

insight text guide

Timothy Roberts

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Once

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Morris Gleitzman

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► innovative ► engaging ► evolving

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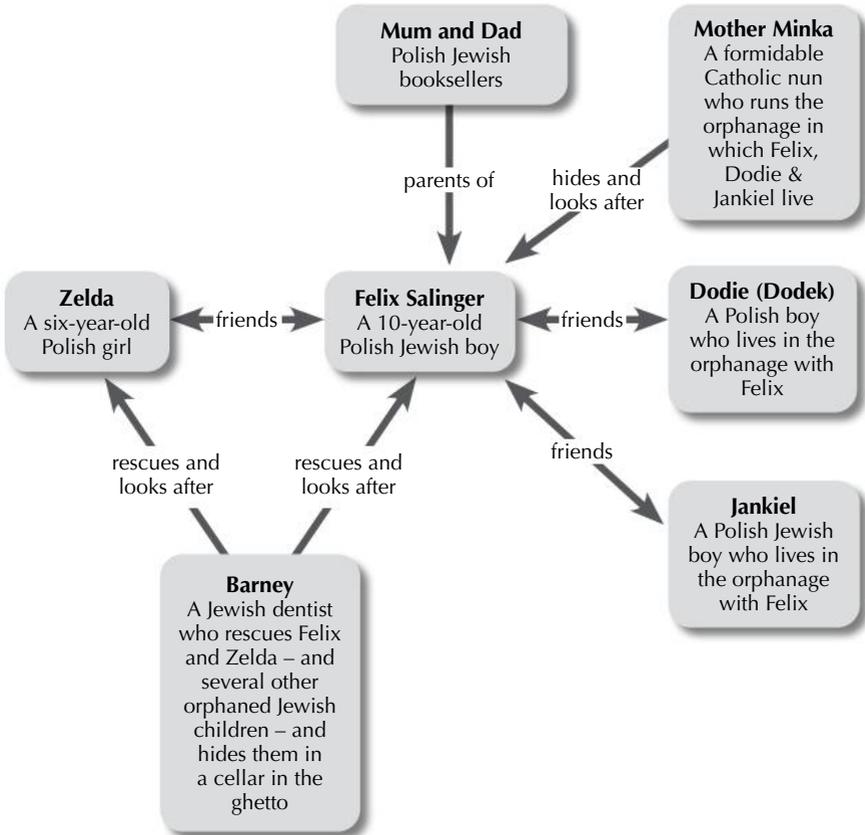
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CHARACTER MAP



OVERVIEW

About the author

Morris Gleitzman is one of Australia's most popular children's authors. Born in England, he moved to Australia when he was sixteen years old. After graduating from university, he worked as a screenwriter for ten years, including on *The Norman Gunston Show* – one of the defining programs of Australian television – in its 1970s heyday.

Gleitzman started writing children's books in the 1980s. His breakout success, *Two Weeks with the Queen*, was published in 1989. This hard-hitting novel explores the illness AIDS and displays Gleitzman's ability to tackle serious subjects with lightness and humour, making them appealing to younger audiences who might be reluctant to read about the topics in more serious works.

We see this talent again in *Once*, which is the first book in a series. The character of Felix features in six further novels – *Then, Now, After, Soon, Maybe* and *Always* – which follow his life during the Holocaust ('the Holocaust' is the name of the period during World War II in which the Nazis executed genocide against European Jewish people). The series also covers the period after the Holocaust, where Felix deals with the challenges he encounters as he grows up and attempts to cope with the trauma he experienced when he was a child.

Gleitzman has written many other highly acclaimed children's books. His other titles explore the bizarre and lighthearted aspects of growing up, including relationships, bodily changes and peer pressure. The novels delve deeply into the absurd, the gross and the zany. Gleitzman is a master of gross humour. Using the body as a source of gags is ideal for younger audiences, who have propelled Gleitzman's works, including *Bumface* and *Misery Guts*, to bestsellers. Several of his more body-related books are co-authored with Australian writer Paul Jennings, another expert on the unusual and the disgusting. Together, they have

proved that the embarrassing situations often experienced by young people can be fertile ground for humour.

Gleitzman also has an uncanny ability to write about situations from unusual perspectives that challenge our expectations. For example, his *Toad* series of novels is narrated by Limpy, a cane toad who gets into dangerous scrapes with humans because he is a despised animal that people instinctively seek to destroy. The *Toad* series is a great example of Gleitzman's gift: by making a hated animal into a funny and endearing character, he turns our expectations upside down. By doing this, Gleitzman shows his support of the underdog, defending the rights of the individual against hostile forces.

As an author with Jewish heritage, Gleitzman has a personal connection with the Holocaust. In the letter to the reader at the end of *Once*, he tells the story of visiting his family's ancestral home of Kraków in Poland. Although Gleitzman's grandfather left Poland years before World War II began, many of his relatives perished in the Holocaust.

In acknowledgement of his services to children's literature, Gleitzman served as Australian Children's Laureate from 2018 to 2019.

Synopsis

It is 1942 in Nazi-occupied Poland. Felix is a ten-year-old Jewish Polish boy living – hidden – in a Catholic orphanage. Felix's parents took him to live with the nuns in 1939 for his safety. His parents promised to come back for him and Felix dreams of the day they will return, passing the time writing adventure stories featuring his parents as the heroes.

One day, some strange men called Nazis arrive at the orphanage and set fire to the library books that were written by Jewish authors that they find in the library. Felix decides to run away to warn his parents – who are Jewish booksellers – that their books are in danger; Felix thinks his parents are overseas, so he plans to travel to his parents' bookshop in his home town to hide their books from the Nazis.

Felix sets out for his home town. Along the way, he finds a house that has been abandoned quickly and recently by its Jewish occupants. After he leaves he hears gunshots and sees an animal truck packed with half-naked people. He tries to flag down an army truck, but one of the soldiers shoots at him and only just misses. Felix doesn't understand these events, but he tries to explain them by using his limited knowledge, experiences and imagination.

When he arrives home, Felix finds another family living in his parents' apartment. Their shop has been emptied of books. Two residents of the town – Mr Kopek and a little girl – tell him that Nazis have taken away all the town's Jewish people.

Felix tries to piece together the snippets of information he has been given. He decides that the Nazis must hate Jewish booksellers and their Jewish customers and have taken all of them – including his parents – to the city. So, he sets off for the city.

Felix sees a house on fire and finds its owners shot dead and their small daughter, Zelda, lying unconscious outside. Felix takes Zelda to safety, but he decides not to tell her yet that her parents are dead. He discovers that Zelda also enjoys storytelling.

Felix and Zelda see a large group of Jewish people being forced by Nazis with guns to walk along a road towards the city. The children are discovered and are forced to join the group. Felix wonders if he's wrong about the Nazis hating Jewish books; he wonders whether they hate all Jewish people.

When they reach the city, the adult Jewish people enter the ghetto. (During World War II, ghettos were walled-off areas in cities where Jewish people were confined. Conditions in ghettos were harsh: they were overcrowded and people lived in poverty.) However, children are not allowed in this ghetto; instead, they are being forced into a truck. Felix and Zelda are rescued by a Jewish dentist called Barney, who takes them to a cellar inside the ghetto, where he is hiding some other children who have lost their parents.

Barney and the other children discover Felix's gift for storytelling. Felix gathers more information about the Nazis and realises that his parents told him a story, not the truth, when they left him at the orphanage. The story saved his life. Felix has started to like stories less than he once did.

Felix tells Zelda the true story about her parents' deaths. The other children tell their own stories about how their families died or were tortured, mixing fantasy with reality. Felix knows he needs a plan to save his parents from the Nazis.

Barney tries to tell Felix the true story of what is happening: the city's Jews are not being taken to work in the countryside, like the Nazis said, but to camps where they are all killed. He talks about Felix's parents in the past tense: as if they are dead. Felix sees that Barney is telling the truth, but he finds this story unbelievable: he can't accept it as true. He decides he is finished with stories.

Zelda becomes ill. Felix sneaks out of the cellar to find medicine for her. She has given him her locket, and he sees that, in the photo inside, her dad is dressed in a Nazi uniform. However, Felix decides that Zelda still deserves his help.

The Nazis discover the cellar where Barney and the children are hiding. Barney and the children are forced to go to the railway station, where they are thrown into a train carriage full of other Jewish people.

In the carriage, Felix gives people pages from his precious notebook to use as toilet paper. When he runs out of blank pages, he gives the pages with the stories about his parents written on them.

Some people manage to squeeze through a hole in the carriage wall and jump out of the moving train. A few escape, but others are shot dead by soldiers sitting on top of the train.

Felix, Zelda and one of the other girls, Chaya, decide to jump out of the train. Barney and the others decide to stay on the train. Felix hugs Barney goodbye and feels syringes in Barney's coat pocket. He realises they have anaesthetic in them: if the train goes to a concentration camp, Barney will euthanise the children with the anaesthetic rather than let

them experience the horrors of the gas chambers or suffer the horrendous conditions of the camp.

Chaya doesn't survive the leap from the train, but Felix and Zelda do. They agree, sadly, that they are lucky.

Character summaries

Felix Salinger

Felix is a ten-year-old Polish Jewish boy. When we meet him at the start of the novel, he has been living in a Catholic orphanage in Nazi-occupied Poland for three years and eight months. Felix is a trusting, generous, kind, thoughtful and open-minded soul. He finds it difficult to comprehend the events he experiences and tries to explain and process them using his gift for storytelling. Eventually, he is forced to face the reality of the Nazis' terrible actions.

Dodie (Dodek)

'Dodie' is Felix's affectionate nickname for one of his best friends in the orphanage: a boy called Dodek. Dodie's parents 'died of sickness when he was three' (p.5). Felix tries to make Dodie's life better.

Jankiel

Jankiel is another boy living at the orphanage; he was sent there after his parents froze to death. When we meet him, Jankiel has only been at the orphanage for two weeks. Felix also tries to make Jankiel's life better. The text implies that Jankiel is Jewish (he's scared of the Nazis who arrive at the orphanage; also, Jankiel is a Jewish name). Jankiel tries to persuade Felix not to run away from the orphanage, warning him that it's too dangerous.

Mum and Dad

The reader only sees these two characters in Felix's memories. We learn that his parents were middle-class booksellers who adored their son. Felix presumes they've been forced to flee Poland because they were selling books the Nazis don't like, but eventually he realises they have probably been murdered for being Jewish.

Mother Minka

Mother Minka is the formidable Catholic nun who runs the orphanage. She has a good heart and a strong independent mind, and displays courage in hiding Felix from the Nazis as she could be severely punished for helping a Jewish boy.

Wiktór Radzyn

Wiktór is a ten-year-old Polish boy who was in the same class at school as Felix before he went to the orphanage. Wiktór is from a working-class family that is not Jewish. When Felix returns home, he discovers that Wiktór and his parents are living in Felix's family's apartment and using the shop for their own second-hand clothing business.

Zelda

Zelda is a six-year-old Polish girl. Her persistent rebelliousness, as well as her reluctance to defer to Felix or anyone else, makes her initially seem like a difficult person. Yet Zelda's glowing spark of life amid the greyness, her refusal to buckle under, makes her particularly appealing. Felix meets Zelda after her parents are murdered. She becomes his companion, and they stay together for the rest of the journey narrated by the text. Towards the end of the novel, Felix discovers that Zelda's father was a Nazi.

Barney

Barney – a kindly Jewish dentist who is highly educated (he studied dentistry and speaks two languages) – is Felix’s saviour in the novel’s second half. When we meet him, Barney has rescued several orphaned Jewish children and has hidden them in a cellar in the ghetto. He courageously breaks the curfew to provide dental treatment to other Jewish people. He also bravely gives dental treatment to a Nazi in exchange for food to feed the children. In his low-key way, Barney is the true hero of *Once*. At great personal risk, he quietly puts everything on the line to save a group of orphans. In the end, he sacrifices his own safety so he can continue to care for the children who have no one else.

Mr Kopek

Mr Kopek lives in Felix’s home town. Like the Radzyns, he is working-class and not Jewish; but unlike them he shows courage and compassion in putting himself in danger to warn Felix and to give him food.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical setting

In *Once*, the story is set in a real-life historical setting: Poland during World War II. Many of the places in the novel exist and many of the events depicted actually took place.

Poland, 1942

Once takes place in Nazi-occupied Poland in 1942. The Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler, rose to power in Germany in 1933, and in 1939, German forces invaded Poland: an event signifying the beginning of World War II. One of the Nazis' goals was to destroy the nation of Poland and make the country German territory. In the early years of the war, the Nazis killed thousands of Poland's social, academic, religious, medical and educational leaders to destroy Polish culture and prevent uprisings.

Persecution and genocide

Hitler had a plan called the 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question', which involved the deliberate and systematic extermination of European Jews and Jewish culture. The persecution and genocide of Jewish people was implemented over a decade in stages of increasingly repressive measures. First, Jewish people living in Nazi-occupied territory like Poland were forced to display a Jewish star on their house and to wear an armband identifying themselves as Jewish. Next, anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) laws were brought in, such as those that made it illegal for Jewish people to work in many white-collar professions, run businesses or own property. Jewish property was confiscated and given to citizens who were approved of by the Nazis. Next, Jewish people were imprisoned in ghettos before being transported to concentration camps (sites where mass executions took place).

