

## These notes are for:

- Secondary school
- Years 10-12

## Key Learning Areas:

- English
- Modern History
- Music

## Example of:

- Novel
- Historical Fiction

## Australian National Curriculum\*:

### English - Year 9

- ACELA1770
- ACELT1633
- ACELT1771
- ACELT1635
- ACELY1739
- ACELY1742
- ACELY1744

### English - Year 10

- ACELA1565
- ACELT1639
- ACELT1642
- ACELT1774
- ACELY1749
- ACELY1752
- ACELY1753

### History - Year 10

- ACDSEH107

\*Key content descriptions have been identified from the Australian National Curriculum. However, this is not an exhaustive list of National Curriculum content able to be addressed through studying this text.

## Themes:

- WWII
- The Holocaust and Jewish experience
- Appearance versus reality
- Courage
- Survival
- Family
- Love and romance
- Loyalty and betrayal
- Emotional and physical journeys
- Cultural understanding
- Empathy

\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

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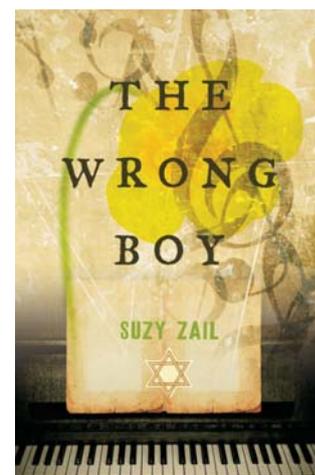
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## The Wrong Boy

### The Wrong Boy

Author: Suzy Zail  
 ISBN: 9781742031651  
 ARRP: \$18.95  
 NZRRP: \$21.99  
 Imprint: Black Dog Books  
 March 2012



## Synopsis

“Being kissed by Karl Jager was devastating. And beautiful. War makes you do dangerous things.”

Hanna Mendel liked to know what was going to happen next. She was going to be a famous concert pianist. She was going to wear her yellow dress to the dance on Saturday night.

But she didn't plan on her street being turned into a ghetto. She didn't plan on being rounded up and thrown in a cattle truck. She didn't plan on spending her sixteenth birthday in Auschwitz, in a wooden barrack with 200 other prisoners. Most of all, Hanna didn't plan on falling in love with the wrong boy.

In *The Wrong Boy*, Suzy Zail explores resonant themes such as loyalty, betrayal, survival and appearance versus reality. These ideas are presented in a rich and nuanced way which acknowledges the complexity of human beings and their feelings. The narrative dismantles crude stereotypes of “villains” and “victims”, instead putting a human face to those who were affected by the Holocaust. The book therefore plays a valuable role in promoting empathy and understanding, helping readers to learn from the tragedies of the past so as to ensure that they are not repeated.

## Author Information

**Suzy Zail** has worked as a litigation lawyer, specialising in family law, but now writes full-time. Among other titles, she has written her father's story, *The Tattooed Flower*, his life as a child survivor of the Holocaust. She lives in Melbourne and has three children.

## How To Use These Notes

These notes provide a variety of discussion questions and activities that can be used with *The Wrong Boy*. Please select according to the level, learning style and targeted outcomes of your students.

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## Suzy Zail on *The Wrong Boy*

“Most of my writing career has been consumed with writing other people’s stories, but the story that has most impacted me is my father’s. Although I was close to my father, there was so much I didn’t know about his early life. I knew he’d spent his teenage years in a concentration camp and lost his parents and a brother but I didn’t know what he’d seen there or how they’d died. After coming to Australia, he’d disconnected from the past as a way of moving forward. He didn’t want to talk about the Holocaust and I guess part of me didn’t want to see my strong, happy father sad, so I didn’t press him. He finally told me his story a few weeks after he was diagnosed with a terminal illness. He wanted me to know who he was. He opened up about his past because he didn’t want me to ever be a victim or to victimise others.

This book was a way to keep him close. I incorporated a lot of his experiences into Hanna’s story. Both my father and Hanna came from happy Jewish homes. Both travelled on cattle trains to Auschwitz and were tattooed and shaved. Both lost their parents. My father worked in a quarry, like Erika. He was operated on without anaesthetic and strangers snuck him food.

