Once

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MORRIS GLEITZMAN

Morris Gleitzman was born in Sleaford, Lincolnshire, England, in 1953. In 1969 he moved to Australia, where he subsequently studied writing at the Canberra College of Advanced Education (renamed the University of Canberra in 1990). After working as a television and film screenwriter, he adapted one of his screenplays into his first novel, a children's book called *The Other Facts of Life*, published in 1987. His second novel, *Two Weeks with the Queen* (1990), became a bestseller and won a Family Award; two years later, Mary Morris adapted the novel into a play, which has since been performed internationally. Gleitzman has published more than 40 books, including *Once* (2005), *Then* (2008), *Now* (2010), *After* (2012), *Soon* (2015), *Maybe* (2018), and *Always* (2021), a series about a Jewish boy named Felix Salinger living through the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Poland and his life in the aftermath. The *Once* series has won many children's-book accolades; for example, the original *Once* novel was named a Sydney Taylor Honor Award Winner, a YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults Pick, and an USBBY Outstanding International Book. Morris Gleitzman himself was named the Australian Children's Laureate for 2018–2019.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, beginning World War II (1939—1945). From 1939—1941, the USSR helped Nazi Germany with the invasion and subsequent occupation of Poland. Then on June 22, 1941, the Nazis launched a surprise invasion of the USSR, their former allies. The Nazi offensive against the USSR led to a wholesale Nazi occupation of Poland, ending only with the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allies (an international military alliance led primarily by the U.S., the UK, the USSR, and China) on May 8, 1945. During World War II, the Nazis carried out the Holocaust, a genocide against Jewish people. During the Holocaust, the Nazis murdered about six million Jewish people through mass shootings, gas chambers, and deaths by starvation, disease, and overwork in ghettos and concentration camps. When the Nazis invaded Poland, about 3.5 million Jewish people were living in the country. From 1939 to 1941, the Nazis stripped Jewish people in Poland of their legal rights and possessions and forced them to live in specially designated urban ghettos. Because the Nazis did not allow nearly enough food into the ghettos, many Jewish people in ghettos died of starvation. Nazis also killed Jewish people in Poland by forcing them into mobile gas chambers known as "gas vans" and by rounding them up into large groups and shooting them. In 1942, Nazis began transporting Jewish people in Poland to concentration camps equipped with multiple gas chambers for large-scale murder. Several of the largest Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz, were in Poland. Historians estimate that about three million Jewish people died in the Holocaust in Poland—approximately 50% of all Jewish Holocaust deaths.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Once by Morris Gleitzman represents the Holocaust through the naïve perspective of its child protagonist, Felix Salinger. Much tension in the book derives from dramatic irony, in which the reader—having greater historical knowledge than Felix—realizes that Felix is in mortal danger of which he is unaware. Gleitzman may have drawn inspiration from such classic novels such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which represents the atrocity of U.S. slavery through the young, naïve perspective of its titular protagonist, and Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897), which represents irresponsible and cruel adults from the perspective of a neglected young girl. It may also have drawn inspiration from Anne Frank's *The Diary of A Young Girl*, a journal that a Jewish girl wrote from 1942 to 1944 while in hiding in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, before she was apprehended and died in a concentration camp in 1945; her journal was published in the original Dutch in 1947, in English translation in 1952, and in many other languages subsequently. Felix, the protagonist of *Once*, himself loves the English children's book author Richmal Crompton (1890—1969), whose *Just William* series stars an English schoolboy who, like Felix, is adventurous and highly ethical. Gleitzman's *Once* is one of several famous contemporary children's books set during the Holocaust, including Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (1989), Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2006).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Once
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Children's literature, historical fiction
- **Setting:** Nazi-occupied Poland, 1942
- **Climax:** Felix, Zelda, and Chaya jump from the train traveling to a concentration camp.
- **Antagonist:** Nazis
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Wicked! Morris Gleitzman co-wrote a children's book series, *Wicked!*, with another Australian children's book author, Paul Jennings. The series has been adapted into a 26-episode animated television series and an animated film.

HIV/AIDS. Morris Gleitzman's second novel, the bestseller *Two Weeks with the Queen* (1990), was notable for its sympathetic portrayal of gay men living with HIV/AIDS at a time when responses to the HIV/AIDS pandemic were often marked by fear and homophobia.

PLOT SUMMARY

At a remote Catholic orphanage in Poland in 1942, young Felix discovers an entire **carrot** in his soup. Because the orphans get so few vegetables, he reasons that his parents must have sent the carrot as a message that they're coming back. They left him at the orphanage almost four years before, telling him they had to take care of their bookselling business. He worries they won't recognize him when they arrive, but he plans to show them his **notebook**, where he's written stories about their adventures.

The next morning, a car arrives at the orphanage. Felix hopes it's his parents, but it turns out to be men in armbands. Felix, disappointed, decides to ask the orphanage's head nun Mother Minka when his parents will arrive. One of the men finds Felix in Mother Minka's office and speaks threateningly to him in a foreign language. Mother Minka bursts in and drags Felix out by the ear. She explains that the men in armbands are Nazis who discovered she was hiding Jewish books—but they haven't discovered that Felix is Jewish. Felix assumes that Nazis are a group with a vendetta against Jewish *books*, not Jewish people. Worried for his bookseller parents, Felix asks about the carrot they left and when they're coming. Mother Minka explains that one of the nuns, feeling sorry for Felix, snuck the carrot into his soup. Felix refuses to believe her. He resolves to find his parents and warn them about the Nazis.

Felix escapes the orphanage and walks to his hometown. Hearing voices in the apartment attached to his parents' bookshop, Felix looks for them—only to find the family of Wiktor Radzyn, Felix's former classmate. When they try to catch Felix, he runs away. Later, another neighbor snatches Felix into an alley and explains that Nazis took Felix's parents and all the other Jewish people to the city. He advises Felix to hide.

Felix, traveling to the city, comes upon a burning house. In the yard he finds a man and a woman shot to death. Assuming the couple were Jewish booksellers who resisted Nazi attempts to burn their books, Felix sits down and cries. Then he spots an unconscious little girl. When he hears a car coming, he picks up the girl and flees. Eventually, he stops to rest behind a hedge. He learns the girl's name is Zelda and that she doesn't know her parents have been shot. Rather than break the news to her, he tells her a story to calm her down while they rest. Having fallen asleep, Felix—who is starting to feel sick—wakes and hears voices coming from the direction of the road. When he peers through the hedge, he sees Nazis yelling at Jewish travelers wearing armbands marked by the Star of David. Then Zelda screams. Felix turns and sees a Nazi pointing a gun at her head. The Nazi gestures at them with the gun to join the crowd. As they walk toward the city, Felix tells Zelda stories and tries to prevent her from witnessing Nazi acts of violence.

By the time the crowd reaches the city, Felix is sick and exhausted. He collapses in the street as Zelda screams and a Nazi points a gun at her. Suddenly, a man wearing a Jewish armband appears, speaking to the Nazi in a language Felix doesn't understand and brandishing a leather bag. The Nazi leaves Zelda alone but shoots another woman. Felix faints. Felix and Zelda's rescuer, Barney, takes them to a hidden cellar, where he introduces him to some other children. Later, the other children explain to Felix that they're hiding from the Nazis because the Nazis hate all Jewish people. Felix realizes his parents colluded with Mother Minka to pretend he was Catholic in order to save his life.

After Felix recovers, Barney admits that he read one of the stories from Felix's notebook and says he needs Felix's help. Barney leads Felix out of the cellar into the deserted streets and explains they're in a Jewish ghetto with a curfew. Barney takes Felix to an apartment where a Nazi officer is waiting. Barney—a dentist, whose leather bag contains dentistry tools—instructs Felix to tell the Nazi officer a story to distract from the pain of unanesthetized tooth drilling. Though terrified, Felix tells a funny story while Barney translates it into German. The Nazi officer likes Felix's story so much that he asks Felix to write it down for him and bring it back to him so he can send it to his children. Barney receives a bag of food as payment.

The next morning, Felix and Zelda look into the street through a crack near the cellar's ceiling. Zelda, convinced she sees her mother's shoes, becomes desperate to leave the cellar. Felix realizes he needs to admit her parents are dead. After he tells her, she sobs uncontrollably. The other children tell start telling stories about the Nazis murdering their families. Everyone starts crying. Felix feels fortunate because his parents aren't dead yet.

Later, Barney asks Felix to help him scavenge necessities. On their way, they overhear Jewish travelers speaking to a Nazi soldier who tells them they're being taken to the countryside. When Felix asks Barney whether they can go to the countryside, Barney says no. Felix, annoyed, silently resolves to take Zelda and go find his parents in the countryside. Barney leads Felix to an apartment that contains an abandoned dentist's surgery, where he scavenges syringes and anesthetic.

When he tells Felix to find food, Felix enters the kitchen and discovers a murdered toddler. Felix starts screaming and sobbing. When Barney runs to comfort him, Felix asks why the parents didn't do anything. Barney explains that sometimes parents can't save their children. He tells Felix that Felix's parents tried as hard as they could. Confused by the past tense, Felix says he's going to find his parents in the countryside. Barney explains that "countryside" is a euphemism for Nazi death camps.

That night, Felix is lying miserable in bed when Zelda comes over and asks whether his parents are dead too. When he doesn't answer, she gives him her silver locket necklace and starts petting his hair. Felix notices her hand is very, very hot. A moment later, she faints. Barney determines that she has a dangerously high fever. Unwilling to leave her while she's so sick, he sends Felix to find aspirin in one of the ghetto's abandoned apartments. Felix realizes Zelda may die if her temperature doesn't come down; he resolves to find her not only aspirin but also a carrot.

Felix eventually finds aspirin and a carrot in an apartment. Then Nazis begin searching the building. Felix runs, falls, and busts open Zelda's locket. A Nazi grabs him, examines the locket—and leaves him alone. Felix flees. Once he's reached a deserted street, he examines the locket. Inside is a photograph of Zelda's mother and Zelda's father—in a Nazi uniform. Felix resolves to bring Zelda the aspirin and carrot even if her father was a Nazi, reasoning that she's not to blame for what her father did and she's basically his family now. When Felix returns to the building where the others are hiding, it's surrounded by Nazis. He hears the other children screaming and runs to join them.

The Nazis march Barney, Felix carrying Zelda, and the other children to a train station, where more Nazis are forcing Jewish people onto a train. Felix puts the silver locket back on Zelda and shows it to Barney. When Barney realizes that Zelda's father must have been a Nazi collaborator killed by the Polish resistance, Felix insists they tell someone. They spot the Nazi officer who wanted Felix's story and flag him down. Barney starts speaking to him in German. The Nazi officer agrees to let Barney and Zelda leave, but when Barney tries to convince him to let the other children go too, he shakes his head. Nazis drags the children toward the train. Barney gives Zelda to the Nazi officer and goes with them. Zelda, struggling, tries to follow the others. After Felix is thrown into a train car, Zelda is thrown on top of him. When he asks what happened, she explains she bit the Nazi officer. Felix hears Nazis nailing the train-car doors shut.

There are no bathrooms on the train. Various passengers eventually go to the bathroom in the corner. When one embarrassed elderly woman starts pushing toward the bathroom corner, Felix decides to tear out all his notebook's pages so people can use them as toilet paper. He goes toward the corner and grabs a bolt in the wall, planning to impale the pages on it—and the bolt comes away in his hands. Realizing the wooden wall has rotted, passengers create a hole large enough to jump through. Machine-gunners on the train roof kill some jumpers, but others make it to the forest and escape. Felix tries to convince Barney and the other children to jump. Most of the other children are too scared, and Barney insists on staying with them. Zelda and one other girl, Chaya, agree to jump with Felix. Everyone hugs. Then Felix, Zelda, and Chaya jump.

The machine gunners kill Chaya, but Zelda and Felix survive. Felix, having felt syringes in Barney's coat pocket when they hugged goodbye, realizes he won't let the other children suffer. He realizes he has no idea how long the rest of his and Zelda's lives will be, but some good things have happened to them.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Felix Salinger – Felix Salinger is a 10-year-old Jewish boy living in Nazi-occupied Poland. At the occupation's beginning, Felix's bookseller parents left him at an orphanage run by a customer, the nun Mother Minka. Mother Minka hides Felix from the Nazis by pretending he's Catholic. Because no one tells Felix the truth about the Nazis, he believes that he's staying at the orphanage because his parents need to travel around to save their business. When *Once* begins, Felix has been at the orphanage for almost four years. He enjoyed making up stories, especially about his parents' adventures. Imaginative yet naïve, Felix witnesses Nazis burning Mother Minka's books and concludes Nazis only hate Jewish *books*. He runs away to warn his parents that their bookstore is in danger. On the way, he finds a little girl, Zelda, unconscious next to her murdered parents. Felix rescues Zelda and takes her with him. Later, the children meet Barney, a Jewish dentist hiding orphaned Jewish children in a Jewish ghetto. From Barney and the other children, Felix learns that Nazis hate Jewish *people*—and that they may have already murdered his parents. This revelation turns Felix against stories, since he was writing happy stories about his parents while they were being persecuted. When Zelda comes down with a dangerous fever, Felix bravely ventures into the ghetto to find aspirin—and when, by a strange turn of events, he realizes that Zelda's father was a Nazi collaborator, he decides to save her anyway, because he considers her his family now. When the Nazis capture Felix and the others and put them on a train headed to a concentration camp, Felix discovers a rotting portion of the train wall through which prisoners can jump to freedom. Relying on the power of stories, he tries to persuade the other children to risk the machine-gunners on the roof and jump. Though most are too afraid, Zelda and Chaya jump with Felix. Chaya dies, but Felix and Zelda survive—suggesting that stories can be powerful tools for endurance and survival.

Zelda – Zelda is a young girl living in Nazi-occupied Poland. Zelda wears a locket containing a portrait of her parents with her father, a Nazi collaborator, wearing a Nazi uniform. After someone (likely the Polish resistance) knocks Zelda unconscious, shoots her parents, and burns their house down, Felix finds her in her yard and rescues her on the assumption that Nazis killed her family. Rather than telling Zelda that her parents are dead, Felix decides to wait until they've found his own parents, who will know how to break the news. As Felix and Zelda travel through Nazi-occupied Poland, Felix tells Zelda stories to distract her from the violence all around them; while bossy, opinionated Zelda critiques and adds to Felix's stories, she clearly also notices the violence and empathizes with the Nazis' victims. After the Jewish dentist Barney rescues Felix and Zelda from Nazis and hides them in the Jewish ghetto with other Jewish orphans, Zelda believes she sees her mother and frantically attempts to leave the hiding place. Felix—realizing that deceiving Zelda about her parents' deaths was a bad idea—tells her the truth. Even after Felix discovers the truth about Zelda's father, he resolves to continue caring for Zelda anyway, thinking of himself as her remaining family. After Nazis put Felix and Zelda on a train to a concentration camp, they jump to a freedom together through a hole in the semi-rotted train wall—suggesting that they will continue to act as each other's family for as long as they can survive.

Barney – Barney is a Jewish dentist living in a Jewish ghetto in Nazi-occupied Poland. He hides Jewish children in a cellar in the ghetto to keep the Nazis from taking them and feeds them by earning food from the Nazis in exchange for free dental services. It is implied, though never stated, that Nazis have already killed Barney's biological family and that he has refocused all his protective familial affection on the children he's hiding. After Nazis capture Felix and Zelda, Barney intervenes and saves them. Unlike the other adults in Felix's life, Barney reluctantly tells him the truth about Nazi atrocities, including concentration camps—but he doesn't tell the younger children in his care. In consequence, after the Nazis capture Felix, Zelda, Barney, and the other children and put them on a train to a concentration camp, only Felix and Barney truly understand that the train is taking them to almost certain death. When Felix and the other passengers create a hole in the train wall through which they can escape, Felix can only persuade Zelda and Chaya to jump with him. Barney insists on staying with the other children, even though it likely means his death. Felix hugs Barney before jumping and feels syringes in his jacket—from which he deduces that Barney is carrying fatal doses of anesthetic and will assist the other children in suicide before letting Nazis kill them.

Mother Minka – Mother Minka is a stern nun, fond of corporal punishment, who runs a remote Catholic orphanage in Nazi-occupied Poland. Prior to the Nazi invasion, she used to buy books from Felix Salinger's parents, a Jewish couple who owned a bookstore. When Felix's parents decide to hide Felix from the Nazis at the occupation's beginning, Mother Minka agrees to keep him at her orphanage, telling everyone he's a Catholic orphan. Mother Minka tries to preserve the orphans' innocence by concealing the truth about Nazi atrocities in Poland from them. Ironically, her protectiveness puts Felix in danger—initially, he's more afraid of her than he is of Nazis, and when she finally reveals some of the truth, he reacts with denial and misunderstanding. Thus, Mother Minka represents the danger of trying to shield children from ugly realities. Yet she also represents human dignity in the face of dehumanizing, antisemitic totalitarianism; though not Jewish herself, she takes a moral stand and risks her life to protect Felix (and, it is implied, at least one other Jewish child) from Nazis.

Dodie – Dodie (whose real name is "Dodek") is an orphan who befriends Felix Salinger at Mother Minka's Catholic orphanage and enjoys Felix's inventive stories. The novel suggests that Dodie may have problematic violent tendencies: he wants to be a "pig-slaughterer" when he grows up, and Felix once witnessed him removing the legs from an insect. Yet Dodie may be violent only because he doesn't understand the consequences of his actions: after he removed the insect's legs, he tried to put them back on again. Moreover, Dodie tries to be kind to other children. For example, when bullies at the orphanage target the new boy, Jankiel, Dodie defends Jankiel. Though there's a long history of violent antisemitism in Poland, Dodie doesn't really understand what being Jewish means when Felix reveals that he's Jewish and planning to escape the orphanage—he only tells Felix that he'll miss him. Dodie's innocent friendship with Felix implies that antisemitism is a dehumanizing prejudice that children have to be *taught*—it isn't something they naturally feel or believe.

The Nazi Officer – The Nazi officer first appears when Barney takes Felix with him to perform dental surgeries under cover of night. Barney wants Felix to tell his patients stories to distract them from the pain of dental surgery, because Barney doesn't have any anesthetic. Barney's second patient is the scowling, liquor-swilling Nazi officer, whose underling gives Barney food in payment for the surgery. Though Felix is terrified, the Nazi officer likes the story Felix tells so much that he asks Felix to write it down and give it to him later so he can send it to his children. After Nazis capture Barney, Felix, Zelda, and the other Jewish children and take them to a train station where they'll be sent to a concentration camp, Felix and Barney spot the Nazi officer, give him Felix's written story, and try to convince him to save Zelda by showing him her silver locket that contains a photograph of her father in Nazi uniform. The Nazi officer is willing to let Zelda and Barney go, but when Barney tries to negotiate for the other children's freedom, the officer refuses. The Nazi officer exemplifies how readers need to judge characters' individual actions in the larger context of their behavior and personality. While the Nazi officer performs a few

things that, out of context, might seem kind, he's complicit in a genocide against Jewish people even if Felix never sees him commit violent acts personally.

Chaya – Chaya, whose name means "alive" in Hebrew, is one of the Jewish children that Barney is hiding from the Nazis in a cellar in the Jewish ghetto. One of her arms is bandaged. Later, she reveals to the other children—indirectly, through a fairy tale about a princess persecuted by goblins—that Nazis tortured her and killed her family because they falsely believed the family had information about the Polish resistance. After Nazis capture Chaya, Barney, and the other children and put them on a train headed to a concentration camp, Felix discovers a rotten part of the train wall through which the prisoners can jump and escape—if they are willing to risk exposure to the Nazi machine-gunners stationed on the train roof. When Felix tries to persuade the other children to jump with him, Chaya and Zelda are the only two who want to risk it. A Nazi machine-gunner shoots Chaya to death after she, Felix, and Zelda jump, which starkly illustrates that the children were in fact putting themselves in mortal danger to escape the train.

Jankiel – Jankiel is a dark-eyed orphan who has recently arrived at Mother Minka's remote Catholic orphanage. When he arrives, Mother Minka makes him promise not to tell the other children about the Nazi atrocities occurring in the world beyond the orphanage. When bullies target Jankiel, Felix and Dodie try to save him. Felix wonders whether Jankiel might be secretly Jewish too but never asks him, knowing Jankiel wouldn't want to admit it at the Catholic orphanage. Jankiel runs into Felix as Felix is escaping the orphanage and tries to convince him not to leave; he won't say why due to his promise to Mother Minka but insists Felix will "really regret" entering the outside world. Felix ignores him. Jankiel functions as foil for Felix: like Felix, he is probably a Jewish boy whom Mother Minka is intentionally concealing from the Nazis, but unlike Felix, he is knowledgeable and fearful whereas Felix (when the novel begins) is ignorant and brave.

