



Teachers' Notes
written by Andrea Blake

morris gleitzman

ONCE

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Introduction

Once is an amazing and harrowing story. It is 1942 and Felix begins his story from an orphanage – where he thinks his parents have placed him until they sort out their ‘troubles’. Felix knows *‘things got difficult for Jewish booksellers’* but is not sure why. One thing he is certain of is that he will return to his lovely old life one day, with his books and his parents - once they come for him or once he finds them. But what Felix begins to see and experience after making his escape challenges his youthful naiveté and brings an end to his innocence in the most brutal of ways. The novel follows Felix on his quest to find his parents and his search for understanding as he comes face to face with death and evil. While *‘Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope, Father Ludwik and Adolf Hitler’* may let him down as protectors and sources of hope, Felix’s faith in himself and others rarely diminishes. Throughout the novel, Felix’s talents as a story teller highlight the humour, courage and strength this character draws on to help himself and support those around him. Herded along the road to a dreaded destination, hiding in a cellar with the heroic Barney, suffocating in a crowded boxcar, distracting sad orphans or a cranky Nazi with a toothache, Felix is a constant reminder of the power of imagination. Books, stories and Felix’s own special notebook are integral to his life and serve as symbolic links in many parts of Morris Gleitzman’s novel. During his journey, Felix forms an intense friendship with Zelda, a young girl he rescues in a devastating scene when her parents have been killed. He too is rescued at a later stage by Barney, a mysterious adult whom he comes to know and appreciate very deeply. Many times in the novel it is overwhelming to imagine the impact and implications of events Felix has lived through. Towards the end of the novel - as Felix comes up with yet another scheme to alleviate the suffering of those around him – this child has now become aware of Death camps, hatred towards the Jews, the role of Adolf Hitler, enforced labour and separation of families, and seen first-hand many other acts of violence and oppression. The reader is saved from succumbing to despair and depression by the resilience of Felix, even though we do not know what his escape from the terrible train will bring. But he is focused on how “lucky” he is – *‘...everybody deserves to*