



TEACHERS' RESOURCES



Irena's Gift Karen Kirsten

Imagine receiving a letter that changes everything you know about your family. In 1942, in German-occupied Poland, a Jewish baby named Joasia was smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto in a backpack—saved by a daring act of love and bravery. She knew nothing about this extraordinary event until she was thirty-two, when a letter arrived from a stranger. That's when Joasia learned the parents who raised her were actually her aunt and uncle. Despite the secrecy surrounding her past, Joasia then hid this knowledge from her own daughter, Karen—until an innocent question revealed the truth.

Determined to understand the secrets that shrouded her family in silence, her own origins and to heal her mother's pain, Karen set out to uncover a hidden history and the choices and sacrifices that shaped her mother's life. When she exposes love and betrayal, narrow escapes from death, secret hiding places and even a daring negotiation with an SS officer who saved her mother—she must face the complicated realities of why people make the choices they do. *Irena's Gift* tells a story about acts of bravery that ripple across generations, and how courage hope and love can endure even in the darkest of times.

RECOMMENDED FOR

Ages 15+ (Years 10 to 12)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- Learning areas: English
- General capabilities: Literacy; Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

THEMES

- Identity and stereotypes
- Discrimination and dehumanisation
- The importance of being an 'upstander'
- Kindness and cruelty
- The emotional and psychological walls people build to cope with trauma
- The impact of war on displacement, migration and refugee families
- Finding hope in the face of tragedy

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Irena's Gift by Karen Kirsten

ABOUT KAREN KIRSTEN

A former business executive, Karen Kirsten is an Australian-American writer and Holocaust educator who speaks around the world on the power of empathy to bridge divides and save lives. *Irena's Gift* is a US National Jewish Book Award finalist, winner of Zibby Awards for Best Family Drama & Best Story of Overcoming and an Australian Jewish Book Award finalist.

CORE QUESTIONS & THEMES

Irena's Gift is a powerful, singular story about a daughter grappling with her mother's war-torn past and her own identity. The essential questions that weave through *Irena's Gift* are:

1. How does war and the aftermath of war affect individuals and their families?
2. How is our identity shaped—and reshaped—by our life-experiences?
3. How does tragedy influence people's identity and choices?

The book also raises timely questions about the effects of scapegoating and blaming an entire group/s of people for a country's troubles, the slippery slope from dehumanising to violence and the complex realities of displacement and migration. The interweaving of stories set before, during and after WWII and Karen's search for meaning in present times, will help students delve into themes that include:

- Identity and stereotypes.
- Discrimination and dehumanisation.
- The importance of being an 'upstander' (a person who speaks or acts in support of an individual or cause, particularly someone who

intervenes on behalf of a person being attacked or bullied).

- Kindness and cruelty.
- The emotional and psychological walls people build to cope with trauma.
- The impact of war on displacement, migration and refugee families.
- Finding hope in the face of tragedy.

The questions and activities outlined below are designed to enable students to quote from a text, summarise a text, determine ideas and explain how they are supported with evidence and analyse how and why individuals, events or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Irena's Gift is appropriate reading for students 15 years old and above (years 10-12), however teachers should read the text—or stand-alone selections that may be suitable for year 9 and above—to determine suitability for their individual students.

The Big Secret (chapters 1-5, 9)

Karen's mother, Joasia receives a letter from a stranger in Canada who tells her that Mietek and Alicja are not her parents but actually her aunt and uncle. Karen writes in chapter two:

'Most families harbour secrets, ordeals we'd rather forget, myths we invent to protect ourselves and those we love. The question is, how to keep secrets and preserve stories of our pasts without lying? And if we don't unravel the lies, how will we ever know the truth?'

As you read these chapters, focus on how Alicja and Mietek's choice to keep the secret about Joasia's birth parents impacted Joasia, themselves, their son Tony and others.

Questions and activities

1. Describe a time when you discovered a secret had been kept from you. Consider if there is such a thing as a 'good secret' and if it is ever ok to keep a secret. Critique the



circumstances under which keeping a secret would be acceptable and the potential consequences for doing so.

2. Interpret the reasons Karen chose to tell the story about the discovery of the ‘big secret’ from the perspective she did. Describe how that impacted your appreciation and understanding of the story.
3. *Activity:* Interview a parent or grandparent about a challenging or meaningful episode in their life. Ask open-ended questions instead of ones that elicit ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. (E.g. What do you remember most about ...? What did it look like? How did that situation make you feel?)

