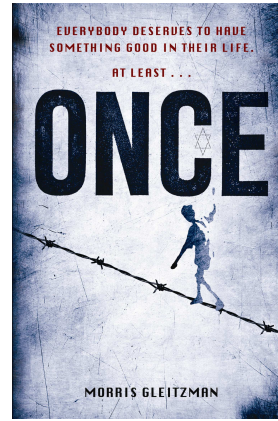


Henry Holt Books for Young Readers *Discussion Guide*

Once
by Morris Gleitzman

Grade Level:
Grade 7 up

Introduction:



Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains and I shouldn't have been and I almost caused a riot. It was because of the carrot.

So begins the story of ten-year-old Felix, a Jewish boy in Poland in 1942, hiding from the Nazis in a Catholic orphanage. The only problem is that he doesn't know anything about the war, and thinks he's only in the orphanage while his parents travel and try to salvage their bookselling business. And when he thinks his parents are in danger, Felix sets off to warn them--straight into the heart of Nazi-occupied Poland.

To Felix, everything is a story: Why did he get a whole carrot in his soup? It must be sign that his parents are coming to get him. Why are the Nazis burning books? They must be foreign librarians sent to clean out the orphanage's outdated library. But as Felix's journey gets increasingly dangerous, he begins to see horrors that not even stories can explain.

Despite his grim surroundings, Felix never loses hope. Morris Gleitzman takes a painful subject and expertly turns it into a story filled with love, friendship, and even humor.

Discussion Questions:

Chapter 1 (p. 1)

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

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

Chapter 2 (p. 9)

"Once I stayed awake all night, waiting for Mom and Dad to arrive."

1. What memories and physical evidence does Felix have of his parent? What beliefs does Felix have of his parents? What beliefs does Felix hold about what happened?

2. Explain the importance of Felix's notebook. Identify 4 things this notebook symbolizes.

Chapter 3 (p.17)

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

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

Chapter 4 (p. 27)

"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."

1. List some of the reasons Felix considers himself "lucky" (p.30)? List things you think he could complain about.
2. What indications are there –recognized or missed by Felix- that something is terribly wrong? What explanations does Felix come up with to make sense of things?

Chapter 5 (p. 38)

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

1. Contrast Felix's dreams with the reality of what he discovers when he makes it home.
2. Describe the range of emotions he experiences. Analyze emotions he observes in other people encountered at this point in the story. How would you classify them

Chapter 6 (p.49)

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

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

Chapter 7 (p. 57)

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

1. What is the significance of the following: the armbands? Felix's predictions about the future?

2. How does Felix answer his own questions- “Why would the Nazis make people suffer like this just for the sake of some books? (p.64) Why is this the turning point?

Chapter 8 (p. 66)

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

1. Why does Felix go from 6 hours of story telling to keeping Zelda’s spirits up, to the point where he suddenly hasn’t got any more stories” (pg 73)
2. Describe the toll such a journey takes on Felix and Zelda – physically and emotionally. How is it they manage to survive?

Chapter 9 (p.74)

“Once I lay in the street in tears, because the Nazis are everywhere and no grownups can protect kids from them, not Mom and Dad, not Mother Minka, not Father Ludwik, Not God, not Jesus, not the Virgin Mary, not the Pope, not Adolf Hitler.”

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

Chapter 10 (p. 83)

“Once I was living in a cellar in a Nazi city with seven other kids when I shouldn’t have been.”

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

Chapter 11 (p. 90)

“Once I escaped from an underground hiding place by telling a story. It was a bit exaggerated. It was a bit fanciful. It was my imagination getting a big carried away.”

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

Chapter 12 (p. 102)

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

1. Why did Barney stop Felix from asking about his parents? Why do he and Felix decide that Zelda needs to know the truth?

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2. Describe the range of reactions the children are showing as result of the traumas each has suffered. How do you feel about the stories shared by the children?

Chapter 13 (p. 111)

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

1. Analyze Barney’s gesture of giving Felix new boots. What does he mean by what he says (p.112) to Felix? What other “good things” does Felix seem to think he’s got and what can you see (e.g. his hope and optimism etc) in him that is good?
2. Felix makes a terrible discovery in the chapter and Barney is forced to tell hi some awful truths about what is going on. What is Felix torn between as he tries to take it all in?

Chapter 14 (p.121)

“Once I loved stories and now I hate them.”

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

Chapter 15 (p. 132)

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

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

Chapter 16 (p.141)

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

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

Chapter 17 (p. 149)

“Once I lay in a field somewhere in Poland, not sure if I am alive or dead.”

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1. Felix feels fortunate –“However my story turns out, I’ll never forget how lucky I am” (pg. 150). What is your explanation of this?
2. Knowing Felix as you do by the end of the novel, make a prediction of how you think his story might continue to unfold or end.

About the Author:



Morris Gleitzman has been a frozen-chicken defroster, fashion-industry trainee, department-store Santa, sugar-mill employee, and screenwriter, among other things. Now he's one of Australia's best-loved children's book authors. His books have been published all over the world. His next book, *THEN*, will be available from Henry Holt in Fall 2010. You can visit him at www.morrisgleitzman.com.

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