Many of these events are represented in *Once*: Felix notes that Barney is 'wearing a Jewish armband' when he first sees him (p.74); Felix's parents' bookshop has been shut down and his family home taken possession of by the Polish (and non-Jewish, likely Catholic) Radzyn family; Felix's mum and dad have been 'transported to the city' (p.46); Barney and the children hide in a cellar in a ghetto; and at the end of the book they are on a train being taken to a concentration camp.

The book burning at the orphanage also reflects events that took place during World War II. Burning books written by Jewish authors was part of the plan to destroy Jewish culture. However, many other types of books were burned by the Nazis: essentially, anything that contradicted fascist Nazism, so books by communist and socialist authors were also destroyed. This is an extreme example of censorship. By the end of the war, in 1945, three million Polish Jews had been killed by the Nazis. Overall, six million Jewish people were murdered by the Nazis and their allies during World War II.

Nazi collaborators and the Polish resistance

During World War II, some Polish citizens were Nazi collaborators. Collaborators were individuals, businesses and groups who, despite not being part of Nazi Germany, supported the Nazis' policies and actions, including the persecution of Jewish people. People chose to 'join the Nazis' (p.136) for financial benefit, or because they agreed with the Nazis' views or actions, or purely to survive. Many collaborators were coerced (forced to collaborate by others using threats or violence).

It is unsurprising that Chaya (one of Barney's orphans) and others in her position feel bitter about Polish collaborators: people in her own country not only failed to protect Polish Jews but actively turned against them. After Zelda gives Felix her locket, he realises that her parents must have joined the Nazis, since her father is 'wearing a uniform. A Nazi uniform' in the photograph (p.129). Chaya also recognises this when she sees the photo.

On the other hand, many Polish citizens took the opposite course of action, and joined the underground Polish resistance movement (called the Home Army), which included Jewish fighters. (Barney alludes to the resistance movement when he suggests that they are likely responsible for the death of Zelda's Nazi-aligned parents, p.136.) The Home Army was loyal to the Polish Government-in-exile in London and fought against the Nazi occupiers by, for example, sabotaging German rail and road transport to disrupt supply lines to German troops, providing information to the Allies, and engaging in battles with the Germans.

In 1943, not long after the events of *Once*, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising took place: this was a month-long revolt by the people living in the ghetto in the Polish city of Warsaw. The uprising was an act of resistance against the treatment of Polish Jews and particularly the forced deportation of Jews to concentration camps. In *Once*, the tensions in the cellar and the ghetto illustrate the fear and frustration that were mounting at this time, and that led to the uprising. The uprising resulted in the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and the deaths of hundreds of Germans and tens of thousands of Jewish people.

Janusz Korczak

The character of Barney was inspired by Janusz Korczak (1878–1942), a Polish Jewish author and doctor who ran an orphanage in Warsaw. Korczak stayed with the children in his care when the Nazis sent them to a concentration camp, despite his friends' offers to help him escape (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2020).

Dramatic irony

In *Once*, Gleitzman uses dramatic irony. This is a literary device where readers have access to information that the characters do not have. Dramatic irony creates suspense and tension, as the reader anticipates the moment at which all is revealed. Many readers of *Once* likely know

about the Holocaust and understand the true meaning behind many of the events Felix innocently describes and misunderstands.

Dramatic irony involves the characters and the readers giving different meanings to the same situation, and in *Once* this sometimes produces a sense of unbalance and humour, although this humour often adds pathos (a feeling of sympathetic sadness) to the scene. For example, when Felix finds Zelda unconscious, he wonders ‘What sort of people would kill a little kid just for the sake of some books?’ (p.52). Gleitzman uses Felix’s confusion to remind readers that there was no logical, sane reason for the Holocaust and it was an inexplicable horror.

At other times, irony makes Felix’s comments take on a far greater weight than he is aware of. For example, his pronouncement that ‘things are finally improving for Jewish booksellers’ (p.3) is poignant, because we know this is not true. Similarly, when Felix confidently says of a Nazi officer, ‘I think when he hears about what’s happened to Mum and Dad he’ll want to help them’ (p.103), we know how incompatible this is with the Nazis’ aim to exterminate Jewish people.

Readers – with the benefit of historical hindsight and knowledge of the Holocaust – understand the implications of Felix’s journey but Felix is only able to understand the immediate context around him.

GENRE, STRUCTURE & LANGUAGE

Genre

Historical fiction

Set in Poland during World War II (1939–1945), *Once* is a work of historical fiction. Historical novels use real historical settings (such as places and events) as backdrops for fictional stories of individuals who are either imagined (Felix) or based on actual historical figures (Barney). (See 'Historical setting' on page 8 for more information about the real-life setting of *Once* and how historical events are depicted in the book.)

By presenting readers with the subjective and emotional experiences of characters – instead of concentrating on the facts of historical events, as nonfiction texts tend to do – historical fiction aspires to break down the barriers of understanding between the past and the present, and to help us imagine how people might have felt at different times in history.

Interestingly, Gleitzman does not sugar-coat the confronting realities of the Holocaust to protect his young readers; instead, he cleverly filters disturbing facts through the protagonist's (Felix's) awakening realisation. This allows Gleitzman to convey a sense of mounting horror without flinching from the details, prompting the reader to feel what Felix is feeling as he gradually learns the truth. Using the first-person perspective of a character who doesn't yet know the full truth of the situation helps prevent readers' hindsight bias, which results from our pre-existing knowledge of the Holocaust. This helps us not only to empathise with the protagonist, but also to become immersed in the atmosphere of fear, bewilderment and confusion that people experienced at the time.

Children's Holocaust literature

Once is part of an extensive sub-genre of historical fiction: literature set during the Holocaust, with children or young adults as the protagonists

and, in some cases, written (as *Once* is) for a young adult readership. Another work of Holocaust literature that presents a young person's point of view is one of the most famous memoirs of all time: the diary of a Jewish girl named Anne Frank. In her diary, Anne recorded her experiences of hiding from the Nazis in an attic in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands. Anne's observations, like Felix's, are from a child's perspective, although she was a little older than Felix; she wrote her diaries (later published under the title *The Diary of a Young Girl*) as a young adolescent. Tragically, Anne's hiding place was discovered, and she died in a concentration camp in 1945.

While Felix's and Anne's stories share a historical setting, there is an interesting contrast between their levels of awareness of the events occurring around them. Anne was perceptive and insightful about the danger she and her family were in and wrote in detail about the Nazis' treatment of German and Dutch Jews (as well as her personal journey towards young adulthood) with a mature humanitarian perspective. Felix, on the other hand, has, since the age of six, been sheltered in a rural orphanage and has no knowledge of the political tensions leading to the war; he had not even heard of Nazis until they arrived at the orphanage to burn books. Gleitzman chooses to tell Felix's story from a naive perspective that allows us to join Felix on his journey of coming to terms with the horror of what is going on around him.

Other books that tell Holocaust stories from young protagonists' perspectives include *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006) by John Boyne, which is about two boys of a similar age to Felix: Bruno, the son of a German Commandant at a concentration camp, and Shmuel, a Jewish boy imprisoned at the camp. Another example of the genre is Australian novelist Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), which features nine-year-old Liesel as the protagonist. Set in Nazi Germany during the war, *The Book Thief* shares with *Once* a focus on literature and storytelling as a central theme alongside the portrayals of the distressing aspects of war. Other novels in the genre include *The Librarian of Auschwitz* by Antonio Iturbe (2012), which is based on the true story of a teenager

who takes on the risky responsibility of protecting precious books in a concentration camp; RJ Palacio's graphic novel *White Bird* (2019); and Katrina Nannestad's *Waiting for the Storks* (2022), which is set in Poland.

Structure

Overall, the structure of *Once* is linear (events are told in a chronological order). However, the story in *Once* is complicated in small but interesting ways, such as by Gleitzman's use of flashbacks and tense shifts.

Flashbacks

Flashbacks are scenes that interrupt the chronological narrative and take the reader – briefly – back to an earlier time. The story's linear structure is frequently punctuated by Felix's vivid memories of his past life. However, each memory quickly vanishes as he returns to the present, leaving only a tantalising glimpse of what he has lost.

The flashbacks show the stark contrast between the life Felix experienced as a young boy and his present circumstances. In some cases, a description beginning 'You know how when ...' (pp.1, 9) evokes his previous experiences rather than describing them directly. For example, Felix prompts the reader to remember 'You know how when you have a haircut or a tooth comes out, your parents carry on about how you must be the kid who belongs to the shoe mender down the street?' (p.9). It's an oddly specific image, and the framing of it as a common memory ('You know') suggests that Felix hasn't yet learned that others may not share his exact experiences.

However, as Felix's story darkens and he loses hope that his parents are alive, the role of these flashbacks radically changes. At an early point, while distressed, Felix tries to comfort himself with 'Mum's smell. The way Dad's hair falls into his eyes when he's reading' (p.53). These memories help him, because at this point, Felix still believes he will be able to return to his earlier life. However, later – when his parents' likely fate can no longer be denied – the recollections no longer provide

comfort for him. For example, after recalling his parents' promise that he could have a dog one day, he scolds himself: 'Stop it. Stop thinking about them' (p.126). The flashbacks retain their power to resurrect his vanished childhood world, but this has become painful. Each excursion into the past is now a heartbreaking reminder of what he has lost forever.

Losing the soothing power of recollection, Felix forces himself to accept the present by denying himself his memories. He instinctively understands the trap of nostalgia (dwelling on the past), even though his current existence is filled with suffering.

Tense shifts

Unusually, each of *Once's* seventeen chapters begins with a brief passage using the past tense before it shifts into the present tense. For example, Chapter 2 starts with 'Once I stayed awake all night, waiting for Mum and Dad to arrive. They didn't. They haven't. But it's alright.'

Many of the chapter openings in past tense are striking for their casual tone; it's as if we're reading a line from a fantastical adventure story rather than a traumatic Holocaust narrative. And that's precisely the point. Faced with a world that seems utterly implausible, Felix connects his experiences with his beloved children's adventure tales of bravery and heroism. Drawing on these fictional tales, Felix tries to construct a narrative to help him interpret the world and the terrifying events around him, perhaps even neutralising some of the fear and trauma by framing them in the safer context of the fiction he has grown up loving.

In the brief snippets at the beginning of each chapter, especially in the first half of the novel, we're encouraged to see Felix as a fictional hero. (For example, Chapter 4 opens with '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.')

Then, in the rest of each chapter, the unrealistic view of Felix as a heroic character is gradually deflated, revealing that our ideals of heroism are a fantasy. Unlike Felix's dreams of excitement and adventure – which are based on fictional adventure stories – brave deeds are more frequently carried out in unglamorous circumstances.

Language

Childlike narrative voice

An immediately noticeable aspect of *Once* is the contrast between the childlike narrative voice and the profound intensity of the setting. Why might an author choose to filter such a serious topic through an innocent boy's voice? Doesn't this undermine the gravity of the brutality being described?

Despite appearances, Felix's frenetic, chaotic way of expressing himself isn't incompatible with seriousness. In fact, the open-hearted, honest, sincere way in which he speaks makes his narration more poignant. His honesty makes him more vulnerable, as he lacks the protection provided by deception and concealment in speech. This kind of protection is demonstrated by Mother Minka when she calls him 'Felek' in front of one of the Nazis who comes to the orphanage (p.19). 'Felek' is a Polish version of the name 'Felix'; it is likely that Mother Minka calls him 'Felek' to make him seem more ethnically Polish and to hide his Jewish heritage.

The ahistorical voice

Felix's voice is an example of the 'ahistorical voice'. This is very tricky to pull off as the voice must sound modern (so the audience will identify with the protagonist and be immersed in their world and see things as they see them) but with no (or few) jarring historical anachronisms. An ahistorical voice must include contemporary speech patterns, vocabulary and world view; however, these must be present without being visible.

Flat descriptions

Despite Felix's habitually exuberant style of expressing ideas and telling stories, a striking characteristic of *Once* is the flatness of Felix's descriptions of the cruelty and traumatic events he witnesses. For example, he describes the procession of Jewish people walking to the city as follows: 'The soldiers have all got guns. None of the people have. The soldiers seem to want the people to go faster' (p.59). The repetition of 'the soldiers' has a numbing effect, and the short, factual, unemotional sentences contribute to the impression that Felix is detached from the disturbing scene.

Gleitzman may be implying here that Felix's violently disrupted world has reduced his emotional responses. It's no wonder that he can only speak of these appalling sights very briefly, without expansion or adornment. Anything more detailed would overwhelm him.

Repetition

The use of repetition in *Once* has various effects: it helps create a familiar world, it emphasises themes and ideas, it creates humour, and it builds tension and expectations regarding what is about to happen.

Examples of repetition in *Once* include:

- The repetition of the book's title word 'Once' at the start of each chapter creates a structural pattern that shapes the novel. The word also alludes to the fairytales and adventure stories Felix is so fond of (with its implied reference to 'Once upon a time ...').
- Zelda's frequent refrain 'Don't you know anything?' (e.g. p.56) helps develop her character as a confident, sometimes bossy six-year-old and adds humour to some of her interactions. Zelda's frequent use of this phrase throughout the novel means we cannot miss the significance and poignancy of the moment in the second-last chapter when, for the first time, she says 'Felix knows' (p.147). The surprising change in her phrase highlights both the firm friendship and trust she and Felix have built, and the extent to which Felix has grown and developed on his journey.