Henryk – Henryk is one of the young Jewish children that Barney is hiding from the Nazis. When Felix first wakes up in Barney's secret cellar, he hears Henryk crying for his parents and Barney suggesting that Henryk may see his parents sometime in the future—a suggestion Felix scorns, thinking Henryk should be allowed to go find his parents right away. Felix's reaction to Henryk shows Felix's naivete about the situation in Nazi-occupied Poland. Later, Henryk reveals that Nazis killed and mutilated his dog, Sigi, exemplifying the horrible, pointless cruelty of antisemitic violence.

Jacob – Jacob is one of the Jewish children that Barney is hiding from the Nazis. Because he blinks so much, Felix sometimes calls him "the blinking boy." He figures out a method of piling mattresses so that the children hiding in the cellar can see through a high crack into the street. Zelda becomes convinced she's seen her mother through the crack, an incident that finally convinces Felix to admit to her that he saw her parents' corpses. Later, Jacob tells the other children that Nazis burnt his entire family to death.

Father Ludwik – Father Ludwik is a Polish Catholic priest who helps run Mother Minka's orphanage. He has told Felix that Adolf Hitler is protecting them, confusing Felix about who Hitler is and leading Felix to pray to Hitler at various points. Father Ludwik may know that Felix is Jewish and be actively deceiving him about Nazi atrocities to keep him ignorant and safe in case any Nazis visit the orphanage. On the other hand, Father Ludwik may be a Nazi sympathizer who doesn't know Felix is Jewish, in which case he represents gentile Polish antisemitism.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Moshe – Moshe is one of the Jewish children that Barney is hiding from the Nazis. Though only a little younger than Felix, Moshe never speaks; he is always chewing on a piece of wood that the novel implies is a fragment of his home, destroyed by Nazis.

Ruth – Ruth is one of the Jewish children that Barney is hiding from the Nazis. She has very curly hair that she wishes were neater, and she treats the younger children with maternal kindness. Eventually, she tells the other children that Nazis beat her father to death.

Janek – Janek is one of the children that Barney is hiding from the Nazis. A toddler, Janek illustrates how young many of the children were that the Nazis sent to concentration camps and killed.

Wiktor Radzyn – Wiktor Radzyn is a Catholic boy with whom Felix Salinger attended school before Felix's parents decided to hide him at Mother Minka's orphanage. After the Nazis take Felix's parents away, the Radzyn family steals the Salinger family's apartment and the possessions they left behind.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

STORYTELLING

In *Once*, storytelling blinds people to danger—but it also protects them, helps them endure pain, and gives them courage, which ultimately makes it a force for good. The novel's protagonist, Felix, is a young, story-loving Jewish boy living in Nazi-occupied Poland during the Holocaust. His parents left him at a Catholic orphanage, telling

him that they needed to fix problems with their bookselling business but would return. By blinding Felix to Nazi persecution of Jewish people, his parents' story puts him in danger: he sees Nazis burning books, assumes the Nazis are oppressing Jewish *booksellers* in particular, and leaves the orphanage—where the head nun Mother Minka is protecting him by pretending he's Catholic—to warn his parents. In the wider world, his misunderstandings lead him to unwittingly put himself in harm's way.

When Felix finally realizes that his parents told him a false story and may already be dead, he decides that he loathes stories because they don't do people any good. Yet Felix later realizes he was wrong to reject stories. Though his parents' story put him in danger, it also saved his life by hiding him from Nazis. While searching for his parents, Felix meets a Jewish dentist, Barney, who has been hiding and caring for orphaned Jewish children. One night, lacking anesthetic, Barney asks Felix to tell stories to the patients whose teeth he's drilling. The experience teaches Felix that stories can distract people from their pain and so help them endure it. Later, Nazis capture Felix, Barney, and the other children Barney has been protecting and put them on a train to a concentration camp. When the people on the train tear a hole in the train-car's rotten wood wall, Felix tells his companions a hopeful story to persuade them to risk the Nazi machine-gunners on the train's roof and jump to freedom. Though most of the children say no and Barney insists on staying with them, Felix does convince two children, Zelda and Chaya, to jump. Felix and Zelda survive, though Chaya dies. Thus, in the end, the novel implies that while stories can be deceitful and even harmful, they can also be powerful forces of self-preservation that help people to endure hardship and trauma.

INNOCENCE AND IGNORANCE

In *Once*, adults try to preserve children's innocence by hiding terrible truths from them. Yet in doing so, they also make children ignorant, which exposes them to danger. The novel's protagonist, Felix, is a Jewish boy living in Nazi-occupied Poland during the Holocaust. When his parents hide him from the Nazis in a Catholic orphanage, they lie to him about why. Similarly, the nun who runs the orphanage, Mother Minka, keeps the truth about the Nazis from Felix and the other orphans so they won't panic. Felix, innocent and ignorant of what the Nazis are doing, runs away from the orphanage—and straight into danger. Later, Felix meets a Jewish dentist named Barney who has been hiding orphaned Jewish children inside an abandoned print shop. When Barney and Felix overhear a Nazi convincing Jewish people to travel to the "countryside," Felix asks Barney whether they can go too; Barney refuses without explaining why. Felix, irritated, plans to escape to the countryside—a plan that would lead to his death, since "countryside" is a Nazi euphemism for concentration camps. It's only when Barney discovers Felix's plan that he admits the truth to Felix—but he still doesn't tell the other children in his care about the concentration camps. Near the novel's end, Nazis have thrown Barney, Felix, and the other orphaned children onto a train headed for a concentration camp when the passengers manage to create a hole in the train-car wall large enough to jump through. Felix asks the other children to jump despite the Nazi machine-gunners on the train's roof, but most refuse—perhaps because neither Felix nor Barney has told them where the train is taking them. In their ignorance, thus, the children almost certainly perish. Thus, the novel suggests that rather than trying to preserve children's innocence by keeping them ignorant of terrible truths, adults should be honest with children to protect them.

ANTISEMITISM VS. HUMAN DIGNITY

In *Once*, antisemitism is a dehumanizing force, against which people assert their human dignity by exercising moral choice. The novel's protagonist, Felix, is a nonreligious Jewish boy living in a Catholic orphanage. Having spent almost four years among nuns, Felix occasionally prays not only to God but also to Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Pope, and to his favorite children's book author, Richmal Crompton. Though Felix vaguely recognizes a Star of David and a menorah, he doesn't know what they're called. By emphasizing that Felix's Jewishness is almost purely nominal, not based on his religious convictions or even his actual cultural practices, the novel highlights that the Nazis want to kill Jewish people just for their ancestry, not for anything they believe or have done, thus highlighting that antisemitism dehumanizes people based purely on ethnicity. In the face of antisemitic dehumanization, the novel's protagonists assert their human dignity by exercising moral choice—or, in other words, by trying to do the right thing—even in positions of powerlessness. For example, Felix saves a little girl named Zelda after he finds her unconscious beside her burning house and murdered parents. As he travels to the city searching for his own parents, he repeatedly puts himself in danger to protect Zelda from Nazi violence. When she comes down with a dangerously high fever, he sneaks through a Nazi-patrolled ghetto after curfew to find her aspirin—and brings it back to her even after her discovers that her father was likely a Nazi collaborator killed by the Polish resistance. Even though Felix has very little power to influence the world, his insistence on trying to protect Zelda and his refusal to blame her for things her father did illustrate his goodness, his moral agency, and his human dignity—and thus the evil of antisemitism, which would deny he possesses those qualities.

FAMILY

Once illustrates how chosen family can be as important as birth family through the story of Felix,

a Jewish boy living in Nazi-occupied Poland whose parents have sent him to live at a Catholic orphanage to avoid Nazi persecution. After living at the orphanage for almost four years, Felix develops great affection for the nuns who run the place and for Dodie, a friend he makes there. Nevertheless, he runs away, believing he needs to help his bookkeeper parents save their books from book-burning Nazis. This initial choice—to leave the nuns who have cared for him and the best friend whom he misses terribly—suggests that, at this point, Felix believes ties to one's birth family supersede bonds with non-family members.

Traveling to find his parents, he stumbles upon a little girl named Zelda lying unconscious next to her murdered parents in their yard; he decides to hide Zelda's parents' murder from her until they find his parents, who will take care of her. For much of the novel, Felix and Zelda are motivated by a desire to reunite with their parents—until Felix reveals to Zelda that her parents and dead and realizes that, given the realities of Nazi occupation, his parents likely are too. Later, when Felix looks inside Zelda's locket and finds a picture of her father wearing a Nazi uniform, he discovers that Zelda's father was probably a Nazi collaborator killed by the Polish resistance. Nevertheless, Felix refuses to hold the crimes of Zelda's father against her. Instead, he decides that he is Zelda's family now, and he continues protecting her even when it puts him in danger and despite Zelda's biological relationship to a Nazi collaborator. Felix's choices show that he has realized that his own relationship with Zelda, forged as they protected and cared for one another under threat of Nazi violence, matters more than Zelda's biological relationship to her birth parents when it comes to understanding who Zelda is—in other words, her father's Nazi sympathies do not reflect Zelda's own support of the Nazi regime. Thus, *Once* recognizes the importance of biological family—Felix's parents continue to matter to him tremendously even as he extends his affection to others, and even as he confronts the grim reality that they're likely never coming back for him—while showing that non-biological family can be just as important, loving, and revealing of character.

MORALITY, VIOLENCE, AND COMPLICITY

In *Once*, people who commit individual violent acts don't always intend harm, while people who avoid violence and commit seemingly kind acts are sometimes complicit in systematic evil. Because of this, the novel suggests, it's important to understand people's contexts and motivations before judging their actions. The novel's protagonist, a Jewish boy named Felix living in an orphanage in Nazi-occupied Poland, fears the nun who runs the orphanage, Mother Minka, because "nuns can have good hearts and still be violent." Yet while Felix's words imply that Mother Minka uses problematic corporal punishment on children, she is also risking her life by hiding Felix—and, it is implied, another boy named Jankiel—from Nazis. Meanwhile, Felix's best friend at the orphanage, Dodie, once pulled the legs off an insect and then tried to reattach them, suggesting that he didn't understand what he was doing or intend to maim the insect permanently. Despite Dodie's violence toward the insect, he also makes Felix help him rescue Jankiel from bullies. Mother Minka and Dodie illustrate that when people commit violent acts, it doesn't always mean that they intend harm or that they are fundamentally bad people.

On the other hand, people can avoid committing violence personally and can even engage in seemingly kind individual actions while participating in systematic evils. For example, the Nazi officer overseeing the loading of Jewish passengers onto a train to a concentration camp commits no physical violence himself, happily receives a story from Felix to send to his children, and at one point offers to let Zelda and Barney go free—yet he refuses to free the other orphans Barney is caring for go with them. And, as a Nazi officer, he is complicit in the mass murder of Jewish people, even if he's not physically committing the murders himself. Thus, the book suggests that individual violent actions may or may not betray patterns of systematically evil behavior—it doesn't in the case of Mother Minka and Dodie, but it does in the case of Nazi soldiers—and that people can engage in systematic evil without committing individual acts of violence. Therefore, one must understand the contexts and motivations that inform people's individual actions before judging them morally.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

NOTEBOOK

In *Once*, Felix's notebook represents his love of escapist stories, a love that evolves as Felix slowly realizes stories are not a *replacement* for reality but a tool to *shape* reality. Felix's parents gave him the notebook before leaving him at a remote orphanage in Nazi-occupied Poland, pretending that they needed to travel to save their business when in fact they were hiding Felix from the Nazis. In the notebook, Felix loves writing stories about his parents' imagined adventures. Felix's relationship to the notebook changes dramatically throughout the novel. He rejects the notebook when he realizes that his parents concealed the horrors of Nazi-occupied Poland from him. When the Jewish dentist Barney, who has been hiding Jewish children from the Nazis, assumes responsibility for Felix and asks whether he can read Felix's notebook stories to the other children, Felix refuses. He has decided his notebook stories are "stupid"

because the escapist adventures he imagined for his parents in no way capture their oppressed, endangered reality. Stories, he concludes, hide ugly truths. Yet when Barney asks Felix to tell Barney's dental patients stories to distract them from their dental surgeries, the experience makes Felix realize that escapism helps people endure unavoidable pain. The notebook, Felix sees, is a useful tool. Finally, when Nazis put Felix on a train to a concentration camp, Felix tears up his notebook to create makeshift toilet paper for the other passengers—and, while making the paper available to all, discovers a rotten section of the train through which passengers can escape. Felix's final destruction of the notebook to help others—and the possibility of survival it reveals—shows that fiction and escapism are tools that must be employed or cast aside as real situations dictate, not a replacement for attention to harsh reality.

CARROTS

In *Once*, carrots represent the hope that Felix tries to inspire in others under horrific circumstances. At the novel's beginning, Felix finds a whole carrot in his soup at the remote Catholic orphanage where his parents left him after Nazis invaded Poland. Because carrots are his "favorite vegetable" and rare at the impoverished orphanage, Felix decides the carrot must be a message from his parents. Before Felix runs away to find them, he gives the carrot to his orphan friend Dodie, promising he'll return with more vegetables after his family reunites. Thus, Felix uses the carrot to inspire hope in Dodie that Dodie won't permanently lose one of the only affectionate relationships in his life, his friendship with Felix. While searching for his parents, Felix meets an orphaned girl, Zelda, and Barney, a Jewish dentist hiding Jewish children from the Nazis. When Zelda contracts a dangerous fever, Barney sends Felix into the Nazi-patrolled ghetto to find aspirin. Felix decides to find a carrot too, believing it will "help Zelda just as much as aspirin." Felix's belief suggests that hope (which carrots symbolize in the novel) is as important to survival as medicine. Before Felix can give Zelda the carrot, Nazis capture them, Barney, and the other children and put them on a train to a concentration camp. When Felix finds a rotted-out section of the train wall, he tries to convince the other children to jump to freedom with him—and uses the carrot he found for Zelda as an illustration of the good future they might have if they escape. Though most of the children refuse to jump, Zelda and Chaya agree—and Felix and Zelda survive, though Chaya is killed. Thus, the carrot represents how hope—justified or unjustified—inspires characters to fight for better futures.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Square Fish edition of *Once* published in 2013.

Pages 1–8 Quotes

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation opens the novel, introducing the reader to Felix and his narrative style. He begins his story with "Once," a clear allusion to the traditional fairy-tale opening, "Once upon a time." This allusion indicates that Felix likes stories and has read a lot of them. But, as fairy tales aren't known for their realism, the allusion may also hint that Felix has a naïve or unrealistic view of the world. Felix is living in an orphanage, which suggests that he's under 18, while his breathless chain of short, declarative sentences linked by "and" without commas imitates the speech of a much younger child.

Felix's naivete and apparent youth imply that he may be an unreliable narrator—not because he lies, but because he's too ignorant or innocent to understand what's going on around him. For example, he claims that he "shouldn't have been" at the orphanage; without more information, readers may wonder whether he's engaged in childish, wishful thinking about his parents being alive (when they aren't) or being able to care for him (when they can't). Similarly, his claim that he "almost caused a riot" because of a carrot sounds implausible, which suggests that he may be honestly misinterpreting events. As such, when first introduced, the carrot seems to represent his naïve, childish hopefulness.

❝ At last. Thank you, God, Jesus, Mary, the Pope, and Adolf Hitler. I've waited so long for this.

It's a sign.

This carrot is a sign from Mum and Dad. They've sent my favorite vegetable to let me know their problems are finally over. To let me know that after three long years and eight long months things are finally improving for Jewish booksellers. To let me know they're coming to take me home.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has just discovered a whole carrot in his soup. Children in the impoverished orphanage almost never get a whole vegetable to themselves, so Felix concludes the carrot must be a "sign" from his parents. At this point, readers know that Felix is living in a Catholic orphanage in Poland in 1942. Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, starting World War II, and occupied it until the war's end in 1945. During the war, the Nazis carried out the Holocaust, a genocide in which they murdered approximately 6 million Jewish people, including approximately 3 million in Poland.

Felix's parents are "Jewish booksellers"—thus, Felix is himself Jewish. That Felix prays not only God but also to "Jesus, Mary, [and] the Pope" is explicable; though Jewish, he has been living for years in an orphanage run by Catholic nuns. That he would pray to Adolf Hitler (1889—1945), the antisemitic dictator of Nazi Germany who engineered the Holocaust, requires more explanation. It suggests both that Felix's parents lied to him about why they hid him in a Catholic orphanage and that the nuns at the orphanage have told the children nothing about the Nazi invasion, occupation, and atrocities. The adults in the novel are trying to keep ugly truths from children—even when those truths are very pertinent to the children's lives.

Given that adults are hiding important truths, Felix has to invent stories to explain the strange events around him. These stories are usually based on a combination of real but limited evidence and wish fulfillment. The whole carrot really *is* unusual, but because Felix lacks relevant information (a nun who pities him dropped it in his soup), it becomes a vehicle for his hope that he'll be reunited with his parents, and he convinces himself that the carrot is a "sign," even though that interpretation is far from the most plausible.

> I don't argue. You don't with Mother Minka. Nuns can have good hearts and still be violent.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Mother Minka, Dodie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has just told Mother Minka a rather extravagant lie while trying to convince her to let his friend Dodie jump the line for the orphanage's sole bath. Mother Minka, without addressing the lie, orders Felix back to the end of the bath line.

Felix's offhand comment, "Nuns can have good hearts and still be violent," is disturbing: it suggests that Mother Minka uses corporal punishment to chastise the young orphans. Felix has already mentioned that Mother Minka used to buy books from his parents' bookshop; presumably, then, she knows that Felix's parents and (by extension) Felix himself are Jewish. Although Felix doesn't know it yet, he is living in Nazi-occupied territory during the Holocaust. Since Mother Minka is non-Jewish and "violent" to children, readers may worry that she might betray Felix to the Nazis, a possibility of which he is unaware.

On the other hand, Felix seems convinced that Mother Minka has a "good heart[]." Given Felix's childish innocence and historical ignorance, readers may doubt that he's a reliable narrator of Mother Minka's character. Yet when the novel begins, Mother Minka has sheltered Felix in the orphanage without betraying him to the Nazis for about three years of their occupation of Poland; this fact suggests that she is in fact intentionally hiding Felix from the Nazis—and potentially risking her own life in the process. Thus, the passage suggests that Felix may be right about Mother Minka—and, in consequence, that people who are overall "good" may at some times or in some contexts behave in violent or objectionable ways.

Pages 9–17 Quotes

> "Jankiel's not hiding from the men in the car," says Dodie. "He's hiding from the torture squad."

Related Characters: Felix Salinger, Dodie (speaker), Jankiel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Visitors wearing armbands have come to the orphanage. Felix has noticed that an orphan recently arrived at the orphanage, Jankiel, seems frightened of strangers, so when

Dodie tells him Jankiel is hiding in the bathroom, he assumes it's because of the visitors. When Felix expresses this opinion, Dodie offers a different interpretation: that Jankiel is hiding from the "torture squad," his name for a group of bullies at the orphanage.

Swastika armbands were part of many Nazi uniforms. Though Felix doesn't describe the armbands, readers can infer that the men visiting the orphanage are in fact Nazi soldiers. In this context, it is ironic and deeply frightening that Dodie refers to child bullies, not Nazis, as "the torture squad": it highlights that he and Felix have no idea of the dangers they (especially Felix, who is Jewish) are in or of the atrocities taking place all around them in Poland.

At this point, it isn't clear whether Dodie or Felix is right about what has scared Jankiel. On the one hand, a group of bullies *has* followed Jankiel into the bathroom where he is hiding. On the other hand, Felix mentions elsewhere that Jankiel is the first new orphan to arrive at the orphanage since Felix, which means Jankiel is the only orphan likely to have witnessed the Nazi invasion and occupation. Moreover, Jankiel has apparently been afraid of any strangers coming to the orphanage. Jankiel's possible knowledge of the true situation in Poland suggests a sharp contrast between Jankiel, who has learned the truth and is appropriately terrified, and the other children, whom adults have kept ignorant and who, as a result, are more worried about bullies than Nazis.

Pages 18–28 Quotes

❝ "We can only pray," says Mother Minka. "We can only trust that God and Jesus and the Blessed Mary and our holy father in Rome will keep everyone safe."

I can hardly breathe.

Suddenly I realize this is even worse than I thought.

"And Adolf Hitler?" I whisper. "Father Ludwik says Adolf Hitler keeps us safe too."

