



Teachers' notes
Written by Jean Yates

Now by Morris Gleitzman

Now brings the story of Felix and Zelda to a gripping conclusion. Whilst it can be read as a stand-alone book, it would certainly have most impact when read in conjunction with the other two titles.

Students who have not read *Once* and *Then*, need to have a background knowledge of the holocaust and the impact it would have had on those who lived through it. Perhaps extracts could be read from the first two books to reinforce these feelings and some of Felix's experiences. Alternatively, students will need to research the period or watch a relevant film such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

In *Now*, Felix is about to turn 80. He now lives in Australia, in country Victoria, with his young granddaughter, Zelda, whose parents are devoted doctors currently working with the underprivileged in Africa. Young Zelda is devoted to her grandfather but, despite her best intentions, everything she tries to do seems to go horribly wrong and she finds herself in increasingly bad situations. Zelda has some understanding of her grandfather's past, but a lot of it remains shrouded in mystery, just whispered pieces of information that she has picked up on over the years.

As an outsider newly arrived in town, and full of stories of a life totally foreign to the local students, Zelda faces bullying from others at school. Unwilling to upset her grandfather, she deals with this herself, although it causes her to question her self worth and makes her act out of fear. Her only ally is Josh, the brother of Tonya, Zelda's greatest tormentor. Josh's poor health had made him the ready target of the bullies' victimisation until, with the arrival of Zelda, Tonya saw a way to deflect attention away from her brother and onto the newcomer.

Worried that Felix seems increasingly lonely and unhappy, Zelda tries to make his birthday a special and memorable occurrence. As her own situation builds to a climax, bushfires surround the town, threatening all of the inhabitants. Felix and Zelda are forced to find their inner strength and use their resourcefulness to get them out of this dangerous situation. In doing so, Zelda has to decide whether or not to help her enemies, whilst Felix confronts many of the demons of his past. Ultimately, the fear and danger they face has a cathartic effect on both Felix and Zelda, finally enabling them to lay their ghosts to rest and find their own identities.

THEMES:

- The Impact of War
- Bullying
- Families
- Storytelling
- Heroes

PRE-READING

- Background to the holocaust.
- The novel draws heavily on the events of the Black Saturday bushfires in and around Marysville. Research these events, or those of another devastating natural disaster such as Ash Wednesday; the Boxing Day Tsunami, 2004; Cyclone Tracey; Katrina etc. Consider what it might be like to live through an event such as these.
- Recap the stories of *Once* and *Then* and consider how *Then* finished. Make some predictions about what might happen to Felix after these events. What do you think Felix will do in his life? Where do you see him as an old man?
- Look closely at the front cover. What predictions can you make from the cover? Who do you think this girl might be? When is this story set?
- What mood is established by the colours and image on the cover?
- The shadowy figure on the back is the original Zelda. Why might her image appear on this book? Why has her image been placed on the back cover rather than the front?
- Read the blurb on the back cover. How does it effectively link the three books?

CHARACTERS:

Felix

In this third instalment, Felix is 80 years old, a remarkable achievement given what he went through as a boy. He maintains many of his childhood characteristics, especially his selflessness and his constant desire to help those

less fortunate. Never one to accept accolades or to see his behaviour as anything remarkable, Felix maintains this modesty well into his old age, and is embarrassed by the fuss made by his former patients and colleagues.

- What attributes of Felix the grandfather mirror those of Felix the child?
 - he became a surgeon who used his talents to help children
 - he can always focus on the positive in even the most difficult circumstances
 - family is important to him
 - he tells stories to help both himself and others through problems
 - he has maintained his love of Richmal Crompton's *William* stories
- How closely did your predictions (in the pre-reading activities) mirror Morris Gleitzman's story? (Students can continue to consider this as they read further into the story).

Zelda

In telling the story through Zelda's eyes, Gleitzman has managed to maintain his ten-year-old narrator and hence that lovely naiveté that was so effective in the first two books.