- Felix frequently prays to or thanks 'God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope and Adolf Hitler' (e.g. p.1). This phrase becomes a kind of character tic for him and often accompanies amusing moments. Later, when he learns about Hitler's actions, the dictator's name is replaced by 'Richmal Crompton' (the author of Felix's beloved William books). The repetition of the initial phrase primes us for the significance of the shift when Hitler is removed from it.
- Felix repeats certain phrases, such as 'I wait for my imagination to come up with something' (e.g. p.89) and 'You know how when ...' (e.g. p.1). Felix often uses one of these phrases as he tries to find a way of describing a bizarre or frightening situation in which he finds himself. This use of repetition helps to develop Felix's character, to make us feel connected with his thought patterns, and to add humour.

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER ANALYSIS

Chapters 1–3 (pp.1–26)

Summary: *It's 1942 in Nazi-occupied Poland. We meet Felix, a ten-year-old Jewish boy who has been living in a Catholic orphanage for three years and eight months. His parents took him to live at the Catholic orphanage in 1939 after the anti-Semitic Nazis invaded Poland. Felix is eternally hopeful that his parents will return and take him home. Felix tries to help his friends and to make sense of what he sees using the tools available to him: his limited experiences, the books he's read and his imagination. His explanations are not accurate but they have a certain logic. Unfortunately, Felix fails to recognise the danger he's in.*

It's hard to think of a more unexpected beginning to a Holocaust story than Felix's opening confession that he 'almost caused a riot ... because of the carrot' (p.1). Surely something as banal as a carrot couldn't have any relevance to the brutal Nazi occupation of Poland? Similarly, in this opening scene, Felix's description of how he uses 'Dodie's slurping noises to guide me in' is unexpectedly funny. Yet this beginning is the perfect introduction to Felix's zany worldview.

We're given a taste of one of the wartime hardships – hunger due to food shortages – endured by the boys at the orphanage. Times are hard for everyone in Poland. At one meal, Mother Minka advises Felix that 'If you've found an insect in your bowl, just eat it and be grateful' (p.3).

Felix is greatly looking forward to being home again with his parents. He believes his miserable situation is temporary. Felix's breeziness clashes with the glum mood of the other orphans; this cheerfulness remains a stable feature of his personality even as his journey progresses and there is less and less to be positive about.

We soon learn two more important things about Felix's personality: he's relentlessly creative and naturally kind. For example, to secure his friend's – an orphan named Dodek (Dodie) – first turn in the bath, he tells Mother Minka that as a future doctor, Dodie must be hygienic (p.7).

It's an absurdly implausible, over-the-top fib, but it shows the extreme measures Felix is prepared to take to help his friends.

Felix is a born storyteller. He has a notebook 'full of stories' that he has written about his parents (p.10). His gift is in high demand, and he uses his ingenuity to help his companions. For example, he spins a hard-luck story about a new boy, Jankiel, distracting 'the torture squad' (p.13) as they prepare to flush Jankiel's head in a toilet.

One question quickly arises for the reader: Why is Felix in an orphanage if his parents are still alive? His faith in their wellbeing seems questionable. Then, when a car enters the orphanage grounds, Felix, 'numb with disappointment', realises that it isn't carrying his parents; instead, 'it's just a bunch of men in suits with armbands' (p.12) who he deduces 'are probably just officials from Catholic head office' (p.12). To readers, Felix's reaction seems odd: it's three years into Germany's occupation of Poland and Felix doesn't recognise the men as Nazis and, as a Jewish boy, he seems completely oblivious to the danger they pose to himself. This builds on the surprise readers felt in Chapter 1 when we realise that a Jewish boy's standard prayer involves Hitler: 'Thank you God, Jesus, Mary, the Pope and Adolf Hitler' (pp.2–3). We are realising that Felix doesn't know as much about his situation as we know.

The official-looking men start a fire in the courtyard and burn books from the orphanage's library. Felix is heartbroken at the sight of books being 'hurt' and he thinks of his beloved parents, who are booksellers. He surmises that the men are 'professional librarians in professional librarian armbands' (p.18); he does not realise why they are burning the books or comprehend the seriousness of what is happening. This example of his naivety reflects both his sheltered existence to this point and his characteristic positivity and imaginativeness.

Felix also doesn't realise that the presence of the Nazis at the orphanage means that he's in danger. Mother Minka's reassurance of 'But don't worry. They don't suspect you're Jewish' (p.20) confirms what readers have guessed: that Mother Minka is hiding Felix in the orphanage and concealing the fact that he is Jewish. At this stage, Felix thinks the

Nazis are just ‘a gang of thugs going round the country burning Jewish books’ (p.22).

Felix’s naivety facilitates his decision to flee the orphanage so he can warn his parents ‘that their books are in danger’ (p.22) and so he can return to the family’s bookshop to hide the books from the Nazis. Despite Jankiel’s warning, Felix sets off on what readers know – but he doesn’t – is an extremely dangerous journey.

Key point

Felix’s mum said ‘We won’t forget you’ when she and his dad left him at the orphanage (p.10). Felix claims ‘I knew exactly what she was saying. That they wouldn’t forget to come and get me’ (p.10). This is an example of dramatic irony, as Felix’s ‘knowledge’ is actually a misunderstanding, and his mother’s statement reflects her awareness that she and her husband will likely never see their son again.

Q Why does Felix think ‘things are finally improving for Jewish booksellers’ (p.3)?

Q What is the significance of Mother Minka calling him ‘Felek’ (p.19)?

Key vocabulary

Adolf Hitler: Nazi dictator of Germany during World War II

Jewish person: someone whose religion and ethnicity is Judaism

Nazis: members of the National Socialist German Workers’ political party, which existed between 1919 and 1945. Adolf Hitler became the leader of the party in 1921. In 1933, the party obtained political control of Germany. The policies of the Nazi party were based on racism; Nazis were prejudiced against Jewish people and some other minority groups.

Poland: a country in central Europe, next to Germany; Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1939.

Chapters 4–6 (pp.27–56)

Summary: *Even though during his journey to his home town, Felix comes close to the Nazis and their cruelty, he remains oblivious to the danger he's in. Once there, he realises that a former schoolmate's family has taken possession of his home. He is warned by a resident that all the Jewish people have been banished to the city. Witnessing the appalling scene of a murdered family, Felix hauls the sole survivor, Zelda, to safety while soothing her with stories.*

Felix escapes from the orphanage. During his journey he draws on his limited experiences and his imagination to make sense of some strange events. For example, when he comes across an empty house, detects that the Jewish occupants have recently and hastily left, then hears gunshots, he surmises that the people are 'out hunting' (p.31). Later, when he notices that the water in the river is 'so red it almost looks like blood', he concludes it is just 'a trick of the light' (p.37). As a ten-year-old child with limited life experiences and a positive outlook, he naturally interprets situations as unthreatening, although his journey throughout the novel is partly one of gradually becoming more aware of the dangerous realities around him.

A pivotal moment for Felix is when he realises that his parents' apartment and shop have been possessed by the family of Wiktor Radzyn, a former schoolmate. He is mildly annoyed at the thought of Wiktor 'blowing his nose on one of my books' (p.44), which is the worst thing he can think of. However, he distracts himself with the thought that his parents have obtained visas to live in America.

The spectre of racial persecution soon rears its head as Felix is chased out of town by the residents after Wiktor loudly identifies him as a Jew, and then soon after, when Felix encounters a little boy and girl 'playing grabbing Jews in the street' (p.45). The girl explains the rules of their game, telling Felix that if he plays the character of the Jew ('Who do you want to be? ... you be a Jew'), he has to act 'sad' because 'the Nazis took

your mum and dad away'. When the girl impatiently tells Felix that 'All the Jew people got taken ... my dad told me', Felix admits that 'Panic is churning inside me' (p.45). His anxiety is a sign that his optimism is being tested. Any moment, it seems, his misconceptions could cave in.

During his attempt to prove the little girl wrong by visiting a Jewish neighbour, Felix meets Mr Kopek, who confirms that all the Jewish people have been forced to go to the city. On his way to the city, Felix comes across a burning house and the owners 'lying on the lawn' (p.51). Yes, the Nazis must have killed them, he thinks. In keeping with the narrative he has built in his head to explain what he's seeing, Felix decides the victims must have been 'Jewish book owners who couldn't bear to let the Nazis burn their books' (p.51). He is shocked at the brutality of what he thinks is the Nazis' retaliation: thinking Zelda is dead, he wonders bewilderingly 'What sort of people would kill a little kid just for the sake of some books?' (p.52).

Felix's rescue of Zelda highlights another appealing aspect of his personality: his natural courage. Continuing the thread of fiction that has sustained him, he uses his superlative storytelling abilities to lift Zelda's spirits. Interestingly, even as he debates with himself the best way to tell her about her parents' deaths, he is unaware that his own parents may have met a similar fate. In his mind, his mum is going to break the news to Zelda when he finally sees her again ('Mum can do it', p.54).

This leads to an additional irony. As Felix tells the traumatised Zelda that he will 'tell you a story about your mummy and daddy taking you on a picnic' (p.55), he is oblivious to the fact that this is the same type of comforting story that he has been telling himself. The line between helpful creativity and misunderstanding reality is extremely thin in Felix's case. He has been extraordinarily lucky so far but being ignorant of the threats around him is placing him in increasing danger.

Key point

Felix tries to explain the Nazis' hatred of Jewish books by concocting a story about 'a bunch of kids ... whose parents work in a book warehouse and one day a big pile of Jewish books topples on the kids' parents and crushes them and the kids vow that ... they'll get revenge on all Jewish books and their owners' (p.48). He admits, however, that 'it doesn't feel like a very believable story' (p.48). Every time he doesn't fully believe one of his own stories, it's a sign of his fantasy world collapsing under the pressure of reality.

- Q** Where is the 'farm animal truck packed with people' likely to be going (p.34)? How does Felix's ignorance of this fact impact the reader?
- Q** When Felix talks to Mr Kopek, what suggests that Mr Kopek feels sympathy for Jewish people?

Chapters 7–9 (pp.57–82)

Summary: *Felix and Zelda are discovered by a Nazi soldier and are forced to join a crowd of Jewish men, women and children who are walking towards the city; they are accompanied by gun-wielding, yelling, Nazi soldiers on motorbikes and in cars. On their way to the city, Felix and Zelda see terrible things. Felix tells Zelda stories to keep up their spirits. When they arrive in the city, the children are rescued by Barney, who becomes their protector. Barney takes Felix and Zelda to a cellar, which is a temporary haven against Nazi persecution.*

During the long walk to the city, Felix again shows his kindness, generosity and thoughtfulness: despite being ill, he gives Zelda a piggyback; he uses some of the rags in his shoes to wind around her sore feet; and he spends 'about six hours' (p.66) telling stories to distract her and keep up her spirits.

During the long trudge towards the city, Felix somehow manages to optimistically speculate that his parents 'have probably already arrived at the city and are having a sit down' (p.61). Yet because he's perceptive, even the eternally hopeful Felix can't block out the implications of what

he is witnessing. Tallying up the suffering of the many Jewish people around him, he reluctantly reflects that 'Maybe it's not just our books the Nazis hate. Maybe it's us' (p.65).

The stories Felix invents to sustain himself and Zelda steadily take on darker tones. For example, his vision of a 'vicious gorilla ... on a violent rampage across Poland' (p.67) is a remarkable metaphor for the Nazi regime, as both are incredibly powerful forces without a moral conscience to keep them in check. As he makes himself remind Zelda 'how much fun kids can have in the city', he admits that he has a 'tired and hungry' imagination (p.66). Being surrounded by and experiencing suffering, Felix's stories are losing their power.

When the crowd of Jewish people arrive at the city, Felix again experiences racism dispensed not by soldiers, but by ordinary people. He describes city people 'standing on the footpaths yelling unkind things at us ... Dirty Jews. Stuff like that.' He also relates how these 'unfriendly' local people laugh as Jewish people are humiliated by Nazis.

Chaos erupts as Nazi soldiers usher the Jewish adults into the ghetto and take away their children, who are put in a truck. Zelda is grabbed by a soldier, who points a gun at her. This breaks something deep inside Felix, who falls to the ground, crying and admitting that 'I haven't got any more stories' (p.73). For the first time in the novel, Felix doesn't 'know what to do' (p.73).

The children are completely at the soldiers' mercy when Barney appears and spirits them away to a cellar where he is hiding other Jewish children from the Nazis. Even though he has temporarily reached safety, Felix is sick with a fever, and he is no longer able to muster the creative, imaginative energy he used to draw on ('[I] try to tell myself a story to cheer myself up ... It's no good. When I close my eyes all I can see are Nazi soldiers', p.80).

It is at this point that Felix realises that his stories cannot always provide protection from reality; he bitterly thinks 'The stories in my notebook are stupid. While I was writing them, Mum and Dad were being chased ... by Nazis' (p.81).

The quiet heroism of Barney – who is based on the real-life figure of Janusz Korczak – is intensified by its covertness (hiddenness). In contrast to the hyperactive heroes populating Felix's adventure stories, Barney simply 'looks very weary' (p.75). He's an ordinary man, not a glamorous crusader.