After, record your own feelings about that story. Then think about your own relationship with your parents or grandparents. Describe how their experiences might have shaped who you are.

Resources and links

- Access [teaching materials](#) and activities from Facing History & Ourselves on how to identify social and cultural factors that help shape our identities.
- [Watch this video](#) where Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie describes the effects labels can have on how we think about ourselves and others and then answer [these questions](#).

Life Before WWII (chapters 6-12)

Before war overtook Europe, Jewish families like Mietek’s, Dick’s and Alicja’s were building lives in vibrant, cosmopolitan cities like Warsaw. The interwar years were a period of promise, but also fragility. Poland had regained independence after more than a century of foreign partition, but democracy was young and unstable. Across Europe countries grappled with the aftershocks of World War I, rising nationalism, economic uncertainty and the creeping erosion of democratic principles.

As you read these chapters, pay close attention to how ordinary people lived and made plans for the

future during a time of escalating tension. What signs of political and social unrest were visible and how did Mietek, Alicja and Dick try to maintain a sense of normalcy? How might the world have looked to each of them? Also, pay attention to the various places Mietek, Alicja, and Dick call ‘home’ and how this changes as the war looms closer.

Questions and activities

- 1) Make a list of the spoken and unspoken rules where Alicja, Mietek and Dick live. Who makes the rules and how do they change over time? Describe how they are similar to or different from the spoken and unspoken rules of your home, school or community.
- 2) Brainstorm a list of qualities or characteristics that come to mind when you think of the word ‘home’. (Students can write this down in their notebooks individually, or collaborate by using sticky notes and sharing in groups.) Describe what ‘home’ is like for Alicja, Irena, Mietek and Dick. Write down what changes as war approaches, and what stays the same.
- 3) Reflect on Alicja and Dick’s identity before the war—their families, religious status, culture, values and traits.
- 4) Write a timeline of life in Poland for Karen’s family from the 1920s up until the war began on September 1, 1939.

Resources and links

- Access [teaching tools](#) on how to identify anti-Jewish racism and antisemitism and how students can deal with it in the classroom and their communities.
- [Read about the history of antisemitism](#) - how it began and how it has manifested throughout history.
- [Learn how World War I heightened divisions](#) between ‘we’ and ‘they’ among people and nations and left behind fertile ground for Nazi Germany to exploit in the following decades.
- Undertake this [timeline lesson](#) that encourages critical thinking about the relationship between Nazi policy, World War



II, historical events and individual experiences during the Holocaust.

- Access lesson plans and tools for teaching [The Holocaust And Human Behaviour](#) from Facing History & Ourselves.
- [Holocaust words glossary](#).
- A [chronology of the Holocaust](#).

Hidden By Everyday People (Roman Talikowski chapters 18-21. Maria Kaczyńska chapters 20, 37, 41.)

In these chapters, we meet several characters who face difficult choices. Roman, a shop owner and acquaintance of Alicja and Irena's father, Eljasz risks his life to smuggle food into the Warsaw ghetto to support Eljasz and his family. Roman also obtains false identity papers for Dick, helps find him a job and later arranges for Dick, Irena and Joasia to hide outside the ghetto in the home of Maria Kaczyńska.

Despite the death penalty imposed by the occupying Germans for aiding Jews, Maria accepts rent payment from Dick, and allows him, Irena and Joasia to hide in her attic.

As you read, consider the choices each character makes, the risks they take and the consequences for themselves and others.

Questions and activities

- 1) First, [watch this video](#) about what it means to be an 'upstander'.
- 2) *Exercise:*
 - a) Read [this explainer](#) about types of courage.
 - b) Divide your paper into 6 sections and give each section a heading according to the 6 types of courage.
 - c) In each section, provide an example of a time in your life when you have displayed or witnessed that type of courage. Use two colours, 1 for when you have displayed it and another colour for when you have witnessed it being displayed.
 - d) Possible whole class discussion to share and collate examples.

3) After the exercise, answer the following questions:

- a) Describe what it means to have moral courage.
- b) Outline the reasons one would choose to display moral courage.
- c) Outline the difficulties one faces when displaying moral courage.
- d) Synthesise the moral courage displayed by Roman with respect to the social and political conditions in Poland before and during the war.
- e) Identify another upstander in *Irena's Gift* who also demonstrated moral courage. Explain the type of courage they demonstrated and outline the reasons they chose to do so.
- f) Write about a time when you either demonstrated moral courage or lacked moral courage.

