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**This will give you an idea of the format and content.**

# *The Wave*

by

**Todd Strasser**

**aka Morton Rhue**

**1981**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Ray Mescallado

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The story takes place primarily in the fictional Gordon High School, which is set in a small suburban community. Some scenes also take place in the homes of Ben Ross and Laurie Sanders. As the.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Laurie Saunders** - A smart and outgoing senior student at Gordon High School. She is the editor-in-chief of the school newspaper, *The Gordon Grapevine*. She is a student in Ben Ross' history class and the main opposing voice against The Wave. She becomes the vigilant resistant force after she initially likes the idea, but then is drawn into opposition by the respect she has for history and the opinion of others. She sees the harmful direction of the wave and sets forth to end it.

**Ben Ross** - An intelligent and energetic history teacher at Gordon High who's popular among his students for his enthusiasm and accessibility. He creates The Wave as an experiment to show his students how fascism can be embraced by the masses. He creates an experiment to see what it would have been like in Nazi Germany during World War II.

**David Collins** - A senior student at Gordon High School and the captain of their football team. He is a student in Ben Ross' history class and the most idealistic about what The Wave can achieve. He is also Laurie's boyfriend.

**Robert Billings** - A senior student at Gordon High School who's become the outcast since he'd rather give up than live up to his older brother's standards. He is weak and shy in many ways, perceivably because of the success of his older brother, but The Wave becomes his salvation, giving him new-found self-confidence and for the first time in his life, social status. Through it, he finds acceptance among the groups that had so long before found him to be an outcast.

#### Minor Characters

**Mr. Gabondi** - A French teacher at Gordon High School.

**Amy Smith** - Laurie Saunders' best friend and a student in both Mr. Gabondi's French class Ben Ross' history class.

**Brad** - A student in Ben Ross' history class who has a history of picking on.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Laurie Saunders is the main voice of reason and protest against The Wave.

**Antagonist** - While not an actual person, The Wave is the main antagonist, even "acting" on its own as its power grows. As one of the most impassioned members of The Wave whose status in.....

**Climax** - After a Jewish boy is harassed for refusing to join The Wave, Laurie as editor-in-chief of *The Grapevine* publishes an issue exposing the troubles caused by the organization. In defending.....

**Outcome** - Ben Ross gathers members of The Wave together at a rally to introduce to them to.....

## SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

At Gordon High School, history teacher Ben Ross is teaching his class about World War II and the Holocaust. His students are upset by the footage of concentration camps and question why the German people allowed this to happen, insisting they wouldn't be so easily duped. Ben Ross considers this and plans an experiment: the next day, he starts to indoctrinate the class using the slogan STRENGTH THROUGH DISCIPLINE. The class reacts well to this, embracing the sense of empowerment it gives them, and they continue their newly disciplined behavior into a second day of class, surprising Ross. He decides to take the experiment further and create a group, The Wave, adding two more slogans - STRENGTH THROUGH COMMUNITY and STRENGTH THROUGH ACTION - which leads to further rules of conduct and an organizational structure. In this way, The Wave takes on a life of its own. While Laurie Saunders is wary of The Wave and its effect on others, her friends are more willing to promote this movement. Her friend Amy is made a monitor, as has school outcast, Robert Billings. Laurie's boyfriend David Collins, introduces the football team to The Wave in the hopes of unifying the team in their game against Clarkstown that weekend.

In the following days, The Wave quickly grows in popularity, but soon its dark side becomes apparent. Laurie receives a letter for the paper detailing how members try to recruit others with bullying. At a football rally that was unofficially christened a Wave Rally, a boy is harassed and called a "dirty Jew". That weekend, the football team is unable to win against Clarkstown, as their newfound drive does not compensate for a lack of proper training and planning. David is confused by this turn of events, while Laurie and her staff on.....

## THEMES

### Major Themes

The main theme of the novel is the appeal of fascism: what makes individuals want to become a part of a community that places an authoritarian state above all other concerns? In what ways are compromises and excuses made, what advantages are gained and what freedoms are lost? The other.....

### Minor Themes

Mass media and its ability to mold opinions is an important minor theme of the story, providing many of the contemporary nuances in the novel. Another minor theme is the nature.....

## MOOD

The novel is serious in tone, often carrying a sense of journalistic reportage, much like a.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Todd Strasser, who also writes some items under the pen name Morton Rhue, was born May 5, 1950, in New York City, New York. His parents moved to Roslyn Heights, New York on Long Island when he was young. He attended Willets Elementary School and then attended the Wheatley School. He has described his best subjects as math and science, but he also liked to read. He attended New York University but dropped out, living on a commune and then traveling to Europe and working as a street musician, then returning to the States to study at Beloit College concentrating in literature and writing. Graduating from Beloit in 1974, he went on to work in both journalism and advertising. His first novel, *Angel Dust Blues*, was published in 1979. With the money he earned, he started-up the Dr. Wing Tip Shoo fortune cookie company that helped support his.....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The real-life incident on which *The Wave* is based occurred in 1969 in Palo Alto, California, in a Cubberley High School history class taught by Ron Jones. Jones wrote an article about his experience for the magazine *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1972; a copy of the article is available at Todd Strasser's website at <http://www.toddstrasser.com/html/thewave2.htm>. Jones' account of it led to both a teleplay by .....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

