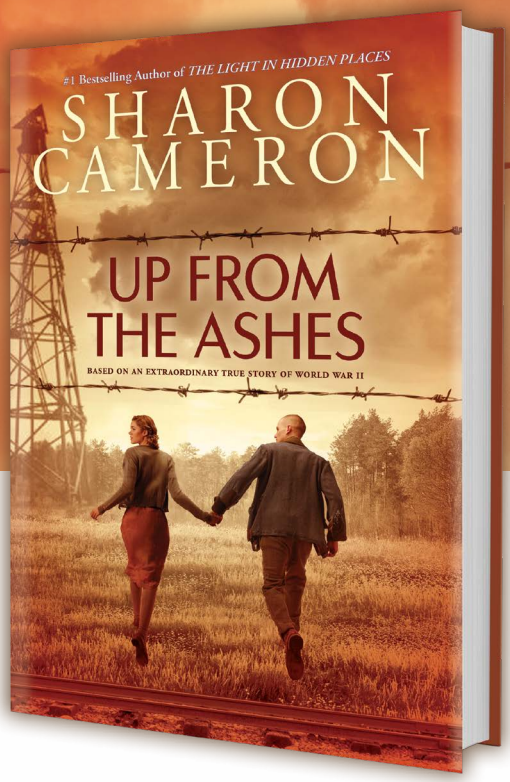

BOOK GUIDE

UP FROM THE ASHES

BY SHARON CAMERON

Up from the Ashes
By Sharon Cameron
HC: 9781546144618 • $19.99
EB: 9781546144625 • $19.99
Also available in audio
Ages 12 & Up • Grades 7 & Up
On sale 10/6/2026

The Story

Selma Wijnberg is a criminal, a prisoner. Because she is Jewish. For this crime, in the depths of Hitler's occupation of Holland, Selma is deported to the Sobibor death camp in Poland, sentenced to sort the clothes of the dead while a smoke made of thousands of Jewish souls blackens the sky. And in the light of this enormous funeral pyre, at the end of a Nazi pistol, Selma is ordered to dance. The hand that offers to dance with her is strong. Steady. It belongs to Chaim Engel, a Polish Jew and fellow prisoner. Chaim and Selma don't speak the same language. But sometimes, love doesn't need a language.

Who falls in love in the middle of hell? Chaim and Selma do. And who knew that love could kindle so much hope?

But when the prisoners of Sobibor hatch a daring plan of escape, it is time to kill or be killed. The gate or the fire. Chaim and Selma will go out on their feet, or out with the smoke. In an hour of terror and panic, of bullets and bloodshed, Chaim and Selma discover that hope—and two hands twined tightly together—can be the key to keeping two people alive.

Based on the remarkable true story of Selma Wijnberg and Chaim Engel and the revolt and escape of the Sobibor death camp prisoners, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Light in Hidden Places*, Sharon Cameron, crafts an extraordinary and evocative thriller that celebrates how hope and love can conquer even the most impossible odds.

Reading Group Questions

1. At the beginning of the war, Selma is an ordinary young woman who dreams of one day finding work she enjoys and romance. Over the course of the story, as circumstances change drastically, how does Selma change? What does she learn about herself? What does she learn about other people?
2. What do you think made the Sobibor death camp especially terrifying?
3. The prisoners craft a daring but ultimately violent plan in order to escape Sobibor, and we see Chaim struggle with the consequences of these decisions. What do you think about their choices? Were they justified? Was Chaim's final decision the right or wrong one? Why?
4. *Up from the Ashes* is ultimately a story about hope. How does holding onto hope help Chaim and Selma survive?

The Power of Story
Connecting Readers, One Book at a Time

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About the Author

Photo © Rusty Russell.