- Felix's grand-daughter, Zelda has been named after the little girl he tried so hard to save during the war and for whose death he has always carried guilt. Zelda feels that she does not deserve the name and fears that she will never be able to live up to her namesake. Her fears appear to be founded when Felix says that he wishes her parents had not called her Zelda. Whilst she believes this is because he sees her as being inferior, Felix believes it is unfair on Zelda. Why does he feel this way?
- In many ways, Zelda is very like her grandfather. She is impulsive and her actions do not always go to plan. But she is caring and loving and, like Felix, goes to great lengths to help others and bring joy to their lives.
- Like young Felix, Zelda holds herself directly responsible for many of the events that happen around her, even those that are clearly beyond her control.

Tonya

- Tonya appears to be a stereotypical bully, out to make Zelda's life a misery for no apparent reason.
- There are hints, however, that she is not as nasty as she appears. She does try to stop the other girls from stuffing Zelda's locket inside the dead bush mouse. Josh also tells Zelda that she is not usually like that.
- Like many bullies she gains her power and status from the group and is most fearsome when there are others around.
- Tonya ultimately turns out to be caring and compassionate and is forced to eat humble pie and seek out Zelda and Felix in an attempt to save the life of her brother, Josh. She is clearly motivated by good intentions, even though her actions are misguided.

Josh

- Josh is gentle and caring. He is clearly a victim of both his health and the merciless bullies in his class.
- He is symbolic of the weak and helpless victims of Felix's childhood who received such harsh and unfair treatment from the Nazis.

THEMES:

The Impact of War

- Even seventy years later, the war has clearly had an enormous impact on Felix and indeed on all the members of his family. Make a note of all Felix's characteristics that are attributable to his experiences during the war:
 - his experiences helping Gabriek and the partisan doctors led him to become a surgeon, a profession that enabled him to save the lives of many children throughout his career.
 - he has weak legs as a result of spending two years in a hole and not playing any sport.
 - *'Felix always wears jumpers made from incredibly soft wool, even in summer. It's because he was cold a lot when he was young.'* (p17)
 - *'Felix hates wasting leftovers. He hates wasting food of any description. He says that's how it is when there wasn't enough in your childhood.'* (p22)
 - his stress at the birthday party thrown by the hospital. *'Felix has spent most of his life away from crowds...big groups like this make him stressed.'* (p41)
 - his reaction to Tonya's bullying that reminded him of the harsh and unfair behaviour he experienced at the hands of the Nazis. *'Can grief and sadness from seventy years ago make a person do that, or is it something else?'* (p75)
 - *'I'm not a hero. I'm not a saint. I don't deserve to be called such things'* (p49). Why does Felix feel so strongly about this?
 - Felix can never call his grand-daughter Zelda.
 - Felix has a constant supply of drinks as *'When Felix was a kid in his hiding hole, he used to get thirsty during the day because Gabriek could only bring him drinks at night. So Felix made a promise to himself that if he survived, he'd always have plenty of drinks handy'* (pp 115-116).
- War can be seen to have a lasting impact not only on those who directly experienced it, but also on subsequent generations. Even though Zelda and her parents have not lived through the Holocaust it has clearly had an impact on them. In what ways would their lives be different from those of other families simply because of Felix's experiences?

- Felix's marriage dissolved and Grandma went to live in New Zealand. Zelda thinks this is because Felix spent so much time at the hospital with his patients (p43). But what other factors could have placed stress on his marriage?
- Zelda blames the Nazis for the fire, which is naive and humorous. But in what way can she actually be seen to be right? (p90)
- Felix met Miklos at his Holocaust survivors group. Why do you think this sort of group would be necessary? '*When you've been very seriously bullied, there are sad things you can only say to other people who've been very seriously bullied too, because only they really understand what you're talking about*' (p 60). Can people who didn't live through the Holocaust really have any understanding of it?
- What sorts of support groups exist in the wider community? Do you agree that these people all need to interact with others who share a common experience in order to gain support?

