



TEACHERS' RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary and lower secondary
(ages 9–12; years 5 to 7)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English, Humanities & Social Sciences, Health & Physical Education.
- **General capabilities:** Literacy; Critical and Creative Thinking; Personal and Social Capability; Ethical Understanding; Intercultural Understanding.

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Analyse how language and writing can evoke mood, tension and characterisation
- Use of humour and figurative devices
- Encourage creative and imaginative writing
- Understanding relationships and stress, discussing resilience, perseverance and the power of human connection
- Discuss social and economic inequality.

THEMES

- Tolerance
- Human Rights
- Racism
- Morality
- Abuse of power
- Loss and grief

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PUBLICATION DETAILS

ISBN: 9780143301950 (paperback);
9781742284897 (ebook)

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Once Morris Gleitzman

PLOT SUMMARY

It is 1942 and Felix begins his story from an orphanage – where he thinks his parents have placed him until they sort out their 'troubles'. Felix knows 'things got difficult for Jewish booksellers' but is not sure why. One thing he is certain of is that he will return to his lovely old life one day, with his books and his parents – once they come for him or once he finds them. But what Felix begins to see and experience after making his escape challenges his youthful naiveté and brings an end to his innocence in the most brutal of ways.

The novel follows Felix on his quest to find his parents and his search for understanding as he comes face to face with death and evil. While 'Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope, Father Ludwik and Adolf Hitler' may let him down as protectors and sources of hope, Felix's faith in himself and others rarely diminishes. Throughout the novel, Felix's talents as a story teller highlight the humour, courage and strength this character draws on to help himself and support those around him.

Herded along the road to a dreaded destination, hiding in a cellar with the heroic Barney, suffocating

in a crowded boxcar, distracting sad orphans or a cranky Nazi with a toothache, Felix is a constant reminder of the power of imagination. Books, stories and Felix's own special notebook are integral to his life and serve as symbolic links in many parts of Morris Gleitzman's novel.

During his journey, Felix forms an intense friendship with Zelda, a young girl he rescues in a devastating scene when her parents have been killed. He is also rescued at a later stage by Barney, a mysterious adult whom he comes to know and appreciate very deeply. Despite the impact and implications of events Felix has lived through, these experiences are filtered through Felix's resilience, presenting harsh realities – death camps, hatred towards Jewish people, the role of Adolf Hitler, enforced labour, the separation of families – allowing readers to understand Felix's journey in an accessible way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morris Gleitzman grew up in England and came to Australia when he was sixteen. After university he worked for ten years as a screenwriter. Then he had a wonderful experience. He wrote a novel for young people. Now, after 38 books, he's one of Australia's most popular children's authors.

Visit Morris at <http://morrisgleitzman.com>

PRE-READING NOTES

Handled with sensitivity and care, there is enormous potential for using this novel in the classroom. The notes that follow have been devised in accordance with guidelines and recommendations from valuable resources designed for educators dealing with the Holocaust in a classroom learning situation. These references are provided below and it is strongly recommended that you read through them before starting work on *Once*. They are imperative if you plan to go beyond Felix's story and conduct a more in-depth analysis with older students, or if you intend to use the novel as part of a unit of study around the Holocaust (e.g. looking into historical and cultural context, political, social and ethical issues, racial, religious and moral implications etc).

The novel is likely to raise many difficult issues and questions so you may wish to enlist support of parents, other teachers or community members where appropriate.

Your Classroom Situation

Consider your goals in using this book. An awareness of the following will determine the depth to which you can explore emerging issues and the value of further research:

- The age and level of your students.
- The emotional and intellectual maturity of readers.
- The knowledge and experience students may already have.
- The appropriateness of providing further information or other materials.

Draw on Themes

There are many major themes that emerge from *Once* which offer enormous opportunity for reflection and discussion (such as Tolerance, Human Rights, Racism, Survival, Morality).

- Investigate the themes highlighted below.
- Monitor students' responses in discussion & elicit their ideas about important themes.
- Create a supportive and considerate environment in which students can feel free to express their emotions and ask questions in response to the themes within this story.

NOVEL ANALYSIS

Morris Gleitzman defines each chapter with a sentence beginning 'Once . . .' (the author's intention in doing this is worth discussing in itself.) But for the ease of this following activity, chapter and page numbers have been allotted. The novel analysis is best conducted when everyone has had the opportunity to complete *Once*. Work in small groups, set as individual tasks, or delegate to pairs then share outcomes as a whole class. Encourage students to present responses in an appropriate product of their choice – e.g. written work, art, drama, music, technology-generated etc.

