

TEACHER RESOURCE PACK: THE SECRET WAR

Book: *The Secret War* by Todd Burleson

Target Grades: 5–7

Time Required: Flexible (Modules can be used individually)

SECTION 1: THE TEACHER'S "CHEAT SHEET"

(Read this first! This section prepares you for sensitive topics and history questions.)

WARNING: CONTENT HEADS-UP

- **Grief & Loss:** This book depicts the gradual physical decline and eventual death of a main character (Billy) due to radiation poisoning. It is emotional and may be difficult for readers who have experienced recent loss.
- **Racism:** The character Ken faces historically accurate racial slurs (e.g., "Jap," "Tojo") and harassment. We recommend previewing **Act IV** and the Post Office scene in **Chapter 9** to support students during these discussions.

"IS IT REAL?" — THE HISTORY BEHIND THE STORY

- **The "Ghost Engine" (The Jet):** Yes. The Bell P-59 Airacomet was America's first jet fighter. It was developed in secret, and test pilots really did wear gorilla masks to confuse anyone who saw them in the sky.
- **The Poison (Polonium):** Yes. The "Dayton Project" was a real, top-secret operation run by Monsanto in residential neighborhoods in Dayton, Ohio. They processed Polonium-210 for the atomic bomb triggers.
 - *Resource:* [Atomic Heritage Foundation: Dayton Project](#)
- **The Incarceration:** Yes. Ken's father is at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, one of 10 camps where 120,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated. The "loyalty questionnaire" and draft resistance mentioned in the book are historical facts.

SECTION 2: INTERDISCIPLINARY MODULES (The Lesson Plans)

MODULE 1: HISTORY LENS

Topic: The Home Front, Censorship, & The "Enemy" Within

Standard: C3 Framework D2.His.5.6-8 (Perspectives over time)

- **Primary Text Connection:** In Chapter 9, the postal clerk destroys Ken's letter. *"The clerk reached under the counter and pulled out a thick black marker... He didn't just cover the words. He crushed them."*
- **"Plug-and-Play" Resources:**
 - **Primary Source:** [The Heart Mountain Roster](#). *Activity:* Project this roster. Ask students to find repeating last names (e.g., "Ishigo") to visualize that whole families were incarcerated.
 - **Visual:** [Dorothea Lange's Censored Photographs](#). *Activity:* Show the photo of the Japanese American grandfather. Ask: "Why did the Army hide this photo? What emotion does it show?"
- **Student Activity: "The Redacted Truth."** Use the [Censored & Uncensored Letter \(Canva\)](#). Project or print the letter and have students act as the censor using black markers.

MODULE 2: STEM LENS

Topic: Radiation, Invisible Forces, & Observation

Standard: NGSS MS-PS4-2 (Waves & Light)

- **Primary Text Connection:** In Chapter 10, Jamie notices the light bending "wrong" around the smoke. *"This light bent wrong... like it was passing through filthy glass."*
- **"Plug-and-Play" Resources:**
 - **Video:** [The Radium Girls \(SciShow Kids\)](#). *Why use it:* Explains "bone-seeking" elements like Polonium in a middle-school-friendly way.
 - **Visual:** [The "Ghost" Plane \(Bell P-59\)](#). *Activity:* Ask students what is missing from the nose (The propeller).
- **Student Activity: "Evidence of the Invisible."** Use [Sun Print Paper](#) to capture shadows of objects. Discuss how we can see the *evidence* of invisible rays (UV/Radiation) even if we can't see the rays themselves.

MODULE 3: ETHICS & CIVICS LENS

Topic: Whistleblowing, Obedience, & The "Good Soldier"

Standard: C3 Framework D2.Civ.10.6-8 (Civic Virtues)

- **Primary Text Connection:** In Chapter 17, Mr. Clark visits Billy, sees he is dying, but tells

him to "hold the line."

- **"Plug-and-Play" Resources:**

- **Video:** [Frank Emi & The Fair Play Committee](#). *Discussion:* Frank Emi disobeyed the government to protest the camps. Billy obeyed to help the war. Who was the "better" citizen?

- **Student Activity: "The Authority Ladder."** Draw a ladder. Rung 1: Patriotism. Rung 2: Duty. Rung 3: Silence. Rung 4: Sacrifice. Ask: "At which rung should Billy have stopped climbing?"

MODULE 4: ART LENS

Topic: Processing Trauma Through Creation

Standard: *National Core Arts Standards (Responding)*

- **Primary Text Connection:** In Chapter 15, Ken draws the boy who threw the brick. "*He made the figure small. He made it brittle.*"
- **"Plug-and-Play" Resources:**
 - **Artist Spotlight:** [Estelle Ishigo's Sketches \(JANM Collection\)](#). *Activity:* Show her sketch of the wind. Ask: "How do you draw wind? How is this like Ken drawing his fear?"
- **Student Activity: "The Black Box Sketch."** Students draw a *feeling* (Fear, Anger, Silence) using only charcoal/black pencil, focusing on pressure and shadow rather than realistic shapes.

