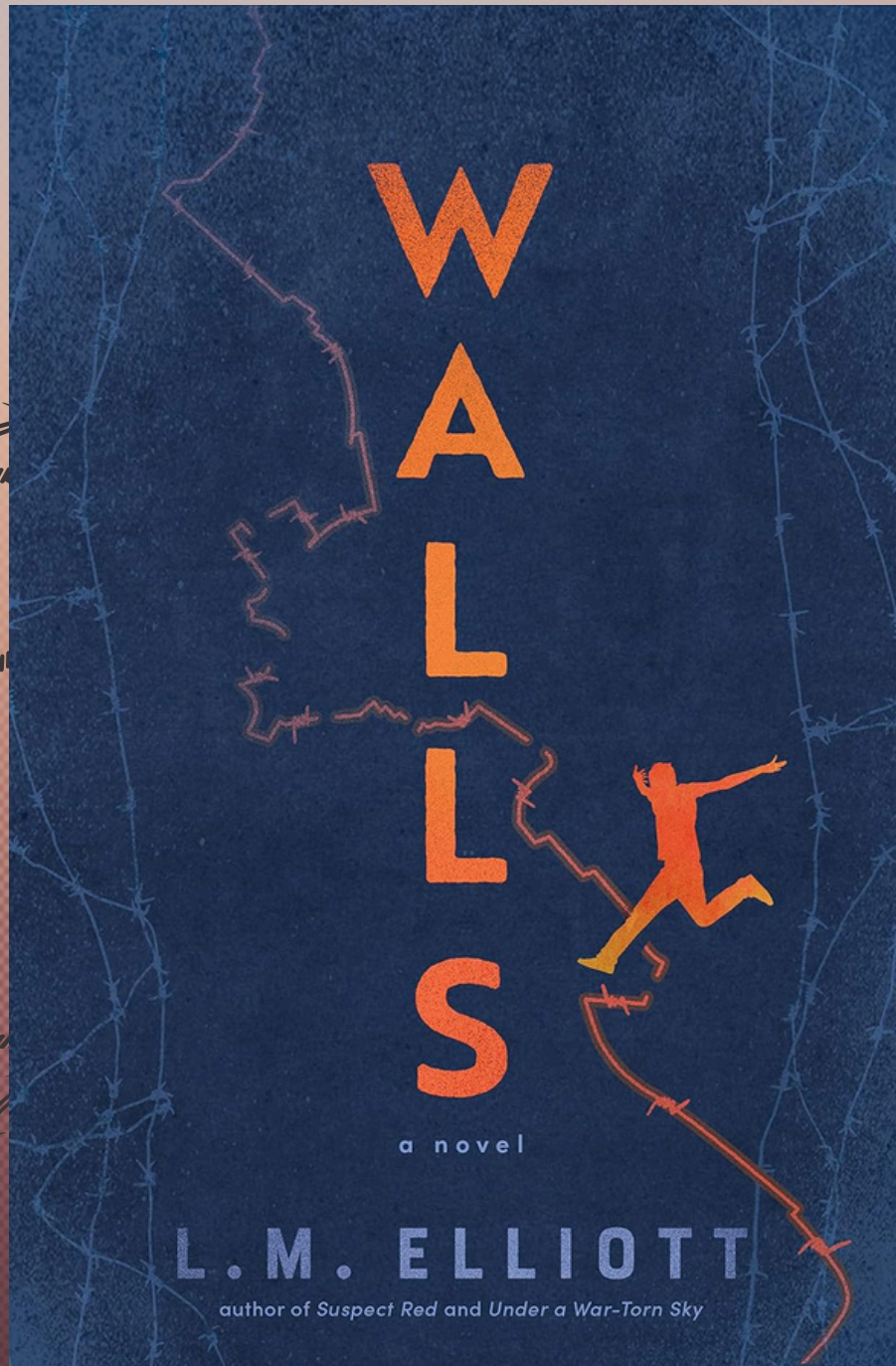


DISCUSSION GUIDE

A story of Cold War Berlin, intrigue, and disinformation, plus the walls people put up between one another, by Scott O'Dell Award-winning author, L. M. Elliott



