

Teachers' Notes written by  
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# *THEN*

*By Morris Gleitzman*

**Please note: these notes contain references to plot lines that may spoil the first reading of the book.**

*Then* is the powerful, moving story of Felix and his challenge to survive as a young Jewish boy in Poland at the time of the Nazi regime. It is the sequel to Morris Gleitzman's award-winning novel, *Once*, but would also work well as a stand alone novel.

Ten-year-old Felix and his unlikely companion, Zelda, the daughter of Nazis whom Felix rescued in horrendous circumstances, have managed to escape from a train heading to a concentration camp. Having already experienced many unbelievable atrocities in their short lives, they set off together in this new country in search of new identities, a new family and, ultimately, safety.

But the Poland into which they walk is anything but safe. The children are immediately confronted by a mass grave of Jewish orphans, after which they need to hide in order to escape discovery and certain death themselves. At every turn the children are confronted by danger and potential enemies.

Their luck begins to change when they are taken in by Genia, a local farmer whose husband has been taken away to work by the Nazis. In spite of the potential risk to her own life, Genia not only provides the children with shelter and new identities, but perhaps most importantly, with their much longed for family. Adopting the personas of Wilhelm and Violetta (names drawn from the heroes of Felix's beloved author, Richmal Crompton), the children pose as good, Jew-hating Polish children. But in this climate, danger is never far away and the children are again forced to confront many chilling inhumane behaviours and events.

The beautiful characterization of Felix, his sense of humour, constant faith, love for others and his powerful storytelling ability makes this powerful and atrocious story compelling and fascinating reading. Just as Felix uses stories as a kind of therapy to help himself and others make sense of the world around him, Morris Gleitzman says '*This story is my imagination trying to grasp the unimaginable*'.

## **STUDY NOTES/ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHERS**

Characters

Themes:

- The impact of war
- Loss and Grief
- Life and Death
- Families
- The treatment of Jews

Symbolism

Writing Style

Storytelling

General Discussion

Companion Texts

### **Using this novel in the classroom:**

This novel would be suitable for study with a wide range of students. Obviously the activities and companion texts selected by the teacher will need to be age-appropriate for the specific class.

*Then* could be studied as a novel in its own right, or used as a springboard for discussion about a wide range of social and moral issues.

### **Background reading:**

To really appreciate this story, students need some background information on the Holocaust. Much of this could be compiled through individual research, but it is important that all students approach the novel with this collective knowledge base.

- Why did Hitler and the Nazis victimize the Jews?
- Who were the Hitler Youth?
- What is 'the Holocaust'?
- Read the information on Morris Gleitzman's website regarding the inspiration for his novels *Once* and *Then*.

It is important that students are guided through their reading and analysis of this novel.

## CHARACTERS:

### Felix

Felix, the narrator, has both the naiveté of a ten-year-old and a maturity far beyond his years, the result of having witnessed many unspeakable acts that no adult should be forced to deal with.

- Why do you think Morris Gleitzman chose to tell this story through the eyes of a ten-year-old child?
- In what ways does Felix appear childish?
- In what ways is he surprisingly mature?
- Felix forms an amazingly strong bond with Zelda, in spite of the fact that her parents were Nazis. What does this reveal about him as a person?
- Even when faced with his own potential discovery, and death, Felix remembers to ask Richmal Crompton to protect the other children on the train (p11). What does this tell us?
- In spite of Zelda's inappropriate behaviour that almost lands them in trouble on numerous occasions, why does Felix never waver in his love for her, nor his determination to protect her?
- After the fishing incident, Felix is sure that retribution will be sought by the Nazis. He spends all night digging a hole for protection. '*The hole was too small. I forgot about me.*' What does this reveal about Felix? (p120)
- Make a list of adjectives that you think describe Felix and provide examples of his behaviour in the novel to support your opinion.
- Why is Felix so enamoured with Richmal Crompton? Research the *William* books. Why would a character such as William have held appeal for a boy like Felix?
- Why is it very apt that Felix's greatest hero is an author?
- After Genia, Zelda and Krol are killed, Felix wants to kill as many people as he can. Consider how he has changed from when he was unable to shoot a Nazi at the river. What has caused this change?
- Why does Felix hide away in his hole at the end of the novel?
- Make a list of the ways in which Felix changes during the course of this novel and what causes these changes.

### Zelda

- Felix says, Zelda might be only 6 but she's got the kindness of a 10 year old kid. (p89) What does he mean by this?
- In what ways is Zelda clearly a lot younger than Felix?
- Zelda constantly says, '*Don't you know anything?*' Why might Morris Gleitzman have chosen to use this expression for her?
- Zelda's behaviour constantly lands the children in trouble. Is she intentionally defiant? Why do you think she behaves so carelessly?