Resources and links

- Access [lesson plans](#) on how to be an upstander in your community.
- Read about the [criteria](#) used by Yad Vashem to determine who is awarded the title of 'Righteous Among the Nations'. (Roman, Maria, Sister Kornelia and Mother Superior Adolinska who saved Joasia, all received Righteous Among The Nations' awards posthumously.)
- Download a [2 page toolkit](#) with words and practical actions to use when faced with bullying and discrimination.

Imprisoned (chapters 24-28)

In the chaos of war-torn Poland, people were forced to make difficult choices. As Alicja said:

'I had to step out of the boundaries to survive'.

She did things she wouldn't have done in normal times. As you read, consider and identify the choices characters make in order to survive- and the choices ordinary people make to help, hinder or ignore those who are vulnerable to persecution and death.



Questions and activities

1. Make a list of any characters in *Irena's Gift* who choose to collaborate with the occupying Germans, those who are bystanders, perpetrators and those who are upstanders. Write down choices each character in your list made that impacted Alicja, Dick, Mietek and/or Joasia and Karen today. Now list alternative choices they could have made. Describe the factors that motivated their original choices, then discuss.
2. *Irena's Gift* delves into the nuances and complexities of history and human behaviour. The Nazi SS officer at Radom prison tortured and killed women yet preserved Alicja and Joasia's lives. Karen would not have been alive to write this book if he had not. Discuss how this challenges the idea of viewing people or actions as purely 'good' or 'evil'? How do we navigate this moral ambiguity in the context of war?
3. Read about '[choiceless choices](#)' Jewish people faced during the Holocaust and answer the questions, thinking about Karen's family while they were trying to escape, masquerading on false-papers, in hiding, in ghettos, in Radom prison, in the camps and after the war.
4. Dick risks his life for his daughter yet he later chooses to keep the true story about her origin secret. Explain why you think he kept this secret for so long, what other things he did not want revealed and why. (Chapters 34-36.) Analyse what you think this teaches us about human behaviour.

Resources and links

- Learn about [Perpetrators, Collaborators, and Bystanders in this Echoes & Reflections teaching unit](#) on moral complexity.
- Read about the choices [ordinary people](#) made during the Holocaust.

- Learn about the [slave labour](#) system Alicja, Mietek and Dick endured.

Freedom (chapters 29-31)

Describing himself and the men who marched with him to their freedom, Dick said: '*We were an apparition that emerged from another world, walking skeletons dressed in clownish prison garb with wooden clogs on our feet and strange numbers on our chests, a glint of fire and determination in our eyes*'.

For Alicja, '*the thought of telling the world about what the Nazis were inflicting on people had kept her going; dreaming of freedom had kept her alive*'.

As you read, consider this question: after years of war and dehumanising treatment, when did Alicja, Dick, Mietek, and Joasia know the war was truly over for them and when did they first feel hope for their future?

Questions and activities

1. Research and discuss who liberated the concentration camps and the military and civilian forces that helped liberate Europe.
2. Watch Hollywood directors John Ford and George Stevens interview Mietek on May 6th 1945 inside Dachau concentration camp: [part one](#) and [part two](#). (An extract of the interview is on display at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum.) Take note of and interpret Mietek's expressions, tone and body language. Write down what you think Mietek believed had happened to Alicja and Joasia and why you think prisoners voted for him to represent them and speak on their behalf with the Red Cross and Allied authorities.
3. Write down and then discuss how you think Joasia's experience of 'freedom' differed from the adults around her.
4. During his time in the camps Mietek composed 'revenge poems' that he repeated to Dick. They would sing them to well-known songs or anthems to remember them. Mietek composed this poem (translated to English) after the 'death march' from



Radom toward the trains for Auschwitz:

*Farther you unlucky clod
Into the world's murk you're sped
Rushed by the corpse's squad
By the devil's brother led*

*Without food, water, breath,
Grief tangled, heart torn.
No mercy nor cover left
When the revenge days dawn.*

Now, on a piece of paper divided into three columns, describe the physical and emotional challenges Alicja, Mietek and Dick each faced after liberation. List choices they each made to deal with those challenges. (Where possible, quote from the text.) Then list and reflect on any consequences you observe that manifested years later. Discuss with a partner or in a group.