NCSS/CBC Notable

Bank Street College of Education Best Book for YA

Kirkus 100 Best YA Novels 2021

Kirkus Best YA Historical Fiction 2021

TLA TAYSHAS High School Recommended List 2023

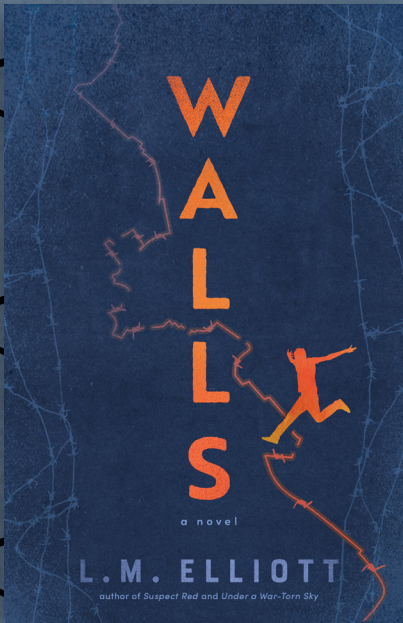
PA Young Readers Choice Best List 2021

FOR ADDITIONAL LEARNING RESOURCES AND BACKGROUND HISTORY: WWW.LMELLIOTT.COM



Photo Credit: Anne Lord Photography

L. M. ELLIOTT was an award-winning magazine journalist in Washington, D.C., before becoming a *New York Times* bestselling author of historical and biographical young adult novels. Her works include *Under a War-Torn Sky*, *Suspect Red*, and *Hamilton and Peggy*.



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ABOUT THE BOOK

It's the end of summer in 1960 and Drew McMahon is starting over in a new place. Not that he and his sisters, Joyce and Linda, aren't used to it. As army brats, they've moved quite a lot—this is the sixth move in Drew's fifteen years. These latest orders have brought them to West Berlin, where American soldiers like Drew's dad hold an outpost of democracy against the communist Soviet Union some one hundred miles behind the Iron Curtain in Hitler's former capital.

While Drew is missing what he's just left behind—starting lineup on the high school baseball team—his father exults in the prestige of being posted to the epicenter of the Cold War, and his mother is excited to be located so close to family she's never met. Her aunt, cousin, and cousin's son all survived the bombing of Berlin during World War II and have stayed in the family's home, now situated in East Berlin. Matthias is Drew's age, and growing up in the war wreckage on streets ruled by the Communist Party's secret police has made him firmly supportive of socialist ideals and wary of any newcomers to his life.

As the family settles in, Drew's mother soon begins to spend a good deal of time putting her German language skills to work at Marienfelde to help process refugees seeking a new home in the West. She also wants her family to befriend their newfound relations and perhaps convince them to flee East Berlin. To this end, she arranges many opportunities for gatherings and outings, especially between Matthias and Drew.

But Drew has a hard time getting past Matthias's communist dogma. They argue over the space race, capitalism, socialism, and even the U.S. presidential election. Drew doesn't trust Matthias and worries the relationship with him and his family will raise suspicions about his own immediate family's loyalty to America. Plus, Drew has other things on his mind—how his younger sister is adjusting, the bully who lives across the hall, and the sophisticated, smart, and beautiful Shirley.

The boys do find some common ground in rock 'n' roll—music that's illegal in Matthias's part of the city—but when Drew's dad receives a mysterious envelope with an offer of cash to turn traitor, Drew suspects Matthias somehow played a role in the attempted recruitment. Matthias, however, is confronted by his own community—the Free German Youth, also known as the FDJ—which accuses him of being corrupted by Western thought and bringing “imperialism and unclean thinking” into the country.

Raised to believe in the socialist worker's utopia—the idea of equality for all—Matthias has also been indoctrinated to see Americans as bourgeois capitalist pigs. As Drew comes to understand what it really means for a young person looking to fit in to live in a police state, his misgivings about Matthias turn into concern for this cousin he's come to find funny and caring. His concern grows as the political situation around them gets even more dire. Time is running out for Matthias to have any choices left.

Photos, headlines, and pop-culture notes from the era start each chapter and provide historical context to this story of loyalty, friendship, family, and fear.

★ “Immersive . . . An expertly crafted, evocative time capsule.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

★ “A tale of rising tensions that culminates in a suspenseful climax . . . A sensitive exploration of cogent themes in a richly detailed historical setting.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW

BEFORE READING

MAP IT OUT

To better understand the background and setting of *Walls*, encourage students to examine the map in the book that identifies the countries that occupied and controlled the different sectors of a divided Germany and Berlin. Then have them compare the map to a current map of Europe, and discuss as a class the differences they find and what they know about how the changes occurred.

BUILD HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

For students to have a fuller understanding of this rich historical novel, political and historical context is valuable. The photos and captions that begin each chapter offer a good grounding in the events of the year leading up to the erection of the Berlin Wall. A video overview may also be helpful in building and activating student background knowledge about the Cold War and the Berlin Wall.

