? Which narrator did you like the most and why?

2. *The Girl with the Red Balloon* is historical fiction but includes elements of fantasy. In the Author's Note, the author suggested that the fantastical elements were meant to illuminate the historical parts of the book. In what ways did the magic support the history in the book?

3. Ellie makes a split-second decision when she confronts the villain of the book, and that decision endangers her ability to find her way home and puts her friends' lives at risk as well. Would you have made the same

decision? If not, what would you have done at that moment in the book? Why do you think Ellie made that decision?

4. Both Ellie and Benno explore their relationship with faith in a world that includes magic. How did faith and magic work together in the book? How did Ellie and Benno's faith influence their decisions? What did you learn about Judaism from the book?

5. Before the book begins, Kai made a decision to hide in East Germany to protect his sister, Sabina, who could use magic. What do you think will happen when they return to London? Do you think Kai and Sabina will be better or worse at handling the discrimination against Sabina? What do you think Sabina learned over the course of the book about herself and magic? What do you think Kai learned about himself, magic, and his sister?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Katherine Locke** lives in a very small town outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with her feline overlords. In addition to fiction, she writes about books and reading and has contributed to *The Forward*, *The GayYA*, *Teen Librarian Toolbox*, and other sites.

## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

**Q:** When did you know you wanted to be an author?

**A:** I've always been a writer. I wrote my first book in elementary school. It was called *The Girl with a Thousand Cats*. It doesn't have much of a plot, but the illustrations of a girl walking around the world and collecting cats are very charming. Also, I kind of wish I was the girl in the book. I decided I wanted to be a *professional writer*, that is, an author, in 2007. That was when I started taking writing and craft seriously. Unfortunately, I was in college at that time and didn't have much free time to write. Instead, I started absorbing the publishing industry, making friends, and reading about craft. I wrote the first draft of *The Girl with the Red Balloon* in the spring of 2013 and it was the first book I wrote and thought, *I could get this published*.

**Q:** Where do you get your ideas?

**A:** For better or for worse, I am not a writer who struggles with the lack of ideas. I get ideas *all the time*. From anything. I hear a snippet of a song and my mind starts making up characters. I have a spreadsheet of book ideas and when I might have time to write them. I don't write nearly as fast as I wish I could to keep up with the ideas my brain generates! Not every idea turns into a book, or should turn into a book though.

When I decide to turn an idea into a story, I usually start with a character, or a scene that becomes the heart of the book. For *The Girl with the Red Balloon*, that scene is now Chapter 2. I built the book from the moment Ellie lands in East Berlin, 1988.

**Q:** What made you want to write *The Girl with the Red Balloon*?

**A:** This idea came to me when I was listening to the song "99 Red Balloons" on the radio and suddenly I had a mental image of a girl going over a wall holding onto a red balloon. I immediately thought, "Oh, that's interesting. What wall? Where's she going? Why a balloon?" And when I sat down at my computer a few minutes later, I started writing.

Additionally, both of my grandfathers passed away about two years before I began writing this book and I found that I began writing to and about them as well. One of my grandfathers helped liberate the Dachau sub-camps, and both of my grandfathers loved reading and telling stories. My desire to write about a Jewish-American girl and her relationship to her grandfather worked its way into the magical historical thriller I wrote because of that image in my head and the song on the radio.

**Q:** How did the first draft of *The Girl with the Red Balloon* differ from the final draft?

**A:** The final version is so different than my first draft! I think maybe three lines survived first draft to the draft my editor read. The last line of the first chapter, which used to be the first line of the book, and the last two lines of the book. I tend to do a lot of rewriting, even though I am an outliner. It's not the most efficient way to write, but I've learned to embrace my process.

**Q:** How did you come up with the characters of Kai, Ellie, and Benno?

**A:** Ellie came to me first. I wanted to see this world through the eyes of a character who was extremely observant but also prone to black and white thinking. She always felt fierce to me so my challenge was helping her ferocity and determination come out on the page.

Kai was a little harder for me to grasp because as the book changed through drafts, so did he. At one point, he had Sabina's role in the book. Once I realized he had a sister that he'd do anything to protect, I began to understand Kai much better. For me, the entire book unlocked when I gave Kai a voice in the book.

Benno was the last of the three characters and because of the content of his chapters, I sometimes found it hard to write him. His voice was easy, but his world heartbreaking.

**Q:** *The Girl with the Red Balloon* includes German, Yiddish, French, Hebrew, and Romani/Romanichal. What made you include all of those languages?

**A:** Those languages are all important to my characters. Kai and Sabina come from a Romanichal family and at home they probably used a mix of Romani and English. I wanted to keep that language there because I think, especially so far from home and under these circumstances, they'd cling to common ground and to memories of home. Because they brought so little with them, language would be important. Ellie says a prayer in Hebrew and uses the Hebrew word for grandfather. Benno uses Hebrew to say *god willing* and to share Jewish stories. The French is only one moment when Kai is teasing Ellie, but it's there to remind the reader that though Kai can be rough around the edges, he's educated, smart, and extremely attuned to the world around him. And with the entire book taking place in Germany in several different time periods, the German in the book was natural.

**Q:** You include many Jewish stories in *The Girl with the Red Balloon*. Why was that important to you?

**A:** A core part of Judaism is shared stories. I think that's true for many religions, but in Judaism, it's the way we remember, the way we pass on warnings about hate and fascism, and the way we celebrate. Our holidays are

built around the telling of stories, just as Benno shares them with the girl by the fence. I also think that those stories, particularly because many Jewish stories are about being a minority and overcoming violent oppressive external forces, would be very important to a boy trapped inside a ghetto during the Holocaust. Jonathan Safran Foer wrote in *Everything is Illuminated* that Jews have a sixth sense: memory. And for me, storytelling is an act of remembering. Memories are stories we tell ourselves.

**Q:** That ending!

**A:** I know. I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not *really* sorry. For me, what Ellie does at the end is more important than finding out what happens. It's the choice she makes. Kai would call it a *calculated risk*. I guess she absorbed that from him, the sponge that she is.

**Q:** What are some resources you recommend if readers want to learn more about the Holocaust or East Germany?

**A:** I highly recommend visiting online or in person the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. It is one of the best curated museums I've ever seen, and their online resources were absolutely crucial to writing this book. I do think younger readers will want to go with parents or teachers because it's important to talk about the exhibits and information afterward.

For middle grade readers, I recommend *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and *The Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen. I would also recommend *I Have Lived A Thousand Years* by Livia Jackson.

For young adult readers, I recommend *The Berlin Boxing Club* by Robert Sharenow, Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, and *All But My Life* by Gerda Weissman Klein.

For teen readers interested in learning about East Germany, I recommend reading *Stasiland* by Anna Funder. *Going Over* by Beth Kephart is another young adult novel set in Berlin during the 1980s with a Romeo-and-Juliet romance over the Wall.

I also recommend checking out the book recommendations by the Jewish Book Council and the Jewish Library Association!

**Q:** If readers have questions, how can they reach you?

**A:** I can be reached through the contact form on my website. I answer all the emails I receive, though response times may vary depending on how busy I am writing the next book! I can't do your homework for you (sorry!) but I am happy to answer any other questions or comments you may have. Thank you so much for reading!

Prepared by  
Katherine Locke

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