Mother Minka doesn't answer, just presses her lips together and closes her eyes.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger, Mother Minka (speaker), Father Ludwik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has just seen the Nazi visitors to the orphanage burning books in the courtyard. Mother Minka pulls Felix away and tries to explain that while the Nazis are burning her books by Jewish authors, they haven't discovered that Felix is Jewish. Felix, confused, assumes that the Nazis are targeting Jewish *books*—and becomes worried for his bookseller parents. When Mother Minka tries to comfort Felix, she suggests praying to all the religious figures that Felix has already learned to pray to—but omits Adolf Hitler, to whom Felix also prays. Though naive, Felix is intelligent: he immediately realizes that if Mother Minka refuses to even mention Hitler, she thinks there's something wrong with him. This passage confirms readers' suspicions that Mother Minka knows Felix is Jewish and has been intentionally hiding him from Nazi occupiers—supporting Felix's earlier claim that she has a "good heart[]" despite her use of corporal punishment.

In this passage, readers learn that Felix started praying to Adolf Hitler after Father Ludwik, the priest associated with the orphanage, told Felix that Hitler was some kind of protector. Though it's possible Father Ludwik lied to Felix to keep him from saying anything negative about Hitler where Nazi occupiers might hear him, it's more probable that Father Ludwik is simply a Nazi sympathizer who doesn't know Felix is Jewish—in which case Mother Minka's decision to keep the truth about the invasion from Felix looks even more unwise: if Felix had let slip his Jewish ethnicity to Father Ludwik, Father Ludwik might have reported him to the Nazis. Thus, while this passage confirms Mother Minka's goodness, it also suggests she has made a bad decision in not telling Felix the truth about the Nazi occupation.

❝ "Look," he says, "I can't tell you what the Nazis are doing because Mother Minka made me swear on the Bible that I wouldn't tell anyone. She doesn't want everyone upset and worried."

"Thanks," I say. "But I know what they're doing. They're burning books."

Related Characters: Felix Salinger, Jankiel (speaker), Mother Minka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has seen the Nazis burning Mother Minka's books and

received an incomplete explanation of the book burning from her. Due to her failure to explain completely, he has concluded that Nazis are targeting Jewish books but not Jewish people. He is preparing to flee the orphanage to save his parents' bookshop when Jankiel, a new boy at the orphanage, stops him and tries to persuade him not to go.

Here, Jankiel makes explicit what readers have likely suspected: Mother Minka has been intentionally keeping news of the Nazi invasion and occupation from the children in her orphanage to keep them from getting "upset and worried." According to a certain line of reasoning, her decision makes sense: poor, orphaned children are unlikely to be able to do anything to resist the Nazi occupation, so telling them will only terrify them without increasing their ability to do anything about it.

Yet Felix's response to Jankiel reveals why Mother Minka's reasoning is faulty. The Nazis are encroaching on the orphanage, but because no one has told the orphans what's going on, they are unable to accurately gauge the danger and respond appropriately. Most obviously, Felix decides to escape the orphanage—where Mother Minka has thus far successfully concealed his Jewish ancestry—without realizing that the Nazis are massacring Polish Jewish people as well as burning books. Though Felix might still have gone to find his parents if he knew the truth, his ignorance makes him insufficiently wary and puts him in near-fatal danger multiple times. Thus, the novel suggests that it's dangerous to conceal important truths from children, even if those truths will terrify them.

Pages 29–40 Quotes

❝ Sometimes real life can be a bit different from stories.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Felix remembers that his parents took him to the orphanage along a river; hearing gunshots, he recalls that wildlife like water, assumes the gunshots are coming from hunters shooting at wildlife, and decides to follow the noise. When he temporarily loses track of the gunshots, he recalls a story he wrote in the notebook his parents gave him about his parents finding a troll by listening for its chewing. Given how much more difficulty he's having than they did in the story, he notes the difference between "real life" and "stories."

This stray thought of Felix's indexes both his maturation and his ongoing naivete. On the one hand, Felix is coming to realize that the world outside the orphanage isn't as he imagined it would be when he was writing fantastical stories in his beloved notebook, which symbolizes his love of escapist narrative. It's not just that there's no such thing as a troll—it's also that behaviors and practices that work for the protagonists of adventure stories don't necessarily work for anyone real, let alone a child traveling solo.

On the other hand, Felix has only realized that real life is "a bit" different from escapist stories—he hasn't yet cognized how large the difference is. The context of the quotation bears this out: Felix is following gunshots assuming they come from hunters, when various clues that Felix doesn't know how to interpret imply to more informed readers that the gunshots come from Nazi soldiers murdering Jewish people. Thus, this quotation illustrates how Felix's journey has already changed his relationship to storytelling—and how much more his relationship to storytelling is likely to change as he sees more of "real life" in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Pages 41–52 Quotes

❝ The street is narrow like I remember and the buildings are all two levels high and made of stone and bricks with slate roofs like I remember, but the weird thing is there are hardly any food shops.

At the orphanage I used to spend hours in class daydreaming out all the food shops in our street. The cake shop next to the ice cream shop next to the roast meat shop next to the jelly and jam shop next to the fried potato shop next to the chocolate-covered licorice shop.

Was I making all that up?

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has just arrived in his hometown. When he sees it, he's confused not only because it's deserted but also because it's missing the food shops he remembers. Since Felix's parents hid him in a remote orphanage starting slightly before the

Nazi occupation, it is possible that Felix is correctly remembering some food stores that no longer exist. As a result of the Nazi invasion and occupation, Poland was able to produce much less food than usual during World War II, which led to dangerous shortages and more deaths among not only Jewish Polish people segregated in ghettos (whom the Nazis were actively starving) but also among Gentile Polish people.

Yet Felix's description of the food shops suggests that, even if he wasn't "making all that up," he was making a lot of it up. For one thing, Felix doesn't describe the town as particularly large or rich, which makes readers doubt that it could support all the different shops he mentions. For another, the shops he lists are sometimes implausibly specific ("chocolate-covered licorice shop," "jelly and jam shop") and disproportionately focused on junk food that a child such as Felix is likely to enjoy. Here, then, we see Felix realizing for the first time that his imagination may tend toward wish-fulfillment narratives and that these narratives may, in turn, distort his sense of reality—for example, by leading him to create false memories.

> I turn and run down the steps. Halfway down I crash into a kid coming up. As I scramble over him, I see his face. He's older than he was, but I still recognize him. Wiktor Radzyn, one of the Catholic kids from my class when I went to school here.
>
> I don't stop.
>
> I keep running.
>
> "Clear off, Jew!" yells Wiktor behind me. "This is our house now."

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Dodie, Wiktor Radzyn , Father Ludwik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has heard voices coming from his parents' apartment and run inside to find them, only to discover a strange, hostile man and woman. When he flees, he runs into his former classmate Wiktor Radzyn, a Catholic boy. This brief encounter both deepens the novel's depiction of antisemitism and sows the seeds for Felix's realization that the Nazis are engaged in complete persecution of Jewish people and culture, not just burning Jewish books.

Prior to this point in the novel, Felix's main encounter with overt antisemitism was witnessing Nazis burn books by Jewish authors. Felix has likely known antisemitic people before; for example, Father Ludwik told Felix that Adolf Hitler was some kind of benevolent protector—and while it's possible Father Ludwik was concealing his true opinions from the orphans, trying to make sure they didn't say anything in front of Nazi soldiers that would put them in danger, it seems simpler to assume that Father Ludwik was an antisemitic Nazi sympathizer. Thus, up to this point, the novel has associated antisemitism with Nazism.

In this moment, however, Felix experiences overt antisemitism ("Jew" used as an insult) from a childhood classmate, whose family is taking the Nazi persecution of Jewish people as an opportunity to steal from their Jewish neighbors. This incident underlines that while Nazism was a particularly violent and systematized antisemitic ideology, antisemitism is an old and widespread form of dehumanizing prejudice. Though at this point, Felix still believes that the Nazis are attacking Jewish books but not Jewish people, the Radzyns' overt antisemitism is one of the incidents that leads him to question whether it's hatred of Jewish people, not Jewish books, motivating the evil behavior he witnesses in his travels.

> "We're playing grabbing Jews in the street," says the little boy.
>
> "I'm a Jew," says the little girl. "He's a Nazi. He's going to grab me and take me away. Who do you want to be?"

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48-49

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has just successfully hidden from an antisemitic crowd that was trying to grab him and give him to the Nazis. When he at last emerges from his hiding place, he comes upon a little boy and girl playing make-believe. The disturbing content of the children's game illustrates both why adults would want to hide ugly and frightening truths from children—and why it's a bad idea to do so.

Felix finds the children's game deeply unnerving—as, presumably, do readers: the children seem to have witnessed Nazi soldiers "grabbing Jews in the street" and, without understanding the import of what they've witnessed, have begun to imitate these violent incidents,

turning them into a game. The evils the children have seen seem to be corrupting their imaginations. Naturally, then, well-meaning adults would want to avoid revealing the full extent of those evils to the children for as long as possible.

Yet the way the novel frames the children's play suggests that such avoidance is unwise, for at least two reasons. First, well-meaning adults can't control everything that children see: if the children witnessed Nazis "grabbing Jews in the street," that implies that the events were sudden acts of violence occurring in public, not something the children's parents knew about ahead of time and could avoid exposing their children to. Second, because no one has explained to them the horror of what's going on, the little children are in danger of accepting antisemitic violence as simply normal Thus, the novel implies that sometimes, adults don't have a choice about whether their children witness evil: they can only choose whether to give their children appropriate interpretive guidance—or leave them to make sense of what they've seen by themselves, with potentially bad outcomes.

> Why are some people kind to us Jewish book owners and some people hate us? I wish I'd asked Mr. Kopek to explain. And also to tell me why the Nazis hate Jewish books so much that they've dragged Mum and Dad and all their Jewish customers off to the city.
>
> I tell myself a story about a bunch of kids in another country whose parents work in a book warehouse and one day a big pile of Jewish books topples onto the kids' parents and crushes them and the kids vow that when they grow up they'll get revenge on all the Jewish books and their owners.
>
> It doesn't feel like a very believable story.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Mother Minka, Father Ludwik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

One of Felix's former neighbors, Mr. Kopek, has just told him that the Nazis have taken his parents and the other Jewish townspeople to the city. Then he warned Felix to hide and gave him a little food and water. Though Felix still doesn't understand that the Nazis are persecuting all Jewish people, his confusion about kindness and hatred toward "Jewish book owners" implies a broader question: why did some people in occupied Poland collaborate in the Nazis' persecution of Jewish people and others resist?

Notably, the novel poses this question without trying to answer it: Mr. Kopek is a working-class, middle-aged Gentile man, and he tries to help Felix, while Mr. Kopek's former coworker Mr. Radzyn is another working-class, middle-aged Gentile man who tries to betray Felix to the Nazis. In the same vein, Mother Minka is a Catholic nun who risks her life to hide a Jewish child from the Nazis, while Father Ludwik is a Catholic priest who is more than likely a Nazi sympathizer. By giving us pairs of demographically similar characters who react radically differently to Nazi occupation, the novel suggests that what determines a person's decision to collaborate with or resist dehumanizing evil may be a mystery.

Felix's inability to come up with a plausible story to explain Nazi persecution of "Jewish book owners" may suggest that fiction, including the novel *Once*, may not be adequate to *explain* Nazism even though it can *represent* Nazism. Yet Felix's acknowledgment that his own story—reminiscent of supervillain origin stories—isn't "very believable" shows that he is becoming less naïve and less prone to take fantastic stories at face value over the course of his journey.

Pages 53–61 Quotes

> Please, Mum and Dad, I beg silently.
>
> Don't be like these people.
>
> Don't put up a struggle.
>
> It's only books.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Dodie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Journeying to find his parents, Felix comes upon a burning house and sees a couple shot dead in the yard. He has previously seen Nazis burning books with Jewish authors and concluded that the Nazis hate Jewish books but not necessarily Jewish people. Because of this, he assumes that the murder victims were Jewish book owners killed only because they "put up a struggle" when the Nazis began burning their books.

Felix mentally pleads with his parents not to act like the murder victims because it's "only books" at stake. This is, of

course, an example of dramatic irony. Readers know that Felix, in his childish innocence, is wrong: it's not "only books" but lives that are at stake, which means that mortal "struggle" against the Nazis is an entirely proportionate and rational choice.

Yet the quotation is not interesting only for its irony. Up until now, Felix has treated books and stories as almost paramount goods. He leaves books behind in the orphanage as a sign to his friend Dodie that he'll come back to visit, on the grounds that Dodie should know Felix would never abandon his books permanently. He carries the notebook in which he writes his own stories everywhere throughout his journeys, even though it doesn't seem to be a practically useful item. This reaction, in which Felix mentally argues that books aren't worth dying for, shows that Felix knows books and stories aren't as important as human life, no matter how much he loves them.

> I feel really sorry for her. It's really hard being an orphan if you haven't got an imagination.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Dodie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Felix has rescued an unconscious little girl, Zelda, from the yard of her burning house where her parents were lying murdered. When she wakes up and starts crying for her parents, Felix decides not to tell her yet about their deaths and instead offers to tell her various stories about her family going on picnics or flying in airplanes—which she rejects because they're inaccurate (her family never picnics or flies).

Interestingly, Zelda's rejections don't annoy Felix; instead, he feels "really sorry for her," interpreting her lack of interest in escapist stories about her parents as a sign that she hasn't "got an imagination." Felix's interpretation reveals that at this point in the novel, he thinks of imaginative escapism as so obviously a good thing that children would only reject it if they were incapable of it. His opinion only changes when he realizes the escapist stories he's been writing about his parents in his notebook have kept him complacent and blinded him to the true danger threatening his parents.

It's clear from this quotation that Felix knows, at some level, that escapist stories can only really make him feel better—they don't have the power to change reality. Obviously, "being an orphan" is a painful and dangerous experience for various children that Felix encounters—but Felix believes that a lack of imagination makes being an orphan harder, presumably because without an imagination one can't take one's mind off emotional pain or imagine a better future. While Felix doesn't yet realize that he too may be an orphan, he is already making an implicit argument for the value of stories as tools to help him and other endangered children endure their difficult circumstances.

Pages 62–71 Quotes

> Each person is wearing an armband. Not a red and black armband like the Nazis had at the orphanage. These are white with a blue star, a Jewish star like on some of the Jewish houses at home. Must be so these travelers can recognize the other members of their group. We used to have paper saints pinned to our tops on sports day so everyone could see which dormitory we were from.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

Hiding behind a hedge, Felix is spying on travelers walking toward the city, trying to understand who they are and what's going on. He notices salient details but misinterprets them, misinterpretations that reveal his innocent, childish goodness and thus emphasize the evil of the antisemitism threatening him.

Historically, Nazis did wear armbands with many of their uniforms, often red with black swastika designs. In Nazi-controlled territories, the Nazi government forced Jewish people to wear various insignia publicly identifying them as Jewish. In some places in Poland, Nazis forced Jewish people to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David (Felix calls it a "Jewish star" presumably because he doesn't know the design's name—a detail reminding readers that the Nazis persecuted all Jewish people, whether religiously and culturally Jewish or non-religious but ethnically Jewish like Felix.)

Although Felix knows that Nazis are burning Jewish books, he is too innocent to immediately realize that a government

would single out an entire religious or ethnic group for targeted hatred and violence. When he sees armbands marking the travelers as Jewish, then, he assumes the travelers put on the armbands voluntarily, to "recognize the other members of their group" more easily. He even compares the armbands to sports team insignia at his Catholic orphanage—a heartbreaking comparison, revealing how young and naïve Felix is. By underlining Felix's youth, innocence, and positive outlook, the novel rhetorically emphasizes how irrational and evil the antisemitism that targets him is.

"Excuse me," I say to a man walking nearby. "Are you a book lover?"

The man stares at me as if I'm mad. His gray sagging face was miserable before, but now he looks like he's close to tears. He looks away. I feel terrible. I wish I hadn't asked.

Not just because I've made a suffering Jewish man feel upset at the sight of a crazy kid. Also because I've got a horrible suspicion I know the answer to the question.

Maybe it's not just our books the Nazis hate.

Maybe it's us.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Mother Minka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70-71

Explanation and Analysis

A Nazi soldier has caught Felix and Zelda and forced them at gunpoint to join the crowd of Jewish travelers being marched toward the city. When Felix witnesses the travelers' exhaustion and misery, he starts doubting his earlier assumption that the Nazis are hateful toward Jewish books but not Jewish people.

Felix initially misunderstands the situation in Nazi-occupied Poland not because he is stupid but because he is sheltered and goodhearted. Early in the novel, he only has evidence of Nazis burning Jewish books, not hurting Jewish people. Because adults like his parents and Mother Minka have concealed Nazi antisemitism from him, and because his innocence makes violent bigotry unintuitive to him, he concludes that Nazis burning Jewish books only proves that they hate Jewish books.

Once Felix starts witnessing Nazi cruelty toward Jewish *people*, however, he quickly suspects that a hatred of Jewish *books* isn't enough to motivate such evil behavior. Once this suspicion occurs to him, he immediately tries to gather more evidence, asking the "man walking nearby" about books to gauge whether the man has been targeted as a Jewish book owner or simply as a Jewish person. Right away, Felix notices that his question brings the man "close to tears" and infers that the man thinks his question is "crazy" because the Nazis really hate "us," that is, Jewish people. Felix's investigating and logical inferences show his sensitivity and intelligence—and thus make clear that he's slow to understand antisemitism largely because his innocence, goodness, and wishful thinking hinder him in recognizing evil.

Pages 72–80 Quotes

"That's a good story," I say. "And when the man gets better, he and the gorilla go and live happily in the jungle and open a cake shop."

"Yes," says Zelda quietly.

She doesn't look as though she totally believes it.

Neither do I.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger, Zelda (speaker), Mother Minka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76-77

Explanation and Analysis

While walking with Jewish people the Nazis are marching toward the city, Felix tells Zelda a story about a gorilla escaping from the zoo—and tries to keep her from noticing the Nazis beating a Jewish man who protests the march. Subsequently, Zelda tells Felix a story about how the gorilla's nice human friend tried to get the army to leave the escaped gorilla in peace, so the army beat him. Horrified that little Zelda clearly witnessed the Nazis beating the Jewish man, Felix tries to give the story a happy ending—but neither of them "totally believes" it. This quotation illustrates both the futility of trying to hide frightening truths from children and the limits of escapist storytelling.

Much as Felix's parents and Mother Minka tried to protect Felix from the truth about Nazism, Felix tries to protect Zelda from witnessing the violence around her. Yet Felix's attempts are unsuccessful—Zelda notices the suffering and violence around her despite Felix's distractions. This suggests that young children are more sensitive and observant than older people give them credit for, so it's

potentially futile to hide frightening truths from them—trying to be honest and emotionally supportive may be a more productive strategy.

Felix and Zelda's inability to believe in the happy ending they've invented illustrates that while stories can help people endure and hope, they aren't all-powerful tools: once the children have witnessed Nazis beating an unarmed Jewish man, their story can't make them forget what they've discovered about the human capacity for cruelty or undo the physical pain the man has suffered. This incident is important to Felix's development in that it brings home to him the limits of the escapism he loves so much in stories.

Pages 81–90 Quotes

"They're in danger," I croak. "Really bad danger. Don't believe the notebook. The stories in the notebook aren't true."

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Barney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

When Felix and Zelda arrive in the city, Felix collapses with illness and exhaustion while a Nazi soldier menaces Zelda with a gun—but, seemingly out of nowhere, a man named Barney appears, convinces the Nazi soldier to leave Zelda alone, and spirits the children to safety. As Felix drifts in and out of consciousness in Barney's hideout, he starts shouting for his notebook, afraid he's lost it—but then, trying to explain his parents' situation, warns Barney not to believe "the stories in the notebook."

This quotation indicates Felix's changing relationship with the notebook, a gift from his bookseller parents that represents the love of stories he learned from them. Felix has been writing stories about his parents' bookselling adventures in the notebook—stories that he's aware are a little fantastical and escapist but that he believes essentially reflect what his parents have been doing since they left him at the orphanage (traveling around and trying to save their business). As Felix comes to understand that his parents are in "really bad danger" from Nazi violence, he still feels an intense emotional attachment to the notebook, shouting for it while delirious—but he is also realizing that escapist stories and wishful thinking can blind people to the gravity of their situations.

Pages 91–98 Quotes

I want to yell at them, Don't *you* know anything? Our parents are out there in a dangerous Nazi city. The Nazis are shooting at people. They could be shooting our parents. A story isn't going to help.