Resources and links

- Take a [virtual tour](#) of the Melbourne Holocaust Museum and listen to Willy Lerma, Rosa Krakowski and Phillip Maisel describe liberation. (Exhibit numbers 25-27).
- [Watch a video](#) showing children liberated from Auschwitz.
- Access [a definition](#) of who the Allies were.
- [Access lesson plans and resources](#) from [Echoes & Reflections](#) on liberation and the physical and emotional challenges survivors faced.

Justice (chapters 30-36)

Mietek was unable to practice law in pre-war Poland due to racist policies barring Jewish lawyers at that time. But in the camps, it was Mietek's desire to see Nazis trialed and punished after the war that helped keep him alive. At night he would encourage his fellow prisoners to repeat details of atrocities committed by SS officers along with their names. After the US Army liberated Dachau on April 29th 1945, the Jewish prisoners elected Mietek as their leader and then the US Army hired him as administrator of the War Crimes Branch and as an 'Investigator Translator'. (See a [picture here](#) of Mietek dressed in U.S. Army uniform.)

As you read and investigate the links listed below, think about the concepts of revenge and justice and their legacy on individuals and societies, noticing the dilemmas faced in the aftermath of mass violence and genocide.

Questions and activities

- 1) Listen to testimony by [Alan Moskin](#) who helped liberate Guns kirchen Concentration Camp and [Benjamin Ferencz](#), a Nuremberg Trials prosecutor. Describe what justice looks like for them. Describe what 'justice' looks like in the book for Dick, Alicja, Mietek, Joasia and for Karen.
- 2) Watch [this film on the Nuremberg trials](#). Describe the Nuremberg and Dachau trials and list justice concepts and principles set up by the Allies that are still in place today.
- 3) Alicja and many survivors didn't speak about the atrocities they experienced because they couldn't believe that humankind could be so cruel and ruthless. Watch U.S. military Chief Prosecutor William Denson [explain](#) how one of the biggest problems was securing testimony that could be believed: the atrocities depicted were so monstrous.

Mietek told a journalist after the war-crimes trials about a sadistic guard the prisoners named, 'Bonecrusher', who at dusk, after his dastardly deeds, would stroll the compound with his wife singing lullabies to a baby in his arms. 'They looked no different from scores of people you might see in any city street,' he said. 'This deceived the Americans – who had no experience of Nazi dual personalities – into leniency on many occasions'. Write down and then discuss what you think all this tells us about human behaviour.
- 4) Describe how reading about the SS officer who helped Alicja save Joasia's life has impacted how you understand people. (Chapters 24 and 25.)



- 5) In 1939 before the war, Polish Jews numbered 3.3 million, close to 10% of Poland's population of 32 million. During WWII, 3.1 million Polish Jews were murdered, 90% of the pre-war population. (Tragically, [1.8-1.9 million non-Jewish Polish civilians](#) were also killed.)

Since the 1960s, around [7,320](#) Polish people have been awarded 'Righteous Among The Nations' for saving or trying to save Jewish lives, representing .02% of Poland's prewar population. Analyse why you think so few people acted to help Jewish people.

Resources and links

- Learn about the [Nuremberg](#) and other [postwar trials](#).
- [Watch testimony](#) from people who liberated camps and participated in war crimes trials.
- Read about the [Dachau Trials](#) and take a 360' tour of an exhibition.
- Access additional [material and lesson plans on Justice And Judgement After The Holocaust](#) from Facing History & Ourselves.

Refugees – Memory, Living with Trauma and How it Affects Future Generations. (chapters 32-36, 38)

When we read *Irena's Gift*, we're not just learning about history, we're learning about the lives of individuals whose experiences were shaped by the Holocaust long after it ended. As you read, consider how the story of one family—Karen's family—offers a different understanding of the Holocaust compared to one informed by statistics, facts or dates alone.

Questions and activities

1. Describe what this story teaches us about the importance of memory and what role memory plays in *how* the story is told. How can sharing a

story like this be a form of justice or an act of resistance?