Sharon Cameron is the author of the international bestseller and Reese's YA Book Club pick *The Light in Hidden Places* and the critically acclaimed thrillers *Bluebird* and *Artifice*. Her debut novel, *The Dark Unwinding*, was awarded the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' Sue Alexander Award for Most Promising New Work and the SCBWI Crystal Kite Award and was named a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selection. Sharon is also the author of its sequel, *A Spark Unseen; Rook*, which was an Indiebound Indie Next List Top Ten selection, a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults selection, and a Parents' Choice gold medalist; and *The Forgetting*, a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and an Indie Next Pick of the List selection, as well as its companion novel, *The Knowing*. She lives with her family in Nashville, Tennessee, and you can visit her online at sharoncameronbooks.com or follow her on Instagram at @sharoncameronbooks or on X at @CameronSharonE.

Author Q&A

What led you to telling the story of the Sobibor uprising? How did you discover Chaim and Selma Engel's story?

Back in 2019, after writing *The Light in Hidden Places*, my editor asked me if I had ever heard the story of the uprising in Sobibor, and like so many before me, I answered with, "Wait, what is Sobibor?" I dipped my toe into the history of the camp, the uprising, the testimonies of Chaim and Selma Engel, and I was stunned. Horrified. And inspired. *What an amazing history,* I thought. *And what a difficult, heartbreaking story to write.*

And so I pulled that toe right back out of the water.

But I thought about Chaim and Selma. Often. I wrote two more books about the Holocaust, and in quiet moments, the scene of that first dance would break the surface of my thoughts. And then, while on tour for *Artifice*, on a rare free afternoon, I went by myself to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, absorbing the tragedy and heroism displayed before me. And when I turned around, the face of Chaim Engel was being projected on the wall behind me, a video of Chaim talking about Selma and Sobibor. I sat down and listened. And listened.

And I jumped right into the deep end and wrote the book.

You collaborated extensively with the Engel family while researching and writing this story. Can you tell us a little bit about that collaboration and about your research for *Up from the Ashes*?

The collaboration with Chaim and Selma's children and grandchildren has been one of the greatest privileges of my life. It is one thing to read a history or watch a video. It is wholly another to mine the memories of a family member. The family gave me a gift of trust when they agreed to let me write Chaim and Selma's story, and that is something I will never take for granted. But I think the most surprising thing about researching a book like *Up from the Ashes*, a book of dramatized reality—where all the events are real, all the characters are real, and where the research needs to not only take you into the lives of one person, but thirty, even forty lives—was the sheer volume of how much I needed to know, from the dates of battles down to what the bread that wasn't really bread really tasted like. Where did the water come from? Did they have their own food bowls? Where were the guards placed? Did this person escape, or did they die before? How was the electricity connected? Who could speak what language? And Sobibor was such a unique camp, nothing could be pulled from research done on any other death camps. It was pages upon pages of notes and drawings and pictures and letters and video links. Much of it was information I wish I didn't have to know. But all of it allowed me to enter that terrible world in a detailed, deep, and personal way.

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What was the most challenging part of writing this story?

Besides the sheer volume of the research, and the toll that research took on my own heart and soul, the most challenging aspect of writing a story like *Up from the Ashes* is deciding how to present such a dark reality in a way that readers will still want to read. To be faithful to the history and the reality of the suffering, but in a way that is, in the end, uplifting. That was a hard task, and I wasn't sure how to accomplish it, but in the end, it was Chaim and Selma who showed me how. They lived through Sobibor, and clung to hope, anyway. So I wrote it, and simply showed their hope.

What would you love for readers to come away with after reading this book?

I want readers to close *Up from the Ashes* with an experience that stays with them for life. To look at the depths the human race can sink to, and at the heights to which we can rise. I don't want them to just say *never again*. I want them to say, *never again, and here is what I'm going to do about it.* I want all of us to realize that, like Selma and Chaim, we have the power to choose. Love instead of hate. Courage instead of cowardice. These are the choices that lead to strength and resilience, that help us to not only survive but thrive. They are the choices of hope. That is what Chaim and Selma have shown me, and I hope that is what I have passed from them to my readers.

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