While the suggestions below may provide additional perspectives on the people and events of the era, note that students should watch them critically, checking for bias, stereotypes, racism, propaganda, and inaccuracies.

Crash Course World History: USA vs. USSR Fight! The Cold War (Crash Course World History #39)

youtu.be/y9HjvHZfCUI

NATO Information Service: Background to Berlin, 1962

youtu.be/e3DWwQkv8HM

United States Information Service: Berlin After World War 2: Berlin Before the Wall—Documentary, 1961

youtu.be/Bur1q87pyA0

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions below can be used for class or small group discussions or offered to students as reflective writing prompts. For even more meaningful discussions, students should also develop their own questions. As students read, encourage them to note ideas they find interesting or that make them wonder, passages they don't understand and those they like, and things they question or are curious to know more about. Consider asking students to generate these further points for discussion in a reader's notebook or on sticky notes.

1. When Drew and his sisters are meeting their fellow Americans on base for the first time, they remind each other: "To take a wall, you have to march straight and fast to it. He who hesitates is lost." Why would this be advice that their dad gives for such a situation? What does this statement mean to them? Is this good advice? Why or why not?
2. The novel presents the pressures on kids moving to a new school and town and having to insert themselves into already existing friend groups, teams, and clubs. Drew, Joyce, and Linda each react to this challenge in different ways. How so? How would you?
3. To manipulate people's beliefs, attitudes, and actions, both the Soviet and U.S. governments made use of propaganda—selective facts, arguments, rumors, lies, and half-truths designed to influence people—during the Cold War. How does the era's political climate affect Drew's daily life? Where does he get information that shapes his ideas and opinions? How does he evaluate the information he gets? How is that similar to or different from the ways Matthias gets information? When Drew visits Potsdamer Platz, he sees information from the East and West collide. When faced with propaganda and counterpropaganda, how would you determine what to believe?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. When Drew finds the pledge Matthias has signed giving his “wholehearted support to the struggle against imperialism and the politics of NATO,” he’s disturbed that his mother’s reaction is to continue to encourage him to befriend Matthias. She urges him to “look beyond a person’s rhetoric when it has clearly been stuffed into his head by his government.” She believes change is possible for those who’ve been inculcated, if they are provided with truth and facts. Will that be an effective way to help Matthias? Are facts and truth enough to make a difference? Why or why not?
5. Both official and unofficial censorship—the suppression or prohibition of works that are considered unacceptable—occurred throughout the history of the German Democratic Republic government. A variety of books and music selections were banned in East Berlin at the time of this story. Why do you think works like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* or Elvis Presley’s records were not permitted? Why does Drew give these forbidden selections to Matthias for Christmas even though he knows it could get his cousin into real trouble with the Vopos?
6. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects the freedom of speech and expression against all levels of government censorship, allowing individuals in the United States to speak, publish, read, and view whatever they wish. But some institutions may remove or restrict access to certain works. What are some books or music that have been removed or restricted in U.S. locations? What else do you see being censored in *Walls* and in your own community? What is censorship really about?
7. Why do you think L. M. Elliott chose to create a character like Bob? Is he just a bully? What more is there to Bob’s character? How does Bob influence Drew’s thinking about Matthias? Why does Bob create a distraction on the train to help the defector?
8. Use Drew and Matthias to reflect on the relationship between the individual and society, and how that relationship is both influenced by and influences personal identity. Then consider and discuss how societal institutions—such as schools, governments, religions, or clubs, for example—your experiences within them, and other people’s perceptions of who you are directly impact your identity. How do your experiences and your identity affect your behavior and how you relate to those around you?
9. Drew’s mom tells him she thinks that Shirley “even changed you a little for the better.” What perspectives did Shirley bring to Drew? How do you think she influences his relationship with Matthias? With Bob? Who are the people in your life that get you to look closely at the world and think about what’s happening around you?
10. Matthias’s mother and grandmother made many sacrifices and suffered great losses during World War II. How do their suffering and losses affect their way of thinking and their decision making? How does knowing something about family history contribute to a person’s identity? How might knowing about the sacrifices his mother and grandmother made affect Matthias as he starts a new life in the West?
11. L. M. Elliott tells a heroic and tragic story against a vivid historical backdrop. How did you decide what is historically true and what is fiction—the author’s interpretation of historical events and facts and how those events would affect and influence her characters? What knowledge or discovery did you take away from this book that you might not have found by reading a history book? In what ways are the issues of the era, such as prejudice, racism, and disinformation campaigns, relevant to us today? How has this novel affected the way you think about freedom and human rights?