Bullying

- Tonya doesn't listen to Zelda. She takes everything Zelda says and turns it against her.
- Josh is upset by his sister's behaviour. '*She's really not like that. I dunno what got into her yesterday*' (p54).
- Tonya tells Zelda, '*You should be locked up. With a tattoo on your head that says liar. Vermin like you are a menace*' (p68). Why would these words have made Felix so irate?
- Felix tells her '*People die because of stupid vicious talk like that...Innocent children...Murdered. Don't you know anything?*' (p68). Is Felix over-reacting? Can this style of childhood bullying possibly lead to something as horrific as the Holocaust? (Consider the fact that Hitler's hatred of the Jews stemmed largely from their decision not to accept him into a Jewish art class).
- Like many bullies, Tonya bullies Zelda because she is hurting. She picks on Zelda in the hope that it will give Josh's class a new victim and prevent them from tormenting him. Zelda is not really a personal target. She is just a tool that is readily available at this moment – Now.

Families

The notion of family and its importance remains a strong theme through this third novel as in the previous two.

- Felix is obviously extremely close to his family. He remained loyal to Gabriel and moved to Australia as his son. He and his own son clearly share a lot in common and have both become doctors who work tirelessly to assist those less fortunate than themselves.
- Zelda is saddened by the fact that in her family the parents keep leaving their kids. '*It happened to Felix, it happened to Dad and it happened to me. I think we should stop it*' (p166).

- For all Tonya's nastiness and bravado, she has behaved like this only in a misguided attempt to help her brother.
- Tonya risks her life to save her brother.
- Tonya doesn't want to leave on the helicopter until she has located her parents and thus re-united her family.
- Just as Zelda and Felix's brother/sister relationship helped them survive their ordeal, Felix's grand-daughter, Zelda has always wished for a sister, and even makes Jumble, the dog, her surrogate sister, believing that life would be easier with a sister.

Storytelling

- Just as he did as a child, Felix uses storytelling to explain things to Zelda. Whilst he protects her from many of the horrors he experienced, he draws upon his past to help teach her about life and prepare her for her future.
- At the end of *Then*, Felix determines to keep Zelda's story alive, in the hope that one day people will learn from it. Does it appear that people have learned from the stories of the Holocaust?
- Why does Felix react the way he does when Zelda gives him a copy of *William's Happy Days*?
- Why has he kept his Polish edition all these years?

Heroes

- In our society today, we all too readily label people as heroes. What is a hero? What does it take to be a true hero?
- Felix doesn't like being given this label. Why?
- Do you think Felix is a hero?
- Who would you list as being a hero?

Activity:

- Present an oral or an argumentative essay honouring your chosen person as a hero.

SYMBOLISM:

The locket

Just as Zelda's locket held enormous symbolism for Felix in *Then*, it continues to play an important role in *Now*.

- The locket is Felix's tangible link with Zelda and his past.
- Their trip to town to buy Felix a locket is what caused Zelda and Genia to be killed.
- Zelda, Felix's grand-daughter takes the locket hoping that it will provide her with the courage shown by her namesake.
- The locket is a means by which Tonya and her gang torment Zelda.
- The locket brings Zelda and Josh together.

- The locket (or Felix's discovery that Zelda has taken it) opens up dialogue between Zelda and her grandfather that they have never had before.
- Zelda polishes it and hangs it over Felix's bed when she wants to comfort him.