The exhaustion Barney is experiencing from physical and mental strain makes a revealing contrast with the 'bored look' of the Nazi soldier who torments Zelda (p.73). Exhaustion is a sign of a person burdened with too much feeling for others, compared to someone who seems to lack such feeling entirely.

Key point

Felix's angry criticism of Barney – 'This man Barney is an idiot. You don't tell a kid he'll find his parents one day' (p.79) – sounds logical, except it is followed by the confused idea that 'you let the kid go and look for them now' (p.79). Felix has not yet realised that Barney's knowledge of the world is far superior to his own.

- Q** Felix thinks: 'With a jolt I understand' (p.60). Why is this thought ironic?
- Q** What is the significance of Zelda's crazy predictions about the future (p.63)?

Chapters 10–12 (pp.83–110)

Summary: *To earn some food for his fellow hideaways, Barney gives dental treatment to a German soldier while Felix tells the man comforting stories. Felix pities the other children having lost their parents, but he still doesn't think he is in the same situation.*

In the cellar, Felix has two shocking realisations: first, he learns that Adolf Hitler is the head of the Nazis, and it is under his orders that Jewish children are being taken away. From this piece of information, Felix has the second distressing realisation: that the story his parents told him about why he had to live at the orphanage is fiction ('I believed it for three years and eight months. That story saved my life', p.86).

Felix tries to take the other children's minds off the fact that 'the most important man in the whole of Poland hates us and our parents' (p.87). Is storytelling, then, a blessing or a curse? The verdict is decidedly mixed. Felix's creative genius is comforting during difficult times, yet it can also obscure the truth, and knowing the truth (such as the importance of remaining hidden) might be necessary for survival.

Barney shows his courage and compassion when he risks his personal safety to treat a Jewish man's toothache. Through this evening excursion with Barney, Felix learns about life in the ghetto. Felix observes that the streets are 'filthy', the buildings have 'bits missing' and there's no electricity, and he learns from Barney about the curfew and that people 'get shot' for disobeying it (p.94). There's also no heating (all the people in the apartment are 'wearing coats', p.95) and there are not enough medical supplies (there 'aren't enough pain-dulling drugs in ghetto curfew places', p.97).

Next, Barney gives dental treatment to a German soldier. This raises an important moral question. Is Barney right to help a member of an evil organisation that is responsible for his people's persecution? To reassure himself that it's okay, Felix decides that 'I don't think he's a friend of the other Nazi officer, the murderer' (p.103). In other words, he regards the patient as a *good* Nazi. Barney, of course, has no such misconceptions; he is simply doing whatever he must do to survive, and to help the children survive.

As the children try to observe what's happening in the city through a small crack in the wall, they project their desire for their parents onto whoever they see. They tell stories to one another, and we see again storytelling's unique power to make unbearable experiences bearable.

Storytelling's downsides are finally revealed when Felix tells Zelda about the murder of her parents. The phrasing of Felix's thoughts – 'for Zelda, my story has made her parents dead' (p.108) – is revealing. Felix's story strips Zelda of the comforting belief that her parents have survived. Stories matter in *Once* because they have the power to alter how its characters process reality.

The children in the cellar who have witnessed family members die or be tortured (and are therefore not in denial) can only cope by transforming the Nazis into 'goblins' (p.109). Ruth, Jacob, Henryk and Chaya share their stories of what they have witnessed. On some level, they know ordinary people have murdered their parents, but reframing the story with supernatural creatures like goblins as the villains prevents them from having to confront human evil.

When compared to the other children's partial understanding of what has befallen their families, Felix's increasingly unjustifiable hope is persistent. He defiantly asserts that 'I know my mum and dad are still alive' and claims that his tears are 'different' from those of the other children (p.110). Felix is affected by the other children's situations, but he refuses to accept that he may also have lost his parents. Barney raises the possibility that Felix may not be able to find his parents, which Felix rejects.

Key point

Even Felix sometimes recognises the limits of fiction's power. For example, he admits that 'I try and think up a story about how parents aren't really that important, but I can't because they are' (p.104). In other words, reality can't be completely suppressed by comforting stories.

- Q** Why does Felix tell Barney a story about having a rare illness (p.91)?
- Q** Barney's Jewish patient rinses his mouth with salty water (p.97) whereas the Nazi patient 'is swigging from a bottle' (p.100), which presumably contains a strong alcoholic drink such as vodka. What does this difference suggest about the circumstances of the two patients? What other differences are there between these two scenes?

Key vocabulary

ghetto: a walled-off area in a city specifically for the confinement of Jewish people

Chapters 13–15 (pp.111–40)

Summary: *Barney tells Felix that the Jewish people in the ghetto are being taken away to concentration camps to be killed. Confronted with this fact, Felix is forced to face the possibility that his parents are dead. Devastated, he laments the fact that stories that promise comfort can disguise or hide the truth. Yet he's distracted by the urgent need to get medicine for Zelda. While searching for medicine, Felix enters an apartment in the ghetto that is like his family's home, which brings back painful memories. Barney and the children's hiding place is discovered and stormed by Nazis. The group is loaded onto a train bound for the camps.*

Barney and Felix leave the cellar to search for water. In the first apartment they visit, Felix is confronted by the sight of a murdered child; distraught, he can only observe that 'They shouldn't shoot little kids' (p.117). It's a heartbreaking reminder of how inadequate his mental tools are for coping with the situation. While comforting the sobbing Felix, Barney says 'your mum and dad loved you' (p.118). Felix refuses to accept the truth in Barney's words. Barney tries to wrench Felix away from his delusions by revealing that 'they're taking Jews away to kill them' (p.118); however, Felix calls this 'the stupidest story [he's] ever heard' (p.118). Violently kicking back against his saviour's compassionate truth-telling, Felix enters a deep depression from which he struggles to emerge.

In the next chapter, Felix again leaves the cellar: this time to look for medicine for Zelda. In one of the apartments, Felix goes into a bedroom, which is 'exactly like the room [he] used to have at home' (p.125). Felix becomes paralysed with longing for a past he has lost forever. His identification with the hero of *Just William* shows how far his own life has departed from the carefree, gung-ho characters he idolises. Now, his life is spent considering the implications of evil.

On his way back to the cellar, Felix has a near-miss with looting Nazi soldiers and in the ruckus, Zelda's locket (which he is wearing) smashes and breaks open, revealing a photo of Zelda's family in which her father is wearing a Nazi uniform. This triggers a moral dilemma; Felix grapples

with deciding whether or not to take her the aspirin. After some thought, he reaches the only defensible conclusion: 'If Zelda's dad's a Nazi, does she deserve carrot soup and aspirin? Yes' (p.130). The understanding Felix arrives at is important because it rejects the core logic of the Nazi regime: to exterminate entire groups because of their nationality or race. As he realises, the only way to ensure just treatment of others is to treat each person as a unique individual.

Felix returns to the cellar to find that their hiding place has been discovered. In a more conventional novel, the soldiers' discovery of the cellar (p.132) would be a despairing moment. Here, though, Barney's efforts to enforce a stabilising routine in the children's lives make a huge difference. As the children 'hold up their toothbrushes' (p.133), as if they're on a sleepover, Barney's painstaking creation of a domestic scene becomes an indispensable asset to these seemingly doomed children. For a fleeting moment before they're loaded onto the train bound for a concentration camp, they have enjoyed something approaching a loving family environment.

However, Felix soon observes that 'Nazi soldiers with dogs are pushing people onto the train really roughly' and those resisting getting on the train are hit 'with sticks and whips' (p.135). The tender care with which Barney inserts a barrier between the children and their appalling reality is shown in his suggestion to 'make a tent' from their coats (p.135), an image of family protection in this hopeless environment. Eventually, the children and Barney end up crammed inside a railway carriage with many other people.

Key point

Barney's explanation to Felix that Zelda's parents must have been killed by 'the Polish resistance' (p.136) is the first we hear of any organised movement against the German occupation of Poland. Unfortunately, it seems very remote from the action; Barney's efforts are in isolation and are aimed purely at survival.

- Q** What is the author implying with the character of Moshe ‘who just chews his wood’ (p.135)?
- Q** Why has Felix replaced Adolf Hitler with Richmal Crompton in his prayers (p.129)?

Key vocabulary

Polish resistance: a group of people who fought against the German and Soviet occupation of Poland during World War II

Chapters 16–17 (pp.141–50)

Summary: *As the train travels along, some people in the carriage manage to escape through a hole in the wall. Felix jumps from the train with Zelda and another girl, Chaya, who is shot and killed in the process. Barney remains behind with the children who did not want to jump. Felix realises Barney is planning to euthanise the remaining children with anaesthetic, rather than let them experience the horrors of the concentration camp.*

A train ride – usually a happy childhood experience – becomes something horrific. As Felix acknowledges, the milestone of his ‘first train journey’ should have been ‘exciting’ but is instead ‘painful and miserable’ (p.141).

Felix’s donation of his precious notebook as toilet paper for the other people in the train carriage – who can ‘tear off a page or two as they need them’ (p.144) – is a deeply symbolic moment for him. This act of kindness can be read in two ways. On the one hand, this act – of letting his precious pages and words be disposed of in the most unpleasant way – could indicate how much Felix has come to question the value of storytelling. However, on the other hand, with his notebook – the emblem of his creativity and his stories – he is giving a generous gift. As he always has, Felix looks for ways to improve others’ lives: he pities the ‘older people’ having no toilet paper (p.143) and he selflessly gives them his stories – the things that once mattered most to him – just for

a moment's comfort, glad to see 'the relief on their faces' (p.144). So, in this way, the stories still represent protection and kindness.

The novel's conclusion strikes a balance between hope for the future and despair at the deaths of Barney, Chaya and the other children. Of course, Felix and Zelda survive, and three children's daring leap from the train wouldn't be out of place in one of Felix's beloved Richmal Crompton novels, featuring improbable triumphs against the odds.

Why, then, is the tone here so different from that of Felix's cherished children's stories? Because, unlike most adventure stories, *Once* is based on reality, and the real story had a tragic ending. Gleitzman refuses to let us forget the real fates of all those left behind.

We know that the rest of Barney's group – and all the people in the train – will soon die. Burdened with this knowledge, the children's miraculous escape can't be seen as a triumph or an adventure. In fact, it's not even clear at this stage whether they're better off or not.

So, rather than giving readers an uplifting happy ending, Gleitzman overlays Zelda and Felix's dash for freedom with tragedy. After several of the children had refused to jump with him, despite his story of how they will survive, Felix has finally accepted that 'you can't force people to believe a story' (p.147).

Key point

Zelda's remark 'We're lucky' is made cryptic by the fact that she says it 'sadly' (p.150). This perfectly captures the darkness of the children's world after they have experienced the worst of human nature. Felix and Zelda may have secured their physical safety, but their psychological world will forever be clouded.

- Q** What is the significance of Felix imagining Barney telling the children a 'true story' about a 'long peaceful sleep' (p.150)?
- Q** What does Felix's need to compulsively apologise to others on the train journey (p.142) say about his personality?

Author's note (pp.152–4)

Summary: *Speaking directly to his readers, Gleitzman explains his story's personal significance, the real person on whom the character of Barney is based and his intended message about the power of friendship.*

The author's note concludes the novel and strikes an unexpectedly optimistic note after the torrent of despair. Gleitzman asserts his interest in exploring friendship and investigating 'how friendship survives in tough times' (p.152); this theme, of course, is perfectly expressed through Felix and Zelda's relationship.

Touching on his own link to the Holocaust, Gleitzman tells us how most members of his grandfather's family were killed during World War II. Tethering the reader's experience of the novel to reality, Gleitzman also notes that one-and-a-half million Jewish children were murdered by the Nazis and their supporters.

Gleitzman admirably explains the complex concept of the Holocaust to the book's young target audience. To present this vast crime within its historical context, he explains that 'the leader of Germany, Adolf Hitler, had tried to destroy the Jewish people in Europe' (p.152). This statement is appropriately brief, because all the insanity of the past 150 pages can be traced back to this fact.

Finally, Gleitzman introduces the historical figure of Janusz Korczak. His revelation that Barney is based on an actual person introduces an interesting realistic dimension to the fictional characters in this account of a tragic period in human history.

Key point

The author's statement of intention gives readers the opportunity to keep in mind Gleitzman's personal perspective when re-reading the text.

- Q** How does writing the book from Felix's perspective assist the author's attempt 'to grasp the unimaginable' (p.154)?
- Q** What does Gleitzman mean when he says he wanted *Once* to be a 'journey of discovery' for Felix (p.153)?

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Felix

Key quotes

'Sometimes real life can be a bit different to stories.' (Felix, p.33)

'Why would the Nazis make people suffer like this just for the sake of some books?' (Felix, p.64)

'I'm confused. Surely Barney knows I've got lots of other good things in my life.' (Felix, p.112)

'They shouldn't shoot little kids.' (Felix, p.117)

Felix is a ten-year-old Polish boy. The child of Jewish booksellers, Felix is the novel's representation of goodness, hope, kindness and idealism in a world that has lost its moral compass. For much of the novel, Felix believes his parents are coming to get him. Felix's childlike viewpoint offers much-needed relief from the unremitting horrors around him.