ACTIVITIES

LISTEN UP

Tune students in to what they are reading. Understanding terms specific to the era, historical references, and words and dialogue in foreign languages may be challenging for students. While they are reading, encourage them to take clues from the context and consider cognates.

To further enhance the reading experience, provide students with samples of some of the types of sounds that surround Drew, such as German, Russian, or music of the era in which Drew lives:

SPOKEN GERMAN

Chris Spandau: Retro TV Berlin 1960 1961
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHdUy-KYbzo>

Zeitzeugen-portal: Rock 'n' Roll und Lipsi: Jugend in den 1950er Jahren (Rock 'n' Roll and Lipsi: Youth in the 1950s)
<youtu.be/jFt0CnwZwWc>

SPOKEN RUSSIAN

PeriscopeFilm: Soviet Espionage Trial Newsreel 1963
youtu.be/wOqnTdS6C_g

Роскосмос ТВ: 1961 год первый человек в космосе Юрий Гагарин (1961: First Man in Space Yuri Gagarin)
<youtu.be/b0ktgWIN7SE>

MUSIC

Bobby Freeman: "Do You Want to Dance?"
<youtu.be/xVff7TJzc-Q>

Fats Domino: "Blue Monday"
<youtu.be/QZ2ISJFdXVA>

Elvis Presley: "(Let Me Be Your) Teddy Bear"
<youtu.be/NkDbk-egHH4>

Vladimir Horowitz: Schumann's "Kinderszenen" ("Scenes from Childhood")
<youtu.be/jeoFfK0iAAI>

Bobby Darin: "Mack the Knife"
<youtu.be/GSGc0bx-kKM>

Ella Fitzgerald: "Mack the Knife"
<youtu.be/wYaEVSjg5BE>

Lotte Lenya: "Die Moritat von Mackie Messer" ("The Ballad of Mack the Knife")
<youtu.be/X7eO7MKEZAY>

The Dave Brubeck Quartet: "Take Five"
<youtu.be/ryA6eHZNnXY>

NEW, JUST SOCIETY

At the end of *Walls*, Drew says to Matthias: "Maybe you can take what you had hoped for in your new, just society—before the Communist Party corrupted the hell out of it—and talk about it in the West. Maybe . . . maybe you can convince us capitalist pigs of some of the kinder aspects of socialism? And lord knows we can use the help with soccer."

Have students work in small groups to examine the differences among capitalist, communist, and socialist societies. At a minimum, they should look at differences in education and career opportunities, the arts, and equality and justice. Ask them to find examples from the book and to do additional research to create a chart that compares and contrasts the three economic systems.

Next, get students thinking about what their ideas of an ideal society are. Ask students, still working in small groups, to create a just society based on goals they set and whatever principles and ideas they choose from any columns in their charts and any others they want to make up or include. Ask for specific details about how their society works: what are the rules, what's the political system, what do people do for work and for fun, etc.

Have student groups present their societies. Encourage modifications based on good ideas found in other students' societies.

This article from Social Studies School Service provides helpful tips for explaining these concepts:

Cynthia Resor: "Capitalism, Socialism, Communism: Distinguishing Important Economic Concepts," February 5, 2021.
<blog.socialstudies.com/capitalism-socialism-communism-whats-the-difference>

EconEdLink has a detailed lesson plan and resources for learning about six broad social goals:

William Bosshart: "Broad Social Goals of an Economy," September 9, 2016.
<econedlink.org/resources/broad-social-goals-of-an-economy/>



ACTIVITIES: WRITING OPPORTUNITIES

EPIGRAPH-INSPIRED POETRY

Have students reread the book's epigraph:

It is only when you meet someone of a different culture from yourself that you begin to realize what your own beliefs really are.

—George Orwell

The Academy of American Poets offers a good definition of an epigraph and links to poems that feature examples: poets.org/glossary/epigraph.

Talk with students about what an epigraph is and the purposes it can serve. Ask: Do you like epigraphs? Why or why not? How is the Orwell epigraph a fitting one for *Walls*?

Have students take another look at the epigraph, and then ask them to free write for a few minutes. Give them plenty of time to develop their free writings into poems, placing the epigraph between the title and the first line of their poem.

Students could also be given the option to use other words or phrases from the book as an epigraph to inspire their poem or as a way to connect L. M. Elliott's ideas to their own.

GET SOME PERSPECTIVE

Drew and Matthias often have very different ideas about how the world should and does work. Pair students and ask them to write a headline for an event that took place during the time of the book, with one student writing as Matthias, with an Eastern bias, and one writing as Drew, with a Western bias.