The bushfire

- In what way is Zelda and Felix's experience in the bushfire similar to the horrors Felix faced as a child?
- How would they have felt when confronted with the fire?
- What memories would the fire have dredged up for Felix?
- In a strange way, the fire proved to be cathartic for both Felix and Zelda. In what way did it help them both overcome their pasts or their fears?
- How would people be affected after the bushfire? How would they feel? What physical and mental challenges would they face? Make a list of any effects you can think of. Now compare these to the effects Felix experienced from his past. In what ways are they similar? (This may best be represented as a venn diagram).
- Can anything positive be gained from an event as horrific as a bushfire, or the events experienced by Felix as a child? Make a list of anything you can see as a positive outcome.

Activity:

- Through your reading of the novel, you would appreciate that the community has been unnerved by the horrific bushfires, with some individuals actually involved in events and others guessing that the full story hasn't been heard. This has sparked intense media interest, and as a result, the producers of the television show, *Enough Rope*, have invited the residents to appear on the show so they can tell their story. Demonstrate your ability to Analyse Perspectives (Dimensions of Learning 3) by creating an interview between Andrew Denton and one of the characters in the novel.

Now:

The term Now is very appropriate for this story on so many levels.

- It is a natural progression from Once, to Then and on to Now.
- At a literal level, the story is contemporary and is set Now.
- Using the term Now at the start of each chapter gives the story a sense of urgency that builds towards the dramatic climax. It has a sense of tension and excitement about it.
- Felix tries to live in the moment and not dwell on the past. '*Felix knows that as soon as bad things have happened, they're in the past. Which is the place to leave them*' (p23). He tries to teach his grand-daughter this skill, even though there are times at which he finds this very difficult to do himself.

- Zelda, Felix's grand-daughter, realises that she and Felix need to break from the past and stop comparing her to her namesake. *'I'm not her. Poor Zelda was killed. But that doesn't mean I will be'* (p105).
- When Zelda is forced to operate on Josh, Felix passes on the advice he was once given *'...don't think about mistakes you've made in the past. Don't worry about what might happen in the future if this goes wrong. When your blade cuts into the skin just think about now'* (p158).
- Ultimately our past has a significant impact upon our present. We are all shaped by our past experiences. Whilst we may like to forget certain aspects of our past, by remembering them we can learn from them and use them to help us with whatever we are experiencing now.
- Felix and Zelda are both ambivalent about the past. They both have reasons to feel bad about it and this informs some of their views about past and present. At the end of the story they are both able to integrate past and present into their lives.
- The horrors of the bushfire are a catalyst for Felix and Zelda. Their experiences force them to leave the past behind them, to lay their ghosts to rest, to face the future and to make changes in their lives, now.
- At some level, the novel makes us question the role of fate – what brings these people, these elements and these events together at this particular time – **Now**. To what extent are our life experiences simply random occurrences and to what extent are they the direct outcome of our past actions? For example:
 - If Zelda's parents had not gone overseas, Zelda wouldn't have gone to stay with Felix.
 - If Tonya had not bullied Zelda, Josh would not have rescued her and Tonya wouldn't have discovered that Felix was a gifted surgeon.
 - If Tonya had not known about Felix, she would never have sought his help to rescue Josh in the bushfire.

What other examples of fate can you find in the novel?

For discussion:

- Is it possible to leave the past behind us and only focus on the present, or are we ultimately the product of our experiences?
- Why is it important to forget the past if we wish to move forward?
- What are the dangers inherent in dwelling in the past?
- Are there any dangers inherent in ignoring our past?
- What can we learn from the past?
- Do you believe in fate? That certain things happen to certain people at certain times for a reason?

Activity:

- Stage a debate: "That we should forget about the past and look forward to the future."
- Consider something that happened to you in the past that has helped to shape you into the person you have become. How might you be different if

this event had not happened? (Students could share their responses with the class, or in written format, depending on the nature of the students and the relationship they share, as some of their responses may be quite personal).

AFTER:

- What do you think the future holds for young Zelda and her family? What attributes will she inherit from her grandfather? Where do you think she will be in fifteen years time?
- Brainstorm your ideas and plan the first five chapters of the next book in the series, starting each chapter with the word After.