Felix's understanding of the world is typical of a ten-year-old child who has lived in the sheltered world of a Catholic orphanage for nearly one-third of his life. Living in this sanctuary since the start of the war, Felix has been protected from witnessing the Nazis' invasion and occupation of Poland and the persecution of Jewish Poles. When he leaves the sanctuary, Felix is faced with a confusing world that does not match the one he remembers from before he was taken to live in the orphanage. Felix tries to understand this changed world using his limited experiences and knowledge to ascribe meaning to the events he sees. However, he cannot fathom the true meaning of what he sees, which is why he often fails to understand the danger that he and other Jewish people are facing.

For a young child finding his way in a frightening, confusing world, Felix displays remarkable courage. His acts of extraordinary bravery

include rescuing Zelda in extremely dangerous circumstances: 'I haul the unconscious girl up onto my back and stagger through the smoke and sparks' (p.52). Then, later in the novel, when Zelda becomes sick, he risks his own safety to travel through the ghetto alone to find aspirin, even while 'German soldiers are running in and out of apartment blocks. In the distance I can hear shooting' (p.124).

Despite his own situation, and what he sees around him, Felix is irrepressibly kind. There are many instances in the novel where Felix tries to help other people and make their lives better. For example, Felix tries to convince Mother Minka to give Dodie the first bath and, when he leaves the orphanage, Felix gives Dodie his precious William books. In his escape letter, Felix asks Mother Minka to give his soup to Dodie. He also tries to help Jankiel by telling a story to distract other boys from flushing Jankiel's head in the toilet. However, the act that most poignantly illustrates his generous kindness is when he gives Jewish people in the train carriage pages from his precious notebook to use as toilet paper.

Confronting unimaginable human cruelty and suffering day after day causes Felix to grow up. Lying 'in a field somewhere in Poland, not sure if [he's] alive or dead' during the final scene (p.149), Felix has jettisoned his constant optimism and is now simply grateful to have survived.

Barney

Key quotes

'A big man in a scuffed leather jacket has his hand on Zelda's shoulder and is pleading with the Nazi officer in a foreign language.' (Felix, p.74)

'This patient is German. Tell him a nice story about Germany.' (Barney, p.99)

'Your mum and dad loved you, Felix ... They did everything they could to protect you.' (Barney, p.118)

"I can't leave Zelda like this," says Barney, dipping the rag into the bucket of water and pressing it gently to her face.' (p.123)

'Cheer up everyone ... It's a beautiful summer day.' (Barney, p.133)

Barney – a Jewish man living in a ghetto in Poland – is the novel's moral centre. Barney is brave, selfless and compassionate, risking his own life to rescue, hide and care for eight Jewish children (Felix, Zelda, Henryk, Ruth, Jacob, Janek, Moshe and Chaya). A dentist with a 'magic bag' (p.76), Barney uses his knowledge and experiences (particularly his dentistry skills and his ability to speak German) to provide for the children and to give medical aid to those who need it in the ghetto.

Barney's compassion and humanity are a counterpoint to all the brutality in the novel. When Felix is sick, we see Barney gently wiping Felix's face with a damp cloth, a look of concern and worry on his face. Soon after, a sobbing Henryk is comforted by Barney: he hugs him and 'gently smooths the boy's hair' (p.79). When Felix and Barney come across the murdered child in the apartment, Felix 'can feel Barney's tears falling onto me' (p.118). This portrayal of Barney contrasts with that of the Nazis, who are 'cold and hard and bored with people' (p.122).

Barney also shows great courage and dignity. When a Nazi soldier grabs Zelda's hair and points a gun at her, Barney intercedes to save her and pleads with the soldier in German. When the 'Nazi officer lets go of Zelda's hair and raises his gun and points it at [Barney's] head', Barney doesn't 'weep or grovel'; instead, he 'lifts up the leather bag ... and holds it in front of the Nazi officer's face' (p.74).

Barney has to find a delicate balance between giving the children too much information and telling them what they need to know. He urges Felix to break the news to Zelda about her parents' deaths, encouraging him to 'tell her the story of what you saw' (p.108), and when he realises that Felix needs to know the truth about his parents' likely fate, he tells him about the concentration camps (pp.118–19). Barney is a realist in some ways. He recognises the importance of getting rid of delusions, yet understands that sometimes the truth is too distressing. As the Nazi soldiers walk them to the train station, Barney tells the children to 'cheer up' because 'it's a beautiful summer day' and they are 'going on an outing' (p.133). The fact that their destination is most likely one of the

concentration camps is not something he shares; he tries to minimise their pain and fear for as long as he possibly can.

Barney's kindness and generosity extend to acts of self-sacrifice. When the Nazi officer sees the photo of Zelda's parents and realises she is not Jewish, he 'points to Zelda and Barney and then points to the railway yard gate' (p.138), offering Barney and Zelda the chance to escape being transported to a concentration camp. However, while Barney encourages Zelda to go, he refuses since this would mean abandoning the other children (pp.138–9). Barney is determined to help the children to the end. Felix's recollection of feeling syringes in Barney's pocket when he hugged him good-bye and his thought that 'I know he won't let the others suffer any pain' (p.150) suggests that, in the end, Barney will painlessly end the lives of the remaining children rather than let them suffer in a gas chamber, a final sign of his goodness. He sees his own life purely in terms of what he can do for the children's welfare and, when there is nothing more he can do, to relieve their suffering.

Zelda

Key quotes

'I'm a girl. My name's Zelda. Don't you know anything?' (Zelda, p.56)

'In 1972 ... cows will make their own butter. Don't you know anything?' (Zelda, p.64)

'Are your parents dead too?' (Zelda, p.122)

Zelda is a six-year-old Polish girl. Felix and Zelda meet when he comes across her family's burning farm. Zelda joins Felix on his journey, and they stay together for the rest of the story. At the end of the novel, Felix discovers that Zelda's dad was a Nazi. Zelda is strong, confident and sometimes defiant ('"No," yells Zelda. "I'm not going without Felix." She struggles and kicks', p.75). She is a feisty character ('Don't you know anything?', p.56) who is reluctant to defer to Felix or anyone else.

However, Zelda's sparkiness, her force of personality and her resilience make her particularly appealing. This zany yet often prickly girl lights up many grim moments.

Zelda's friendship with Felix develops quickly and they form a strong bond. This is shown in Zelda's irate refusal to be parted from Felix when they arrive at the ghetto, and in her decision to join him in jumping from the train. We also see their bond in Felix's actions, such as when he risks his own safety to search the ghetto for aspirin for Zelda when she's sick.

Like Felix, Zelda is an endlessly bubbling stream of ideas and inventions. Her colourful fantasies about the future, even in this bleak environment, show she's retaining her faith that the world has something better (or, at least, crazier) in store for them. She matter-of-factly tells Felix that people will 'have wheels instead of feet' by 1960 (p.63), and that 'in 1972 ... cows will make their own butter' (p.64). In their own ways, Zelda and Felix both use the power of creativity and imagination to endure an unbearable situation and to sustain hope.

Mum and Dad

Key quotes

'I wish Mum and Dad were here instead of away somewhere persuading their favourite author to write faster, or trying to sell books on gun safety to soldiers.' (Felix, pp.39–40)

'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.' (Felix, p.57)

Felix's parents are defined by their absence, and by Felix's strong and unwavering love for them. The fact that they took Felix to live in a Catholic orphanage when the Nazis invaded Poland shows their wish to protect their son and their awareness of what was likely to happen to them.

Felix's parents had clearly forged a connection with Mother Minka, who had been 'a customer of their bookshop' for several years (p.4). This example of fellow feeling and compassion between people of different faiths is refreshing in a world where people are strictly divided along religious lines and are encouraged to despise each other by the state.

Given Felix's parents' absence, it's understandable that they are not fully fledged characters. What we know about them is limited to what we glean from Felix's memories. We learn that they are educated, middle-class booksellers who adored their son. From Felix's memories of his parents, we can also infer their values and personal qualities. Shivering in the orphanage, he confides that 'I close my eyes and think about the baths Mum and Dad used to give me. In front of the fire with clean water and lots of warm wet cuddles and lots and lots of stories' (p.8). This image captures the warmth and love of family life, in stark contrast to the later images of parents being shot and children pushed onto trucks outside the ghetto (pp.72–3). Felix's unquestioning trust in his parents' ability to care for those who are vulnerable is shown when he is faced with having to tell Zelda that her parents are dead, and he convinces himself that 'Mum can do it' instead (p.54). Felix also fondly remembers his parents reading to him and imagines that they 'would have taken' the books burned by the Nazis since 'we love all books, even old and tatty ones' (p.18). These comments show the value his parents placed on books and their desire to foster a love of reading in their son.

The memories of the bliss that the infant Felix experienced with his parents sustains him for much of his journey. For example, surrounded by weeping children in the cellar, he thinks 'My tears are different. I feel so lucky because somewhere out there I know my mum and dad are still alive' (p.110). The intensity of his love for them is so great that he simply can't conceive of a world in which he is permanently separated from them. In the end, it is Barney who tells him the truth by saying 'your mum and dad loved you' (p.118) – in the past tense.

Mother Minka

Key quotes

'If you've found an insect in your bowl, just eat it and be grateful.'
(Mother Minka, p.3)

'How they knew I had Jewish books here I've no idea. But don't worry. They don't suspect you're Jewish.' (Mother Minka, p.20)

Mother Minka is the imposing yet caring senior nun at the orphanage who is tasked with protecting the children in her care. Mother Minka shows her compassion, independent mind and courage by hiding Jewish children (Felix and, it is strongly implied, Jankiel) from the Nazis. Those who were discovered defying the Nazis were severely punished (see 'Totalitarianism' on page 45), yet Mother Minka willingly protects Felix. She calls him 'Felek' to disguise his identity when the Nazis come to the orphanage and then drags him into the kitchen when he threatens to draw too much attention to himself.

Although unable to be openly, publicly critical of the Nazis, Mother Minka shows her negative opinion of them in small ways. When talking to Felix in private she refers to the Nazis as 'those brutes' (p.20), and when Felix asserts that 'Father Ludwik says Adolf Hitler keeps us safe', Mother Minka 'presses her lips together and closes her eyes' (p.21). Felix can't yet grasp the gesture's implications, but small clues like this help him gradually piece together the truth. It is only later, though, that he realises Hitler's true role in the persecution of Jewish people.

Mother Minka may be stern, but she clearly cares about the children. She ensures that they have regular baths and that the limited food is shared around fairly: Felix describes the way in which a carrot would normally be 'chopped into enough pieces so that sixty-two kids, eleven nuns and one priest can all have a bit' (p.2). Mother Minka's concern is also shown when she is compelled to tell Felix the truth about the carrot, clearly not wanting him to have unrealistic hopes. After telling Felix that his parents didn't send the gift, she looks at him 'sadly for

a long time' (p.20); she resists telling Felix that it is very unlikely that his parents are still alive, but the reader can interpret the truth, and the kind intentions, behind her expression. Beneath her forbidding exterior lies a compassionate woman who is doing her best in extremely difficult circumstances.

Jankiel

Key quotes

'My parents froze to death.' (Jankiel, p.15)

'Don't go' (Jankiel, p.24)

As a new boy in the orphanage, Jankiel is at risk from the moment he arrives. We meet him as he's about to be brutalised by the orphanage's gang of bullies, nicknamed the 'torture squad' (p.13). The violence this innocent boy faces in what should be a safe space demonstrates the persistence of cruelty in virtually every corner of society.

However, Jankiel is aware of the danger he faces. His concern is not so much with the other boys as with 'the men in the car' (p.15): the Nazis who have come to destroy books. The implicit suggestion that he is Jewish is strengthened when Felix wonders 'if Jankiel is Jewish. He's got dark eyes like me' (p.15). He also grasps – as Felix does not – the danger that Felix will be in if he leaves the orphanage, and is torn between the promise he has made to Mother Minka not to tell the others 'what the Nazis are doing' and wanting to protect Felix (p.26).

Although Jankiel disappears from the narrative once Felix leaves the orphanage, his warning foreshadows Felix's future experiences. Jankiel's hints at the threats Felix will face in the outside world cause Felix to feel 'a jab of fear' (p.26); this is the beginning of Felix's journey towards knowledge and understanding.

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust

Key quotes

'Clear off, Jew ... This is our house now.' (Wiktor Radzyn, p.42)

'I look around at the tired hungry sick Jewish people staggering along the road ... Why would the Nazis make people suffer like this just for the sake of some books?' (Felix, p.64)

'Lots of [the local people] are standing on the footpaths yelling unkind things at us as we straggle past. Dirty Jews. Stuff like that.' (Felix, p.71)

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is a form of racism: it is hostility towards and discrimination against Jewish people as a religious or racial group. The Nazis didn't invent anti-Semitism; this bigotry has existed in one form or another for thousands of years.

The Holocaust

The genocide that the Nazis perpetrated during World War II (called 'the Holocaust') was based on anti-Semitism. The Nazis' determination to destroy the European Jewish population and culture lies behind every horror in *Once*, including the violence perpetrated against Jewish people, the burning of books, the ghettos and the concentration camps.

The atrocities committed by the Nazis are difficult to comprehend, and in *Once* this is conveyed by the narrative point of view of Felix, who often literally doesn't understand what he is seeing. Felix's fundamentally positive view of humanity means that the acts of violence and cruelty he witnesses don't make sense. However, to a reader who has some knowledge of what took place during World War II, there are several recognisable scenes. These include the book burning, the crowded trucks and trains transporting Jewish people to concentration camps,

the ghetto and the general antipathy of many non-Jewish Polish people towards their Jewish countrymen and women.

