

Then **by Morris Gleitzman**

Year 7

That's the good thing with stories. There's always a chance they can come true... That's the bad thing with stories. Sometimes they don't come true and sometimes what happens instead is even worse than you can imagine. (pp. 7-8)

Background

This story begins where *Once* finished, as ten-year-old Felix and six-year-old Zelda jump from the train that is taking them to the concentration camp. Now in the Polish countryside, they are far from safe, and almost immediately are fired upon by Nazi soldiers. Taken in by Genia, they are disguised as Catholic orphans and live at her small farm until the inevitable happens, and their masquerade is exposed with tragic consequences.

While *Then* is not a long reading experience, it is an emotionally powerful one. Ideally, then the novel would be read together as whole class, pausing to allow for predictions, discussion, questions and to let emotions settle. Students could discuss progressive events in the story as it is read, in small groups, to share the powerful emotional experience.

Objectives:

- To demonstrate the power of literature to allow readers to live through events that are beyond their experience for greater understanding of the human condition, good and bad.
- To demonstrate to younger readers one of the pleasures of reading is to expand our repertoire of knowledge about the world. Teachers might like to contextualise the Holocaust before reading *Then*, (there are excellent links in the Teachers' Notes http://www.penguin.com.au/PUFFIN/NOTES/f_notes.cfm) or invite students to fill in the context after reading.
- Taking from the dedication of the book '*to all the children who have to hide*' use the metaphor of 'hiding' to understand central ideas of the book.

Students read and interpret texts that present some challenging issues. They compare texts that explore similar themes and ideas, and recognise that writers can express views and values other than their own. They develop a critical understanding about the ways that writers and producers of texts try to position readers to accept particular views of people, characters, events, ideas and information. They discuss the ways in which persuasive texts present opinions and evidence, justify positions and persuade.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *VELS English Domain Level 5* p 22.

Focus

Power and function of story

- Consider how stories operate in *Then*. Find and discuss examples of Felix's stories, such as on page 15: '*It's not true, but sometimes to try and save your family you have to make up stories*'. Also on page 480 telling 'a story' about being Genia's Catholic niece and nephew. There are examples of stories as comfort, such as on page 51, and examples of the ones Felix tells Zelda, '*hoping our stories come true*' (p53). On page 163 Felix writes a '*long story about the things the Nazis have done to my family and Dov's family and all the other people they've hurt too*'. On page page 168 he tells the story of Zelda and Genia and '*their loving hearts*'.
- Have a discussion with the students with about their understandings of the different interpretations of the word 'story'. Are all of the examples quoted above 'stories', or are some untruths? Does it matter?
- What sorts of stories do you tell – to yourself? To your friends? About events in your life?
- How important are stories to you?
- Hiding: Find references to hiding in the book – actual and metaphorical, inviting the students to see beyond the surface of events. For example, on page 11, Felix contrasts hiding for fun, to be '*cosy and safe*' with hiding '*for life*'. Talk about the different emotions that can be associated with hiding – thrill, fear, terror, danger, safety. (p55)
- Identify the different sorts of hiding presented in the story, such as
 - Hiding *from* persecutors, danger
 - Hiding *behind*
 - Hiding *to* survive
 - Hiding *identities*

Who does the hiding and why? Is one sort of hiding better/worse than another? For example, talk about 'hiding' in terms of Cyrul and his gang, of Dov hiding under bodies, of Felix hiding the stories and the pictures (p. 163) and the final image of the story of Felix hiding. Go back to the dedication, which is written in the present tense. Discuss various interpretations of whom Morris Gleitzman might be referring to now.

Assessment

- Write or act: Felix can't hide forever. What happens to him?
- Write Felix's story about Genia and Zelda.
- Felix has been hiding for eleven months. Imagine the first time he emerges out of his hiding place, into the barn and then outside. Write or act the sensations that Felix will have almost forgotten, such as fresh air on his skin, bright light, smells of the farm etc.
- Morris Gleitzman is going to write a third book called *Now*. Discuss its possibilities - where and when it might be set, who might be telling the story, or write the opening sentence for the first five chapters, beginning with 'Now' to follow Gleitzman's style.

Related Reading

- Gleitzman, Morris *Once*
- Boyne, John *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*
- Frank, Anne *The Diary of Anne Frank*
- Glatshetyn, Yankev *Emil and Karl*
- Hautzig, Ester *The Endless Steppe*
- Kerr, Judith *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*
- McEwan, Ian and Roberto Innocenti *Rose Blanche*
- Richter, Hans Peter *Friedrich*
- Richter, Hans Peter *I Was There*
- Richter, Hans Peter *The Time of the Young Soldiers*
- Seraillier, Ian *The Silver Sword*



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