Assign specific steps or set the whole sequence of tasks 1 – 6.

1. Read aloud the opening sentence of your given chapter. (There may be an additional sentence or two you think important to include.)
2. Identify the context and explain the meaning of the sentence.
3. Review and outline what happens in this chapter.



- Discuss the set questions and talk about any other issues which emerge.
- Explore the given theme. This is open to interpretation so allow each group member to comment according to the links he/she draws with the story.
- Reflection: this question asks you to reflect on something inspired by that particular chapter. You are asked to reflect and analyse this, not in isolation but with the whole story in mind. Awareness of connections may enable a fresh perspective or interpretation of events.

Consider how you will share or present your responses to the larger group (if required).

Chapter One

Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains and I shouldn't have been and I almost caused a riot. (p1)

- Describe your first impressions of Felix, Mother Minka and one other character introduced in the opening chapter (consider the traits they appear to possess and your response to meeting them).
- What is the significance of the carrot and what are Felix's plans for it?

Theme: Living with others

Reflection

Hopes and Dreams – what sustains Felix? What shelters him at this point compared with mid-way through the story or at the conclusion of the novel?

Chapter Two

Once I stayed awake all night, waiting for Mum and Dad to arrive. (p9)

- What memories and physical evidence does Felix have of his parents? What beliefs does Felix hold about what will happen?
- Explain the importance of Felix's notebook. Identify four things this notebook symbolizes.

Theme: Being displaced

Reflection

The book burning – what did Felix think the men in armbands were doing? What were they actually doing and why?

Chapter Three

Once I saw a customer, years ago, damaging books in Mum and Dad's shop. Tearing pages out. Screwing them up. Shouting things I couldn't understand. (p17)

- Identify two things that unsettle Felix and explain how his thinking starts to change.
- Felix has plans to help his Mum and Dad. What are they and what motivates him to take action?

Theme: Kindness

Reflection

On the truth – how might knowing the truth (about what could have happened to his parents) have made a difference to Felix at this point? Recall some moments when the truth begins to dawn on him or he suspects his impressions may be false. At the end of the novel, what do you imagine he thinks the truth really is?

Chapter Four

Once I escaped from an orphanage in the mountains and I didn't have to do any of the things you do in escape stories. (p27)

- List some of the reasons Felix considers himself 'lucky' (p30)? List things you think he could complain about.
- What indications are there – recognized or missed by Felix – that something is terribly wrong? What explanations does Felix come up with to make sense of things?

Theme: Keeping the Faith

Reflection

Making sense of the inexplicable – why would the truth be the furthest thing from Felix's mind given what he is witnessing? Is it a blessing or a curse for him to be able to explain everything or reason an acceptable outcome?

Chapter Five

Once I walked all night and all the next day except for a short sleep in a forest and all night again and then I was home. (p38)

- Contrast Felix's dreams with the reality of what he discovers when he makes it home.
- Describe the range of emotions he experiences. Analyse emotions he observes in other people encountered at this point in the story. How



would you classify them? (e.g. negative, strong, fleeting . . .)

Theme: Hope or Disappointment

Reflection

Help in unexpected places – why are Mr.Kopek's actions meaningful? Why do you think he chose to do what he did and how did it help Felix? What other unexpected sources of assistance did Felix encounter on his journey?

Chapter Six

Once I walked as fast as I could towards the city to find Mum and Dad and I didn't let anything stop me. Not until the fire. (p49)

1. What changes have taken place in Felix (e.g. more cautious, fearful of Nazis) and how do they influence his actions?
2. How does Felix control his anxiety and make use of his story telling ability?

Theme: Instinct or Courage

Reflection

Felix's choices – do you think Felix did the right thing by a) taking Zelda and b) not telling her the truth about her parents at that point? What other choices did he make for Zelda's benefit?

Chapter Seven

Once I woke up and I was at home in bed. Dad was reading me a story about a boy who got left in an orphanage. Mum came in with some carrot soup. They both promised they'd never leave me anywhere. We hugged and hugged. (p57)

1. What is the significance of the following: the armbands? Felix's predictions about the future?
2. How does Felix answer his own question – 'Why would the Nazis make people suffer like this just for the sake of some books?' (p64) Why is this a turning point?

Theme: Loss

Reflection

Displacement – think about the many things the people forced to travel on the road had to abandon. Apart from material possessions, what else would they have had to leave behind? (e.g. other people, businesses, family heirlooms, pets, freedom, wealth etc . . .) What could they bring with them? (e.g. spiritual beliefs, knowledge, loved ones etc . . .)

