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**TEACHER GUIDE**  
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**Domenic's War**  
**A Story of the Battle of Monte Cassino**

Written by Curtis Parkinson



**Category:** Juvenile Fiction - Action & Adventure; Juvenile Fiction - Historical - Europe; Juvenile Fiction - Historical - Military & Wars

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

It is January 1944 and the German army is determined to stop the Allied push up the Italian peninsula toward Rome. At Monte Cassino, a strategic position that has never been captured in centuries of warfare, the Germans make their stand. In an ancient Benedictine monastery atop the mountain, Italian refugees are trapped between the Germans and the advancing Allies. They believe, wrongly, that no one will bomb the monastery.

In a quiet valley north of Monte Cassino, in German occupied territory, thirteen-year-old Domenic Luppino makes a perilous daily journey from his family's farm to deliver food to two escaped British prisoners of war. As the fighting draws nearer, the Luppino family's situation becomes increasingly desperate. Domenic's father and older brother must go into hiding or be taken away by the Germans for forced labor. Domenic stays behind as the man of the house with his mother and two little sisters. The boy can only stand helplessly by when a troop of German soldiers takes over the house for use as a command post.

In a story set against actual historical events, Domenic is forced to leave childhood behind as he and his family are drawn into the whirlwind of war. As guns roar and people die on the slopes of Monte Cassino, shock waves from the dramatic battle roll down into Domenic's valley. With the enemy in his own home, Domenic must somehow find the courage and resourcefulness to help his family survive the ordeal of their lives.

## ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Born in Montreal and raised in Kingston, Ontario, Curtis Parkinson first began writing when he worked on a high school yearbook. He studied chemical engineering at Queen's University and worked in that field across Canada and in South America. He occasionally tried his hand at writing but did not begin to meet with success until after his retirement. One night, while Curtis and his wife were living on a sailboat in the Caribbean, their cat fell overboard. The incident inspired a picture book that became Curtis's first published work. Since then he has written several picture books and three novels. He has also written short stories for the *Antigonish Review* and the *New Quarterly*, and articles for *Canadian Yachting*. Now a grandfather, Curtis Parkinson lives near Maynooth, Ontario.

## TEACHING IDEAS

### Thematic Connections

#### RESPONSIBILITY

When Domenic's father made the decision to help the British airmen, he put his own family at risk. Under the circumstances, was it the right thing to do? Was it wise of him to send a young boy like Domenic to take the airmen food?

#### WAR

War exacts a terrible price in human lives and in destruction of property. How is this shown in the experiences of (a) Domenic and (b) Antonio?

#### GOOD VS EVIL

In war, one side is seldom all good and the other side all bad. How does the story illustrate this? How did a German soldier show kindness to Sergio?

#### TRANSITIONS

Domenic's War could be called a coming-of-age story. In what ways were Domenic and Antonio more grown-up by the end of the story than they were at the beginning?

#### LOVE

Even though he loses his family, Antonio clings to hope. What keeps him going?

## DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. A flashback is a literary device used to tell the reader about something that happened prior to the events of the story. What flashback does Domenic have early in chapter two?
2. The time and place in which the story takes place make up the setting. How does the setting for Domenic's War, Italy during the World War II, contribute to the novel's appeal?

3. Domenic is the protagonist (main character) in this story. His antagonists (adversaries) are the German soldiers. Which German soldier is his main antagonist? Explain why.
4. The plot of a story is the unfolding of the most important events involving the protagonist and antagonist(s). Sub-plots are smaller stories occurring within the main story. What is the plot of Domenic's War? What is one of the sub-plots?
5. Irony is a situation in which the actual result of a sequence of events is not what would normally be expected. What was ironic about the bombing of the monastery? What was ironic about the German occupation of Domenic's home?
6. The high point of a story is the climax. What is the climax of Domenic's War?

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Using a map, explain to students how after driving the Germans out of North Africa, the Allies captured Sicily and then began the long advance through Italy. Have students locate Monte Cassino and Rome. Ask them what the Allied generals meant when they called Italy the soft underbelly of Europe.
2. Several characters in the story make references to ordinary soldiers being killed and wounded while the senior officers are someplace relatively safe. Ask students if they think the high-ranking officers should have been in the front lines, or if it was right that they commanded from behind the lines. What difficulties could arise if the generals are far from the actual battle?
3. The bombing of the old monastery was a very controversial event. Ask students why people were critical of this action. What reason did the Allies give for their decision to do it? How did the destruction of the monastery backfire on the Allies?
4. Monte Cassino was strategically important because of its height. Ask students why this made it a difficult objective for the Allies to capture. Other places had had strategic military importance. On a map, show students the location of Gibraltar and ask them why the British considered it a vital place to hold in the event of war.
5. Two animals play key roles in this story. Ask students how the mules, Dolce and Mussolini, help the plot to unfold and come to a satisfactory conclusion.

## BEYOND THE BOOK

### The Road to Monte Cassino

*After driving Axis armies out of North Africa in May of 1943, Allied commanders turned their attention to an invasion of Italy. They believed that by advancing up the Italian peninsula they could knock Italy out of the war and bring about the downfall of the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. The capture of an Axis capital, Rome, would be of enormous symbolic importance. Hitler would be obliged to send large numbers of German troops to Italy—soldiers he might otherwise have used at the Russian front, or in France, which the Allies were preparing to invade.*

*From North Africa the Allies captured Sicily, then crossed to the Italian mainland. However, the notion that Italy was the soft underbelly of Europe was soon proved false. The German army made good tactical use of Italy's mountainous terrain. They retreated only gradually, making the Allies fight hard for every foot of ground they gained. But Allied troops from the United States, Britain, Canada, France, Poland, New Zealand, and India pushed steadily north toward Rome. Then at Monte Cassino, just south of Rome, the Germans dug in to make a stand. They deployed along a defensive position called the Gustav Line. They took full advantage of rivers and other natural obstacles, especially Monte Cassino, one of the strongest natural defensive positions in military history over which armies had fought since Roman times.*

*The battle of Monte Cassino, which lasted from January 12 until May 18, 1944, was actually four battles. In the first attack, which was hampered by bad weather, the Allies suffered heavy casualties but captured the town of Anzio. It was during the second battle that the Allies made the controversial decision to bomb the ancient Benedictine monastery on the summit of Monte Cassino. They thought the Germans were using the historic site as an observation post. Actually, there were no German soldiers in the monastery. But after the Allies had bombed it to rubble, the Germans quickly turned the ruins into a strong defensive position. The Allies' second attack was a failure. A third attack was beaten back with heavy casualties. For the fourth attack the Allies tricked the German commander into thinking they were going to launch a sea-borne assault from the rear, causing him to move some of his troops to another location. Then they attacked Monte Cassino in full force, overwhelming the exhausted Germans by sheer firepower and weight of numbers. It was one of the bloodiest battles of the Second World War. The Allies achieved victory — at a great cost in lives—when they captured the town of Cassino and drove the Germans off the mountain.*

*The victory was a hollow one, though. American General Mark Clark ignored orders to strike at the retreating German army and capture most of its men and equipment. He decided instead to lead his men into Rome and claim the glory of being the city's liberator. Soldiers from half a dozen Allied nations died in the struggle for Monte Cassino, but thousands of Hitler's troops escaped to fight in other battles.*

## **OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST**

Other Books By Curtis Parkinson

Picture Books:

Tom Foolery

Emily's Eighteen Aunts

Mr. Reez's Sneezes

Novels:

Storm Blast

Sea Chase

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwtwo/>