- Why does Zelda continually claim to be Jewish and denounce her Nazi parents?
- Why is Felix so determined to make her accept them?

### Dov

- In what ways does Dov's character serve as a contrast to that of Felix? Why is he so much more negative and prepared to take revenge?
- Why does Dov's family story finally enable Zelda to love her own parents?

### Mr Krol

Mr Krol initially appears to be the epitome of the evil Nazi supporter, collecting and turning-in Jewish children for his own reward. He is the one person in whom Felix cannot see the good.

- Are there any clues that Mr Krol is not evil?
- Is it a surprise that Krol goes to town with Genia and Zelda?
- How would Felix feel when he realises what has happened to Mr Krol?

### Genia

- Given that Genia tells Felix and Zelda, '*I don't like Jews. I never have. It's how I was brought up*', (p45), why does she risk her life to give the children a home?
- How does she react when she hears that her husband is coming home? (p125). Why would she react in this way?

### Cyryl

- Cyryl initially befriends Felix. Why does he turn against him and try to prove he is a Jew?
- How does Felix constantly manage to outwit him?
- What sort of person is Cyryl?
- What sorts of boys would have been in his gang?
- How would a person like Cyryl have reacted to the treatment of the Jews?
- Given that it is the Jews who were regarded as being bad, what sort of statement might Gleitzman be making with the character of Cyryl?

### FOR DISCUSSION:

- Morris Gleitzman has managed to depict such realistic and human characters that the reader is able to feel some degree of sympathy for almost all of them. Make a list of all of the main characters in the novel and explain why you feel any degree of sympathy towards them.

- Why did people such as Genia (and Barney in *Once*) shelter Jews when to do so meant putting their own lives at risk? Would you be prepared to do this? Why?
- How can a person's upbringing shape their attitudes or politics? Can you think of any other examples where this may happen?
- Morris Gleitzman's dedication in *Then* reads '*For all the children who have to hide*'. In many ways, this novel is not just about the children of the Holocaust. Make a list of groups within society who, throughout history, have been forced to hide to escape persecution.

### ACTIVITIES:

- Students are to think of questions they would like to ask each of these characters if they had the opportunity to meet them.
- "Hot Seat" activity: students are to adopt the persona of one of the characters in the novel. In character, they are to respond to questions regarding their behaviour, attitude and personal reactions to situations. (This activity is designed to reveal more about the characters, but also to illustrate the notion that different people have different perspectives on the same situation).
- Students could design a piece of Nazi propaganda that encourages young boys to join the Hitler Youth.

### THEMES:

#### The Impact of War:

Felix asks: '*Why do people start wars when they know so many sad things are going to happen. I don't get it.*' (p52)

- What is your opinion of this issue? Why do people start wars, especially when we now know of the horrors that will inevitably take place? What is it about a war that leads calm, ordinary people to become vicious, merciless killers?
- One of the notions that are presented in *Then* is that it is not just 'the enemy' who suffers during war. Many of the townspeople seemed to be happy to participate in the Jewish humiliation sessions. But, given that Genia is opposed to this, and yet so able to act convincingly, it is plausible that many others in the town felt the same way. At least one of the Hitler Youth, Amon, does not want to perform this role. Cyril's own mother is unable to protect him from a Nazi beating for fear of retribution. Make a list of all of the people you think suffer during war.
- What role does fear play during war?
- Why were many young boys so keen to become members of the Hitler Youth?

- Many behaviours during war seem to be irrational. When Felix finds out that the Nazis make the children do farm work to feed the German army he asks *'If they are good at farming why not keep them alive?'* Why did the Nazis kill off thousands of Jews rather than use them as labourers?
- Given what many people see and experience during war, whether at the front-line or back at home, do you think it is possible for a war just to end? What might be the long term social impact of war? Why do many people find it impossible to resume a normal life after war?

### Families:

The notion of family and its importance is a strong theme throughout this story.