2. Write down and discuss the impact of Alicja not speaking about her experiences on herself and on others.
3. Describe how Joasia's relationship with Alicja changed over time, and also Karen's relationship with her mother, Joasia. Discuss why you think these changes occurred and any advice you may have for people who have endured tragedy and loss.
4. Australia is almost 14,000 kilometers from Poland. Describe how and why Karen's family made the journey to settle in Australia.
5. Find an example of someone, (perhaps in your neighbourhood or in your own family) who has experienced similar displacement. Make a list of the challenges they faced and how they attempted to overcome them.
6. In what ways were the experiences of Jewish refugees after the Holocaust the same and different from those of refugees today? Analyse and discuss why it is important to examine both the differences and the common threads between them.
7. A recurring theme in *Irena's Gift* is how those who have endured traumas often erect emotional barriers to suppress traumatic memories. Write down how Joasia handled the various traumas inflicted on her. Discuss how you think living with traumatised people and writing this book has affected Karen.
8. Reflect on Alicja and Dick's identity *after* the war—their families, religious status, culture, values and traits. Compare to what you noted about their identities before the war and discuss any differences you may find.
9. People often cling to stereotypes and characteristics that they believe represent a group of people. Write a list of any assumptions you had before reading *Irena's Gift* about what it means to be Jewish. Next, describe the impact reading *Irena's Gift* had on those assumptions.



10. Discuss why you think Karen chose to write this book and reflect on what you think *Irena's Gift* says about the world today.
11. Discuss the meaning of the book's title: *Irena's Gift*.

Resources and links

- Read about the [fate of Jewish refugees](#) between 1936-1945.
- Read [Karen's essay](#) about the 'White Australia Policy', Australia's immigration response to Jewish persecution in Europe and how it impacted Mietek and his family.
- Watch [stories of child Holocaust survivors who migrated to Australia](#) and learn about their hopes and challenges.

This guide was produced with help from:

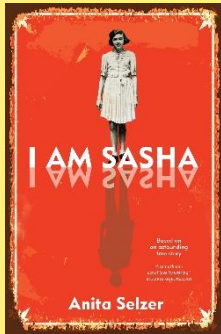
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FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



I Am Sasha **by Anita Selzer**

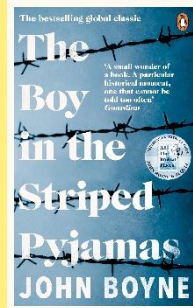
It is German-occupied Poland in 1942 and Jewish lives are at risk. Nazi soldiers order young boys to pull down their trousers to see if they are circumcised. Many are summarily shot or sent to the camps.

A remarkable mother takes an ingenious step. To avoid suspicion, she trains her teenage son to be a girl: his clothing, voice, hair, manners and more.

Together, mother and son face incredible odds as their story sweeps backwards and forwards across occupied Europe.

One boy's extraordinary experience of wartime survival. One mother's incredible courage. Based on an astounding true story.

Teachers' resources



The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas **by John Boyne**

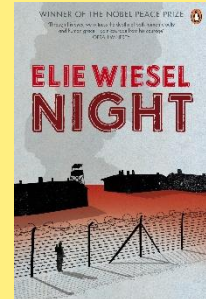
'A small wonder of a book . . . A particular historical moment, one that cannot be told too often'
Guardian

What happens when innocence is confronted by monstrous evil?

Nine-year-old Bruno knows nothing of the Final Solution and the Holocaust. He is oblivious to the appalling cruelties being inflicted on the people of Europe by his country. All he knows is that he has been moved from a comfortable home in Berlin to a house in a desolate area where there is nothing to do and no-one to play with. Until he meets Shmuel, a boy who lives a strange parallel existence on the other side of the adjoining wire fence and who, like the other people there, wears a uniform of striped pyjamas.

Bruno's friendship with Shmuel will take him from innocence to revelation. And in exploring what he is unwittingly a part of, he will inevitably become subsumed by the terrible process.

Teachers' resources available.



Night **by Elie Wiesel and Marion Wiesel**

Born into a Jewish ghetto in Hungary, as a child, Elie Wiesel was sent to the Nazi

concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

This is his account of that atrocity: the ever-increasing horrors he endured, the loss of his family and his struggle to survive in a world that stripped him of humanity, dignity and faith. Describing in simple terms the tragic murder of a people from a survivor's perspective, *Night* is among the most personal, intimate and poignant of all accounts of the Holocaust. A compelling consideration of the darkest side of human nature and the enduring power of hope, it remains one of the most important works of the twentieth century.

Teachers' resources available.



ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
<i>Irena's Gift</i>	Karen Kirsten	9781761340055	10-12	\$19.99		
<i>I Am Sasha</i>	Anita Selzer	9780143785743	10-12	\$19.99		
<i>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</i>	John Boyne	9780552773805	7-9	\$24.99		
<i>Night</i>	Elie Wiesel and Marion Wiesel	9780141038995	10-12	\$26.99		
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