But I don't. It's not their fault. They don't understand what it feels like when you've put your mum and dad in terrible danger. When the only reason they couldn't get a visa to go to America is because when you were six you asked the man at the visa desk if the red blotches on his face were from sticking his head in a dragon's mouth.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Barney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

When Felix recovers from his illness, he sees Zelda and the other children in Barney's hideout playing in a makeshift story tent. Their play frustrates him so much he wants to "yell," feeling that their ability to enjoy stories shows that they don't "know anything." Due to Felix's justified fear for his parents' lives, he has concluded that any activity that "isn't going to help" save them is worthless.

Felix is misunderstanding what stories can and can't do. Though they can't save any of the children's parents, they *can* give the terrified, endangered children a moment of respite and joy, which makes them valuable. Thus, this quotation shows that Felix has gone from valuing stories too much to valuing them too little—suggesting that Felix will have achieved greater emotional wisdom when he finally understands what stories can and can't do and values them accordingly.

Felix isn't only angry at stories because they can't help his parents, however. He also believes that his love of fantasy stories prevented his parents from escaping danger: he thinks that when he asked the bureaucrat in charge of U.S. visas whether "the red blotches on his face were from sticking his head in a dragon's mouth," the bureaucrat took offense and denied his parents the travel visas they would have otherwise received. Felix's belief is incorrect: the 1924 U.S. Immigration Act restricted immigration from many Eastern European countries, including Poland, so Felix's parents would have had a difficult time obtaining visas no matter what. Felix's assumption that his parents are in danger because of him shows that he is turning against stories out of misplaced guilt as well as fear.

Suddenly I'm thinking about another story. The one Mum and Dad told me about why I had to stay at the orphanage. They said it was so I could go to school there while they traveled to fix up their business. They told it so well, that story, I believed it for three years and eight months.

That story saved my life.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Barney, Mother Minka, Father Ludwik

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Zelda and the other children in Barney's hideout have just informed Felix that Adolf Hitler is not a benevolent protector, as Father Ludwik taught him, but the leader of the Nazis, who have been abducting all the Jewish children in Poland. When Zelda, bored with explaining things to Felix, asks him to tell a story instead, Felix begins contemplating the story his parents told him when they left him at Mother Minka's orphanage.

This quotation marks another shift in Felix's relationship to stories. At the novel's beginning, he both loved stories and believed they were semi-accurate, if somewhat hyperbolic, reflections of reality. When he first realized the extent of the danger his parents were in, he turned on stories, deciding they were useless lies. Now he realizes that his parents told him a "story" when they left him at the orphanage that "saved [his] life"—a realization that suggests to him the possibility that stories can be a tool for survival.

Felix's claim that his parents' story "saved [his] life" is ambiguous. He could mean that the story they concocted with Mother Minka—that Felix was a Catholic orphan, not a Jewish boy—prevented the Nazis from killing him. On the other hand, he could also mean that the lie they told him—that they just needed "to fix up their business"—prevented *Felix* from insisting on going with them, ensuring through deception that he would cooperate with their and Mother Minka's cover story. If the latter is true, this quotation somewhat complicates the novel's usual implication that it's dangerous to keep children ignorant: in select cases, if the children are too young or too stubborn to react appropriately to the truth, lying to them may be the best among bad options.

Pages 99–111 Quotes

A story?

Then I get it. When Mum went to the dentist, she had an injection to dull the pain. Barney hasn't given this patient an injection. Times are tough, and there probably aren't enough pain-dulling drugs in ghetto curfew places.

Suddenly my mouth feels dry. I've never told anyone else a story to take their mind off pain. And when I told myself all those stories about Mum and Dad, I wanted to believe them. Plus, I didn't have a drill in my mouth.

This is a big responsibility.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Barney

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Barney, a dentist, has been performing dental surgeries in the city's ghetto at night, both to help poor Jewish people and to obtain food. After Barney reads some of the stories in Felix's notebook, trying to discover some facts about Felix's parents, he realizes Felix is an excellent storyteller and brings Felix to his dental appointments so that Felix can tell his patients stories to take their mind off the pain.

This incident further nuances Felix's understanding of stories. He has already come to believe that the stories he wrote in his notebook about his parents' adventures, the ones he "wanted to believe," worked to numb his emotional pain but also blinded him to the truth of the danger they were in. After he realized his parents told him a false story to get him to hide in a remote Catholic orphanage where Nazis wouldn't find him, he has realized that stories can at once manipulate people and save lives. In this moment, however, Barney is suggesting to Felix that his stories can substitute for "pain-dulling drugs" even if the audience *knows* the story is just escapism. Thus, Felix is coming to learn that stories don't need to be outright lies or even deceptive to help people endure suffering.

Pages 112–120 Quotes

❝ "Once a princess lived in a castle. It was a small castle, but the princess loved it, and she loved her family who lived there with her. Then one day the evil goblins came looking for information about their enemies. They thought the princess knew the information, but she didn't. To make her tell, the goblins gave the princess three wishes. Either they could hurt her, or they could hurt the old people, or they could hurt the babies."

Chaya pauses, trembling, staring at the floor. I can see how hard it is for her to finish her story.

"The princess chose the first wish," she says quietly. "But because she didn't know any information, the goblins made all three wishes come true."

Related Characters: Felix Salinger, Chaya (speaker), Zelda, Barney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119-120

Explanation and Analysis

After Felix finally explains to Zelda that her parents were killed, the other children in Barney's hideout begin narrating their own losses, family members killed, and homes destroyed by Nazis. Last of all, Chaya narrates her own traumatic experiences in the form of a fairytale. Chaya's narration shows how even stories that technically aren't true—like *Once* itself, which is a work of fiction—can convey aspects of the truth in a way that's bearable for the narrators to tell and the audience to hear.

Like *Once* itself, Chaya's story begins with the word "once," evoking the traditional fairy-tale opener "once upon a time" and thereby positioning itself as fantasy. Yet because the other children have been telling stories about their families killed by Nazis, the context implies that Chaya's story is not a fantasy but an allegory: the "princess" is Chaya, the "small castle" is her lost family home, and the "evil goblins" are Nazi soldiers who tortured Chaya and her family for "information about their enemies" (presumably the Polish Resistance, which fought the Nazi occupation of Poland throughout World War II).

As Chaya narrates, she is "trembling" and unable to meet the other children's eyes; the novel is clearly implying that the only way she can explain what happened is through allegory—stating the plain facts would be impossibly painful. Moreover, the moral atrocity that Chaya is describing (the torture of a young girl, "old people," and "babies") is likely something better not described for the other young children in full, explicit detail. Chaya is thus modeling a method for explaining real-world evils to children: she uses age-appropriate language, omits graphic detail, and frames the events in narrative terms the children understand while still making clear the underlying truth she's trying to convey—much as the novel *Once* itself does.

Pages 121–131 Quotes

❝ "Sometimes […] parents can't protect their kids even though they love them more than anything else in the world. Sometimes, even when they try their very hardest, they can't save them."

Related Characters: Barney (speaker), Felix Salinger, Zelda

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

Barney and Felix sneak out of their hideout at night to find water for themselves and the others. In a vacant apartment formerly inhabited by a Jewish family, they find a murdered toddler. When Felix, in tears, demands to know why the toddler's parents didn't prevent the murder, Barney explains that sometimes parents who are good, determined, and loving still "can't protect their kids."

This moment marks a turning point in Felix's understanding of the world. Throughout much of the novel, he has assumed with childish innocence that if he can reunite with his parents, they will be able to take care of him and others. For example, he delayed telling Zelda that her parents had been killed because he was hoping that once they found his parents, his mother would know how to break the news to Zelda. When Barney explains to Felix that even parents who "tr[ied] their very hardest" wouldn't have been able to save the murdered toddler, however, it makes Felix realize that his parents won't necessarily be able to save themselves or him from murderous Nazi antisemitism.

Barney's emotional explanation seems to imply that Nazis have already killed Barney's own family: Barney may have assumed guardianship of Felix, Zelda, and the other orphans in his care because he wants to protect them as he wasn't able to protect his own children. Yet when Barney tells Felix that sometimes parents can't save children "even when they try their very hardest," it foreshadows that Barney ultimately will fail to protect the children currently in his care. Indeed, while Felix and Zelda escape a train bound for a concentration camp at the novel's end, the narrative

implies that Barney and the group of children who do not escape are going to die together.

Pages 132–143 Quotes

❝❝ If Zelda's dad's a Nazi, does she deserve carrot soup and aspirin?

Yes.

She can't help what her father did. Plus he's dead now and so's her mum and I don't know if she's got any other living relatives but after what we've been through together that makes me one and I say yes.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Barney, Dodie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

After Zelda gives Felix her silver locket necklace to try to make him feel better in the aftermath of seeing the corpse of a toddler murdered by Nazis, she collapses with a high fever. Barney sends Felix out to find aspirin—and Felix resolves to find her a carrot as well, which he believes will help her get better. After finding some aspirin and a carrot, Felix looks inside Zelda's locket and sees a photograph of her dead parents, in which her father is wearing a Nazi uniform. Felix's decision to help Zelda despite "what her father did"—and his rationale for doing so—reveal both Felix's evolving definition of family and his moral goodness, in contrast with the antisemitic moral depravity all around him.

In the novel's beginning, Felix has lived in a Catholic orphanage with his good friend Dodie for almost four years, a large portion of his short life. Though he feels great affection for Dodie and for the nuns who've cared for them, he runs away from the orphanage as soon as he believes his parents' bookselling business is in danger because he loves his parents very much and wants to prioritize them. Though Felix has shared many experiences with Dodie and the nuns, he doesn't consider them family. Yet he and Zelda have "been through" tragedy and mortal danger together, during which they've tried to take care of each other despite their limited power and extreme vulnerability—and this experience, Felix believes, "makes [him] one" of Zelda's family members.

For much of the novel, carrots have represented hope and wish fulfillment for Felix. His determination to get Zelda "carrot soup," then, reveals both his intense hope that she gets better and his belief that hopefulness about the future is as important to sick people as medicine. Felix's brotherly love for Zelda and his resolution to give her medicine and hope, despite her Nazi father, shows his generosity, goodness, and humane spirit.

Pages 144–152 Quotes

❝❝ "Zelda," I moan. "Why didn't you stay?"

"I bit the Nazi," she says. "Don't you know anything?"

Related Characters: Felix Salinger, Zelda (speaker), Barney, The Nazi Officer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Nazi soldiers have captured Felix, Zelda, Barney, and the children Barney has been caring for and marched them to the train station, where trains are leaving for concentration camps. Felix and Barney try to save Zelda's life by showing her locket, which contains a photograph of her father in Nazi uniform, to the Nazi officer. Though Felix believes they have succeeded in saving Zelda, Zelda struggles so ferociously to stay with Felix that she ends up in the same train car as him shortly before the doors close—and when Felix asks how this happened, she explains that she "bit the Nazi."

Zelda's follow-up question ("Don't you know anything?") is one she has asked Felix at various times throughout the novel. In this context, however, its meaning changes: Zelda is no longer calling Felix ignorant but making clear that she would never have stayed with the Nazi officer and willingly abandoned Felix to face danger alone. Shortly before this scene, Felix decided that he considered Zelda a family member even though her father was a Nazi collaborator. Now, Zelda is making clear that she feels the same way: Felix is like her brother, and she would rather suffer with him than live comfortably with the people oppressing him. As Zelda is only about six years old, it isn't clear that she understands the extent of the danger she has chosen to face with Felix, yet her choice still illustrates her sisterly love for him and her rejection of her father's antisemitism.

Pages 153–161 Quotes

"Here," I say to the woman in the corner. "Use this."

The other people pass it over to her and when she sees what it is she starts crying.

"It's all right," I say. "I haven't written on it."

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

On the train headed for the concentration camp, there are no bathrooms. When people are no longer able to contain themselves, they have to use a corner of the train car as a bathroom, without any toilet paper. When Felix sees how humiliating many people, especially dignified elderly people, find this situation, he has the idea to give them pages from his notebook to use as toilet paper.

Felix's sensitivity and generosity in this scene are striking. Though he himself is used to unhygienic situations, having spent years in an impoverished orphanage, he immediately notices that other people find the lack of bathrooms on the train disturbing and humiliating—and he sacrifices his notebook, the last gift his parents gave him, to make these suffering strangers feel better. Felix's gesture really matters to the people around him: the woman who receives his gift bursts into tears when she realizes what he's given her. The novel is once again using Felix's childish goodness to highlight the irrational evil of Nazi antisemitism, which cruelly attacks the human dignity Felix is trying to protect and attempts to dehumanize and kill innocent, humane children like Felix.

Felix's decision to sacrifice his notebook—he ultimately gives away all the pages, not just the ones he hasn't "written on"—shows that he has matured enough to understand when escapist stories are and aren't useful. Sometimes the stories that he tells can be tools for endurance, hope, and survival—but other times, paper is more useful as toilet paper than as a book. Thus, Felix's decision to make his notebook into toilet paper shows the culmination of his evolving relationship to storytelling: he has finally figured out how to value it the right amount, neither too little nor too much.

You can't force people to believe a story.

Related Characters: Felix Salinger (speaker), Zelda, Barney

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

After Felix discovers a rotted-out section of the wooden train car, adults on the train create a hole large enough through which to jump. While Nazi machine-gunners on the train roof kill some jumpers, other jumpers reach nearby woods and escape. Felix believes that he, Barney, Zelda, and the other children should jump. Trying to persuade the terrified children to jump with him, he tells a story about what their future could be like if they escape. Most of the children are unconvinced, however, and Felix realizes: "You can't force people to believe a story."

By this point in the novel, Felix has come to a correct evaluation of stories' value. Whereas at the novel's beginning, he believes stories were a mostly correct (if sometimes hyperbolic) guide to reality, he later realizes that, for better or worse, stories are tools for shaping perception as much as or more than mirrors reflecting reality. In this scene, Felix consciously deploys a story to try to shape the other children's perceptions: he wants them to conclude that the chance at escaping the Nazis is worth the risk the machine-gunners pose to them. Yet he immediately encounters a limit to stories' power: stories can't "force" belief—they can only persuade. As a storyteller, then, Felix can't make other people do what he wants; he can only try to show them what he sees and then let them make their own choices.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PAGES 1–8

"Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains," the narrator says. At dinner, a nun ladles him some soup. The soup steams up his glasses, and the narrator prays "to God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope, and Adolf Hitler" for the steam to dissipate. He finds his way to a table, lifting his soup overhead to keep other children from stealing it, by listening for his usual companion Dodie, who gulps his soup audibly.

The narrator starts his story with the word "once," reminiscent of the traditional fairy-tale opening "once upon a time." This allusion suggests that the narrator likes storytelling and treating his life as a story. Since the narrator is living in a remote orphanage, readers may wonder if the narrator's family is dead. Soon after, the narrator shockingly prays not only to God and various religious figures but also Adolf Hitler (1889—1945), dictator of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945, who engineered the Holocaust, an antisemitic genocide carried out during World War II (1939—1945) that killed approximately 6 million Jewish people. This prayer suggests that the narrator is ignorant of who Hitler actually is and what Hitler has done.

The narrator sits down, wipes his glasses, and sees an entire **carrot** in his soup. He's astonished; he hasn't seen a carrot since he came to the orphanage "three years and eight months" before. Any carrots the orphanage buys are chopped into bits to share among the children, the nuns, and the priest. The narrator thinks he might be the only child in Poland with a carrot; he considers whether the carrot is a miracle but discards the idea since it's 1942, not "ancient times."

The story takes place in 1942 in Poland—three years after Nazi Germany invaded and began occupying Poland, starting World War II (1939–1945). If the narrator came to the orphanage "three years and eight months" prior, it's possible that due to the orphanage's remoteness, he doesn't know about the invasion or the Holocaust—though that still doesn't explain why he would pray to Hitler. In this passage, the narrator interprets the carrot in his soup as a stroke of luck, almost (but not quite) a miracle, which shows both his innocence and the poverty in which the orphans live.

The narrator concludes that the **carrot**, his "favorite vegetable," must be a message from his parents. They're telling him that they'll take him back from the orphanage soon because the situation is getting better for "Jewish booksellers." While the other children wolf down their soup or examine it for tiny bits of meat or vermin feces, he grabs the carrot and pockets it. He's worried that if higher-up Catholic administrators find out his parents are alive, they may punish the nuns for caring for him, a non-orphan.

Because vegetables are so rare at the orphanage and because carrots happen to be the narrator's "favorite vegetable," he makes up a story to explain the carrot's appearance: namely, that the carrot is a message from his parents. In this moment, the carrot represents the narrator's hope for reunification with his family. Here he reveals that his parents are "Jewish booksellers." While he believes they left him at the orphanage because the situation in Poland was getting bad for Jewish booksellers, *readers can guess that his parents foresaw the Nazi invasion of Poland and—as the Nazis began persecuting Jewish people in Germany upon Nazis' rise to power in 1933—knew that the situation was going to get very bad for Jewish people in Poland. The narrator's ignorance suggests that adults in his life have been concealing important truths from him—truths that are particularly important to him because, as a Jewish boy, he is in danger of antisemitic violence and death during the Nazi occupation.*

Mother Minka shouts, "Felix Saint Stanislaus." She tells the narrator—Felix—not to play with his food: if he's discovered a bug in his soup, he should "eat it and be grateful." Felix speculates that his parents are in the village and that they convinced Father Ludwik to deliver the **carrot** to him. He feels indebted to Mother Minka for "mak[ing] a joke to draw attention away from my carrot." He recalls how his parents chose to leave him at this orphanage not only because it was the nearest, but also because Mother Minka used to patronize their bookshop and "never once criticized a single book."

As readers probably doubt Felix's assumption that the carrot is a message from his parents, they must likewise assume that Mother Minka is not "mak[ing] a joke to draw attention away from" it. When Mother Minka tells Felix to "eat [a bug] and be grateful," she's dead serious. Felix's misinterpretations of the carrot and of Mother Minka show that his hopeful innocence leads him to draw false conclusions. Yet Mother Minka used to be a patron of his parents' bookstore, which means she must know that his family is Jewish—and she nevertheless adds "Saint Stanislaus" to his name, which could be a reference to one of several Polish Catholic saints. This name—which Felix's Jewish parents likely did not give him—suggests that Mother Minka is pretending that Felix is Catholic, hiding his Jewishness to protect him during the Nazi occupation. Thus, while Felix interprets Mother Minka's gruffness too optimistically as humor, he may ultimately be correct in assuming the best of her.

Since Mother Minka is now glowering at another table and doesn't see Felix smiling at her, he turns his smile on Sister Elwira, who's serving children dinner and trying to comfort a weeping little girl. Felix thinks how good the nuns are and how much he'll "miss them" when he leaves and "go[es] back to being Jewish."

Felix cares about the nuns, but while he's been living with them for almost four years, he wouldn't hesitate to leave them to rejoin his parents, which shows how much he loves and prioritizes his family. His unconscious assumption that it will be easy to "go back to being Jewish" reveals once again his childish innocence and ignorance about the genocidal antisemitic violence occurring in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Dodie asks whether he can have Felix's soup. Felix wants to help Dodie, a real orphan, but he gulps his soup without sharing because they never have much food. Then he and Dodie laugh at the idea that he would've shared. Sad that he'll leave soon and that he's lied to Dodie, Felix tries to think of something nice he can do for him.

Though Felix has no hesitation about leaving the orphanage and returning to his parents, it grieves him to leave the nuns and his orphan friend Dodie. His desire to help Dodie, whom he perceives as less fortunate because Dodie's parents are actually dead, shows his instinctive goodness—a goodness that Nazi antisemitism would deny he's capable of.

Later, while Mother Minka examines the orphans to see whether they're dirty enough to need baths, Felix jumps the line and asks whether "Dodek" can bathe first, claiming that since illness killed Dodie's parents, he wants to become a doctor and needs to practice excellent hygiene. Felix hopes that Dodie hasn't heard him, since Dodie's real ambition is to become "a pig-slaughterer." Mother Minka glares and orders Felix to the back of the line. Felix goes, since "nuns can have good hearts and still be violent."

From context, readers can guess that "Dodek" is Dodie's real name and "Dodie" is a childish nickname. Here, Felix uses his fondness for stories to make up a lie, trying to get Dodie into the communal bath first, while the water is clean. Dodie's desire to become a "pig-slaughterer" is a bit disturbing, as is Felix's acceptance that "nuns can have good hearts and still be violent," which suggests that Mother Minka uses corporal punishment on the orphans. Yet Felix seems fond of both Dodie and Mother Minka; either Felix is mistaken about their characters, or there is more to both than their occasional violent tendencies.