Burning books written by Jewish people was one of the strategies the Nazis used to try to abolish Jewish culture. The book-burning scene at the orphanage – ‘a pile of smoking ash and a few charred books’ (p.24) – represents this aspect of anti-Semitism. The Nazis’ thoroughness in executing their racist plan is reflected in their search of a Catholic orphanage in the mountains. The anti-Semitism prevalent in the broader community is reflected in Felix’s memory of a customer in his parents’ bookshop ‘tearing pages out’ and ‘shouting things’ – actions that cause Felix’s mother to cry and his father to become ‘furious’ (p.17) – although Felix assumes the customer didn’t enjoy the book and was responding irrationally. From Felix’s perspective, burning and tearing books are illogical actions; his description of the Nazis ‘hurting books cruelly and viciously and laughing about it’ (p.17) makes the men seem crazy and foolish.

The scenes of overt cruelty towards Jewish people are more disturbing, and again Felix’s observations expose the inverted moral order of his world. These scenes – the crowded truck of ‘half-naked people’ (p.34), the Jewish people ‘walking wearily’ (p.59) towards the city (people who lived in small towns were forced to move to the ghettos in cities), the digging of a mass grave (for which even Felix’s imagination can’t come up with an explanation, p.69) and the senseless shooting of adults outside the ghettos as their children are forced onto a truck – all appear incomprehensibly inhumane. Felix’s unanswerable question ‘Why are the Nazis separating the kids from the adults?’ (p.72) points to the way in which Nazi ideology systematically denied Jewish people their humanity.

Although the concentration camps are not shown directly in *Once*, Barney tells Felix about their existence (p.119). Also, the mass transportation of Jews to the camps is implicitly referenced in the crowded truck (p.34) and the train journey at the end of the novel.

Reflecting Felix's gradual awakening to the horrors of the Holocaust, the phrase 'death camp' isn't used until towards the end of the narrative. Once Felix realises the Nazis' intention he loses, at least for a time, his characteristic optimism and specifically his love of stories.

Violence

Key quotes

'Suddenly a soldier hits the man in the face with a machine gun. The man falls down.' (Felix, pp.68–9)

The Nazis used violence as the primary strategy to control and dominate, and maintain their domination of, Poland and the Polish people. The Nazis used three kinds of violence to achieve their aims:

- collective violence, which is the use of violence by a group (e.g. Nazis) against another group (e.g. Jewish people)
- interpersonal violence, which is the use of violence by an individual against another individual ('The soldier with the kid points a pistol and shoots the man', p.73)
- systematic violence or structural violence, which is the harm inflicted by social structures and institutions (e.g. laws that prevent Jewish people from owning property).

A shocking aspect of *Once* is the readiness of the Nazis to use violence as a first resort against anyone deemed threatening or resistant, or to coerce people to do something they don't want to do. For example, at the train station, Felix observes individual Nazi soldiers using interpersonal violence as a tool of coercion: 'Nazi soldiers with dogs are pushing people onto the train really roughly ... Some people don't want to get on and the Nazi soldiers are hitting them with sticks and whips' (p.135).

Totalitarianism

Key quotes

‘All the other Jewish kids around here have been taken away by the Nazis. Adolf Hitler’s orders. And they never come back. The only kids left are the ones hiding like us.’ (Chaya, p.86)

The system under which the Nazi Party governed Germany and occupied countries such as Poland during World War II is known as totalitarianism. In a country with a totalitarian form of government, it is expected that everyone must completely and unquestioningly obey the state. A totalitarian government also tries to control every aspect of the lives of its citizens. Personal, individual freedom and thought are not allowed. For this reason, relatively small acts of resistance (such as Mother Minka and Barney hiding Jewish children, and Barney providing dental care to Jewish people in the ghetto) are extremely dangerous to a totalitarian state. They are evidence of the possibility of another way of thinking, which is contrary to the totalitarian ideal of everyone conforming and submitting to the demands of the state.

Most importantly, Felix’s roving, restless and humorous intelligence is shown to be a direct threat to totalitarianism. Children like nothing better than to question everything, an attitude that is unacceptable to those who seek to instil complete conformity. *Once* upholds childhood as a force capable of resisting subjugation. Like the green shoots of a plant breaking through concrete, Felix’s spirit can’t be suppressed.

The Other

Key quotes

‘A Nazi officer with a bored look on his face is holding [Zelda] by the hair and pointing a gun at her.’ (Felix, p.73)

The term ‘the Other’ is used to describe people who are considered fundamentally different and inferior in appearance, abilities, beliefs and

culture (people who are not like 'us' and from whom 'we' are somehow separate). The term is often used by members of a dominant race, culture or religion to describe people who are not members of that elite group.

The Nazis – white, Aryan (meaning 'pure German race'), fascists – considered many groups of people to be inferior 'Others' to themselves: including Jewish people, black people, Slavic people, communists, gypsies, anyone LGBTIQ+, Jehovah's Witnesses, trade unionists, and anyone with a disability or a mental illness. Essentially, anyone who in any way conflicted with Nazi beliefs was labelled 'Other'.

The Nazis took 'Othering' to the extreme. Not only did they marginalise, exclude and oppress 'the Other', they actively dehumanised particular groups ('dehumanisation' means to regard and treat a person or a group of people as less than human) and then set out to exterminate everyone considered to be 'Other'.

We see this 'Othering' in *Once*: Jewish people like Felix's parents are excluded from owning property and businesses; Barney wears 'a Jewish armband' so he can be easily identified as being different; Jewish people are forced to leave their homes, travel to the city and live in poverty in an overcrowded ghetto.

Fiction, imagination, reality and storytelling

Key quotes

'It's really hard being an orphan if you haven't got an imagination.' (Felix, p.56)

'The stories in my notebook are stupid. While I was writing them, Mum and Dad were being chased ... And being captured.' (Felix, p.81)

'I hate stories about parents who say they'll come back for their children and never do.' (Felix, p.121)

'Now I've only got pages left with stories on them. Stories I wrote about Mum and Dad.' (Felix, p.144)

A striking aspect of *Once* is its emphasis on Felix being a raconteur (a skilled storyteller). From the beginning, Felix is proud of his notebook, which is 'full of stories' he has written about his parents (p.10). The notebook was given to him by his parents and is a tangible link with his life before he lived at the orphanage: his parents, their bookshop, and the books and stories that are valued in his family.

Felix's notebook is also a symbol of his identity. He imagines it is how his parents will recognise him when they collect him from the orphanage after more than three years. When Felix thinks his parents have arrived, he stands at the window waiting: 'I hold my notebook up for them to see' (p.12). The notebook – like Felix's parents' identities as booksellers – reminds us that stories and imagination are central to his identity.

Those around Felix appreciate his storytelling ability, too. In the cellar, the other children beg Felix for stories and Barney takes Felix with him when he gives people dental treatment; in the absence of anaesthetic, he uses Felix's storytelling to distract patients from their pain.

Felix's storytelling has similarly positive powers in other situations. He uses it to help him and his friends cope with and explain things they witness, and he often tells comforting stories, particularly to Zelda, with happy endings to provide distraction from reality, such as when he tells her about the 'big cake shop at the zoo' (p.67). (Note that the characters in this story are William and Violet Elizabeth, both of whom are characters from the William books Felix loves so much.) Storytelling in *Once* functions as a type of forcefield, protecting both tellers and listeners from traumatic events.

Felix's storytelling also serves a functional protective purpose at several points during the novel. Felix's outlandish story about Jankiel's parents' deaths saves Jankiel from being bullied by the 'torture squad' (pp.13–14); he says 'Once I escaped from an underground hiding place by telling a story' (p.90); and the African story he has partially written for the Nazi who needed Barney's services appears to contribute (along

with, of course, the photo in the locket) to the officer's decision to let Zelda leave the train station (p.138). Even more powerfully, when Felix is alone in the ghetto apartment searching for aspirin for Zelda, stories save his life, in the form of a blanket of books that he hides under when a Nazi soldier enters the room he is in (p.127).

Other evidence in the novel also shows how deeply the characters in this world believe in the power of books, which is a belief held by those who respect books and stories and by those who fear them. One example is the fact that Felix starts to add Richmal Crompton, an author, to the list of deities he prays to (praying to her exclusively when he covers himself with books to hide from the Nazis, p.127), literally equating storytelling with godly powers. Another example is the Nazi book burning scene; for the Nazis, books (particularly books written by Jewish authors) are so powerful and dangerous that they must be destroyed.

Yet there's also a darker shade to storytelling in *Once*. Felix's gift of fabrication, while highly entertaining, places barriers between him and the real world; and while these are often protective, sometimes they are not. Felix uses the frameworks provided in the *Just William* books to help him build stories to interpret reality. Unfortunately, these fictional stories are woefully inadequate in helping a Jewish boy understand and navigate Nazi-occupied, war-torn Poland. By seeing everything he witnesses through the lens of the stories he has read, he becomes less capable of accepting difficult truths about the world and less adept at acting appropriately in perilous situations.

For example, his willingness to see his journey back to his home town as a zany adventure, rather than the deeply irresponsible action it really is, places him in genuine danger.

However, Felix is conscious of his storytelling's constructed nature. For example, when asked to distract Barney's German patient, he thinks about telling him 'a story about how burning books and shooting innocent people makes toothache worse'. However, he quickly realises that 'I'd better not risk that' (p.100). He instinctively understands that, even though fanciful stories can have risky effects, overtly honest ones

can be fatal. Indeed, when he finally tells Zelda the true story about her parents, it is as though his story has the literal power to have 'made her parents dead' (p.108). This suggests that true stories can be the most dangerous, while those created by the imagination can protect us.

The power of stories is undeniable, but as Felix's journey gradually forces him to become less naive and increasingly engaged with the horrors of the real world, his faith in the beauty and magic of imagination and storytelling begins to waver: 'Once I loved stories and now I hate them' (p.121). He realises that stories can sometimes fail to protect, and can even bring heartbreak.

Yet still he carries his notebook with him, even when Barney and the children are forced from the cellar and onto the train, and in the closing pages of the book he uses it to bring comfort and 'relief' to others, by giving it to them for toilet paper (p.144). In a practical sense, the book is ripped up and the stories lost, but in a symbolic sense, once again, Felix has used stories and imagination to make the world around him a more compassionate place.

Heroes, courage, compassion and sacrifice

Key quotes

'Instead I step between the man and Zelda so she won't see.' (Felix, p.69)

"I got you the boots because everybody deserves to have something good in their life at least once" [says Barney] ... I'm confused. Surely Barney knows I've got lots of other good things in my life.' (Felix, p.112)

Once shows us individuals who courageously risk their own safety to help others. In the context of some of humanity's darkest hours, these acts of compassion are beacons of light, hope, morality and humanity. In a totalitarian environment that has no moral compass, in which treating whole groups of people as less than human is normalised, even a small acknowledgement of a marginalised person's humanity is an act of deep courage and compassion.

The heroes in *Once* do not conform to our traditional image of a courageous hero. For example, Felix's quirky personality and self-deprecating humour make him a very different figure from the traditional, masculine (almost macho) hero. Also, many acts of courage do not conform to our traditional ideas of courageous behaviour. Felix's courage is evident not in battles or daring rescues, but in his choices to help others without hesitation, such as when he risks his own safety to search the ghetto for aspirin for Zelda.

Barney is the novel's ultimate courageous figure, someone who thinks nothing of placing himself in danger to help others, as is evidenced when he stands up to the Nazi soldier to rescue Zelda and Felix (pp.74–5), and later when he risks his personal safety to find food, water and medicine for the children he is hiding. Barney is no swash-buckling action figure: he's a dentist. Also, no stirring speeches or grand gestures accompany Barney's protection of the children; he acts instinctively, without considering how this will look from the outside. Uninterested in pursuing glory or recognition, Barney quietly sacrifices himself to help those who have no one else to protect them.

Like Felix, Barney shows us that even small acts can be profoundly heroic deeds. Although it involves no outwardly spectacular feats, Barney's decision to defy a totalitarian regime and hide Jewish children exemplifies the highest level of courage, because the stakes for him are so high (many people were shot for hiding Jewish people). With even the smallest gesture of support for Jewish people potentially fatal, great courage is needed simply to maintain a morally defensible life in an impossible situation.

Other examples of courage in the novel include Mr Kopek's gift of bread and water to Felix when Felix returns to his home town in search of his parents. Mr Kopek risks being punished for communicating with Felix ("If they get you," [Mr Kopek] says, "we never spoke", p.47), but his compassion overrides his fear and he takes a risk to explain to Felix what has happened, suggesting that he 'go and hide in the mountains'

and giving him a small survival package (p.47). Mother Minka, too, shows courage and compassion when she shelters Felix in her Catholic orphanage.

Trauma

Key quotes

‘The Nazis aren’t taking anyone to the countryside. They’re taking Jews away to kill them.’ (Barney, p.118)

‘Trauma’ is a deeply distressing, shocking, stressful, frightening or disturbing experience (such as war) that can cause physical and psychological harm. Most who are touched by war are traumatised, which means they have ongoing physical and psychological symptoms caused by their experiences.