### CHAPTER ONE

#### Summary

As editor-in-chief of *The Gordon Grapevine*, the newspaper of Gordon High School, Laurie is troubled by the lateness of its latest issue: she believes her staff isn't disciplined enough, but does not know what to do about it. As she passes Mr. Gabondi's French class, she sees her friend Amy Smith and tries to catch Amy's attention. However, she also catches Mr. Gabondi's attention and almost gets in trouble if it wasn't for the end-of-class bell. Amy joins her as they go to Ben Ross' History class.

Ross is in his classroom, having trouble with the projector. Despite the lack of mechanical skills, he has a strong reputation as an outstanding, charismatic teacher. The faculty is divided on Ross: some like his energy and creativity, while others thought he should be more traditional. For his part, Ben is troubled by the attitude of many of his students, who value their social lives over homework. As the students start to enter class, Ross enlists the help of David Collins for the projector. Robert Billings is teased by Brad when he dully asks if they'll be watching a movie that day. As class begins, Ross warns students about homework getting too sloppy - the third time he's had to do so this semester.

#### Notes

High school social hierarchies are established quickly: David Collins is among the elite and called upon by Ross to help set up the projector, while Robert Billings is derided for asking an obvious question. In his internal monologue, even Ross considers Robert the "class loser". It's worth noting that in this novel, the elite of the high school hierarchy excel in both studies and extracurricular activities: the split between gifted athletes ("jocks") and gifted scholars ("nerds") is never explored extensively, though Brian Ammon is one such example. For that matter, rebels - "cool" kids resistant who earn respect from their peers for opposing authority figures in school - are not represented at all. In this way, the social hierarchy of the novel is actually somewhat simpler than it is in real life, where some students excel in only one aspect of high school life (academic, extracurricular, social) but not in others.

### CHAPTER TWO

#### Summary

Ben Ross' class is studying World War II and the film they're watching is about the Nazi concentration camps. Ross speaks of Hitler's rise to power, anti-Semitism, and the Final Solution. The class is visibly shocked by the millions who died in this manner, which doesn't surprise Ross given their comfortable middle class upbringing. When asked if all Germans were Nazis, Ross answered that less than 10% were party members; asked why no one tried to stop the Nazis, Ross explains that most Germans claimed to have not known about the camps. The students scoff at this claim, adding that they wouldn't let such a thing happen if they were in that situation.

When class ends, David asks Laurie to go to lunch with him. However, she first talks to Mr. Ross further about how the Nazi atrocities could have happened. Ross then stops Robert Billings, his most problematic student, and warns Robert that if he doesn't start participating in class, he'll fail. Robert doesn't seem to care, and Ross knows it's because he lives under the shadow of his older brother Jeff - a popular athlete and student in his time - and had given up on trying. Ross tries to reach out to Robert nonetheless, but it doesn't work.

#### Notes

Robert's lack of response to Mr. Ross' warning is an interesting contrast to his later - and quite sudden - adherence to the discipline of *The Wave*. Ross threatens Robert with failure, but he already considers himself a failure; in contrast, *The Wave* assures Robert power and success, more carrot than stick. In a sense, Robert is clearly saved by *The Wave* and the sense of empowerment it bestows him.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

As *The Wave* is about a group, character analyses would benefit from considering both individuals and other groups in the story. While groups are made up of individuals, one of the important points of the novel is that groups often exhibit behavior different from what individuals within the group would otherwise do, and in turn imposes its own influence on those same individuals. It's important to stress that the novel often alludes to The Wave asserting a life of its own but never does anything to project such a view beyond simple metaphor. To do so would have taken liberties with the novel's chosen style of journalistic reportage, making it more fanciful than the book intended.

If we do treat The Wave as a character in its own right, it begins as a simple idea in Ben Ross' head - albeit one with a very complex lineage. It then manifests itself as one slogan, then rules, then more slogans, then finally a symbol. As it grows, it asserts its independence from Ben Ross quite quickly - it only takes one class session for it to win the hearts and minds of the history class. From there, it grows and asserts itself outside of the influence of any one individual, as Ben Ross learns when orders are given in his name that he never issued. Once The Wave's lineage is exposed - that is, its basis in the Third Reich and the demagoguery of Adolf Hitler - we are led to believe The Wave suffered a quick and sudden demise.