As Felix goes, he ruminates that Dodie might make a good doctor: one time, he reattached several legs to a fly whose limbs he had pulled off. Seeing that the first child into the bath has dirtied the water, Felix recalls the warm, clean baths his parents used to give him and how they used to tell him stories. In his mind, he orders his parents to come get him quickly.

The anecdote Felix tells about Dodie pulling the legs off a fly both deepens and complicates the readers' sense of Dodie's violent tendencies. On the one hand, Dodie maimed a defenseless insect; on the other hand, since he tried to fix the damage, it's possible that he acted out of childish innocence without understanding the permanent harm he would cause the insect. Felix's memories of his parents telling him stories, meanwhile, suggests that he learned his love of storytelling from them.

PAGES 9–17

Felix's parents don't come that night. Felix tells himself they wouldn't risk taking the road into the mountains in the dark; Father Ludwik claims to get help from God when he does it, and Felix's parents "were never very religious."

When Felix's parents don't come, he rationalizes their failure to appear—which shows how his imagination, rather than bringing him closer to the truth, helps him to construct a false, optimistic story. His casual admission that his parents "were never very religious" reminds readers that Nazi antisemitism wasn't just about persecuting and murdering religious Jewish people for their beliefs but also nonreligious Jewish people for their ethnicity alone. Readers with historical knowledge likely understand (as Felix does not) that Felix's parents are in mortal danger, no matter what they believe.

Felix worries his parents won't recognize him when they come: when they left him at the orphanage, he was much shorter, "plump," and without glasses. But he remembers his parents promised never to forget him when they left him. He tells himself that this meant they'd come back for him "once they'd fixed up their bookshop troubles." Besides, they gave him a **notebook** with a yellow cover, which he can use to identify himself and in which he's written wild stories about their adventures "discovering why their bookshop supplies suddenly went so unreliable."

Felix obviously loves his parents very much despite how long it's been since he's seen them; this, together with his parents' poignant promise never to forget him, shows the depth of their family bond. That Felix plans to use his notebook, a gift from his parents, to identify himself when they arrive shows both that Felix inherited his love of stories from his parents and that storytelling is central to his identity. His belief that his parents left to "discover[] why their bookshop supplies suddenly went so unreliable," finally, implies that his parents lied to him to protect him from the realities of antisemitism and Nazism.

At daybreak, Felix hears a car approaching the orphanage. Assuming his parents have somehow acquired a car, Felix rushes to the window. To his great disappointment, he sees not his parents but "a bunch of men in suits with armbands" exit the car.

Many Nazi uniforms included swastika armbands. Since Felix is living in Nazi-occupied Poland, readers can infer that the "men in suits with armbands" are Nazi soldiers. That Felix is merely disappointed, not afraid, shows how little he knows and how much danger his ignorance may expose him to.

As Felix heads for the dormitory exit, wanting to ask Mother Minka when his parents will come, Dodie tells him Jankiel, a new boy at the orphanage, is hiding in the bathroom. Annoyed that Jankiel is skittish about "strangers," Felix tells Dodie to tell Jankiel that the men are likely Catholic administrators coming to make sure all the children are orphans. Then Felix wonders whether Mother Minka will lie to the men, sticking to the story about Felix's parents' sad, agriculture-related deaths.

Felix assumes that Jankiel is afraid of the visitors because they are "strangers," but readers know that Jankiel, who came to the orphanage more recently than Felix, has likely witnessed the Nazi occupation and may be afraid of the visitors because they are Nazis. Here Felix reveals that Mother Minka has been lying to people about his parents, lending credence to the theory that she is hiding his background to protect him; despite her problematic use of corporal punishment, she is a person willing to risk her life to a hide a Jewish child from Nazis.

Dodie tells Felix that Jankiel is hiding from "the torture squad," not the visitors, and indicates a group of boys entering the bathroom. Dodie says they should go rescue Jankiel. When he and Felix enter the bathroom, the bullies are shoving Jankiel's head into a toilet. Felix quickly tells the bullies that a plow horse killed Jankiel's parents—it had a heart attack, fell, and crushed them. As they died, they made Jankiel promise to pray for them daily at the hour of their death. The chapel bell strikes seven, and Felix adds that Jankiel's parents died at seven. When one bully claims that this is "just one of [Felix's] stories," Dodie adds that he hears Mother Minka coming.

Sadly and ironically, Dodie and Felix think of the orphanage's bullies, not the visiting Nazis, as "the torture squad," illustrating their ignorance of the atrocities the Nazis are perpetrating. Dodie's desire to rescue Jankiel from the bullies reveals that despite his violent tendencies, he has some good moral instincts too. Felix's use of a complicated lie to protect Jankiel shows that stories can be tools for affecting reality as well as escapes from reality, while one bully's retort that it's "just one of [Felix's] stories" reveals that Felix is known in the orphanage for his tall tales.

The bullies flee the bathroom. Jankiel asks whether "they" have left. When Dodie says one of the bullies will be smearing Jankiel's bed with mud, Jankiel says that he means the visitors. Felix says that Mother Minka will get the men to leave; he wonders whether Jankiel also has living parents, given how scared he looks. Jankiel thanks Felix for making up the story about the horse. When Felix says he hopes it didn't upset Jankiel, Jankiel says it didn't. "My parents froze to death," he explains. While Felix processes this disturbing fact, Jankiel asks whether Felix often makes up stories; Felix admits he does, "sometimes."

Jankiel knows that the real danger in the orphanage is not the bullies but the visitors, who are likely Nazis. Jankiel's matter-of-fact admission that his parents "froze to death" not only illustrates his loss of childish innocence due to trauma but also makes clear that bad things can and do happen to children. When asked, Felix downplays his drive to tell stories, claiming he only does it "sometimes," which suggests he may be a little ashamed.

As Felix, Dodie, and Jankiel walk back to the dormitory, Felix wonders whether Jankiel is Jewish too, since both boys have "dark eyes." He knows it's no use asking, however, since Jankiel wouldn't admit to being Jewish "here."

When Felix assumes that Jankiel would never admit to being Jewish "here," it suggests that while Felix is ignorant of Nazism, he's aware of antisemitism—at least enough to think that Jewish children wouldn't be allowed in a Catholic orphanage.

Leaving Dodie and Jankiel, Felix goes to find Mother Minka. On his way, he looks out a window into the courtyard and sees Mother Minka gesticulating at the visitors. Then he sees smoke. At first, he wonders why the visitors are "having a bonfire." Then he realizes that what the visitors are doing would make his parents cry: they're burning books.

Throughout the 1930s, Nazis burned books in Germany and Austria that they believed opposed Nazism, including any books by Jewish authors. After invading Poland, Nazis engaged in mass books burnings there as well. Felix's initial confusion at seeing the "bonfire" again shows both his childish innocence and his dangerous ignorance.

PAGES 18–28

Felix, shocked, wonders why the visitors would burn books—punishing Mother Minka for being "bossy" isn't a good enough reason. Then he recalls Mother Minka complaining that the orphanage library was too disorganized. He speculates that the visitors are workers she hired to clean the library; they're probably burning the most beaten-up books without Mother Minka having told them to.

Because no adult has told him the truth, Felix tries to figure out what is happening based only on what he sees. He's too good-hearted and innocent to guess that the visitors are burning books out of hatred; instead, he invents a story in which the visitors are trying to be helpful.

Instead of asking Mother Minka about his parents in front of the visitors, Felix goes to wait in her office. There, he hears a man yelling in a language he doesn't recognize and then sees one of the visitors, whom he thinks are "librarians." Felix tells the man that the **notebook** he's holding isn't a library book and wonders why Mother Minka would get librarians who don't speak Polish to tidy the library.

Felix still thinks of the visitors, who are likely Nazi soldiers, as "librarians." Yet he avoids them in the courtyard and tries to protect his notebook—which represents his love of stories, given to him by his parents—from the soldier he meets. This and Felix's curiosity about why the "librarians" don't speak Polish suggest that Felix is too smart to be deluded by his own innocent assumptions for long.

Mother Minka rushes in and asks Felix why he's in her office. Then, calling him "Felek," she says she remembers: she asked him to collect his **notebook**. Then she orders him upstairs. Wondering why she called him the wrong name, Felix notices she looks worried. Suddenly, Mother Minka says she'll take Felix upstairs herself, pulls him from the room, and shoves him into the kitchen.

"Felek" is a Polish version of the name "Felix." Mother Minka may call Felix "Felek" to make him seem more ethnically Polish and hide his Jewish heritage from the intruders; clearly, she is worried about Felix having been alone with one of them, even for a short while.

Dodie once told Felix that eating mold could "affect your brain." Felix wonders whether Mother Minka has eaten moldy bread, given her weird behavior. She confesses she thought "those brutes" wouldn't visit the orphanage. When Felix asks if she's talking about the "librarians," she says she means "Nazis." She doesn't know how the Nazis discovered she had "Jewish books," but at least they don't know Felix is Jewish.

Once again, when confronted with something he doesn't understand, Felix makes up a story to explain it: to account for Mother Minka's odd demeanor, he speculates that she may have eaten some consciousness-altering mold. Here, Mother Minka finally reveals to Felix that the visitors are Nazis and that she has been concealing his Jewishness from them.

Felix infers that the Nazis, whoever they are, are traveling around burning Jewish books. Worried, he asks whether his parents specified when they'd arrive at the orphanage when they delivered the **carrot**. Sadly, Mother Minka explains that Sister Elwira put the carrot in Felix's soup because she pities him. When Felix vehemently insists that his parents sent the carrot, Mother Minka asks him to "be brave."

Even when Mother Minka reveals some of the truth, Felix can't necessarily understand or accept it. He's worried about his parents because he concludes from Mother Minka's revelations that their books are in danger, and he rejects her explanation of the carrot, which to him represents a tangible hope of being reunited with his parents.

Mother Minka says they must hope that God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the Pope will protect them. Felix, shocked, asks whether Adolf Hitler will protect them too. Mother Minka just shuts her eyes. Felix resolves to save the books in his parents' shop, go find his parents, and tell that that their books are in danger.

Though Mother Minka refuses to reinforce Felix's mistaken belief that Hitler is a good protector, she doesn't explain who Hitler is or what's going on in Poland. Her failure to explain puts Felix in danger, as he assumes the Nazis are only a threat to books, not his and his parents' lives—and makes plans accordingly.

The next morning, in chapel, Dodie asks Felix whether he's really Jewish. Felix confirms it. Dodie asks, "What's Jewish?" Felix, worried that Father Ludwik might notice them whispering, just says that "Jewish is like Catholic only different." When Dodie says he'll miss Felix, Felix gives Dodie his **carrot** and promises he'll bring more carrots and turnips when he visits.

Dodie doesn't understand what it means to be Jewish, and Felix gives a totally contentless explanation of the difference between Judaism and Catholicism. The boys' religious ignorance and their friendship despite their different backgrounds imply that religious hatred and antisemitism aren't natural phenomena; hate is something children have to be taught. When Felix gives Dodie his carrot—which up to this point has represented Felix's hope of reuniting with his parents—it suggests that Felix is trying to share hope with Dodie, imbuing in Dodie the belief that Felix will come back.

While the other orphans eat breakfast, Felix sneaks into the dormitory. On Dodie's bed he leaves the books he brought from home, "the William books by Richmal Crompton," which his parents used to read to him, as a sign that he'll come back. He removes a page from his **notebook** and writes a letter to Mother Minka, thanking her and asking her to give Dodie his share of the soup. He takes his notebook and letters from his parents delivered "before the postal service started to have problems" and prepares to leave.

Richmal Crompton (1890 – 1969) was an English writer whose Just William *children's book series narrates the adventures of an 11-year-old English boy named William. Felix makes sure to leave a sign for Dodie that he'll return and to thank Mother Minka, which shows both his strong attachment to them and his instinctive goodness. His decision to bring the notebook with him shows his love of and reliance on storytelling, while his belief that his parents stopped sending letters because of problems with the postal service shows his ongoing innocent gullibility.*

Jankiel appears and tells Felix not to go. Felix imagines that Jankiel wants him to stay so that he can keep inventing stories to distract the bullies. Felix assures Jankiel that he can invent stories himself—the story Jankiel was telling the girl orphans earlier about the horse killing his parents made them cry. Felix tears a story from his **notebook** and tells Jankiel to study it as a model. Jankiel thanks him.

Felix knows that stories are good for more than escapism; they're also tools for self-protection. Though storytelling is part of Felix's identity, he isn't possessive about it: he praises Jankiel's abilities and shares a page from his notebook with Jankiel. Felix's generosity again highlights his instinctive goodness.

When Felix tries to leave, Jankiel tells him he shouldn't go: there are Nazis everywhere. When Felix says that's why he's leaving, Jankiel says that Mother Minka made him promise not to spread news of Nazi actions in the orphanage since it would frighten the orphans. Felix says he already knows the Nazis are burning books. After some internal conflict, Jankiel just tells Felix that he'll "really regret" leaving. Though uneasy, Felix praises Jankiel's "vivid imagination," and then he leaves.

While Mother Minka's desire not to terrify the orphans is understandable, her secrecy and Jankiel's put Felix in danger: Felix plans to leave the orphanage without any idea of the situation he's walking into, having dismissed Jankiel's ominous yet vague warning as the product of a "vivid imagination."

PAGES 29–40

Passing through the orphanage's gate into the forest, Felix notes that he didn't have to "dig a tunnel" or engage in other adventure-story tropes to escape. He reminisces about Dodie and then makes himself stop—he needs to focus on reaching his parents' bookshop and figuring out how to find them.

When Felix notices the difference between fictional escapes and his own, the novel is slyly pointing out the difference between many stories and reality. Felix's refusal to miss Dodie shows that he is consciously trying to prioritize his family over his non-familial relationships.

Hiding in a pigpen near the village, Felix recalls that when his parents took him to the orphanage, they traveled along a river. Felix tells the pig he needs better shoes and clothes and someone to give him directions to the river. He considers stealing the pig's food but decides not to: the pig is penned, whereas he "can get food anywhere" because he's "free."

Felix won't take food from the pig because he's "free" to go where he likes and find food elsewhere, whereas the pig is not. Though Felix's assumptions about his freedom show his ignorance of the situation in Nazi-occupied Poland, his refusal to steal food from a penned creature again shows his instinctive goodness and generosity.

After wandering through fields, Felix finds a remote house "with one of those carved metal things that religious Jewish families in our town have on their houses." Felix knocks and calls out; no one answers. When he enters the house, he finds a turned-over chair, abandoned meals, the stove on, and the back door open. Hearing gunfire in the distance, Felix concludes that the house's owners must've gone rabbit hunting and won't return for a while.

By "one of those carved metal things," Felix may mean a mezuzah, Torah verses—often in an ornamental protective case—that practicing Jewish people put on their house's doorpost. Felix doesn't know the words for Jewish cultural objects, which underscores that the Nazis are persecuting him and his family not for their beliefs or practices but for their ethnicity. When Felix hears gunfire, he assumes someone is hunting rabbits, again showing his ignorance of the danger he's in.

Felix drinks water and eats some food, though he's careful to leave some for the house's occupants. He finds a hat and men's clothes, which he cuts shorter to fit him. He also finds shoes, which he stuffs with rags to make them fit. He writes a note (torn from his **notebook**) apologizing for stealing. Hearing gunshots again, he recalls how his father told him that wild animals like water and infers that the gunshots must be coming from the river. He decides to head that way.

Felix makes sure that he doesn't take too much food from the house and tears a page from his beloved notebook (which represents the love of stories inherited from his parents) to apologize for stealing. These actions show his moral goodness. When he deduces that the "hunting" is occurring near water, it shows both his logical mind and his dangerous ignorance.

Felix pauses at an intersection. He listens for gunshots but only hears nature noises. Reminded of a story he wrote, where his parents navigated to a troll's cave by listening for its chewing, he thinks: "Sometimes real life can be different from stories." At last, he hears gunshots again. He heads down a dirt road, sees tire tracks, and decides to hitch a ride if he can.

As Felix sees more of the world outside the orphanage, he quickly realizes that "real life can be different from stories"—but he still doesn't realize how much more sinister the real world is than the world of children's stories.

A truck is coming down the road. Felix walks into the road to flag it down and realizes it's stuffed with "half-naked people." Confused, Felix reasons that they must be farm laborers who've taken their clothes off to travel to a swimming holiday. When the truck doesn't slow down, Felix eventually has to jump out of the road. Felix is astonished that the driver "was so busy daydreaming about his holiday" that he didn't see Felix.

This incident emphasizes, once again, that Felix's ignorance and his goodness prevent him from correctly interpreting the things he sees. The "half-naked people" are likely Jewish prisoners, and the driver likely saw Felix but refused to slow down—but such cruelty and callousness simply aren't intuitive to Felix, who assumes that the prisoners are just travelers and that the driver put him in danger out of negligence, not malice.

Felix sees an "army truck" coming. He waves and calls out, asking for a ride. One soldier "pretends" to aim a rifle at him. Felix assumes the soldier is trying to "giv[e] a country kid a thrill." The truck passes, bouncing over a pothole, and a gun goes off. Felix falls, stunned—the bullet passed near his head. Figuring it must've been an accident, Felix gets up and yells that he's fine—but the soldiers in the truck don't see him.

Felix is so unable to believe that other people have evil intentions that when a soldier shoots at him, he assumes it was an accident and tries to reassure the soldier that he's fine. Felix's emotional generosity once again highlights both his dangerous ignorance and his goodness.

Felix reaches the river and has a drink. He's feeling better, having decided that the Nazis must be destroying books in remote areas first so they won't have to travel there when winter comes. His parents' bookshop in town should be fine. Suddenly, Felix hears loud gunfire. Though he still thinks it must be hunters, he's glad he's traveling the other way. Suddenly, the river runs red. Felix wonders whether it's blood but decides the hunters couldn't have shot that many rabbits: it must be "a trick of the light."

In addition to murdering Polish Jewish people in concentration camps, Nazi soldiers also carried out genocidal mass shootings against Poland's Jewish population. Given the truck of half-naked prisoners that Felix just saw, it's likely that they were shot to death upstream, and their blood is turning the river red. Felix's somewhat panicked insistence that the blood-red river must be "a trick of the light" hints that he's beginning to suspect something is very wrong.

PAGES 41–52

Walking almost nonstop for two nights and a day, Felix reaches his hometown. The buildings look as he remembers, but he thought the town contained more food shops. Now he wonders whether he invented them while he was hungry at the orphanage.

When Felix wonders whether he invented the food shops he remembered from home, it's an instance of him realizing that his storytelling imagination can sometimes lead him away from the truth.

Felix also remembers his town bustling, but this town is empty. Looking around, confused, he sees his parents' bookshop without "a single Nazi burn mark." Dizzy with hunger, Felix wishes his parents were there, not elsewhere saving their business. Then he tells himself to toughen up, hide the books before the Nazis arrive, and find clues about his parents' location.

The town's emptiness reminds readers of the horrors of Nazi Germany's occupation of Poland: the vast majority of Polish Jewish people were murdered, Polish intellectuals (including teachers, doctors, and priests) were executed, and many non-Jewish Polish people were dislocated to make room for German settlers. Because the adults in Felix's life have concealed the truth about the Nazi occupation from him, he cannot accurately interpret the deserted town and assumes the main danger is still just to his parents' books.

Felix tries the bookshop door. It's locked. He peers through a window and sees no books, only used clothes. Confused, he checks and finds his own initials on the front door where he put them before he left for the orphanage. Hearing voices from the apartment over the bookshop, Felix yells for his parents. Though the voices go quiet, no one responds. Felix infers that his parents no longer recognize his voice. He runs around the bookshop and through the apartment's open back door. Inside, he finds a strange, angry woman who yells at him to leave.

The bookstore full of clothes and the strange voices in Felix's family's apartment suggest that after Felix's parents fled or were arrested, non-Jewish Polish people stole Felix's family's property—demonstrating the indifference of some non-Jewish Polish people to the fate of their Jewish neighbors.

A strange man appears from the bedroom and tells the woman to catch Felix so they can "hand him over." Felix flees. On his way out, he runs into Wiktor Radzyn, a Catholic boy from his old school, who yells "Jew" and says the place belongs to his family now.

The Radzyns have not only stolen Felix's family's property but are actively propagating antisemitism (yelling "Jew" like an insult) and trying to cooperate with the Nazis by "hand[ing Felix] over." This reminds the reader that some Polish people cooperated with their Nazi occupiers and that violent antisemitism long predates Nazism.

