



The Wave

Morton Rhue



About the author

The Wave is a true story. History teacher Ron Jones started 'the Wave' in one of his lessons in 1969, and it turned into one of the most frightening things he had ever seen in a school. He later wrote a short story about it, and this was then turned into a full-length novel by Morton Rhue and published in 1981.

Summary

When Ben Ross, a history teacher at an American high school, shows his students a film about the Nazis and what they did during the Second World War, they are shocked. The students ask him how it was possible for such a party to become so powerful in a civilised 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. He tells them that 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 Mr Ross's amazement, the students like the Wave and the new discipline. They begin to work much harder and do more homework. It is as if this is what they have wanted all along. Very soon, almost everyone in the school wants to join the Wave. But it becomes clear that there is a darker side to such a team, and soon the Wave is out of control.

Chapter 1: Ben Ross shows his students a film about Hitler and the Nazis and the students ask him questions about it that he cannot answer.

Chapter 2: Ben Ross makes a plan. He introduces the slogan 'Winners Need Discipline' to his class. The students like his lesson about discipline, and Mr Ross is surprised.

Chapter 3: Mr Ross continues his experiment and tells the students they are now part of a team called 'the Wave'. He teaches them how to do a special salute.

Chapter 4: Laurie Saunders tells her parents about the Wave. Her mother doesn't like it. Ben Ross's wife is not happy about the experiment either, but most of the students think the Wave is great.

Chapter 5: Laurie decides to write an article about the Wave in the school newspaper. The principal of the school tells Ben Ross to be careful with his experiment.

Chapter 6: Laurie receives a letter from a worried student and two boys have a fight over the Wave.

Chapter 7: Laurie refuses to give the Wave salute.

Chapter 8: Laurie's story appears in the school newspaper. Many students do not like it because it says bad things about the Wave.

Chapter 9: Ben Ross is unhappy about the Wave. Laurie has an argument with David about it.

Chapter 10: Laurie and David go to see Mr Ross to ask him to stop the Wave.

Chapter 11: Mr Ross organises a surprising last rally for the students.

Chapter 12: The Wave is over.

Background and themes

Group pressure: 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 evil deeds that they would never have individually 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 civilisation, the large-scale murders they committed could ever have happened.

The Nazis' rise to power: 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 imposed on it by Britain, France and the United States under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, after the end of the First World War. The Nazis promised 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 into one Germanic



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super-state, which was to be the centre and purpose of everyone's life. People began to be attracted to the Nazis' message that the problems of Germany had identifiable causes, and that by tackling these causes a bright new future was possible.

After gaining power in 1933, 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 their political opponents. All this was necessary, they said, to protect the future of the country. They used slogans to spread their ideas, such as: 'Right is what serves the people'. They also began their programme of excluding the Jews from more and more aspects of national life. By January 1942, the Nazis had adopted the 'final solution' and the mass extermination of the Jews in Europe began. No one knows how many people knew what was happening. By the end of the war, the Nazis had murdered 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, gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals and political opponents.

Disturbing: One of the most disturbing aspects of this mass crime was that it was not just the work of a few madmen. It was a complex operation that depended on thousands of individuals each carrying out their own small job so that the overall purpose was achieved.

Resistance: Although Hitler was supported by many ordinary Germans, there were also numerous resistance movements in Germany throughout the Nazi period. Between the years 1938 and 1942, several army officers opposed Hitler's plans for war with Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Hitler survived several unsuccessful assassination attempts during his years in power. The German Catholic church was openly critical of the Nazi's policy of euthanasia of the mentally ill and physically disabled. Their organised opposition led the regime to alter its policy in this area. German communists were also involved in resisting the regime after the entry of the Soviet Union into the war.

Recent atrocities: The kind of psychological and social pressures that led to Nazism are not only to be found at a certain time in Germany or Europe. Even in the last few decades thousands or even millions of innocent people have been murdered in Nazi-style 'purification' programmes or for the sake of revenge. These killings have

happened in many different places, such as in Africa, in former Yugoslavia, in Cambodia, in South America and elsewhere.

Social science experiments have shown the frightening extent to which people will simply obey authority. In the 1960s, at the time of the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichman, a psychologist called Stanley Milgram carried out a series of experiments at Yale University which showed that most participants did not refuse to administer harmful electric shocks to another person for as long as they were instructed to do so by a person in authority.

Experiments such as this show how frighteningly easy it is to make people act in a way which is contrary to their moral beliefs. Yet, they have also shown that a minority will oppose the group and disagree with authority when they think it is right to do so.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask the students to note down three things that they know about Nazi Germany. If necessary, help them by asking a few questions such as: *When were the Nazis in power? Who was their leader? What did they do during their time in power?* After a few minutes put the students into small groups and tell them to share their information.