Ben Ross' history class is another group in the novel, but it actually works as the starting seed of The Wave and functions almost solely in that manner. This is reinforced when we discover that his class grows as The Wave grows. There are two other groups worth considering as characters, however. First, there is the football team: it is described as dysfunctional and lacking unity, seen by the fights between Brian Ammon and Deutsch. It unifies somewhat under The Wave, though Deutsch continues to resist it, but that does little good as it loses to Clarkstown. This group recovers at the end of the novel, as the Wave members patch up their differences with David. In contrast to the football team, the staff of *The Garden Grapevine* are distinctly anti-Wave, from editor-in-chief Laurie Saunders on down. The group seems just as fractured and unproductive as.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The main protagonists in this novel create the most obvious plot structure: the intertwined narratives of student Laurie Sanders and teacher Ben Ross, the former resisting the Wave for the sake of her own individualism, the latter creating the Wave and becoming a prisoner of its momentum. It is through these two characters that all.....

### THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

*The Appeal of Fascism* - The main theme in the novel is the appeal of fascism and how it can take root in unexpected, even seductive, ways. On a broader level, this theme may be interpreted as the struggle in society between the values of the community - in fascism's case, the state - and that of individuals. Clearly, the novel brings home the point that a society that values individual will is more humane than.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

### AUTHOR'S STYLE

One may think this book was written in an unimaginative, bland style: the novel is straightforward and simple, often journalistic in its attention to necessary details. As the story is based on a real incident that occurred in a Palo Alto school, this stylistic decision creates a sense of reportage. That is, the bare-bones just-the-facts approach makes it easier to imagine the events of the novel as really happening, as being less a flight of fancy than a kind of docudrama unfolding before the reader. In this way, the book becomes more compelling as.....

## IMPORTANT QUOTES - NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

The novel starts with an idyllic moment, one that emphasizes how ordinary the setting and situation is:

1.) Laurie Sanders sat in the publications office at Gordon High School chewing on the end of a Bic pen. She was a pretty girl with short light-brown hair and an almost perpetual smile that only disappeared when she was upset or chewing on Bic pens. Lately she'd been chewing on a lot of pens. In fact, there wasn't a single pen or pencil in her pocketbook that wasn't worn down on the butt end from nervous gnawing. Still, it beat smoking. (pg. 7)

Her ability to stop smoking shows a self-control and willingness to sacrifice that contributes to her future resistance against *The Wave*. This opening also establishes her role in the novel as the voice of dissent, expressed through the school newspaper *The Gordon Grapevine*. The introduction of her history teacher Ben Ross is similarly conflicted in tiny details, as he fumbles with the film projector. However, that fumbling is used to contrast what he is truly skilled in:

2.) Thus far in his career at Gordon High - Ben and Christy had been teaching there for two years - he had managed to hide his mechanical inabilities. Or rather, they had been overshadowed by his growing reputation as an outstanding young teacher. Ben's students spoke of his intensity - the way he got so interested and involved in a topic that they couldn't help but be interested also. He was "contagious," they'd say, meaning that he was charismatic. He could get through to them. (pg. 10)

The use of the word "contagious" is ironic as *The Wave* also becomes contagious when its philosophy spreads outside Ben Ross' classroom. However, the film projector is itself a key idea: his inability to handle it correctly mirrors his inability to maintain control of *The Wave*. Another key character is introduced in.....

27 Quotations are presented and analyzed in the complete study guide.

## SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

The main symbol and motif of the novel is of course the wave. The choice of imagery is itself potent: a wave is unstoppable, a force of nature that sweeps over everything in its path. It indicates strength and inevitability, but also a lack of thoughtful discrimination and futility of resistance. A key motif tied to this image of *The Wave* are its three slogans, all emphasizing strength but rhetorically empty in meaning. As a result, the use of wave takes on further complexity: water is fluid and can slip through one's fingers, refused to be grasped. Similarly, the empowering slogans and rhetoric of *The Wave* is as elusive as water, impossible to.....

## IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** *The Wave*

**Author:** Todd Strasser

**Date Published:** 1981

**Meaning of Title:** The group created by Ben Ross as an experiment in fascism.

**Setting:** Gordon High School.

**Genre:** Drama.

**Protagonist:** Laurie Sanders.

**Antagonist:** *The Wave*.

**Mood:** Somber, journalistic.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. What are Brian Ammon and Deutsch competing over?
  - a. The best grade in history class.

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- b. The affections of Amy.
  - c. The first-string quarterback position.
  - d. Nothing.
2. Why is Laurie Saunders chewing on pens so much?
- a. To avoid smoking cigarettes.
  - b. Out of anxiety for her grades.
  - c. She's worried about her relationship with David.
  - d. None of the above.....

**ANSWER KEY**

1.) c 2.) a 3.) c 4.) a 5.) b 6.) b 7.) c 8.) c 9.) a 10.) b 11.) c 12.) c 13.) a 14.) d 15.) c

**ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

- 1. Is there a clear middle ground in the novel between individualism and an authoritarian community such as The Wave? If so, what is it and how does it behave? If not, why is this not the case?
  - 2. Is the novel dated or a product of its era in any significant manner? Does the situation described in the novel have a believable chance of occurring in a modern American high school? Why or why not?
- In what way does Ben Ross stand in conflict with the themes of the novel? That is, how does his role as a teacher and a self-proclaimed experimenter influence the way we understand power and the extent to which it can be used? How would the story be different if he.....

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