Consider the following quotations from the novel:

- ❖ *'Sometimes love from your family can make your tummy not hurt quite so much.'* (p15)
  - ❖ *'Sometimes you have to take a risk to protect your family.'* (p81)
  - ❖ *'Neither one of you can help who your parents are. Your Mummy and your Daddy aren't your fault.'* (p81)
  - ❖ *'Kids like us don't forget our real parents. Not ever.'*
- Why is the notion of family so important for Felix?
  - In what ways does war destroy families? Make a list of all the different ways in which families can be affected by war.
    - ❖ Consider Felix's statement: *'Why do a lot of people end up in bed married to other people's husbands and wives.'* (p169)

### Attitudes towards Jews:

Make a list of how the Jews were treated as shown in the novel:

Consider the following:

- ❖ the sign on the shop door that reads *'No dogs or Jews'* (p67)
  - ❖ *'Sisters. They're worse than Jews.'* (p72)
  - ❖ *'Dumb Jews swapped all this stuff for bits of food. Perhaps they were hungry.'* (p71)
  - ❖ Town meeting called to humiliate Jews. (p131)
  - ❖ The description of Jewish people. (p131)
  - ❖ Attitudes of the people – *'a one-way ticket to somewhere hot. Filthy vermin'* (p132)
- Why were the Jews victimised by the Nazis?

### The Nazis and the Hitler Youth:

- Why did the Nazis take Trotsky and the chickens and shoot Leopold?

- Why were the townspeople ordered into the street to watch the Nazi youth parade?
- Why did the Nazis take over the orphanage?
- Describe the boys in the Hitler Youth.
- How is Amon different from the other boys? How did he and Felix manage to make a connection?
- Why did Amon help Felix?
- In what ways does a child like Amon also suffer because of the Nazis?

### **Symbolism:**

Just as Felix's book was a key piece of symbolism in *Once*, the locket is key in the sequel.

- What is the significance of Zelda's locket?
- Why is the gift, that Zelda and Genia went to town to get, a special locket for Felix?

### **Writing style:**

#### Foreshadowing:

Make a list of the events in the novel that foreshadow or provide clues to the horrendous, but inevitable outcome in *Then*.  
(e.g. Felix worries that unless he leaves, he will cause the death of Genia and Zelda; the suggestions that Krol is not evil; the symbolism of the locket).

#### For Discussion:

- Each chapter begins with the word 'Then' which appears in a child-like hand. How does this style of storytelling fit with the 'voice' of a ten-year-old child and the way that they tell stories?
- How does Morris Gleitzman manage to keep the story entertaining rather than depressing?

#### Activities:

- Make a list of all of the dangers Felix (and Zelda) face during the course of the novel.
- Each chapter begins with the word 'Then'. Each one builds up to a climax that is resolved early in the next chapter. Trace the development of each chapter. (This may best be represented in graph format).
- Think of another incident that could happen to Felix and Zelda in which they are almost discovered. Write the incident in the same way as Morris

Gleitzman, building to the climax at the end of the chapter and resolving it early in the next chapter before rising to the next climax.

### **Storytelling:**

#### **For Discussion:**

Throughout both *Once* and *Then* storytelling is an important notion.

- Consider how Felix uses storytelling: to distract others, to help keep his and others' spirits high, to provide explanations, to make sense of the impossible.
- At the very end, Felix hopes that others will read his story. It is this belief that carries some feeling of hope in an otherwise devastating outcome.
- Why is it important to tell stories?
- Why is it important that the stories of the people of the holocaust (and other atrocities) be kept alive?
- What do we learn from stories?
- Einstein said, '*If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairytales*'. What did he mean by this? How can reading stories really help to make people more intelligent?

#### **Activities:**

- In his character, write the story that Felix leaves in his hole for the world to read.

### **General Discussion:**

- The irony is that in spite of Zelda's lack of compliance, tact and understanding, Felix was right. It was ultimately he who brought about Zelda's death. Do you agree with this statement?
- What does Felix hope will happen when he and all his 'evidence' are discovered at the end of all these atrocities?
- Given what we know about the Holocaust, the ending of this book was perhaps inevitable. Do you think the final feeling is one of despair? Or does Felix still manage to leave the reader with some hope? Consider Felix's last words, a tribute to Zelda.

*"She was only six," I'll say, "but she had the loving heart of a ten-year-old."  
And if people carry on hating each other and killing each other and being  
cruel to each other, I'll tell them something else.  
"You can be like her," I'll say, "Don't you know anything?"  
Let's see what they do then.'* (p183)

### Companion texts:

Depending upon the age and maturity of the group reading the novel, there are a number of additional resources that could be used.

There are many primary-source accounts of personal experiences during the holocaust. Many of these are available on-line. See also Morris Gleitzman's references on his web-page, under the heading '*Once & Then – The Real Life Stories*'.

Depending on the age of the group, students could watch the films *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *Schindler's List*. Both of these not only depict the atrocities of the Holocaust, but also address the notion of people harbouring Jews at great personal risk.

Students may like to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne, or *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.

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