A crowd chases Felix, but he escapes and hides at the town's outskirts. Watching people disperse, he wonders why they hate his family—"They couldn't all have bought books they didn't like"—and why the Radzyns are living in his family's apartment. Abruptly, Felix decides the U.S. visas his parents applied for must have been approved. His parents must have sold the bookstore to finance a new one in the U.S. Felix recalls his father telling him once that in America, bookshelves are "solid gold."

Felix is both innocent due to his personal goodness and ignorant due to adults' attempts to hide the truth from him. Yet he already senses that his current theory—that people are persecuting his family over books—doesn't explain the animosity he's witnessing. Despite his forebodings, he retreats to storytelling again, deciding his parents must have left the apartment willingly because they got U.S. visas.

Felix reasons that if his parents have U.S. visas, they must have gone to the orphanage to get him. He decides to travel back there as fast as he can. Leaving his hiding place, he runs into a small boy and girl. The boy tells him they're "playing grabbing Jews in the street." The girl explains that she's pretending to be Jewish; the boy, pretending to be a Nazi, will abduct her. She tells Felix to be a Nazi. When he refuses, the girl tells him to be a Jew and act sad because the Nazis took his parents. When Felix gawks, the girl says that her father told her that "all the Jew people got taken." The boy tells the girl Felix "doesn't want to play." Internally, Felix agrees.

This scene shows how events like the Nazi occupation of Poland and the Holocaust corrupt and destroy children's innocence. The two little children Felix encounters are incorporating scenes of genocidal antisemitic violence ("grabbing Jews in the street") into their narrative play, because they seem to have witnessed such violence and because their parents have explained the violence to them in callous terms ("all the Jew people got taken"). Though Felix doesn't grasp the full import of the children's story-game, he understands enough to be frightened.

Felix sneaks back into town after dark and stakes out his Jewish neighbor Mr. Rosenfeld's house. He wants to prove that the little girl is wrong—that the Nazis haven't taken away all the Jewish people. When he doesn't see Mr. Rosenfeld, he knocks on the door and calls out, saying it's "Felix Salinger."

Due to the little children's disturbing game, Felix now suspects that the Nazis' violent antisemitic activities may include more than just book-burning. It is possible that Felix's last name, Salinger, alludes to famous American author J.D. Salinger (1919—2020), who wrote The Catcher in the Rye (1951); if so, the allusion emphasizes the centrality of storytelling to Felix's character.

A man covers Felix's mouth and snatches him into a nearby alley. The man, whose face Felix can't see in the dark, tells him that Mr. Rosenfeld and Felix's parents have been taken to the city: that's why the "weasel Radzyns" are living in Felix's house and selling clothes and possessions that Mr. Rosenfeld left behind.

The unknown man confirms what earlier passages have implied: some non-Jewish Polish people are using the Nazi persecution of Jewish people as an opportunity to steal their Jewish neighbors' property. This man seems not to approve of such behavior, as he compares perpetrators like the Radzyns to "weasel[s]."

The moon lights up the alley, and Felix recognizes the man as Mr. Kopek, who "used to empty toilets with Mr. Radzyn." Mr. Kopek tells Felix to "go hide in the mountains" and asks him to deny that he talked to Felix if "they" catch him. Felix tells Mr. Kopek that the Nazis won't pursue him: he doesn't have books. Baffled, Mr. Kopek gives Felix a package and flees.

Mr. Kopek used to work a sanitation job "empty[ing] toilets" with Mr. Radzyn. The men's shared economic situation shows that economic difficulties didn't cause Mr. Radzyn's antisemitism, his theft of his Jewish neighbors' property, or his willingness to turn Felix over to the Nazis: Mr. Kopek, in the same economic situation as Mr. Radzyn, warns Felix and tries to help him. Despite mounting contrary evidence, Felix clings to his belief that the Nazis are just book-burners—a mistake that Mr. Kopek is too confused by to correct.

Inside the package are bread and bottled water. Felix wonders why some people help "Jewish book owners" while other people are so hateful. He invents a story about children whose parents die under an avalanche of Jewish books at a warehouse and who swear revenge, but it doesn't seem plausible. He thinks maybe he'll invent a better story on his way to the city to find his parents.

Felix still doesn't grasp the extent of the antisemitic violence around him, but he notices that people in similar social circumstances (like Mr. Kopek and Mr. Radzyn, two working-class Gentile Polish men) can have radically different attitudes toward religious and ethnic diversity. When Felix tries to explain antisemitic hatred, he comes up with a supervillain-style origin story that he himself can't believe. The implausible story demonstrates Felix's ignorance about evil, but his recognition *that the story is implausible shows his growing awareness of his own ignorance.*

PAGES 53–61

Walking toward the city, Felix sees a fire in the distance. Worried that Nazis are burning books, he crosses some fields to investigate and sees a house on fire. He removes his hat, urinates on it, and puts it back on—an anti-blistering technique he learned while writing a story about his parents rescuing someone from a fire.

Felix's decision to urinate on his hat, though comical, demonstrates that writing and reading stories can teach people helpful facts as well as entertaining them.

When Felix gets closer to the house, he crawls under the yard's wire fence. In the yard are chickens, a man in pajamas, and a woman in a nightdress—and all of them have been shot to death. Felix sits down and cries, thinking that the man and woman are "Jewish book owners" whom the Nazis killed for protesting the burning of their books. He thinks to his parents: "Don't put up a struggle. It's only books."

When Felix thinks, "It's only books," he reveals a limit to his allegiance to stories: while he loves them, he doesn't think they're worth dying for. Felix's understanding of the situation is tragically and ironically mistaken; by contrast, readers know that the Nazi persecution of Jewish people wasn't *about "only books" and that Felix's parents will likely die if Nazis apprehend them, regardless of whether or not they struggle.*

A spark from the house catches Felix's clothes. He rolls around trying to put out the fire and knocks into a girl (Zelda), "about six years old." Horrified, he wonders who would kill a child over books and whether, perhaps, Jewish people are being persecuted for some other reason.

When Felix's former neighbors chased him with intense animosity, he wondered whether books could possibly be the reason. Here his doubts return with greater force, as his moral instincts prevent him from believing that anyone would kill a six-year-old child over books.

Felix sees no blood on the girl (Zelda). He rolls her over and finds no wounds, only a bruise on her head. He hears her breathing—and engines in the distance. Seeing cars approach, Felix assumes the Nazis are returning to clean up the crime scene, a "criminal behavior" that Felix has read about. He picks up the girl and carries her under the fence to hide.

Felix interprets what he sees and hears according to his understanding of "criminal behavior," which he likely gleaned from reading detective stories. He may be wrong about what's going on; in Nazi-occupied Poland, Nazi soldiers would not necessarily feel the need to hide evidence of their violence. Yet his decision to flee with the girl seems both wise and good, illustrating his increasing understanding of the danger and his instinct to help others.

Felix walks down the road carrying the girl (Zelda). When he asks her name, she doesn't reply. Since his arms are getting tired, he stops at a haystack behind a hedge and puts her down. She starts crying for her parents. He tells her that he's looking for his parents too, and that he's going to the city to find them. He decides not to tell the girl about her parents' murder until they've found his parents; then his mother can break the news, and they can take the girl to Mother Minka's orphanage.

Felix immediately takes responsibility for this orphaned young girl, yet again demonstrating his moral goodness. Yet just as Mother Minka and Felix's own parents kept him ignorant of the dangers and evils around him, so Felix decides to keep Zelda ignorant of her parents' murder. As Felix's ignorance has endangered him, so it is possible that Felix's decision to keep Zelda ignorant will endanger her. The parallel between Felix's ignorance and Zelda's in this moment may also hint that, unbeknownst to Felix, his beloved parents could already be dead.

The girl (Zelda) asks for Felix's name. After he tells her, she yells for her parents again. He tells her that he wants his parents too, which is why they'll travel to the city. He asks whether her bruise hurts; when she says yes, he tells her that his mother will fix it. The girl, crying less, tells Felix his hat smells.

As Felix sees more of the world beyond the orphanage, he is coming to understand more of its evils and dangers—but in his childish innocence, he still believes that if he finds his beloved parents, they will be able to fix what is wrong.

Felix tells the girl (Zelda) that if she lies down, he'll tell her a story about her family going on a picnic. The girl says her family doesn't go on picnics. When he suggests a story about her family on an airplane, she denies that her families flies. Felix pities the girl: it's "hard being an orphan if you haven't got an imagination." At last, he offers to tell her a story about a child who lived for "three years and eight months" in a mountain castle. The girl gives him a skeptical look but lies down. When Felix starts talking about a boy named William, the girl cuts in: "I'm a girl. My name's Zelda. Don't you know anything?"

When Felix muses that it's "hard being an orphan if you haven't got an imagination," he implies that children use stories to escape pain, but he doesn't yet realize that the stories he's been telling himself about his parents may be similarly escapist. This passage also suggests that the stories children invent tend to be self-centered: though Felix names his story's protagonist William after Richmal Crompton's Just William *series, the detail about living in a mountain castle for "three years and eight months" indicates that "William" is a stand-in for Felix, who lived in a mountain orphanage for exactly that long. In the same vein, Zelda's reminder that she's a girl implies that she wants a story with a female protagonist based on her.*

PAGES 62–71

Felix wakes up from a dream about his parents reading him "a story about a boy who got left in an orphanage" and finds himself in a haystack. When Zelda complains of hunger, he shares his bread and water—and when she complains about his smelly hat, he doesn't mention its firefighting properties so as not to make her think about her destroyed home. She mentions that her head hurts; Felix realizes that his does too. He's also cold and sweaty.

Felix's dream expresses his secret wish: that his current life was just a story and that his stories about reuniting with his parents were reality. Despite Felix's understandable discontent with his situation, he treats Zelda kindly and responsibly, sharing his limited supplies, trying to protect her mood, and not complaining about his own discomfort. Yet again, the novel is implicitly contrasting Felix's actual goodness with the hateful antisemitic stereotypes that Nazi propagandists spread about Jewish people.

Felix hears voices in the road. He tells Zelda to stay put and creeps to the hedge to see what's going on. In the road, a crowd of exhausted-looking people are carrying their belongings and wearing armbands marked with "a Jewish star." Felix supposes the people put on the armbands "so they can recognize the other members of their group" and compares the armbands to the "paper saints" the orphanage uses to distinguish between different dormitory teams when they play sports.

By "a Jewish star" Felix means a Star of David, a Jewish religious and cultural symbol; the Nazi forces occupying Poland during WWII required Jewish people to wear armbands with a Star of David on them. That Felix doesn't know the name for a Star of David emphasizes yet again that Nazi antisemitism was all-encompassing, targeting every Jewish person, whether religiously Jewish, culturally Jewish, or (like Felix) ethnically Jewish without much knowledge of Judaism. Felix doesn't understand that the Nazis are forcing Jewish people to wear the armbands to more easily identify and persecute them; instead, he imagines that the travelers chose the armbands themselves, to "recognize" each other, like players on the same sports team. His innocent, inaccurate comparison of the armbands to sports emblems highlights the actual horror of the events he's witnessing.

Nearby, armed soldiers ride on motorcycles and yell at the crowd in a language Felix doesn't understand. Felix realizes the soldiers must be Nazis and guesses that the travelers are "Jewish book owners" whom the Nazis are forcing to travel to the city. He looks for his parents but can't find them.

By now, Felix has repeatedly doubted his own theory that the Nazis are only persecuting "Jewish book owners." He may be clinging to the theory anyway not only because the truth of all-encompassing Nazi antisemitism is too horrifying for him but also because he hopes to spot his bookseller parents in the crowd.

Zelda screams. Felix, exiting the hedge, sees a Nazi aiming at her. When Felix yells at the Nazi not to shoot, the Nazi aims at him. Seeing his **notebook** on the ground, Felix realizes he dropped it and supposes the Nazi believes he's a rebellious Jewish book owner. He says that it's a notebook, not a book, and that he plans to surrender it in the city. The Nazi stares. Interpreting the Nazi's silence as disbelief, Felix apologizes for yelling and claims that in the mountains where he's from, people yell and yodel to make sure others hear them. The soldier gestures at the hedge with his gun. Felix explain to Zelda that the Nazi wants them to join the crowd going to the city.

The Nazi soldier likely doesn't speak Polish, a fact that renders Felix's fast-talking explanations useless. Though the Nazi soldier literally can't understand Felix's stories, readers can also interpret the scene figuratively: stories have limited power because some people are unwilling to listen to them or recognize their morals, just as the Nazi soldier is unwilling to recognize the humanity of the young, story-loving Jewish boy whom he's menacing with a gun.

Walking with the crowd, Felix looks for his parents but can't find them. He hopes they've already reached the city and can rest. He also hopes any Nazis his parents have interacted with are politer than the ones policing this crowd, since his mother tends to scold rude people. When Zelda complains that her feet hurt, Felix notices she only has slippers on and gives her a piggyback ride. Children in the crowd whose parents are too tired to carry them give Zelda envious looks.

Here Felix displays both his growing awareness of danger and his residual innocence: he's aware enough of the threat Nazis pose to hope his mother didn't scold rude Nazis, but he's not aware enough to realize that his mother would likely be far too frightened to attempt such a scolding. Felix's willingness to give Zelda a piggyback ride shows Felix's generosity and the two children's growing bond.

Eventually Felix feels too sick to carry Zelda. He puts her down, wraps her feet in rags from his shoes, and puts her slippers on over them. When she tells him the rags feel strange, he tries to make her feel better by claiming that all the best explorers have worn rags like that. In the future, Felix insists, shoes will be manufactured with interior rags. Zelda, scornful, says that in the future, people will have wheels for feet.

Despite his own illness, Felix does his best to make sure that Zelda is as physically comfortable as possible and in good spirits—taking an almost parental role toward her.

Later, Zelda notices an old woman crying and asks Felix why all the people around them are upset. Felix, wanting to keep Zelda's spirits up, decides not to tell her that everyone's terrified for their "books and parents." He claims the people are sad because they don't have foot rags. Then the crying old woman collapses. No one tries to help her. Felix realizes he can't help her either; he's too sick and exhausted.

Though Zelda is only about six, she notices that the crowd is unhappy; while children may be innocent or ignorant of the world's evil, they still recognize and are affected by others' suffering. Felix's guess that everyone is scared for "books and parents" shows the limitations of his understanding, while his decision not to be honest with Zelda repeats a pattern in the novel in which older characters lie to younger ones to try to protect them.

Zelda asks what's wrong with the woman. Felix says she's resting, but soon a farmer will come adopt her, and in the future she'll "invent a machine that milks [cows] automatically and also makes butter." Zelda, scornful, replies that in the future, cows will be making the butter. Meanwhile, Felix is still wondering whether Nazis would persecute people like this just because of books. He asks one of the walking men whether he's "a book lover," and the man's face twists with incredulity and intense sorrow. Felix realizes that the Nazis may hate Jewish people, not just Jewish books.

Though Zelda tends to respond scornfully to Felix's stories, she participates in them by one-upping them, making claims even more outrageous than Felix's. This dynamic shows that both children love using their imaginations; it also suggests a big brother-little sister dynamic, though Felix and Zelda are not literally related. The disbelieving reaction of the man whom Felix asks about books further erodes Felix's confidence in his initial theories about the Nazis and opens his eyes to the antisemitism around him.

PAGES 72–80

As the crowd walks, Felix tells stories to Zelda to distract her. Sick, hungry, and worried about his parents, he trails off. Zelda prompts him, reminding him that "William and Violet Elizabeth are in the big cake shop at the zoo." Felix tells Zelda that a gorilla escapes the zoo, so William and Violet Elizabeth fill a hotel room with foods gorillas love and lurk in the room's closet with a net.

William and Violet Elizabeth are characters in Richmal Crompton's Just William *series; Felix is repurposing the books he loves to take emotional care of Zelda, showing how stories can help children endure painful situations. When Felix loses his focus, Zelda returns him to the story; while it's possible she simply wants to know what happens next, it's also possible she is trying to take care of him at the same time as he takes care of her, indicating their growing emotional bond.*

The man Felix asked about books goes into hysterics, shouting at the Nazis. One Nazi strikes him down with a gun, and other Nazis kick him. Felix blocks Zelda's view and talks loudly about the gorilla-catching plan. When Zelda pooh-poohs the plan, Felix asks her to invent a better one. Zelda says that they could "dig a big hole, like those people over there," to catch the gorilla. Through trees, Felix sees hundreds of people digging while soldiers aim guns at them. When Zelda asks what the people are doing, Felix can't invent a response. Zelda suggests that "a gorilla has really escaped" and throws her arms around Felix.

Nazi soldiers sometimes forced their victims to dig their own mass graves before shooting them. It is likely that the people Felix and Zelda see digging are about to be shot and buried in a large mass grave. Felix's inability to guess what's going on and Zelda's panicked suggestion that a "gorilla really has escaped" highlight their innocence, their attempts to use stories to make sense of the world, and their unspoken, panicked sense that something truly terrible is going on.

Zelda says that the gorilla's nice friend tried to get the army not to bother the gorilla, so soldiers hit him with a gun. Felix realizes that she saw what the Nazis did to the shouting man. Felix hugs Zelda and says the friend will "get better" and then he and the gorilla will start a cake shop in the jungle. Zelda agrees, but Felix knows neither of them fully "believes it."

That Zelda witnessed the Nazi soldiers beating the Jewish man who protested shows how hard—and perhaps counterproductive—it is to try to hide the truth from children when large-scale social evils are occurring. That Felix and Zelda respond to the violence they've witnessed with a story neither of them can believe suggests both that escapism is a defense mechanism for children and that it can't fully shield them from reality.

When the crowd reaches the city, Felix notices that unlike "in stories," it's ugly, full of Nazi banners and soldiers, without a cake shop in sight. The city-dwellers shout "dirty Jews" at the crowd. Felix thinks it should be obvious that they're dirty; they've been traveling for hours in the rain. Zelda says she doesn't like the city; Felix wants to cheer her up but can't think of stories. Nazis are forcing Jewish people to get on their knees and clean the cobblestones while city-dwellers laugh. Upset, Felix hopes his parents didn't have to clean.

Yet again, the difference between "stories" and reality strikes Felix; more experiences of the wider world are forcing him to confront ugly truths. He is noticing more violent, virulent antisemitism—without, however, fully understanding it. He finds the pejorative "dirty Jews" confusing, for example, because travelers in bad weather are naturally going to be dirty.

Felix sees Nazis tossing Jewish children into a truck while their parents yell and sob. He wonders why the Nazis would take children away from their parents. Wanting to stay and find his own parents, Felix grabs Zelda and looks for somewhere to hide. Shots ring out. Felix sees two bleeding bodies. Then a Nazi soldier, having grabbed a child, shoots a man trying to retrieve the child. Zelda screams. A Nazi grabs her and aims a gun at her. Felix begs him not to shoot and then, sick and exhausted, collapses in the street.

During the Holocaust's mass murders, it was not uncommon for Nazi soldiers to kill young Jewish children first because they were too small to engage in forced labor. Moreover, during the Nazi occupation of Poland, some "Aryan-looking" Polish children were stolen from their parents to be raised in German homes. Through the Nazi indifference to children's lives and family unity, in contrast with Felix's desperate search to find his parents, the novel asserts the inhumanity of Nazi ideology and the importance of family.

PAGES 81–90

Just when Felix thinks that no adult—"not Mum and Dad, not Mother Minka, not Father Ludwik, not God, not Jesus, not the Virgin Mary, not the Pope, not Adolf Hitler"—can save children from the Nazis, a man (Barney), "wearing a Jewish armband" but "speaking Nazi," confronts the Nazi aiming a gun at Zelda.

Witnessing the Nazis' destruction of families, Felix comes close to losing his belief in adults' power to protect the children in their care—though the litany of adults he thinks might want to protect children shows his ignorance, in that he still doesn't realize that Adolf Hitler is the architect of the violence around him. A heroic intervention from a Jewish man who can "speak[] Nazi" (i.e., German) restores Felix's faith in adults, however.

The Nazi aims at the man (Barney), who shows the Nazi a "leather bag" he's carrying. The Nazi yanks on the man's beard while onlookers laugh. Then the Nazi walks to the Jewish parents protesting their children being taken and aims at a woman's head. Felix tries to get up and stop him but falls, too sick to walk. The Nazi kills the woman. The man (Barney) who saved Zelda tries to lead her away, but she yells that she won't leave without Felix. Felix vomits and faints.