Chapter Eight

Once I spent about 6 hours telling stories to Zelda, to keep her spirits up, to keep my spirits up, to keep our legs moving as we trudge through the rain towards the city. (p66)

1. Why does Felix go from six hours of storytelling to keeping Zelda's spirits up, to the point where he suddenly hasn't 'got any more stories' (p73)?
2. Describe the toll such a journey takes on Felix and Zelda – physically and emotionally. How is it they manage to survive?

Theme: Oppression (alternatively, discuss feelings/questions emerging from this chapter).

Reflection

On what existed before – Felix refers to 'Dad's big book about two thousand years of Jewish history' (p71). Share what you know or find out more about the rich history and culture of the Jewish community before the events of this novel.

Chapter Nine

Once I lay in the street in tears because the Nazis are everywhere and no grown-ups can protect kids from them, not Mum and Dad, not Mother Minka, not Father Ludwik, not God, not Jesus, not the Virgin Mary, not the Pope, not Adolf Hitler. (p74)

1. Explain what Barney is doing. What sort of a person do you think he is? What does he represent?
2. What impact does the realization that no-one can protect the children have on Felix? How does this affect his belief in the power of stories?

Theme: Resistance – discussion on this theme could include talk about the Resistance Movement itself but should also focus on physical and spiritual, emotional and cultural resistance in a situation such as the characters in this novel endured.

Reflection

Heroism – Barney became something of a hero for Felix and the other children. Think about Barney's actions and words through the course of the novel. Identify what was heroic about his behaviour and the goodness of human beings it reflects.

You could further this discussion by researching stories of heroism in the time of the Holocaust – not just that of the very well-known figures, but also of quiet survivors & other children like Felix who



maintained their hope in the face of utter desolation. (see website references)

Chapter Ten. p83

Once I was living in a cellar in a Nazi city with seven other kids when I shouldn't have been. (p83)

1. Use an example of Felix's behaviour or self-talk to illustrate his unusual degree of maturity and self-awareness. Explain your reasoning.
2. What story 'saved his life' and what connections has he finally made?

Theme: Hiding

Reflection

Wishes – finding his parents is a driving force for Felix. Does his hope ever fade as his journey continues? What do the other children wish for in this chapter? Why do you think these things are so important to them?

Chapter Eleven

Once I escaped from an underground hiding place by telling a story. It was a bit exaggerated. It was a bit fanciful. It was my imagination getting a bit carried away. (p90)

1. What lengths does Felix go to when trying to escape? How does Barney handle it?
2. What does Felix discover about Barney and how does Barney enlist Felix's help?

Theme: Power – consider ethical and unethical uses as well as aspects such as bargaining power, personal strength, the power of stories and of relationships.

Reflection

On the Nazi dental patient (p100–3; p137–9 – Felix is able to hand over the promised story. What do his actions in the surgery and at this later stage say about Felix's faith in people? Why does he hope for in spite of all he has seen of the Nazi soldiers?

Chapter Twelve

Once a dentist stopped me from asking a Nazi officer about my parents and I was really mad at him. (p102)

1. Why did Barney stop Felix from asking about his parents? Why do he and Felix decide Zelda needs to know the truth?
2. Describe the range of reactions the children are showing a result of the traumas each has

suffered. How do you feel about the stories shared by the children?

Theme: Relationships – consider the factors which create and nurture bonds between people in the context of this novel, e.g. dependence, common experience, adversity, frailty, leadership.

Reflection

Individual experiences – think about the different experiences of the seven other children. Discuss why generalizations cannot be made about experiences of people as a group (Jews, victims, perpetrators) or within a group (based on age, race, culture, beliefs).

Chapter Thirteen

Once I told Zelda a story that made her cry, so I lay on her sack with her for hours and hours until she fell asleep. (p111)

1. Analyse Barney's gesture of giving Felix new boots. What does he mean by what he says (p112) to Felix? What other good things does Felix seem to think he's got and what can you see (e.g. his hope and optimism etc) in him that is good?
2. Felix makes a terrible discovery in this chapter and Barney is forced to tell him some awful truths about what is going on. What is Felix torn between as he tries to take it all in?

Theme: Trust

Reflection

What it means to save another – Barney takes something from his surgery. What do you think is going through his mind? Talk about the many ways in which people saved each other throughout the novel? (e.g. physical rescue, telling stories, finding food, explaining the truth etc . . .)