Writing this book allowed me to revisit my father’s story and remember him and the millions of other children and teenagers who didn’t survive. It was also the perfect way to pass on his warning, because only by remembering can we prevent the past from fading. By reading about the Holocaust and trying to understand it we can make sure it never happens again.”



## Discussion Questions and Activities

### Setting and Context: Life in Auschwitz

- Trace Hanna’s journey from Debrecen, Hungary to Auschwitz-Birkenau on a globe or map.
- What does the novel teach us about the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp? Consider the organisation of the camp, the different types of prisoners, systems and daily routines, the chain of command, living conditions, atrocities, the liberation of the camp and any other information you can extract from the novel.
- Research Auschwitz on the internet. (A useful starting point is the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website: <http://www.auschwitz.org/>) How did it make you feel to be confronted with photographs and other primary sources? Did you learn anything new from this research? Discuss your reactions as a class.
- While *The Wrong Boy* is set during an actual historical event, it is primarily a work of fiction. Identify the elements of the text which can be viewed as historically accurate and those where the author has used creative licence to invent or embellish. How reliable do you think this novel is in presenting a realistic portrait of life in Auschwitz?
- Did your response to the book change after you read the author’s note and discovered that Zail’s father was an Auschwitz survivor? Why or why not? To what extent do you think her father’s experiences may have influenced Zail in writing the novel?
- Compare Zail’s fictional account of life in Auschwitz with that presented in Elie Wiesel’s memoir, *Night*, Primo Levi’s memoir, *If This is a Man*, or Zail’s biography of her father, *The Tattooed Flower*.

What similarities and differences are there between the texts in terms of the experiences and attitudes of the protagonists/ subjects, authorial intent/purpose, tone, style and structure, and the central themes and messages? Present these differences and similarities as a Venn diagram. Discuss the importance of context, with *The Wrong Boy* being a fictional work and the other accounts being autobiographical or biographical. How did the two texts work together to give you a richer understanding of survival in Auschwitz?

### Exploring Character

- How does Hanna develop as a character over the course of the novel? Identify specific points in the book which signal growth or change, then present these on a timeline.
- “Anyu and Erika had looked out for me my whole life. It was my turn to take care of them. It was my turn to be strong.” (Chapter 6.) How important is family in helping Hanna survive in Auschwitz? To what degree is she motivated by her desire to protect her mother and sister? What are the other things that give Hanna strength? Some ideas to consider include her piano playing, the example of Clara Schumann, the C sharp key she keeps as a talisman and her friendship with Karl.
- “Your mother lights the Sabbath candles, Hanna. You walk to synagogue. To them you are a Jew and you’ll always be a Jew. Be proud of that difference.” (Chapter 2.) Discuss the role religion plays in Hanna’s identity. How does her attitude to God and religion change throughout her experiences? Find quotes to support your ideas.
- In what way does Karl try to help Hanna and the prisoners in the camp? Do you think this is enough? Should he – or could he – have done more? Discuss your answers with a friend.



- How does Erika respond when Hanna reveals that she is attracted to Karl? Why do you think she responds this way? How would the other women in the barracks react if they knew that Hanna was friendly towards Karl? Think particularly about the reaction of the Block Leader. In your opinion, can Hanna's feelings towards Karl be seen as a "betrayal" of her family and culture? Or is this reducing people to the level of political symbols rather than seeing them as complex human beings who are often placed in adverse circumstances through no fault of their own? Can Karl himself be viewed as a "victim" in any way, or is this insulting when juxtaposed with the suffering of the people in the camps?
- Discuss the significance of the title *The Wrong Boy*. Why do you think the novel is called this? Consider both Karl's position as son of the Nazi Commandant and Hanna's claim in her letter to General Kafelnikov that he "had the wrong boy".
- Imagine that you were a member of a war crimes tribunal examining Karl. Write a series of questions that you would ask him and possible responses he might give. Develop this into a "hot seat" activity with different students taking on the role of Karl and answering questions from the rest of the class.