The Nazi soldier from whom Barney saves Zelda participates in both individual sadistic violence and systemic evil: though Barney's mysterious "leather bag" prevents the Nazi from killing him, the Nazi choses to hurt and publicly humiliate him in sadistic fashion before murdering a Jewish mother. In contrast with Mother Minka and Dodie, who committed individual violent acts but had good overall characters, the Nazi soldier both commits violence and is dedicated to an evil cause; the difference between Mother Minka and Dodie on the one hand and the Nazi soldier on the other shows the importance of context to judging people's actions. Zelda's refusal to leave a sick Felix—even to go with a man who saved her life—shows Zelda's loyalty and the bond between the children.


Felix wakes, sees candlelight, and remembers the candle Mother Minka used to carry when she visited the dormitory at night to discipline misbehaving boys. Wondering whether he's returned to the orphanage somehow, he sits up. A familiar-looking man (Barney) pushes him down and tells him to rest. Felix remembers that this is the man with the "magic bag." Zelda comes up and tells Felix that the man's name is Barney. Felix faints again.

Felix's extreme disorientation shows how sick he has been while traveling with Zelda. His sickness only emphasizes his determination, bravery, and moral goodness in caring for Zelda while impaired himself; by emphasizing Felix's virtues, the novel indirectly points out the hateful irrationality of antisemitism.

Felix wakes, thinks he's lost his **notebook**, and starts yelling for it. Zelda lights a candle; a "silver heart" necklace glints on her neck. Barney tells Felix that his notebook is safe; Zelda adds that they've saved his letters but thrown away his hat. Barney makes Felix drink water. When Felix coughs, Zelda asks whether he'll die. Felix wishes he could find his parents, who he believes could cure him, but he knows they're in danger from the Nazis. He tries to tell Barney about the danger his parents are in and says, "Don't believe the notebook. The stories in the notebook aren't true."

After waking, Felix's first thoughts are about his notebook, which represents the love of stories he inherited from his parents. Yet the violence and cruelty Felix has witnessed since leaving the orphanage make him more aware of the distance between children's stories and reality: he still loves his notebook, but he doesn't want Barney to take it as a guide for action. Though its significance is not yet clear, Felix's sudden noticing of Zelda's "silver heart" necklace foreshadows that the necklace may be important.

Later, crying wakes Felix. A little boy is sobbing. Barney calls the boy Henryk and promises to care for him until he's reunited with his parents. When Henryk stops crying, Barney tells him he can keep going—a curly-haired girl named Ruth will comfort him—but Henryk says he's done. Barney checks Felix's temperature and offers him soup. Felix refuses the soup, thinking that Barney's an idiot: he should let the children find their parents, not promise far-off reunions. Felix tries to invent a story about a child finding his parents but can only picture Nazis shooting at people, "including kids who just want a lift." He wonders whether his parents tried to hitchhike and then tries not to think about it.

Readers can tell Felix still doesn't fully understand the danger he and the other children are in, as he thinks Barney should allow the little Jewish boy Henryk to go search for his parents in Nazi-occupied Poland. Yet Felix is revising the falsely optimistic stories he told himself to explain the violence he witnessed on his journeys. For example, his comment about Nazis shooting at "kids who just want a life" indicates that he now knows the soldier who shot at him didn't do so by accident. Felix is thus at a transitional point, understanding more than he used to but not enough to make maximally safe, wise decisions.

Later, Barney wakes Felix and asks whether he can read the children a story from Felix's **notebook**. Felix, donning his glasses, sees children all around his bed: Zelda, Henryk, Ruth, a young boy gnawing on "a piece of wood" (Moshe), a girl "with a bandaged arm" (Chaya), and others. Barney says that Zelda told him that Felix has good stories and that the children would like to hear them. Several children agree, but Felix refuses. When Barney says it's fine for Felix to refuse, because the stories really matter to him, Felix thinks that they don't—he hates them now, because while he was writing fake adventures for his parents, Nazis were grabbing them.

Barney's request to read from the notebook indicates that Felix's storytelling ability has value to others: at minimum, it can entertain and give joy to terrified children. Yet now, Felix has turned against stories, because he feels that they blinded him to the truth of his parents' situation. Meanwhile, Barney seems to have taken on a fatherly role toward the children he's taken in, acting in loco parentis toward children whose parents the Nazis have killed.

Barney says that they're all glad Zelda and Felix have come to live with them. Various children agree, but Felix suspects they're all sad he refused to share his stories. Barney asks Zelda to tell a story instead. Giving Felix a dirty look, she begins a story about two children, "Zelda and William," in a mountain castle.

Zelda is angry at Felix for refusing to tell stories, but she still bases her own story on the ones she's heard from him. Felix's influence on Zelda both indicates the power of Felix's imagination and the big brother-little sister relationship they have developed.

PAGES 91–98

Later, Felix's fever breaks. Zelda jumps on his bed and demands a story. Felix looks around and asks where Barney and the other children went. Zelda, stifling laughter and pointedly ignoring coats heaped on the floor, says that Barney is finding food. The coats go flying, revealing the other children laughing in a pile. Zelda explains that the coats are their story tent. Felix wants to say that Nazis might be killing their parents and "a story isn't going to help," but he doesn't, because the children aren't to blame. Felix blames himself for the danger to his parents: when he was six and his parents were trying to get U.S. visas, he asked the bureaucrat in charge whether he'd gotten the red spots on his skin "from sticking his head in a dragon's mouth."

Right now, Felix is focused on what stories can't do: they can't "help" save any of the children's parents from the Nazis. While Felix is correct, he is ignoring how play and imagination—exemplified by the story tent—give the traumatized children a small opportunity for joy in a terrible situation. Felix's reminiscences suggest his harsh overcorrection to his previous enthusiasm for stories is due to guilt: he believes the fairytale-inspired question he asked the bureaucrat in charge of visas may have insulted the bureaucrat and prevented his parents from escaping Poland.

Henryk asks for a story. Felix refuses, saying he must leave. He looks around and concludes that they're in a cellar with an exit overhead. He finds a door in the ceiling with stairs leading up to it but can't open it. The girl with the bandaged arm (Chaya) explains that Barney locks it. When Felix hits the door, Zelda tells him to be quiet because they're hiding. Ruth adds that Hitler hates Jewish children. Felix protests that Father Ludwik praised Hitler, and Hitler is "the prime minister or the king or something" of Poland. Zelda, scornful, explains that Hitler runs the Nazis. The girl with the bandaged arm explains that Hitler told the Nazis to grab Jewish children; only the ones who hide remain.

Here readers learn why Felix has been praying to Hitler: Father Ludwik spoke positively about Hitler. While it's possible Father Ludwik was intentionally lying to keep the horrible truth from Felix, as Felix's parents and Mother Minka did, it's more probable Father Ludwik was a genuine Nazi sympathizer—in which case Felix's ignorance put him in great danger: if Felix had let slip to Father Ludwik that he was Jewish, Father Ludwik might have betrayed Felix and Mother Minka to the Nazis. Thus, the novel indirectly shows why it is better to tell children frightening truths for their own safety than to keep them ignorant.

Felix realizes that when his parents said they were leaving him at the orphanage so they could fix their business, they were only telling him a story—which "saved [his] life." The children again demand a story from Felix. Felix starts telling them about William finding a "magic **carrot**." When Zelda and another child start fighting about how many wishes the carrot grants, Felix asks them what they'd wish for. When Zelda says she'd wish for her parents, the girl with the bandaged arm (Chaya) asks them to say what else they'd all wish for.

Felix's conclusion that his parents' story "saved [his] life" suggests that, given his age at the time, he doesn't think he could have accepted the truth and successfully concealed his Jewishness if his parents hadn't lied to him. This conclusion in turn implies that lying to very young children can sometimes protect them—though Felix's subsequent adventures suggest that once children reach a certain age, concealing the truth from them is dangerous. Realizing that his parents' story saved him convinces Felix again of stories' value, and he becomes willing to tell stories to the other children. As carrots in the novel have previously represented hope, Felix's story about a "magic carrot" is a way to keep the children's hopes up by getting them to think about their wishes for the future.

Ruth says she'd like neater hair. A boy named Jacob says he wants his dog. Henryk says he wants his dog and his grandmother's dog. The toddler says he wants a **carrot**. The girl with the bandaged arm wishes to be "alive"; when the other children laugh, Ruth explains to Felix that the girl's name is Chaya, Hebrew for "alive." When the wood-chewing boy, Moshe, says nothing, Chaya says he'd probably like "the rest of [his] house," and Moshe nods.

The children's wishes illustrate both their innocence and the horrors that antisemitic violence have wreaked on their lives. The children aren't wishing for their parents because their parents are likely dead, so the fact that two boys wish for their dogs implies that Nazis killed their pets also. The toddler wishes for a carrot, suggesting that his imaginative horizons have narrowed to food due to hunger. Chaya makes a funny joke about her name—but in so doing, she avoids making a wish at all, suggesting she is no longer comfortable hoping for things given the situation in Nazi-occupied Poland. Finally, when Chaya suggests that Moshe would like "the rest of [his] house," it implies that the wood Moshe constantly chews is part of a family dwelling the Nazis destroyed.

Zelda insists that Felix share his wish, but his imagination fails. He's transfixed by the idea "God and Jesus and the Virgin Mary and the Pope" might also hate Jewish children if Hitler does. The other children, rather than wait for Felix, start a "lice hunt." Zelda scolds Felix. He apologizes, lies down, and tries to use his imagination to figure out how he'll save his parents "before Adolf Hitler's Nazis kill them."

Felix's worries show how antisemitism can harm Jewish children psychologically as well as physically: realizing that one powerful figure he has been taught to respect hates him for no good reason, Felix becomes intensely anxious that all powerful figures hate him, and because of this anxiety, he can no longer concentrate on the other children's games. While the other children turn picking lice off themselves into a game—showing how children can use their imaginations to derive fun even from disgusting activities—Felix takes on the massive responsibility of using his storytelling skills and imagination to rescue his parents from the Nazis.

PAGES 99–111

That night, while the other children sleep, Felix tells Barney that he needs to leave the cellar with Barney. Barney takes Felix through the ceiling door into a room full of machines, which Barney explains used to be a print shop, "before." When Barney asks why Felix needs to go with him, Felix claims he has a "rare illness" and needs medication in his parents' possession to survive, so he needs to find his parents. Barney grins and says Zelda's right about Felix's storytelling skills. Then, sobering, he says Zelda told him Felix last saw his parents almost four years ago.

The detail of the print shop once again suggests the importance of storytelling and imagination to survival: Felix, Barney, Zelda, and the other children are hiding from the Nazis in a building that used to print books. Felix's rather extravagant lie to Barney, meanwhile, shows that he has decided immediately to put into action his plan to save his parents through storytelling.

Felix assumes that Barney will take him back to the cellar. Instead, Barney gives him a candle and admits he read a story from Felix's **notebook**, trying to learn about Felix's parents. He says that Felix spins good stories and that he needs Felix's help. They go to the door of the print shop, where Barney looks around carefully. Felix sees a hole in Barney's jacket. He wonders whether it's a bullet hole, whether Barney or his family was shot, and whether Barney is caring for strangers' children because his family was murdered. Barney tells Felix that it will doom them if anyone spots them leaving, and then he tells him to move.

Though Barney doesn't buy Felix's lies, something about Felix's notebook makes Barney willing to bring Felix along—which suggests that Felix's love of stories may help him achieve his goals after all. When Felix wonders whether Barney is caring for orphaned children because Nazis have killed Barney's biological family, it implies that "chosen" family can be a psychologically and emotionally necessary salve to grief after losing one's original family—an observation that neither diminishes the validity of chosen family nor the importance of biological family.

The streets are empty except for corpses, which Felix checks to make sure aren't his parents. Barney explains that they're under curfew. People who violate curfew are shot, but he and Felix will be fine; he gestures with his bag as an explanation. Felix speculates about the bag. Then he asks why the curfew is in place. Barney says that this neighborhood is a Jewish ghetto run by Nazis. Barney knocks on a door, waits, and then tells Felix he may never find his parents. Refusing to believe it, Felix asks whether all Jewish people in the city live in this ghetto or whether there are other ghettos. Barney doesn't answer.

In Nazi-occupied Poland, Nazis forced ethnically Jewish people to live in segregated urban neighborhoods called "ghettos." Because Jewish people were not allowed to leave these ghettos, they were entirely dependent on Nazi rations or smugglers for food, and many starved to death. Barney's brief explanation of ghettos to Felix highlights both Felix's ignorance of the dangers threatening him and the dehumanizing brutality of Nazi antisemitism.

A woman takes Barney and Felix into an apartment. Inside, a crowd is gathered around a man moaning on a bed. Barney examines the man's mouth. Then he removes some objects from his bag and assembles a machine out of them. Barney asks for salt water, tells the man to rinse his mouth, and starts foot-pedaling the machine, which whirs. Felix realizes that it's a drill, and Barney is a dentist. Barney orders Felix to tell the man a story. Felix realizes that Barney has no anesthetic and wants a story to distract the man from his pain—something Felix has never done for someone else and which feels like a "big responsibility." He launches into a story about a boy named William who found a magic **carrot** that granted him three wishes.

In prior scenes, Felix has gone from thinking stories are useless distraction to realizing that they can be tools for survival. In this scene, Felix realizes consciously what he already subconsciously knew: that stories can also be tools for enduring inescapable pain. Felix chooses to tell a story about a magic carrot to the dental patient; as carrots have previously represented hope in the novel, Felix's choice of story suggests he is trying to give the patient hope for a future without pain.

At the next door, Barney praises Felix for how he helped the first patient, which makes Felix proud. Then he warns Felix that the next patient will be "different." A Nazi soldier opens the door and leads them upstairs. As they climb, Barney whispers to Felix that the next patient is German, so Felix should invent a "nice story about Germany." Felix knows almost nothing about Germany—he thinks it may be full of windmills—and points out that he doesn't speak German; Barney says he'll translate.

Felix's pride at Barney's praise indicates both his continued emotional investment in his own storytelling and his desire to help others. The Nazi soldier at the next apartment and Barney's warning that the patient is German suggests that the patient is a Nazi—leading the reader to suspect that Barney's "magic bag" has saved him and the children because the Nazis know Barney will provide them with free (and perhaps otherwise unavailable) dental care.

When Barney and Felix enter the upper room, Felix discovers that the patient is a scowling Nazi officer, swigging from a bottle. Felix, wondering why Barney would help a Nazi, wants to launch into "a story about how burning books and shooting innocent people makes a toothache worse," but he realizes that's a dangerous idea. The Nazi soldier who showed them in proffers some food, and Felix realizes Barney is helping the Nazi officer to get food. Felix starts a story about German soldiers traveling through an African jungle to repair a windmill. He hopes he can make the Nazi officer grateful enough that he can ask the officer about his parents.

Asked to tell a Nazi a story, Felix's first impulse is to invent a story with a pointed moral and thereby to try to change the Nazi's evil behavior ("burning books and shooting innocent people"). Yet Felix believes this first impulse is an unhelpful one—suggesting that Felix knows stories are powerful but still limited in their ability to change people's real-world behavior. This passage reveals that Barney is giving the Nazis dental care not only to keep them from killing him and the children directly but also to keep them from killing them indirectly (by starvation).

PAGES 112–120

In the cellar the next morning, Felix brushes his teeth furiously; he's enraged at Barney, who wouldn't let him ask the Nazi officer about his parents. Felix's story involved the German soldiers transforming a windmill into a water pump to create an ice-rink for African children, which amused the Nazi officer so much he asked Felix to write the story down; he wanted to send it home to his children. Felix thought that maybe this Nazi officer would be willing to help his parents, but Barney yanked Felix away before he could ask, saying asking for help would be "too dangerous."

The Nazi officer's reaction to Felix's story encouraged Felix, as it seemed to reveal the officer's sense of humor and fondness for children. Felix doesn't understand why Barney thinks asking the Nazi officer for help would be "dangerous." In his relationships with Mother Minka and Dodie, Felix has shown that he can put his loved ones' bad or violent actions in context and still believe them to be good people; yet in his belief that the Nazi officer might help him, Felix reveals that he has difficulty putting a person's apparently friendly acts in context and realizing that a person who commits such acts can still be cruel, violent, and deeply complicit in systematic evil.

Zelda comes into the bathroom and asks whether Felix found their parents when he went out with Barney. Felix feels guilty about his impatience to find his parents when Zelda's are dead: "I try to think up a story about how parents aren't really that important, but I can't because they are."

When Zelda asks after her own parents, it reminds readers that Felix is still concealing their deaths from her, just as Felix's parents and Mother Minka concealed important truths from him. Felix senses that his behavior toward Zelda is wrong because parents "really are that important"—emphasizing how much family matters to Felix and the other children.

Zelda says she knows how they can spot their parents, points to a crack near the ceiling, and says they can see into the street from there. Jacob confirms it—he's piled up mattresses, stood on them, and peered out. Felix and Zelda try it. They only see feet, but Zelda exclaims that she sees her mother's shoes. Felix sympathizes—he thought he recognized his father's pants until he saw three other people wearing the same kind. Zelda bounces, and the mattresses topple, dumping Felix and Zelda to the floor. When he checks whether she's all right, she's looking for her slippers; she wants to put them on and go find her mother. Felix realizes that she "needs to know the truth."

Zelda's belief that her parents are alive puts her in danger—she plans to flee the safety of the cellar and enter the Nazi-occupied city to find them. It is only when Felix realizes that his kind lie has made Zelda more likely to act dangerously that he decides she "needs to know the truth."

Barney asks Felix whether he's certain that Zelda's parents were dead. When Felix says he is, Barney says that Zelda does need to know and that Felix should be the one to tell her, since he witnessed it. When Felix says he doesn't "know how," Barney says to describe what happened without inventing. Felix wishes he could invent a happy story, but he knows he can't.

When Felix says he doesn't "know how" to tell Zelda that her parents are dead, he means that he doesn't feel up to the responsibility of bearing terrible news. This reminds the reader both of how young Felix is and how much he has come to care about Zelda. Yet Felix does realize that a happy story is inappropriate to the occasion, which demonstrates that he is learning what stories are and are not good for.

When Felix tells Zelda the truth, she refuses to believe him, falls onto a mattress, and sobs. Other children start crying. Ruth says that "goblins" beat her father to death with sticks. Jacob says he found his family burned when he came home from school. Henryk says that goblins "killed Sigi and cut his tail off."

Though Zelda at first denies that Felix is telling the truth, the other children find Felix's acknowledgment of horrible truths cathartic. It allows them to share their own traumatic experiences of Nazis killing their families and mutilating their pets ("Sigi" is presumably Henryk's dog). Ruth calls the Nazis "goblins," suggesting that some of the children can only talk about the evils they've experienced by using fairy-tale terminology.


Chaya tells a story about goblins who visited a princess's castle seeking "information about their enemies." They said the princess had to choose: they'd hurt the princess, "the old people," or "the babies." The princess chose for them to hurt her, but when she couldn't tell the goblins anything, they hurt the old people and the babies too. Everyone is weeping, but Felix is crying because he feels "lucky," since his parents aren't dead yet.

Chaya extends Ruth's use of "goblins" to describe Nazi soldiers to explain what happened to her own family. She says the goblins wanted "information about their enemies," which indicates that Nazis tortured Chaya and her family for information about the Polish Resistance (military and civilian groups in occupied Poland that smuggled intelligence to Allied forces fighting the Nazis, sabotaged Nazi supply lines, engaged in guerilla fighting against Nazi soldiers, and so on). That Chaya explains symbolically what happened to her using fairy-tale terminology shows that stories can help people indirectly communicate truths that are too painful to convey directly. Given the horrible tragedies that the other children have experienced, readers may wonder whether Felix is in fact "lucky"—or whether bad things have happened to his parents without his knowledge.

PAGES 121–131

Felix lies on the mattress beside Zelda, who sobs until she falls asleep. Then he works on a written version of his story for the Nazi officer until he falls asleep too. Barney shakes him awake, says they've run out of water, and asks Felix to help get some. Then he hands Felix nearly new boots that fit. Felix, baffled, asks where he got them, and Barney admits he traded food for them because people should "have something good in their life at least once." Though astounded by Barney's generosity, Felix believes he has more good things in his life than Barney or the other children.

Felix treats Zelda like his little sister, staying with her while she cries. Similarly, though Felix and Barney have just met, Barney treats Felix almost like a son, trading some of their limited food so that he can give Felix "something good." These interactions show how the characters, having lost their original families under tragic circumstances, form important familial bonds with others who have suffered similar tragedies. Felix assumes that he has more good things in his life than the others because he believes that his parents are alive; his unthinking assumption may foreshadow that something bad has happened to his parents.