Chapter Fourteen

Once I loved stories and now I hate them. (p121)

1. Describe Felix's state of mind as this chapter opens. Describe your own feelings as you read about his close shaves and what he discovers upon returning to his hideout.
2. The importance of books is emphasized again in this chapter. Felix's favourite gets him into terrible danger but other books save him. What do books symbolize and mean for Felix?

Theme: Moral Choices



Reflection

Making judgments – Felix thinks others might wonder – ‘If Zelda’s Dad’s a Nazi, does she deserve carrot soup and aspirin?’ (p130). Despite his own experience of Nazis, his knowledge of Zelda and what she has been through determines his decision. What are other people in the novel basing their judgments on? Can you suggest what might be influencing them? (e.g. fear, ignorance, selected information etc . . .)

Older students looking at the broader picture could reflect on issues such as tolerance and respect for the rights of others – how Nazi propaganda, prejudice and social pressure (among other things) helped to create a wave of racist fear and repulsion, culminating in genocide.

Chapter Fifteen

Once the Nazis found our cellar. They dragged us all out and made us walk through the ghetto while they pointed guns at us. (p132)

1. Barney and Zelda wouldn’t go. Why not? Think of three or more reasons.
2. What is important to Felix as they head to the Railway station? What is important to the others as they are tossed aboard the train?

Theme: Separation

Reflection

Resilience – ‘You know how when things are really bad and you feel like curling up and hiding but instead you take deep breaths and the air reaches your brain and helps you think better?’ (p134). There are many examples of the strategies Felix uses to keep focusing on what is good or hopeful. Find further evidence of Felix’s resilience and discuss its impact on the situation and the people around him. Why is it so valuable?

Chapter Sixteen

Once I went on my first train journey, but I wouldn’t call it exciting, I’d call it painful and miserable. (p141)

1. Once again, a book becomes a saviour of sorts. Explain how. What is the significance of the fact that Felix is willing to use – and virtually lose – his notebook?
2. What choice and possible outcomes does the hole in the carriage create for the people inside?

Theme: Sacrifice

Reflection

An incredible bond – ‘And Barney. Now I’ve got my arms around him, I don’t ever want to let go’ (p147). Reflect on what Barney and Felix have been through together. How did they become friends, how was the relationship tested and why did it endure? How do you feel as you share the intensity of this poignant farewell?

Chapter Seventeen

Once I lay in a field somewhere in Poland, not sure if I am alive or dead. (p149)

1. Felix feels fortunate – ‘However my story turns out, I’ll never forget how lucky I am’ (p150). What is your explanation of this?
2. Knowing Felix as you do by the end of the novel, make a prediction about how you think his story might continue to unfold or end.

Theme: Chance

Reflection

Your thoughts – can you articulate your thoughts and feelings about the story’s ending? Explain what struck you the most in the character of Felix? What is the dominant emotion you feel at the conclusion of the novel?

(You may wish to write a private response or share your views to find out others’ perspectives.)

FOCUS ON FELIX

Explore and analyse the powerful roles that Hope, Resilience and Optimism play in Felix’s story.

Though just a young boy, he clearly possesses these psychological tools to a remarkable degree. We witness Felix’s use of them over and over again in his fight for survival and understanding. Felix’s wonderful story telling gift reflects not only his humour and imagination, but a noble sensitivity. Putting others’ needs before his own, Felix often tells his tales to distract and cheer up his friends. His story telling prowess also helps to preserve his own mental and physical health - getting him out of the occasional negative frame of mind and several other precarious situations!

But, as the tragic reality of what is happening around him begins to sink in, Felix understandably experiences profound lapses into overwhelming frustration and grief. Even at its most creative, Felix’s imagination sometimes struggles and becomes simply incapable of overcoming the horror



and brutality with which it is continually confronted. At times like this, his stories cannot help him - yet he always comes back to them. As the novel draws to a close, Felix and the reader are left wondering what the future holds, 'I don't know what the rest of my story will be' (p.150). But the love of stories and incredible resilience we have witnessed throughout Felix's journey create a sense of hope and optimism for us - enough to believe he may one day share his ultimate story, one of survival.

Morris Gleitzman has created a wonderful character and vehicle in Felix. Through the eyes of this central character the reader will witness humanity's capacity for inhumanity. The events and experiences endured by Felix (and many other characters) are extremely difficult and complex to comprehend, if comprehensible at all. The reader for whom this is an introduction to the Holocaust may experience the same terrible dawning realization of what was truly happening at that time. A study of Felix (his history, personality, actions & impact) should encourage this reader, and those with a greater depth of knowledge about the Holocaust, to spend time thinking, reflecting and sharing questions or views in an attempt to find some understanding.