The effects of trauma are clearly visible in the other children under Barney’s protection. We are shown that Felix is traumatised in the way he describes the cruelty and traumatic events he witnesses later in the novel: his descriptions are factual, brief and unemotional (see ‘Flat descriptions’ on page 17). These unadorned descriptions create an impression that Felix is numb and detached from the disturbing things he is seeing; emotional numbness and dissociation are common responses to trauma.

Dissociation can also be seen in the responses of the other children in the cellar to the trauma they have experienced. For example, when Chaya relates the horrors she has seen, she places the events in a fantasy world and transforms the people into fictional monsters: she tells a story about a princess who lived in a castle (who the reader understands is Chaya). When ‘goblins’ arrived at the castle, the princess received an ultimatum of choosing between three ‘wishes’: ‘Either they could hurt her, or they could hurt the old people, or they could hurt the babies’ (p.109). Chaya tells the others that the princess ‘chose the first wish’ but ‘the goblins made all three wishes come true’ (pp.109–10).

Friendship

Key quotes

'You've both been through a lot together and she trusts you.' (Barney, pp.107–8)

"No," yells Zelda. "I'm not going without Felix." (p.75)

At the core of this novel is Felix's friendship with the feisty and combative Zelda. The bond shared by these two Polish children – one Jewish, one not – and the compassion and understanding they show for each other is the antithesis to everything the Nazis stand for, because the pair are seemingly able to look past each other's background to see each other's individuality and inherent goodness.

Once shows us the protective nature of friendship. By leaning on a companion, vulnerable people are more able to accept harsh truths that would otherwise be too difficult to bear. For example, the fact that Zelda hears about her parents' deaths from her friend seems to enable her to take it in; as Barney suggested, the news was best coming from Felix because he and Zelda had 'been through a lot together' (p.107). In Felix's words: 'When a little kid doesn't even know her parents are dead, you've got to try and keep her spirits up' (p.63). Felix does everything he can to help his friend cope with the almost unbearable circumstances they are facing.

Humour

Key quotes

'Why would Mother Minka call in foreign librarians? Perhaps people who don't speak Polish are faster library-tidiers.' (Felix, p.18)

'Barney's eyes are twinkling in the candlelight. He almost looks amused. I feel indignant. People shouldn't be amused by other people's rare illnesses.' (Felix, p.91)

It may seem inappropriate to use humour as a recurring element in a book about a horrific historical event. However, Gleitzman uses humour not to trivialise Felix's experiences but to highlight the madness behind them. Black humour – which is a humorous way of looking at or treating something that is serious, painful or taboo – is often used to help challenge people's assumptions, as well as to provide relief from distressing moments.

Much of the humour in the book comes not from intentional jokes made by characters but from dramatic irony: the discrepancy between how the characters see the world and how we understand it to be. Felix, particularly, unintentionally – and sometimes humorously – misunderstands people's motivations and actions, and the ridiculousness of this can be amusing to us as readers. For example, when explaining why he thinks his orphanage friend Dodie would make a good doctor, he observes that 'Once, after he pulled the legs off a fly, he managed to stick a couple back on' (p.7). In his mind, this is a genuine compliment, but for us the absurdity of considering Dodie's actions to be compassionate creates humour. Similarly, when Felix initially reads Nazis' behaviour as benign instead of malignant (such as thinking they are librarians, or believing the soldier in the truck has merely shot towards him for the purpose of 'giving a country kid a thrill', p.35), his charming naivety makes us feel amused. Gleitzman uses dramatic irony to create gentle humour that contrasts with the horrors taking place and thus increases their emotional impact.

Gleitzman also uses dramatic irony to emphasise the insanity and inexplicability of the Nazis' decision to exterminate all Jewish people. While readers likely have some knowledge of the history of World War II, Felix hasn't heard of Nazis at the start of the book, and he can't imagine that the acts of violence and cruelty he witnesses are due to the Nazis hating Jewish people just because they are Jews. For a while, he believes it's only Jewish books that the Nazis are upset about (based on his incomplete knowledge that his parents' bookshop was struggling). He tells Mr Kopek 'Don't worry ... The Nazis won't be interested in me.

I haven't got any books' (p.47). Gleitzman uses Felix's confusion and the dark humour in this to remind readers that there was no logical or sane reason for the Holocaust.

Zelda, too, is often a source of amusement in the novel, in a similar way to Felix. She is a child caught in a world that is too sophisticated for her, and we are made to laugh by her boisterous confidence and her matter-of-fact yet ridiculous assumptions about the world, such as when she says that a magic carrot will grant a person three wishes, not just one, if the person 'holds the carrot right' (p.87).

Innocence and experience

Key quotes

'When grown-ups go cheerful on a trip it means you won't be getting there for ages. It can also mean when you do get there you'll be killed.' (Felix, p.133)

These two sentences, expertly combining a naive child's perspective with a young adult's darkened view, perfectly sum up the toxic environment Felix has been forced into.

Many stories of a character's development chart their progression from innocence to experience, from youthful idealism to adult realism. In *Once*, the natural period of childhood innocence is cut short. Felix's society has been shattered by the German occupation, leaving nothing behind except feelings of profound loss and a desire to return to a more compassionate world. By the novel's conclusion, an older and wiser Felix has left behind his stories and chosen survival over near-certain death. Yet with nothing remaining of his old life, it's unclear what his path to adult normality will be like. He isn't yet a teenager, but he is forced to face the dark impulses behind the persecution of Jewish people. Even while he attempts 'not to look hopeless' (p.134), he can't help it. As he and the others are ejected from the cellar, the dejected Felix admits that 'They must want other people to see us ... knowing it's hopeless and deciding they might as well give themselves up' (pp.133–4).

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Different interpretations arise from different responses to a text. Over time, a text will evoke a wide range of responses from its readers, who may come from various social or cultural groups and live in different places and historical periods. Responses by critics and reviewers can be published in newspapers, journals and books, both online and in print. They can also be expressed in discussions among readers in the media, classrooms, book groups and so on.

While there is no single correct reading or interpretation of a text, it is important to understand that an interpretation is more than a personal opinion; it is the justification of a point of view of the text. To present an interpretation of a text, you must use a logical argument and support it with relevant evidence from the text.

The critics' viewpoints

Once is one of many novels about the Holocaust that is aimed at tween and teenage readers. When the book was published, it was met with acclaim, with many critics admiring Gleitzman's portrayal of the unimaginable atrocities committed during the Holocaust in a way that didn't alienate young people. Annemarie Simmons of the *Historical Novel Society*, for example, praised *Once* as 'a fantastic book for children to read and learn about the 2nd World War and a different insight into life as a Jew' (Simmons 2006).

Once was also praised by readers and reviewers in the blogging community, with *Hannah's Bookshelf* (2018) commending Gleitzman's ability to 'create a picture of what life was like for people being persecuted at this time in history'. Similarly, *Kirkus Reviews* (2010) suggests that the novel 'delivers a sharp sense of what it must have been like to be a child during the Holocaust, forced to grow up far too quickly'. Bloggers also appreciated the way in which Gleitzman balances sadness

and hope, including Laura Marriott (2018), who describes the novel as being ‘suffused with hope’ and the ending as ‘a wonderful mix of ... hope, fear and devastating sadness’.

Gleitzman’s decision to filter the events of the Holocaust through a young person’s perspective has been appreciated by many commentators. For example, *Young Adult Lit Reviews* saw the novel’s ‘naive, untrustworthy narrator’ as ‘a brilliant choice’ who intensified the reader’s empathy (YALitReader 2020). In addition, critic Laura Marriott (2018) observed that ‘seeing these things [the horrors Felix witnesses] through the eyes of the child strips away the history and politics and shows them for what they are’.

Two interpretations

Interpretation one: *Once* makes the reader feel what it must have been like to be Jewish in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Once gives the reader a very good sense of what it must have been like to be a Jewish person in Nazi-occupied Poland because the audience is told the story through the eyes of the novel’s Jewish protagonist, Felix. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to feel what Felix feels because Gleitzman sets up the audience to develop sympathy for his young protagonist and to build an emotional connection with Felix. The authenticity of Felix’s setting ensures the reader is responding emotionally to a historically accurate depiction of Poland during World War II.

The entire narrative is told in the first person in the present tense from the perspective of Felix, a Polish Jewish boy. As Felix navigates Nazi-occupied Poland, the reader is aligned to see people, situations and events as Felix sees them. We see firsthand the Nazis’ persecution of Jewish people: burning books written by Jewish authors (‘The men are burning books ... I turn away from the smoke and flames’, pp.16, 18); marking people as being ‘Other’ by legislating that they wear armbands (‘Each person is wearing an armband’, p.59); physically abusing Jewish

people ('a soldier hits the man in the face with a machine gun', p.69); humiliating Jewish people ('They're making them kneel down and scrub the cobblestones' and when a soldier 'grabs a tuft of [Barney's] beard and twists it hard ... the local people watching all cheer and laugh', p.75).

Not only does the reader witness the persecution that Jewish people living in Nazi-occupied Poland were forced to endure, we experience firsthand this persecution through Felix's experiences of anti-Semitism: Felix is shot at (p.35), chased by an angry mob (p.42), threatened with death ('The soldier points his gun at me', p.60), taunted with racial slurs (p.71), and finally thrown into a cattle train carriage that is taking people to a death camp (p.139).

The reader is also moved to feel what Felix feels because we are positioned to build an emotional connection with this ten-year-old child, who is separated from his beloved parents and who is struggling to comprehend the situation he is in. It is easy to feel sympathy and compassion for this kind-hearted, endearing boy who is always willing to help his friends, even if it means putting himself in danger.

Finally, the historical accuracy of the setting of the book means the reader is getting a true and accurate sense of what it was like for Jewish people, and to feel what those persecuted people felt.

Interpretation two: *Once* shows how hope always survives, even in the worst circumstances.

Once is set in a horrific period of history: Nazi-occupied, war-torn Poland, where death, violence, hunger and persecution are the norm. Yet, even in this setting – one of the darkest eras in human history – there is hope: hope that immense evil forces as systematic and brutal as the Nazi regime can be resisted.

The unrelenting strength of Zelda is a beacon of hope. Despite being separated from her home and her parents and witnessing horrors that no six-year-old child should see on the journey to the ghetto, she retains her feisty confidence ('Don't you know anything?', p.122). Zelda is a force, a spark, who does not give in or buckle; we see her character in

her reaction to being grabbed by Barney: “No,” yells Zelda. “I’m not going without Felix.” She struggles and kicks’ (p.75). Zelda’s strength, her refusal to be pacified or cowed by her situation or the brutal actions of the soldiers, is a form of resistance.

We also see resistance in Barney’s selflessness, morality, dignity and kindness; he retains his humanity despite the Nazis’ concerted efforts to dehumanise Jewish people. Not only does Barney risk his personal safety to rescue and hide Jewish children, he also risks being shot by venturing out during the curfew to provide medical aid. We see Barney’s dignity in his reaction to a Nazi soldier (when a Nazi officer ‘raises his gun and points it at [Barney’s] head’, Barney merely ‘lifts up the leather bag ... and holds it in front of the Nazi officer’s face’, p.74). And Barney’s compassion and deep humanity are evidenced in how he tenderly cares for the children; for example, when a sobbing Henryk is comforted by Barney, who hugs him and ‘gently smooths the boy’s hair’ (p.79). At the end of the novel, we witness Barney’s final act of kind compassion: his plan to euthanise the children on the train rather than let them suffer anymore.

Each in their unique way, these characters individually resist the Nazi machine; this courageous rebellion by everyday people – a middle-aged man and children – is a beacon of hope that evil forces can be resisted and, ultimately, overcome. This shows that hope always survives, even in the worst circumstances.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

This section focuses on your own analytical writing about the text and gives you strategies for producing high-quality responses in your coursework and exam essays.

Essay writing: An overview

An essay on a literary work is a formal and serious piece of writing that presents your point of view on the text, usually in response to a given topic. Your 'point of view' in an essay is your interpretation of the meaning of the text's language, structure, characters, situations and events, supported by detailed analysis of textual evidence.

Analyse don't summarise

In your essays, it is important to avoid simply summarising what happens in a text. There are important differences between analysing and summarising a text:

- A **summary** is a description or paraphrase (retelling in different words) of the characters and events. For example, 'Macbeth has a horrifying vision of a dagger dripping with blood before he goes to murder King Duncan.'
- An **analysis** is an explanation of the meaning or significance that lies 'beneath' the text's words (and images, for a film). For example, 'Macbeth's vision of a bloody dagger shows how deeply uneasy he is about the violent act he is contemplating and conveys his sense that supernatural forces are impelling him to act.'

A brief summary is sometimes necessary to let your reader know which part of the text you will be discussing. However, always keep this to a minimum and follow it immediately with your analysis of what this part of the text is telling us.

Plan your essay

Carefully plan your essay so that you have a clear idea of what you are going to say. The plan ensures that your ideas flow logically, that your argument remains consistent and that you stay on topic. An essay plan should be a list of **brief dot points** covering no more than half a page. In your essay plan:

- include your central argument or main contention, which is a concise statement of your overall response to the topic
- write three or four dot points for each paragraph, indicating the main idea and evidence/examples from the text. In your essay, you will need to *expand* on these points and *analyse* the evidence.

Structure your essay

An essay is a complete, self-contained piece of writing. It has a clear beginning (the introduction), middle (several body paragraphs) and end (the last paragraph or conclusion). It must also have a central argument that runs throughout, linking each paragraph to form a coherent whole. See examples of introductions and conclusions in the 'Analysing a sample topic' and 'Sample answer' sections.