MODULE 5: LITERACY & CREATIVE WRITING LENS

Topic: Voice, Imagery, & "Show, Don't Tell"

Standard: *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3.D (Sensory Language)*

- **Primary Text Connection:** Jamie's description of the "filthy glass" light.
- **Activity A: "The Censor's Poem" (Blackout Poetry).** Use [Ken's Letter Template \(Canva\)](#). Students black out words to reveal a hidden poem about Fear or Secrets.
- **Activity B: "The Sensory Snapshot."** Project one of these images and ask students to describe the *texture* without naming the object.
 - **Option 1 (Rust/Decay):** [Pixabay: Rusted Metal Texture](#)
 - **Option 2 (Peeling Paint):** [Pixabay: Peeling Paint Wall](#)
 - **Option 3 (Vintage Microphone):** [Pixabay: Vintage Microphone](#)

SECTION 3: GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

(Note: Visual, immersive versions of these trackers are available in the **"Field Notes" Student Workbook**. We recommend printing that PDF for students. If you are not using the workbook, you may copy the text-based versions below.)

OPTION A: THE "FIELD NOTES" WORKBOOK (Recommended)

- **The Trust Tracker:** Found on **Page 5** ("Billy's Lens") of the *Field Notes*.
- **The Symptom Log:** Found on **Page 7** ("Mapping Sickness") of the *Field Notes*.

OPTION B: TEXT-BASED ALTERNATIVES (A La Carte)

Use these if you need a quick, single-sheet activity and are not printing the full workbook.

THE TRUST TRACKER

Directions: As we read, rate how much you trust Mr. Clark. Is he a hero or a villain?

SCENE	WHAT CLARK DOES	TRUST SCORE (1-10)	WHY? (EVIDENCE)
Act I	Tells Billy he is "Man of the House" & gives him the secret mission.		<i>Is he being kind or flattering him?</i>
Act II	Visits Billy's room. Sees the sickness. Checks the rock first.		<i>Who does he care about more?</i>
Act III	Billy realizes: "He saw what it was doing to me. And he told me to keep going."		<i>Is this loyalty or betrayal?</i>

THE SYMPTOM LOG: "THE FLU" vs. REALITY

Directions: The adults keep saying Billy has "the flu." Use this log to track the evidence that proves them wrong.

SYMPTOM OBSERVED	ADULT EXPLANATION	REAL SCIENTIFIC CAUSE
<i>Example: Bleeding Gums</i>	<i>"You are brushing too hard."</i>	<i>Radiation destroys healthy tissue.</i>
Hair falling out		
Gray skin		
The Rock is warm		

SECTION 4: STUDENT HANDOUT (Printable Text)

(Note: A formatted visual version of this letter is available at the Canva link in Modules 1 & 5. You may also use the plain text below.)

Dear Dad,

I hope this finds you well and warm enough. Mom says Wyoming cold teaches you patience, but Ohio cold feels sharper, like it gets into your bones faster. The snow here reminds me of Heart Mountain sometimes. Flat and quiet. The wind moves it the same way, like it is always searching for something.

Mom is doing all right. She is tired, but she does not complain. She works long hours at the factory and comes back with her hands sore and her face gray from the machines, but she still makes sure we eat. Our room at the hostel is small, but it is clean, and the heat works most nights. We have a window that looks out over the tracks.

School is fine. I keep my head down. The teachers talk a lot about the war and about doing your duty. I do my work and stay quiet. Some days I feel invisible, which is easier. I miss my old school. I miss California light.

I saw something at the tracks two days ago. A train accident. There was mud that hissed when they sprayed it. The workers looked scared, even the men in white coats. I thought you would understand. It did not seem right.

Please do not worry about us. I am taking care of Mom the best I can. I think of you every day.

Your son,

Ken

SECTION 5: VOCABULARY & VISUAL GLOSSARY

TIER 1: THE LANGUAGE OF 1944 (History)

- **Ration:** Limiting goods like sugar/gas. [Image: Ration Book](#)
- **Censor:** Removing secrets from mail/news.
- **Internment:** Forced imprisonment (Ken's father).
- **Gold Star Family:** A family that lost a soldier. [Image: Man with Service Flag \(Smithsonian\)](#)

TIER 2: THE LANGUAGE OF THE SECRET (Science)

- **Isotope:** A chemical variation (Polonium-210).
- **Contamination:** Being made impure/poisoned.
- **Geiger Counter:** A tool that clicks when radiation is near.

TIER 3: VISUAL DICTIONARY (For Projection)

- The "Ghost" Plane: [Bell P-59 Airacomet](#) *(Note the lack of propeller).*
- The Camera: [Jamie's Rolleiflex \(Canva Image\)](#) *(Note the twin lens).*
- The Camps: [Estelle Ishigo Sketches \(JANM\)](#) *(Visualizing the wind/dust).*