There are many ways to undertake character studies. Some suggestions are offered below or your students may be able to tailor their own studies according to aspects or issues of interest to them.

Meaningful quotes

- Select (or ask students to select) some thought-provoking quotes from different points in the story.
- Give specific guidelines (e.g. before Felix knows the truth, or the first 3 chapters, or dialogue Felix has with other children etc . . .) or work on random selections to see what students pick up on.
- Use these as starting points for discussion or to develop dramatizations, oral presentations, reflective or creative writing, music or art work and other appropriate response activities.

Mapping & graphic representations

- Chart an aspect of the character's development – e.g. emotional spectrum, beliefs and understandings, relationships and interactions, impact of positive and negative experiences etc.
- Identify changes and turning points in written or graphic form.

- Analyse context and influences at work to provide annotated detail.
- Use these to inform and inspire journal writing or reflective poetry, music or art work.

Thinking about questions

- Students develop a series of rich questions they would like to ask the character in focus.
- Provide different models of questioning and discuss the importance of diverse invitational stems.
- Questions could then be shared with a partner for purposes of writing or role play which explores the character's potential responses.

Compare and contrast tasks

- Evaluate the character in terms of criteria which compares and contrasts his/her behaviour, traits and attitude.
- Try to identify the forces at work which shape these aspects and explain how events and experiences impact on outcomes. E.g. simple before/after headings, time line or sequential markers, specific events (such as getting caught, witnessing death, making choices), interactions with other people or overarching themes (such as loss, hope, survival, persecution).

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

Dedication

Morris Gleitzman makes this dedication to open the novel:

For all the children whose stories have never been told.

- Discuss what you think this means.
- Find out about things that have been done to ensure the stories of children who experienced the Holocaust are told – e.g. museum displays, books, films, biographical records and archival materials, memorials, Days and Rituals of Remembrance.
- Why is it important to share these stories today?
- Research for and share some views of people or organizations that have endeavoured to collect and share real-life stories of victims and survivors.
- Follow Morris Gleitzman's lead by reading diaries, letters and notes of those who were young at the



time of the Holocaust and discussing their impact on your students.

View some children's stories using the following resources:

- Website of the Museum of Tolerance
This has a special section devoted to "Meeting the Children of the Holocaust" containing images and biographies to tell each child's story.
- Website of the U.S. Holocaust Museum
A child's story is followed in an exhibition entitled 'Remember the Children: Daniel's Story'.

Author's letter

Read Morris Gleitzman's letter to his readers.

- What is your response?
- Why do you think he included this?

Students may wish to undertake further research into Janusz Korczak, who inspired the heroic character of Barney in *Once*, or choose another real-life identity who features in a compelling tale of heroism during the Holocaust (e.g. German businessman Oskar Schindler, Raoull Wallenberg, Giorgio Perlasca). Many heroes and heroines have been honoured in literature and art, in films and on the internet. Their stories – and those of many others who risked or gave their lives to help others – may be a source of interest and inspiration for your students.

Guidance and supervision in use of the internet is important in distinguishing the more worthwhile and reputable websites. Attention can be drawn to the less obvious, 'quiet heroism', shown by many of the characters in *Once* through acts of resistance and ultimately survival. In the more high-profile stories as well as in the lives and deaths of countless victims, discovery of positive role models may plant seeds similar to that which Morris Gleitzman has nurtured. Writing thoughtful stories may be a way of exploring and reflecting for your students.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following books were read by the author in preparation for writing *Once*.

- *The King Of Children* by Betty Jean Lifton
- *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers' Diaries Of The Holocaust* edited by Alexander Zapruder
- *The Hidden Children* by Jane Marks
- *Words To Outlive Us: Eyewitness Accounts From The Warsaw Ghetto* edited by Michal Grynberg
- *Witness: Voices From The Holocaust* edited by Joshua M Greene & Shiva Kumar
- *A Childhood* by Jona Oberski
- *Maus* by Art Spiegelman
- *The Diary Of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank
- *Born Guilty* by Peter Sichrovsky
- *The Hidden Children* by Howard Greenfeld
- *Children Of The Ghetto* by Sheva Glas-Wiener
- *Konin: A Quest* by Theo Richmond
- *The Boys* by Martin Gilbert
- *Flares Of Memory: Stories Of Childhood During The Holocaust* edited by Anita Brostoff with Sheila Chamovitz
- *Yiddishland* by Gerard Silvain & Henri Minczeles
- *Children With A Star* by Deborah Dwork
- *Ghetto Diary* by Janusz Korczak



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