## Themes

- "The Block Leader cracked her whip and I leapt off the bed. There were no Nazi guards stalking the barrack, no SS watching from the door ... She was wearing a yellow star; she was one of us." (Chapter 4.) Consider the character of the Block Leader. What is your initial response to her? Does your response change at all when you learn her history in Chapter 11? Is her cooperation with the camp authorities and her bullying of the prisoners a betrayal of her people? How does she compare to the "girls in Barrack nine who part their legs for the guards"? (Chapter 4.) Or to Hanna, whose piano playing for the Commandant gives her special privileges and a protected status in the camp?
- Piri says in Chapter 4, "Orchestra members get extra rations. We don't have to work. ... I want to get out of here alive, and I won't apologise for it." Can all these characters be seen as traitors to varying degrees, or does the novel instead encourage the reader to empathise with them, seeing them as ordinary people simply trying to survive in horrific circumstances? Imagine that you were in a concentration camp. Do you think that you would make similar compromises in order to get by?
- Read the article, "John Demjanjuk, the 'littlest of little fish', convicted for Nazi atrocities", which tells of a 91-year-old death camp guard found guilty of being an accessory to war crimes (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/12/john-demjanjuk-guilty-nazi-killings>). In your opinion, are those who cooperated with the Nazis by working in the concentration camps guilty of war crimes? Should they stand trial today? Have a class debate on this issue.
- How do the prisoners react when the Red Army captures their first SS officer after the camp is liberated? Consider their actions in the village at the end of Chapter 18. Is their behaviour understandable, given what they have experienced?

What does this reveal about the consequences of brutality and oppression, and the human desire for revenge and punishment? Is it possible to break this cycle of revenge? Consider these ideas in light of the various war crime tribunals held after WWII, and organisations such as the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation which is today still concerned with bringing to justice perpetrators of the Holocaust. As a society, how do we reconcile the desire for punishment with the need for understanding and healing?

- Some say while war and adversity sometimes brings out exceptional heroism and strength, it also reveals the ugly and ignoble side of human nature. Do you agree? Write an essay explaining how this is demonstrated in *The Wrong Boy*. Make sure you include quotes and examples from the novel.
- Research Clara Schumann on the internet. Use this information to write the text for a picture book inspired by Clara's life. Try to incorporate one of the key themes from the novel into your story; for instance, love, courage, survival, family, loyalty and betrayal or war. If time permits, publish and illustrate your work. (A useful starting point for your research is <http://www.geneva.edu/~dksmith/clara/schumann.html>. You might like to get creative inspiration from *Song of the Dove* by Errol Broome and Sonia Kretschmar, a picture book which similarly looks at the life of a famous composer and musician, Bellini.)
- Consider the final pages of the novel. What do you think will happen next? If Hanna and Karl were to reunite and have a relationship after the war, what sort of challenges and difficulties would they encounter, given their respective backgrounds and affiliations? Think particularly about how the Jewish community around Hanna might respond. Would a relationship be possible without starting a new life in a place where nobody knew their pasts, and would this be too much of a sacrifice on Hanna's part? Do you think Zail has deliberately ended the novel at this point as a way of allowing for the possibility of a happy ending while still acknowledging the difficulties that the couple would inevitably encounter? In what other ways might she have concluded the book? How satisfying would you have found these endings?
- Imagine that the publishers were unhappy with the title of the book and had asked you to come up with an alternative. What would you choose? Use a design program such as Publisher or InDesign to create a new cover for the book featuring this title. Consider how you can use visual techniques such as font, colour, composition, framing and symbolism to communicate the key themes of the book. Present your work to the class.

## Have you read ... ?



### *Requiem: Poems of the Terezin Ghetto*

By: Paul B. Janeczko • Hardback • Oct 2011  
ISBN: 9780763647278 • RRP: AU\$29.95/NZ\$34.99

Hitler hailed Terezin (Theresienstadt) as a haven for artistic Jews, when in reality the Czech concentration camp was little more than a way station to the gas chambers. In his second book inspired by devastating history, acclaimed poet Paul B. Janeczko gives voice to this heartrending creative community – its dignity, resilience, and commitment to art and music in the face of great brutality. Accented with dramatic illustrations by the inmates found after WWII's end, Janeczko's spare and powerful poems convey Terezin's tragic legacy on an intimate, profoundly moving scale.