The introduction establishes your overall response to the topic. It includes your main contention and outlines the main evidence you will refer to in your essay. Write your introduction *after* you have done a plan and *before* you write the rest of the essay.

The body paragraphs argue your case. These paragraphs present evidence from the text and explain how this evidence supports your argument. Each body paragraph needs:

- a strong **topic sentence** (usually the first sentence) that states the main point being made in the paragraph
- **evidence** from the text, including some brief quotations
- **analysis** of the textual evidence, with an **explanation** of its significance and how it supports your argument
- **links back to the topic** in one or more statements, usually towards the end of the paragraph.

Connect the body paragraphs so that your discussion flows smoothly. Use linking words and phrases such as ‘similarly’ and ‘on the other hand’, though don’t start every paragraph like this. Another strategy is to use a significant word from the last sentence of one paragraph in the first sentence of the next.

Use key terms from the topic – or synonyms for them – throughout, so the relevance of your discussion to the topic is always clear.

The conclusion ties everything together and finishes the essay. It includes strong statements that emphasise your central argument and provide a clear response to the topic.

In a conclusion, avoid simply restating the points made earlier in the essay as this will imply that you have run out of ideas and vocabulary. The conclusion should be a logical extension of what you have written, not just a repetition or summary of it. Writing an effective conclusion can be a challenge. Try using these tips:

- Start by linking back to the final sentence of the second-last paragraph, rather than leaping to your main contention straightaway – this helps your writing to flow.
- Use synonyms to vary your vocabulary. This allows you to reinforce your argument without being repetitive.
- When planning your essay, think of one or two broad statements or observations about the text’s meaning. These should be related to the topic and your overall argument. Keep these statements for the conclusion, since they will give you something new to say but still follow logically from your discussion. The introduction should focus on the topic, but the conclusion can present a wider view of the text.

Essay topics

- 1 What does *Once* suggest about humanity's capacity for good and evil?
- 2 Although Gleitzman focuses on one boy's story, Felix represents the experiences of all victims of persecution. To what extent do you agree?
- 3 Despite the novel's central character being good and kind, *Once* offers a bleak vision of humanity. Discuss.
- 4 What is the role of Felix and Zelda's friendship in *Once*?
- 5 *Once* suggests that painful compromises must sometimes be made when people are faced with difficult situations. Discuss.
- 6 How does Felix's character develop as he comes to terms with the reality around him?
- 7 'Sometimes ... parents can't protect their kids even though they love them more than anything in the world.' What roles do parents play in *Once*?
- 8 'I got you the boots because everybody deserves to have something good in their life at least once.' *Once* demonstrates the power of small acts of kindness. To what extent do you agree?
- 9 'Sometimes real life can be a bit different to stories.' How does Felix's obsession with fiction alter his perception of reality?

Vocabulary for writing about *Once*

anti-Semitism: prejudice against Jewish people

discrimination: treating people unfairly because of a characteristic such as their age, sex, gender, ethnicity, religion or disability

first-person narrative: a story told from the perspective of a character in the story

genocide: the extermination (murder) of a national or racial group of people

ghetto: a walled-off area in a city specifically for the confinement of Jewish people

Holocaust: the genocidal murder of Jewish people by the Nazis during World War II

Jewish person: someone whose religion and ethnicity is Judaism

Nazis: members of the National Socialist German Workers' political party, which existed between 1919 and 1945. Adolf Hitler became the leader of the party in 1921. In 1933, the party obtained political control of Germany. The policies of the Nazi party were based on racism; Nazis were prejudiced against Jewish people and other minority groups.

prejudice: a negative, irrational attitude or opinion about an individual or group that is formed before getting to know that person or group; comes from Latin words that mean 'prior judgement' and 'injustice'

racism: the belief that human races have distinctive characteristics and that some races are superior and have the right to rule other races

Analysing a sample topic

This section leads you through an analysis of a sample topic and the planning of a response.

‘Sometimes real life can be a bit different to stories.’ How does Felix’s obsession with fiction alter his perception of reality?

As this topic asks you to consider Felix’s perspective, you will have to focus on his character to thoroughly answer the question. Fortunately, because *Once* is narrated by Felix, we can deduce a lot about his personality from how he interprets his environment and decides to react. There are two main ideas in this: reality and fiction/stories. Acknowledging and explaining the differences between these ideas is crucial to your response.

You might start by looking in detail at the fictional models that Felix uses to help him understand his surroundings. His storytelling is largely inspired by adventure stories, so it would be good to lay out how these types of narratives work. For example, adventure stories are usually dominated by action rather than introspection, and often have a central character who is independent and resourceful. There’s little room for ambiguity in the stories Felix loves, and the events they describe usually lead to a happy ending in which the hero achieves their goal after overcoming a series of obstacles.

It’s interesting to consider how the clear-cut categories of fiction and reality partially break down when faced with the experience of being a Jewish person in Poland during the 1940s. While Felix is confronted with a harsh reality that he has no power to change, his storytelling gives him a way to navigate and adapt to this reality.

A response to this topic is explored in the following essay outline.

Sample introduction

The protagonist of *Once*, Felix, is defined by his obsession with stories. Caught up in what was perhaps the twentieth century's most horrific event, he frequently augments what he sees with the characteristics of fiction. This overarching interest can be seen in either a negative or a positive sense. While Felix undoubtedly sustains a more optimistic viewpoint through his persistent engagement with storytelling, he is also prevented from clearly perceiving the danger he faces and the likely reality of his parents' situation. Making things more complicated are the many dangerous adventures Felix endures, which superficially resemble those in the books he loves. Yet as Poland sinks further into calamity, he is forced to realise the distinction between fiction and reality; in the latter, there are no guarantees of neat or happy endings.

Body paragraph outline

Paragraph one: Felix's obsession with stories contributes to his appealing personality and positive outlook.

- Felix's seemingly crazy behaviour in the orphanage reflects his interest in stories and his ability to tell them.
- His behaviour contrasts with the other children, who have a more realistic mindset; he believes the impossible is possible. This is reflected when he plans his departure and dismisses Jankiel's serious warnings that 'it's too dangerous' (p.25).
- The 'about six hours' of stories he tells Zelda during their long walk to the city help to distract her and 'keep her spirits up' (p.66).

Paragraph two: Danger can result from Felix's preoccupation with stories.

- Felix does not see the horrors around him, perhaps because no book that he has read describes such a terrible situation or such evil intent, which means he is unable to recognise threats to his safety. For example, at first, he assumes the Nazis who come to the orphanage must be 'professional librarians in professional librarian armbands' (p.18); he initially assumes the best of people, coming up with innocent explanations for unfamiliar events.
- Felix has an increasing propensity to get himself into danger, resulting from his miscalculation of risk. He is shot at during his journey to his home town when he imagines the army truck might stop and give him a lift (pp.34–5) and he stays too long in the apartment reading *Just William*, which increases the risk of being discovered by the Nazis (p.126).

Paragraph three: Stories provide a way of sheltering from reality, but ultimately Felix recognises the truth.

- Felix's fantasies are in some ways *more* logical than the surrounding insanity. For example, he thinks the owners of the empty house he comes across while walking to his home town must be 'out hunting ... rabbits' (p.31). Surely this simple interpretation is a more rational explanation than the horrifying and incomprehensible truth: that they are victims of a genocide.
- Felix's determination to imagine himself as playing a part in a narrative may be, in fact, the most logical survival tactic in this inverted world. As he notes early in the story, coping with reality is nearly impossible without the relief of fantasy: 'It's really hard being an orphan if you haven't got an imagination' (p.56).
- However, in the end, Felix leaves his notebook on the train and leaps to safety, admitting that 'you can't force people to believe a story' (p.147). This suggests that he now recognises a limit to the power of stories and can respond to reality without imagining himself inside a narrative.

Sample conclusion

At first glance, Felix's belief that his parents are still alive makes him an object of pity. Yet over the course of his story, the implicit strength of his position becomes clearer. It's likely, for example, that his pilgrimage to his home town to find his parents would never have taken place without his ability to imagine himself within a story with a happy ending. Similarly, perhaps Felix's inability to recognise the full extent of the Nazis' crimes is a crucial act of psychological self-preservation. Surrounded by people who have been irreparably harmed by the unimaginable horrors they have witnessed, this boy's simple enthusiasm for life is only sustainable through a retreat from reality. On the other hand, at times Felix's obsession with stories places him in greater danger and contributes to a distorted view of what is happening around him. Only in the end does he truly perceive the grim nature of his reality, without the benefit of a story to ease the pain.

SAMPLE ANSWER

'I got you the boots because everybody deserves to have something good in their life at least once.' *Once* demonstrates the power of small acts of kindness. To what extent do you agree?

Small gestures of kindness are found throughout *Once*, which rejects the grand and spectacular in favour of the intimate and personal. Those who support each other in Gleitzman's novel do so through unspectacular acts of compassion. While these aren't life changing in themselves, they do provide evidence of the persistence of love. This counts for a great deal in a world that appears to have lost the basics of human kindness, and in which children are separated from the love and security of their parents and their homes. Nevertheless, in the face of Nazi oppression and brutality, these small acts are ultimately unable to change lives.

At first glance, human goodness is difficult to locate in the barren and often terrifying environment of *Once*, but, if we search hard enough, it is present. An ideal example is Mother Minka in the orphanage. On the surface, she is a remote, imposing figure of authority. She interacts with the children from a distance, refusing emotional involvement and seeming to do her duty. However, as more details are revealed, Mother Minka is revealed to be compassionate and caring. She tells Felix that 'your parents didn't send the carrot ... Sister Elwira ... felt sorry for you' (pp.20–1). This is a dual act of kindness. Sister Elwira, of course, took the lead in giving Felix the carrot; however, Mother Minka also colluded in the deception, keeping Felix's misunderstanding a secret until she had no choice but to reveal the truth. Under this small kindness lies an even greater one: the nuns' collective bravery in sheltering Jewish children at a time when this placed everyone in danger. There are no rousing speeches or dramatic scenes from the nuns themselves, but the very act of admitting Jewish children to the orphanage is an impressive example of unheralded kindness that makes Felix's survival possible.

As well as the more dramatic feat of rescuing Zelda, Felix is responsible for several acts of kindness towards others that make them feel valued and appreciated. For example, in the orphanage at the beginning, Felix unthinkingly lies to protect other children, coming up with amusing stories about their past. He tries to get Dodie to have the first bath by telling Mother Minka a story about Dodie wanting to become a doctor because his parents 'died of sickness' (p.7); he rescues Jankiel from 'the torture squad' with a story about Jankiel's parents being crushed by a horse (p.14). He gets few thanks and no rewards for his caring deeds, yet he continues anyway.

When the danger escalates after Felix's escape, he retains his tendency to make others' lives easier in whatever ways he can. Underlying this is an unspoken belief that others would do the same thing for him when faced with the same situation, even if this isn't necessarily true. Kindness comes so naturally to Felix that it's only towards the end of his journey – when he is tasked with retrieving aspirin for Zelda – that he even considers acting otherwise. Even after Felix learns that Zelda's father was a Nazi, he completes his mission. The moment of crisis is quickly resolved, as he understands that Zelda's value as a human surpasses anything her parents may have done. Retrieving the aspirin may seem like a relatively trivial gesture, but the danger it places him in, and its role in reducing Zelda's fever, give it deep significance.

Barney provides another prominent example of the power of seemingly minor gestures of kindness. His presentation of Felix with a pair of boots 'because everybody deserves to have something good in their life at least once' (p.112) is a small act that has a powerful impact. On the face of it, Barney hasn't done anything exceptional; they're just shoes, after all. Yet his small gesture is more important than it seems on the surface, because shoes, especially 'almost new' boots (p.111), would have been extremely hard to find in the ghetto. Barney has also chosen to give them to Felix, rather than replace his own shoes that are 'split open' and held together with rope, which adds an element of self-sacrifice to the gift.

Of course, the small acts of kindness permeating *Once* are offset by the many acts of cruelty and violence; they can't change history. Moreover, just as people's compassion can be expressed through seemingly trivial acts, contempt for other human beings can be shown through what could be regarded as relatively insignificant actions and laws. For example, the Nazi Party's law that Jewish people and members of some other minority groups should wear a badge of identification is an act of oppression that is superficially minor. As Felix observes: 'Each person is wearing an armband ... these are white with a blue star, a Jewish star like on some of the Jewish houses at home' (p.59). With his usual comical positivity, he speculates that they are wearing armbands 'so these travellers can recognise the other members of their group' (p.59). As we know, though, this law is symptomatic of the Nazi Party's all-encompassing practice of dehumanisation. Those who are simplistically categorised with a visual symbol are regarded and labelled by those in power as inferior human beings. Amid the multiple killings and beatings of Jewish people in the pages of *Once*, this example of the Nazis visually setting Jewish people apart as an inferior race is one of thousands of acts of unkindness that make coexistence impossible.

The optimistic elements of *Once*, which are life affirming amid appalling brutality, are often encapsulated in small acts of compassion and kindness. These might not all be as dramatic and moving as Barney refusing to take the possibility of survival and joining the children on the train, but they nevertheless tell a simple story of respect that fuels the human spirit's endurance in the darkest times imaginable.

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