In the print shop, Felix and Barney hear voices outside. Spying through a window, they see Jewish people wearing armbands escorted by a Nazi soldier. One Jewish person asks the soldier where they're going, and the Nazi soldier says, "Countryside [...] Much food. Easy work." Felix asks Barney whether they can go to the countryside too. Barney, horrified, says no. Felix, thinking his parents must be in the countryside, resolves that once he's given his story to the Nazi officer, he'll ask where in the countryside his parents are. Then he'll leave and take Zelda with him.

Once again, an older character fails to tell a younger character the truth and so puts the younger character in potential danger. Barney clearly knows that the Nazis are not taking their Jewish prisoners to the "countryside" to enjoy "much food" and "easy work," but he doesn't explain what he knows to Felix—and Felix, in his ignorance, comes up with a plan that could get him and Zelda killed if enacted.

Barney enters an apartment without knocking. Felix, following, sees "a Jewish candlestick, the type that holds a row of candles," which looks like someone has stomped on it. Barney says it's his friends' apartment. Felix supposes the friends forgot to lock their doors when they traveled to the countryside.

Felix doesn't know what a menorah is called, referring to it as a "Jewish candlestick," which emphasizes yet again that the Nazis persecuted and murdered both religious Jewish people and non-religious ethnically Jewish people like Felix. Felix's guess that Barney's friends must have simply forgotten to lock their doors on the way to the countryside demonstrates once again how, when he is spinning a hopeful narrative, he often ignores more plausible explanations.

In the next room, Felix sees special equipment and realizes they're in "a dentist's surgery." Barney is rifling the cupboards for syringes and "small bottles filled with liquid." When Felix asks, Barney explains it's an anesthetic and that children shouldn't touch it, because it's dangerous—if you take too much you "go into a very deep sleep and never wake up."

This scene contains a rare example of an adult giving a necessary explanation to a child in an age-appropriate way: Barney warns Felix off the dangerous anesthetic by telling him that it can kill people. The attention the novel pays to the anesthetic here seems to foreshadow that the anesthetic will be important later.

Barney and Felix enter a bathroom and find water in the tub and toilet tank. Barney tells Felix to go find food in the kitchen while he fills some buckets. In the kitchen is a toddler covered in blood in a highchair. When Felix screams, Barney comes running. Felix, sobbing, says you shouldn't kill children and demands to know why the parents didn't "do something." Barney hugs him and says that parents can't always protect their children, no matter how hard they try.

Throughout the story Felix has been implicitly assuming, with a child's innocence, that if he can find his parents, everything will be all right. The shocking appearance of a dead toddler reveals to him that parents can't always "do something" to protect their children—that evils like antisemitism can destroy families even when family members are entirely devoted to one another.

Barney says that Felix's parents "loved" him and "did everything they could" to save him. Confused by Barney's use of the past tense, Felix asserts that he's going to find them in the countryside. Sighing, Barney admits that the countryside is a lie—the Nazis are transporting Jewish people to kill them.

When Barney refers to Felix's parents in the past tense, it reveals that he believes the Nazis have already killed them. Much as Felix finally realized he had to tell Zelda the truth about her parents' deaths, Barney seems to realize here that he needs to tell Felix the truth about what is happening to Polish Jewish people.

When Felix demands to know how Barney knows this, Barney explains that an escapee from the "death camps" came to the ghetto to warn people. Felix shouts that Barney would have warned the travelers they saw earlier if his story were true. Barney, struggling with his emotions, says that no one would have believed him any more than they believed the escapee, whom the Nazis murdered—and Barney must survive to care for the children. Felix tries to invent a story about how his parents could have escaped, but he keeps picturing the dead toddler. He recalls Barney's syringes and wishes he could use one to "never wake up and never feel this bad again."

Barney argues that no one would have believed him about the "death camps"—that is, the concentration camps that the Nazis built in Poland for the mass murder of Jewish people, such as Auschwitz. This argument suggests that even true stories have limited power to persuade because people refuse to believe things that they don't want to believe. Barney's admission that he's surviving for the sake of the children once again suggests that he has adopted them as his own family. Felix's wish to die by suicide rather than "feel this bad again" shows how traumatic knowing the truth about evil can be, even when one needs to know the truth.

PAGES 132–143

In bed that night, Felix thinks how he used to "love stories" but now loathes them. He especially hates stories about God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and other powers that are supposed to protect people; about the countryside; and about parents who claim they'll return for their children but don't. He thinks his parents would "have been better off with guns" instead of books.

Felix rejected stories the first time when he realized how much danger the Nazis posed to him and his parents. Afterward, he decided stories might still be useful for finding his parents and started telling them again. Now that he's losing hope in his parents' survival, he rejects stories again. The stories that he particularly loathes are those that give people false expectations about the world: stories about powerful protectors, which make people feel safe when they aren't. He compares stories to "guns" and decides guns would be more helpful. Felix's comparison suggests that while he values stories as a survival tool, he doesn't think they're particularly effective.

Zelda comes over and asks whether Felix's parents are dead too. When he doesn't reply, she puts her silver necklace around his neck as a gift "to make [him] feel better." Felix, hating having feelings, wishes he were like a murderous, emotionless Nazi. When Zelda pets Felix's hair, he realizes that she's running an extreme temperature. She faints, and Felix yells for Barney.

Presumably Zelda received her silver necklace from her parents, as a little girl wouldn't be able to buy her own jewelry. That she gives Felix a gift from her dead parents "to make [him] feel better" shows how much she cares for him and implies that she views him as family.

Though reluctant to send Felix out alone, Barney doesn't want to leave Zelda and needs aspirin to lower her temperature. He tells Felix to go get aspirin from the apartment where they were last night—or some other apartment if he's afraid to return to that one. Felix realizes that Barney is avoiding saying that Zelda will die if her temperature doesn't drop; he resolves to get her the aspirin and "something else."

Felix is willing to risk his life to save Zelda's, which shows not only his goodness and bravery—qualities Nazi antisemitism would deny he has—but also the quasi-familial love he has developed for her. His resolve to get "something else" for Zelda in addition to aspirin foreshadows that Felix won't follow Barney's instructions exactly and may encounter danger as a result.

In the streets, Felix sees Nazi trucks and soldiers and hears gunfire. He finds aspirin in one apartment but keeps searching apartments for something else. In the last apartment, he prays to "God, Jesus, Mary, and the Pope"—and finds a **carrot**, which he believes "will help Zelda just as much as the aspirin."

Though Felix was just expressing his hatred of stories about God, he prays to "God, Jesus, Mary, and the Pope" to help him in his quest for Zelda. This change of heart suggests that people rely on stories for bravery in difficult situations. It's not entirely clear why Felix thinks a carrot "will help Zelda just as much as the aspirin," but given that carrots have represented wishes and hope throughout the novel, it's possible that Felix believes hope is as important to survival as medicine.

In the apartment, Felix discovers a bedroom that looks very much like his old one, containing Richmal Crompton's *Just William*. He reads a bit about William's poorly behaved but lovable mixed-breed dog, Jumble, and remembers how his parents promised he could have a dog at some point. He sits on the floor, reading and crying, until he falls asleep.

Though Felix cares about Zelda very much, memories of his parents promising him a dog sufficiently distract him that he delays getting her the aspirin and falls asleep in a dangerous location. Felix's distraction shows how important his parents continue to be to him even as he forms familial bonds with new people like Zelda and Barney.

Felix wakes up in the dark and hears a growling dog and Nazis searching the apartment. He knocks the books off the bookshelf and hides under them. Someone opens the bedroom door and passes a flashlight over the books, but then the noises of dogs and soldiers diminish. Felix climbs out from under the books, grabs *Just William*, and runs. On the stairs, he trips and falls. A Nazi with a flashlight sees him, takes *Just William* from him, and looks at Zelda's silver heart locket—which Felix's fall busted open.

Though Felix loves stories, he doesn't hold books as objects sacred—he's perfectly willing to use them as tools for survival in ways that have nothing to do with their story content. Here, for example, he hides under a pile of books to escape Nazis. Yet he does make sure to take Just William *with him, which shows both his love of books and his desire to stay connected to his parents (who introduced him to* Just William*). The Nazi soldier's focus on Zelda's locket, meanwhile, suggests there's something important about it.*

The Nazi heads back into an apartment and yells to someone. Felix runs out the gate and into the alleyways behind the apartment building. Once he finds an empty street, he examines Zelda's locket. In one half, he sees a photograph of a man and a woman, Zelda's parents. They're standing in front of a Polish flag, and the man is wearing a Nazi uniform.

When Felix found Zelda's parents killed outside their burning house, he assumed they were Jewish people murdered by Nazis. The picture in Zelda's locket suggests that in fact, her father was a Nazi collaborator. This disturbing revelation makes readers wonder whether Felix and Zelda's quasi-sibling bond will survive his discovery.

Felix approaches the street where the printing press is located. He thanks God, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Richmal Crompton that he'll be able to get Zelda her aspirin and **carrot** soon. Addressing God and the other figures to whom he prays, he tells them that even though Zelda's father was a Nazi, she should still get aspirin and carrot soup, because she isn't responsible for her father's actions and she's basically Felix's family now anyway.

Felix has added children's book author Richmal Crompton to the list of protectors to whom he prays, revealing that he has once again come to think of stories as a powerful survival tool. If carrots represent hope in the novel, the carrot that Felix finds for Zelda represents not only his belief that hope is necessary to survival but also that his own hope that she survives. Felix's emotional generosity toward Zelda and his acceptance of her into his family, despite her father's crimes, implicitly contrast his goodness and humanity with the dehumanizing horror of Nazi antisemitism.

Felix hears dogs, trucks, and soldiers. He peeks around a corner and sees Nazis surrounding the print shop. Trying to think of a way to warn Barney and the children, he hears screaming and realizes he's run out of time. Deciding "it doesn't matter anymore" who sees him, he sprints for the others.

When Felix realizes the Nazis have captured Barney and the other children, he runs to join them rather than escaping. His belief that "it doesn't matter" whether the Nazis see him once they've captured the others shows his loyalty and familial devotion to Zelda and Barney.

PAGES 144–152

Nazi soldiers march Barney, Felix carrying Zelda on his back, and the other children through the ghetto. When Felix asks Barney where they're going, he says they're headed for the train station. When Felix asks whether the station will have water for Zelda, Barney says yes; Felix hopes he's right, because they haven't managed to give her the aspirin yet. When Felix asks whether the station is far away, Barney ignores him, instead giving the children an excessively positive pep talk. Felix fears this means that the walk will be long—and they'll be murdered on arrival.

Throughout the novel, adults have lied to Felix or hidden the truth from him when they thought he was too young to handle it. Felix has matured enough over the course of the novel that he knows recognizes this phenomenon: when Barney dodges his question about the journey to the station, Felix realizes that Barney is concealing a scary truth.

On the way, Felix concocts a plan to save Zelda's life. He tells her to take back the silver locket. When she hesitates, he praises the gift but insists she take it. At last, she does. When they reach the station, Barney asks the children whether they're excited to ride a train. Most of the kids say they are—which suggests to Felix that they haven't noticed Nazi soldiers with dogs and whips forcing people into the train cars.

Felix's plan to save Zelda requires that she wear her locket—which suggests Felix is hoping the Nazis won't kill Zelda once they realize her father was a Nazi collaborator. Felix selflessly tries to save Zelda rather than trying to use the locket to save himself, once again showing his goodness and his brotherly love for Zelda. The other children's excitement about the train suggests that Felix is the only one Barney has told about the concentration camps.

When a woman standing in line for the train faints, a Nazi shoots her. Ruth screams. Quickly, Barney tells the children to make a tent. He and the children huddle under their coats, and he passes around a water bottle for them to sip. Once they've all had some, he instructs Felix to crush two aspirin, add it to the water bottle, and shake it. Barney makes Zelda drink the water with aspirin. Felix shows Zelda's locket to Barney. When Chaya sees it too, she says she hates Polish collaborators. Barney says that the Polish Resistance must be responsible for Zelda's parents' deaths. Felix insists they need to tell someone.

Barney makes a tent, shutting out the world to avoid terrifying the children in a situation they can't escape. This kind gesture illustrates that protecting children from evil truths isn't always a bad thing—it's just that often, concealing evil truths exposes children to greater danger. During the Nazi occupation, the Polish Resistance did execute some Polish people who collaborated with the Nazis, so Barney's inference that the Resistance killed Zelda's collaborator father is a reasonable one.

Barney tells the children to stay in the tent. He and Felix (carrying Zelda) crawl from beneath the coats. Looking for an authority, Felix spots the Nazi officer who wanted Felix's story. He pulls out his **notebook**, rips out the story, and brandishes it at the Nazi officer. When the officer comes over, Felix gives him the pages; the officer smiles and takes them. Felix gestures to Zelda's locket and Barney speaks German. Zelda says the "Polish assistance" killed her parents.

Originally, Felix wanted to give the Nazi officer his story so the Nazi officer would help find Felix's parents. Now, he gives the Nazi officer the story hoping to save Zelda. This shift shows how Zelda has become Felix's family. Felix's efforts here hold out hope that his love of storytelling, which the notebook represents, will manage to save a life—though the novel has repeatedly suggested that stories have limited power to change the minds of people committed to systemic evil, which may foreshadow that Felix's attempt won't succeed. Zelda's assertion that the "Polish assistance" killed her parents, meanwhile, hints that she's too young to understand what the Polish Resistance is.

The Nazi officer gestures for Zelda and Barney to leave the station. Barney speaks German and gestures to the other children; Felix infers he's asking whether they can come too. The Nazi officer shakes his head. Felix tells Barney to go with Zelda and volunteers to care for the others, but Barney keeps speaking in German. Then Nazi soldiers grab Felix and the other children and carry them toward the train. Barney hands Zelda to the officer and runs after the children.

The Nazi officer refuses to spare the lives of the Jewish children, showing that his acts of apparent friendliness toward Barney and Felix are meaningless in the larger context of his participation in the systematic evil of the Holocaust. Barney decides not to go with Zelda and save his own life, choosing instead to die with the children in his care—a choice that demonstrates his fatherly devotion to them.

Zelda fights against the Nazi officer, trying to go with the others. Felix, landing in a train car full of people, yells goodbye to her—only for a Nazi soldier to throw her on top of him. When Felix asks why Zelda came with them, Zelda replies, "I bit the Nazi […]. Don't you know anything?" Felix hears banging and realizes the Nazis are nailing the doors to the train cars shut.

Unlike Barney, Zelda probably doesn't know where the train is heading (to a concentration camp). Like Barney, however, she would rather remain loyally with Felix and the others than flee danger. Her scornful response to Felix's question implies that she didn't find it to be a difficult choice—which illustrates her sisterly love for Felix and her rejection of the antisemitism her parents embraced.

PAGES 153–161

In the crowded train, Felix apologizes for bumping into people until a man shouts at him to stop. When Barney says that Felix is a child and suggests that the man "give him a break," the man asks, "Who's giving us a break?" Felix sympathizes: the train won't stop to let people use the bathroom, and there's no toilet or toilet paper. Ruth, Moshe, and a few other passengers have already gone to the bathroom in the corner. When Jacob asks whether they'll arrive soon, Barney shushes him. Felix suspects this is because if Jacob keeps asking, it will make other passengers angry too—especially since they're trying not to think about the "death camp."

Even in a dire situation, Felix shows his emotional generosity and empathetic character: he isn't angry at the man who shouts at him because he understands that the man is reacting to the degrading conditions on the train (like extreme overcrowding and a lack of toilets) and out of fear of their destination, the "death camps." Implicitly, the novel is pointing out how irrational and evil antisemitism is, as it denies the humanity of a kind, sensitive child like Felix.

An old woman pushes her way to the toilet corner, apologizing as she moves. Felix feels sorry for her and wonders whether this happened to his parents, but he tries not to think about it. Having an idea, he pulls out his **notebook** and passes pages through the crowd for the old woman to use. When they reach her, she bursts into tears.

Felix sacrifices part of his notebook, a gift from his parents that represents his love of storytelling, to make the train journey a little less humiliating for an old woman he doesn't know. Once again, the novel is implicitly pointing out the irrationality of antisemitism, which refuses to recognize Felix's humanity and goodness. In addition, this incident shows that Felix has fully learned that stories are tools appropriate for some situations and not others: sometimes notebooks are useful as stories—but sometimes they're more useful as toilet paper.


At first, Felix only rips out unused **notebook** pages for people to use. Then, figuring his parents would understand, he rips out the written pages too and goes to impale them on a metal bolt in the wall by the toilet corner. When he grabs the bolt, it comes free—the plank it was attached to is rotten. He kicks the plank, and his foot breaks through it. He yells for Barney. Soon several men are kicking a hole in the wall. Once they've made the hole big enough, people start jumping out.

In the act of sacrificing his notebook, Felix discovers a weakness in the train wall through which the prisoners can escape. Since the notebook has represented Felix's love of stories throughout the novel, this incident symbolically suggests that Felix is best equipped to survive once he realizes when stories are or aren't appropriate.

Felix asks Barney whether Nazis will stop the train to catch escapees. Barney replies that they don't need to. Gunfire rings out, and Barney explains that the Nazis have mounted machine guns on the roof. A woman, looking through the hole in the train car, shouts that some jumpers have reached the woods. Felix tells Barney they should all jump. Barney, seeming to think Felix is wrong, stares at the terrified children.

For much of the novel, Barney has known more than Felix, and the two characters have disagreed about what to do because of their asymmetrical knowledge. Now, however, they have the exact same limited information: they are headed for a concentration camp, where they will likely die, and if they jump from the train, they may escape—or die sooner. In possession of the same information, Felix and Barney disagree about what to do. This disagreement shows that while telling children the truth is important, everyone having access to the same truth won't necessarily end disagreements or make it easier to decide what to do.

Felix tells the other children a story about children who jump from a train, are adopted by a farmer, and, in the future, "invent a **carrot** that cures all illnesses." He shows them the carrot he found for Zelda as an example, but most of them look doubtful. Barney says he won't stop Felix from jumping but that he will stay with the children who choose to stay. Felix begs them all to jump, but four children quickly say they don't want to. Felix, despairing, recognizes that "you can't force people to believe a story."

Felix tries to use storytelling to persuade the other children to jump; thus, the novel suggests that storytelling can be a survival tool, making people brave enough to try to save themselves. Since Felix tells a story about carrots, which have represented hope throughout the novel, the novel seems further to suggest that stories can be particularly helpful to survival when they help people hope for a better future. Yet Felix knows that "you can't force people to believe a story," reminding readers that while storytelling is a useful tool, it's not an all-powerful one.

Zelda says she wants to jump. After a moment, Chaya says that she does too. Barney asks whether any of the other children want to; none do. Felix hugs all the children who plan to stay. Lastly, he hugs Barney and requests that if Barney meets Felix's parents, he tell them that Felix loves them and knows "they did their very best." Barney, crying, says he will. To the children who are staying, Felix says: "Only two wishes this time […] But at least we got to choose." Then he, Zelda, and Chaya join hands and jump.

As far as readers know, Felix is the only one of the children Barney told about the concentration camps—and the children's initial excitement at the prospect of riding a train seems to support the idea that they don't know where the trains are headed. Thus, while Felix is glad that the children all "got to choose" how to respond to their situation, most are choosing in ignorance—and will likely die in a concentration camp as a result. This outcome underscores one of the novel's recurring ideas, namely that keeping children ignorant puts them in danger.

PAGES 162–163

Felix lies dazed in the field. Beside him, Chaya lies dead from machine-gun fire. Felix resolves to move her body under a beautiful nearby tree when he feels up to it. He asks Zelda how she is. She says she's fine: "We're lucky." Felix agrees. He felt syringes in Barney's jacket when they hugged; he's sure that Barney "won't let the others suffer." Felix ponders that he doesn't know how his story will end—it could end soon or a long time in the future—but either way, he's had good things in his life "more than once."

Chaya died, and Felix and Zelda were "lucky" to survive, outcomes that show the other children weren't unreasonable to stay on the train—even if that choice will likely lead to their deaths. Felix's certainty that Barney "won't let the others suffer" implies that as a last act of parental love, Barney will give the other children lethal doses of the anesthetic he found in the dentist's surgery rather than let Nazis torture and kill them. Finally, Felix's conclusion that he's had good things in his life "more than once" despite the horrors of the Holocaust implicitly argues that acting morally and developing close bonds with others are meaningful, valuable activities even under conditions of extreme suffering and persecution. The change in meaning of the word "once"—which also began the book—from a fairy-tale invocation to a counting word, meanwhile, suggests that Felix has grown beyond his excessive dependence on stories.

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