Chapter 1, pages 1–4

After reading

- Pair work:** Divide the class into two equal halves. Ask one half to imagine they are David Collins and the other half to imagine they are Laurie Saunders. Tell the students to note down the answers to the following questions: *How do you think David/Laurie feels after seeing the film in Mr Ross's class? How do you think David/Laurie feels about Laurie/David?* Then put the students in pairs – one member of each pair come from each group. Tell the students to imagine the characters meet after school to continue the conversation they started at lunchtime. Give the students 10 minutes to prepare and then have them act out the conversation in front of the class.

Chapter 2, pages 4–8

After reading

- Write:** Put the students into small groups. Tell them to imagine that they are Robert Billings. Ask them to answer the following questions: *Is Robert usually happy at school? Why/Why not? How did he feel during the class on discipline? Why?* For homework, tell the students to write an entry in Robert's diary in which he talks about the day Mr Ross introduced discipline to the class.



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Chapter 3, pages 9–11

After reading

- 4 **Pair work:** Put the students into pairs. Student A is David and student B is another member of the football team. Tell the students to imagine how the conversation at the end of Chapter 3 will continue. After ten minutes, ask some of the pairs to act out their conversation for the rest of the class.

Chapter 4, pages 11–14

After reading

- 5 **Role play:** Put the students into groups of three. Tell them to look at the picture on page 12 and to answer the following questions: *Who are the characters in the picture? What are they talking about?* Write their answers on the board. In each group, each student takes one of the three roles. Then write the following sentence on the board: 'Too much discipline is dangerous'. Ask the students to decide if their character agrees or disagrees with the sentence. You may need to pre-teach them the structure *I agree/I disagree*. Then tell them to imagine how the conversation between the three characters continues. Tell them to write it out, with each character saying at least two lines. Then get them to act out the scene.

Chapter 5, pages 15–19

After reading

- 6 **Debate:** Tell the students to look at the picture on page 17. Write the following sentence on the board: *This house believes that you must never break the rules.* Divide the class into two equal halves. Regardless of their personal opinions, tell one half to think of as many arguments in favour of the proposition as they can, and tell the other half to think of as many arguments against the proposition as they can. Each side elects two students to present their arguments to the whole class. Now hold a debate. Write up the main arguments on the board. Ask the students to vote on the proposition at the end of the debate.

Chapter 6, pages 20–23

After reading

- 7 **Discuss:** Is this the end for Laurie and David? Divide the class into two halves. Tell the students to imagine that at the end of Chapter 6, Laurie goes to see a friend to talk about her relationship with David. Half the class think of reasons why she should stay with David and the other half think of reasons why she should not stay with David. Help them with vocabulary if necessary. After a few minutes, put the students into pairs (one student from each half of the class) and have them exchange their ideas.

Chapter 7, pages 23–24

After reading

- 8 **Pair work:** In pairs, students write out the dialogue between Brad and Laurie on page 24 as if it were a

stage play. Then each pair practises the dialogue until they can do it without reading the text. Make sure the students pay careful attention to pronunciation and intonation. Ask some of the pairs to act out the dialogue in front of the whole class.

Chapter 8, pages 24–25

After reading

- 9 **Write:** In this chapter Laurie writes bad things about the Wave in the *Grapevine*. Working with the whole class, ask the students to suggest things they think Laurie wrote in her story. Put their suggestions on the board. Then, put the students in small groups and tell them to write Laurie's story. When they have finished, ask the groups to give their story to another group for them to check the grammar and spelling. Ask some of the groups to read their story out loud.

Chapter 9, pages 27–31

After reading

- 10 **Role play:** Put the students into pairs. It is the end of Chapter 9. Tell the students to imagine how the conversation continues after David pushes Laurie over. Give them 10 or 15 minutes to prepare. The students then practise the dialogue. Then ask some of the pairs to act out the scene in front of the whole class.

Chapter 10, pages 31–33

After reading

- 11 **Guess:** At the end of Chapter 10 Mr Ross tells Laurie that he will end the Wave. Put the students into groups of four and ask them to imagine what is going to happen next. *How is Mr Ross going to end the Wave?* After ten minutes, ask each of the groups to present their predictions to the class. Note down the main points on the board and conduct a class discussion to decide on the best suggestions.

Chapter 11, pages 34–39

After reading

- 12 **Discuss:** At the end of Chapter 11, Mr Ross says 'Perhaps we all learned something from the Wave.' Put the students into small groups and ask them to write down what they think the following characters learned from the Wave: Mr Ross, Laurie, David. Then ask each group to present their findings to the whole class and hold a class discussion.

Chapter 12, page 39

After reading

- 13 **Role play:** Put students into pairs and ask them to write a conversation between Mr Ross and Robert. Ask them to act out the conversation in front of the rest of the class.

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.