

Once

Morris Gleitzman

About the book

Once is dedicated to 'all the children whose stories have never been told.' It is 1942 and Felix is weary of living in an orphanage. He explains how 'once' he almost caused a riot because of a carrot, got confused when people made bonfires of books, escaped from the orphanage to find his Mum and Dad, saved a girl called Zelda from a burning house, made a Nazi with toothache laugh and jumped off a moving train into a Polish field. The story, with a 10 year as the narrator moves at a rapid pace as Felix attempts to make sense of what the grown ups around him are doing.

Each chapter begins with the word 'Once' and contains the statement 'You know how it is when...' before outlining yet another challenge for Felix. As one chapter closes, with a problem resolved the next presents something else which does not make sense to Felix.

The book examines a child's attempt to find meaning in a world turned upside down through hatred, discrimination and atrocity. It is a story of courage and of a desperate attempt to stay hopeful and look towards the future. The ending will encourage students and teachers to reach for the sequel *Then*. <http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/for-young-people/books-for-young-people-then>.

You should be prepared to discuss emotional issues with young readers but students between the ages of 8 and 14 will appreciate hearing about events of the Nazi era through the eyes of a child. The book works well when read aloud and could be used as a serial, with a new cliffhanger at the end of each day.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

1. we hear that Felix is a Jewish boy. Why is he living in a Christian orphanage?
2. how do we know that Felix likes books?
3. how would you describe the relationship between Felix and the other children in the orphanage and between Felix and the nuns?

4. does Felix always make the right decisions?
5. when Felix first hears gunshots what does he think is happening? What is really happening?
6. what have the Nazis and some of Felix's old neighbours done to the house and shop where Felix once lived with his Mum and Dad?
7. how does telling stories help both Felix and Zelda to remain brave and to stay alive?
8. describe anything in the story which makes you sad or angry.
9. describe Barney's cellar and the people hiding there. Why are they hiding?
10. how did you feel at the end of book? What do you think Felix and Zelda should do next?
11. if you were asked to write about this book, for a display in your library, which part of the story would you summarise to encourage other people to read it? Why have you chosen this particular section?
12. what do you think happens next? You can find out by reading the sequel, which the writer has called *Then*.