Student pairs will need to agree on one event to cover, researching either an event from the book that interests them or choosing to learn more about:

- the 1960 U.S. presidential election
- the release of Elvis Presley's film *G.I. Blues*
- birth control pills introduced in Germany
- Muhammad Ali's boxing gold medal in the 1960 Olympics
- *Boynton v. Virginia*
- Alan Shepard's launch into space
- John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev's summit
- Jackie Kennedy in Paris

Students should review several sources and may wish to first draft their headline from their own perspective. Once student pairs have their finished headlines, have them share the headlines with the class to see if others can identify the perspectives from which they were written.

Facing History and Ourselves has a helpful resource for this activity: facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/create-headline



PAST/PRESENT

In 2021, Drew and Matthias would be seventy-six years old. Have students work in pairs to imagine, write, and perform a dialogue between the much older Drew and Matthias. Student pairs should focus on a topic that Drew and Matthias discussed in *Walls* and relate it to current or recent events, such as elections, race relations, propaganda, or censorship. For example, Secretary Khrushchev brags about influencing the election in John F. Kennedy's favor; President Vladimir Putin has reportedly ordered influence campaigns aimed at recent U.S. presidential elections. Ask students to consider how the ideals of both Drew and Matthias may have changed over time and how each may have influenced the other.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Developed by UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) and the Wende Museum, the Berlin Wall & Beyond offers six units of lesson plans, activities, discussion questions, primary source documents, and analysis worksheets: The Berlin Wall & Beyond theberlinwallandbeyond.weebly.com/

A full unit of study from the California History–Social Science Project with research–based and standards–aligned resources aims to develop student critical thinking, literacy skills, and historical content knowledge: “Why and How Was the Cold War Fought?” chssp.ucdavis.edu/resources/in-classrooms/blueprint/coldwar

L. M. Elliott provides extensive resources and links to help readers learn about the facts behind Walls. Visit lmelliott.com/book_landing_page_historical/walls to find out more about the Cold War and East Berlin as well as 1960s music, TV and film, lifestyle, fashion, and literature.

For students who want to dig deeper:

Jacob Abigor TV–Elias Chebira: Life in East Germany, 1949–1990 (Documentary Extract) youtu.be/b3MQBCoaloo

PublicResource.org: The Big Picture: “Soldier in Berlin” <https://youtu.be/-koWmmNgdXE>

Randall Bytwerk, Calvin University: German Propaganda Archive: “East German Propaganda” research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/gdrmain.htm

Eleven U.S. government organizations provide the background and describe the political aftermath of the Berlin Wall's construction through documents, essays, and overviews: Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room: The Berlin Wall Collection: “A City Torn Apart: Building of the Berlin Wall” cia.gov/readingroom/collection/berlin-wall-collection

Formerly classified documents reveal the history of the Berlin Wall, from the conditions in Berlin and East Germany following World War II and the wall's construction in 1961 to its fall in 1989: Wilson Center Digital Archive: International History Declassified: “Berlin Wall” digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/156/berlin-wall

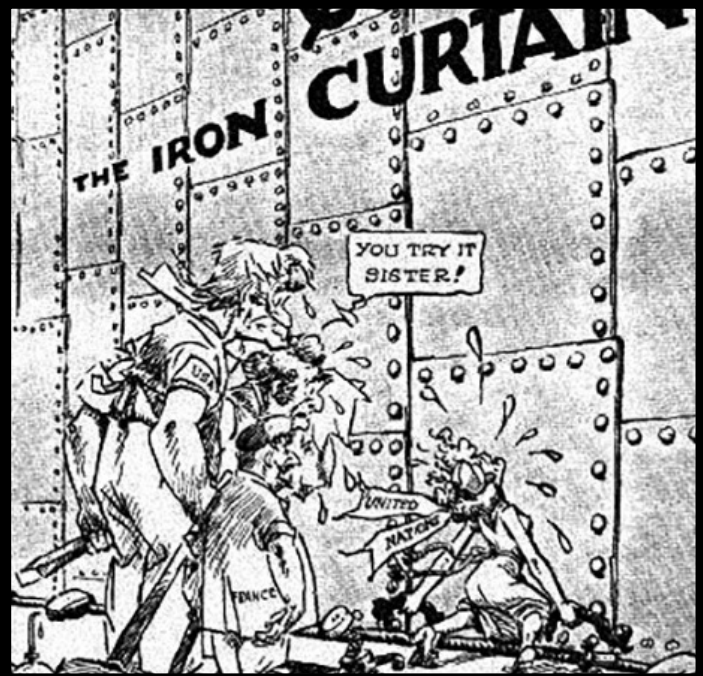


Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa