



# Tomi

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## Tomi Reichental

### Teaching Guide

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#### RATIONALE AND THEMES

The activities in this guide are designed to complement a class reading of the text in a way that inspires young readers to delve deep into the characters and themes of this fascinating story whilst encouraging them to engage with the Holocaust in a sensitive manner. It aims to develop empathy skills, stimulate discussion and encourage readers to dissect literary techniques in fresh and engaging ways. There are also activities included that are designed to hone communication, presentation and literacy skills. This novel deals with very important events in history, and its key themes include:

- loyalty and trust
- courage
- prejudice and discrimination
- family.

#### SUMMARY

This book is based on the true story of Holocaust survivor Tomi Reichental, whose family were driven from their homes in Slovakia and interred in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen during the Second World War. The novel starts in a happier time as Tomi and his cousins play on his family farm, free from care and the shadows of what is to come. As the novel progresses, life for the Jewish community becomes progressively more difficult until Tomi's grandparents are taken away and he and his brother are forced to move to their aunt's as they are no longer permitted to attend the local school. Things continue to worsen for Tomi and his family, and they go into hiding. They are betrayed, and the Gestapo capture thirteen of them, sending them to the horrific conditions at Bergen-Belsen. The novel tells of Tomi's life in the camp and the horrors he witnesses and suffers at the hands of the cruel guards. When the camp is liberated, life changes, and Tomi and his friends and family are given their freedom.

The novel ends with Tomi returning home to Slovakia with his mother, brother, aunt and cousin, where they are reunited with those that survived.

#### APPROACH

This guide has followed the structure of the novel and is divided into four sections, with suggested discussion points and a range of activities at the end of each section. The setting for the story is Slovakia and the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, and the novel makes reference to a number of challenging historical events, offering excellent opportunities for elevated debate and discussion. It's an engaging and emotional read with well-developed central characters that readers will instantly relate to.

### Section 1: Foreword and Part I (pp. 7–31)

#### SUMMARY

The book opens with a foreword from Tomi Reichental, introducing himself, his story, and his beautiful childhood farm in Slovakia.

The book begins in summer as Tomi plays with his cousins on the farm in Slovakia where he lives with his parents and brother, Miki. His life is full of laughter, homemade cakes and delicious ice cream, but there is a hint that things are about to change. We next meet Tomi in winter, when he is grumbling about having to do errands instead of his brother Miki, especially since the weather outside is so cold. On his errand, he witnesses a man being very rude to his grandparents because they are Jewish, which upsets him. He tells his parents, and the local priest tells him that shouldn't have happened because they are all God's children. Unfortunately, this is only the beginning, and once the snow has

melted, it becomes clear that he and Miki are not as welcome as they once were, being referred to by the other boys as simply 'Jews' rather than by their names. By the time the summer holidays come around, he and Miki are no longer allowed to go to the local school because they are Jewish, and their grandfather has to close the shop as it is forbidden. Miki and Tomi have to leave their home to live with their aunt in Nitra so they can go to school. Once there, things deteriorate. They have to wear a yellow star on their clothes to show they are Jewish, and this section ends with Tomi being hit by a stone on his first day at school.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p. 8.** Tomi makes it clear that this book will have a lot of sadness and tragedy. Why do you think the book has the foreword? Is it important to know how it will end before we begin reading? What do you expect the book will be like?
- **Read p. 13.** Tomi tells us that his favourite time was springtime, 'when the trees in the orchard were covered in blossom'. What is your favourite season? Why? Why do you think Tomi's favourite season is spring? What does this tell us about him?
- **Read p. 14.** Tomi tells us his parents are different. How does he explain their differences? Are these differences important? Why do you think he has told us this so early in the story? Why do you think some people are afraid of those who are different from them? What advice would you give them?
- **Read pp. 22–3.** A stranger is very rude to Tomi's grandparents. Why? Why do you think Tomi's grandfather warns him to say nothing? Why doesn't his grandfather tell him off? What would you have done?
- **Read p. 27.** Why do the boys call Miki and Tomi 'Jews' rather than by their names? Why is this so offensive? Why do you think it is wrong to define people by

race, gender or creed instead of as human beings? How does this event show that prejudice is starting to grow?

- **Read pp. 30–1.** A yellow star is sewn onto Tomi's clothes. What does this symbolise? How will this make things difficult? Why do you think this law was passed?
- **Read p. 31.** Tomi is hit by a stone as he returns to his aunt's house from school. Remember, he is a young boy. Why would someone hit him with a stone? Have you ever seen someone being picked on for being different? Did you stand up for them? What happened?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. PARADISE

On p. 7, Tomi describes his childhood home as 'paradise'. Have you ever been to a place that seemed like paradise? Write a description, then swap with a friend. Next, sketch each other's described places. How easy is it? Did they draw your place as you'd pictured it? What three things could you do to improve your description so it's easier for your reader to picture?

### 2. METAPHORS

On p. 12, Tomi's father describes their surroundings: "The harvest fields are our gold. And there are diamonds in the wet grass when the sun lights it up in the morning!" Why has he chosen this imagery? What is being compared to 'gold' and 'diamonds'? Write your own description of a scene (it can be urban or rural) and try to use at least three interesting metaphors.

### 3. RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

We find out Tomi is Jewish on p. 19 when we see his excitement at celebrating the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. What do you know about Hanukkah? Research the festival: What are they celebrating? What symbols are involved? What traditions do they have? Create a colourful poster to present your findings to the rest of the class.

### 4. JUDAISM

Work with two or three of your classmates. Make a list of all the things we learn about Jewish customs on pp. 19 and 20 and research them further. How are they similar to customs in Christianity or Islam? As a group, create a short presentation of the Jewish customs Tomi describes to us and how they are similar and different to the customs of other religions.

## 5. FAMILY HEIRLOOMS

Tomi's mother has kept her wedding gifts safe so they can be passed on to future generations. Is there anything in your house or your grandparents' house you are not allowed to touch? Why? Why do you think items are passed through the generations? Do you own anything that belonged to your ancestors? What do you think when you use it? Write a report of the item, detailing what it is, what it was used for, how old it is, who originally owned it. Make sure you include images!

## 6. FORBIDDEN

On pp. 26–31, we learn about more and more things Jewish people are forbidden from doing. This was a time of great change, when more freedoms were taken from Jewish people. Research how things changed for Tomi and his relatives by looking at all the things they were forbidden from doing. Draw up a timeline.

## 7. DIARY ENTRY

Imagine you are Tomi's mother. You find out Tomi has been hit with a stone thrown by other children because he is Jewish. What advice do you give him? What do you tell him about the world? Write him a letter giving him advice and telling him to stay strong.

## Section 2: Part 2, The Hunt (pp. 34–90)

### SUMMARY

Tomi's situation has worsened. His trip to school has become a nightmare as boys call him horrible names and spit on him. When the time comes to return home for Christmas, he's really excited, but when he arrives, everyone is sad, and his family have been isolated from the community because they are Jewish. He hears stories of men with swastikas on their arms blaming all the ills of the world on Jewish people and how some Jewish people have been taken away. When he and Miki return to Nitra, they only attend school for a few weeks before it is closed as Jewish children are no longer allowed an education. Tomi is very excited to return home, but his parents are determined their sons will be educated, and he and Miki have to travel to lessons with a private tutor.

Soon, Jewish people begin to disappear, and their uncle is arrested. Then, one awful summer's evening, Tomi's grandparents are taken away. Tomi and his family have to hide from the Hlinka on a regular basis, given

warnings by supportive neighbours. One night, the Hlinka come without warning. The guard, who is a neighbour, takes money from Tomi's father, and they leave. Tomi, Miki and their mother decide to go into hiding. Tomi's father stays behind to work on the farm.

As Tomi, Miki and their mother try to make their way to safety, they are hounded at every turn, moving from safe place to safe place as the police try to catch them. However, they are betrayed and are arrested by the Gestapo. Tomi's father has also been arrested. In Bratislava, Tomi and thirteen of his relatives wait in the terrible conditions of the Gestapo HQ to be transported to a camp. Meanwhile, Tomi's dad manages to escape, jumping from a train.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read p. 35.** 'Tomi had always thought that laughter was something good. Now he realised that it could be cruel.' Why do you think cruel laughter is so unpleasant? Have you ever been in a situation where someone has laughed at you unkindly? How did you feel? Remember, Tomi is only six. How do you think he feels at this point in the book?
- **Read pp. 37–8.** The advice given to Tomi and Miki is to stay out of the way and avoid attracting attention. Is this right when they have done nothing wrong? What do you think they should do?
- **Read p. 38.** How have things changed at home when they return for Christmas? Why has this happened? How does it make Tomi feel? Have you ever been disappointed when something didn't live up to your expectations? What happened? How did you feel?
- **Read p. 46.** Tomi thinks that Ludo Nedelka is enjoying himself. Why? Have you ever done something unkind to someone because you were jealous of them? How did it feel? Did you regret it?
- **Read pp. 49–50.** What sort of person is Mariška? Do you think you would have the courage to help like she does? What do you think would happen if she was caught? What would have happened if everyone was like Mariška and refused to isolate Tomi and his family?
- **Read pp. 52–3.** Why did Miki's speech work? How do you think the men felt? Was he brave or stupid for making his speech?
- **Read pp. 67–8.** Although Tomi and Miki are in hiding, they still manage to have fun. Why do you think the writer has included the happier times? Does it make the story more or less sad?

- **Read p. 76.** Tomi's impression of the guards is not a pleasant one. 'Why [...] did every word or order that came out of the guards' mouths have to be shouted or snarled?' Why is the tone of voice so important when we speak? Why do you think these guards were always shouting? Do you think it is necessary to shout when you are angry about something? What is the better thing to do?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. HLINKA RESEARCH

We first learn about the Hlinka guards on p. 38 when Tomi tells us about a new, unpleasant type of guard that has appeared in the village. Use the internet to research these guards and write a short report, using sub-headings to organise the information. Who were they? What was their role? How were they seen by the community? Why were they unpopular? What sort of person became a Hlinka guard? What happened to them after the war?

### 2. DIARY ENTRY

Imagine you are Tomi. You've just returned to Nitra after spending Christmas at home, and you have your first day at school tomorrow. Write a diary entry outlining your thoughts and feelings. Have you told your parents about what happens when you walk to school? Why not?

### 3. FORBIDDEN CONVERSATIONS

On pp. 41–2, we hear about how the situation has become even more dangerous for the Jewish community. Imagine you are Tomi's parents. What sort of conversations are you having that the boys are not allowed to hear? What fears do you have for the future that you don't want to mention in front of your sons? In pairs, write a script of one of these conversations and act it out.

### 4. LETTER GOODBYE

Tomi's grandmother has to leave her home on p. 46, stopping to say goodbye to objects filled with memories. Imagine you have to leave a place you love. (It could be your home or somewhere you stayed for a while on holidays.) Write a letter to say goodbye, focusing on objects that have happy memories.

### 5. DRAMATIC CONFRONTATION

Tension rises on pp. 52–3 when Miki confronts the Hlinka. In small groups, either

act out the scene or create four freeze frames that show the conflict and tension in the situation.

### 6. RESEARCHING THE WAR

Tomi gives some detail about Europe in 1943. Work with a partner to research and create a presentation of Europe in 1943. What was happening in the war? What was happening in Ireland and Britain? What were the Nazis and other right-wing governments doing to the Jewish community?

### 7. DIARY ENTRY

Imagine you are Tomi's mother. Your husband has just been arrested. You and your family have been imprisoned by the Gestapo. Write a diary entry, outlining how you are trying to be brave for the boys. What are your fears for the future?

### 8. JOURNEY STORYBOARD

The journey that Tomi and his family have to make from the Gestapo headquarters to the camp is horrific. Using the information on pp. 72–82, create a storyboard of images that tells the story of their journey.

### 9. ESCAPE!

Imagine you are Tomi's father. You have managed to escape the train and find freedom. Write a letter to your family letting them know you are alive. What will you say to give them hope for the future?

## Section 3: Part 3, The Camp (pp. 92–130)

### SUMMARY

Tomi and his family arrive in the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, where conditions are awful. The toilets are shared pits; they can't keep themselves clean or warm; and the food is stale bread and watery coffee. The water is contaminated with disease. The guards are cruel, even though the female guards wear make-up and look glamorous. However, the children still try to play. Tomi makes a friend, Sam, and regularly goes exploring with Miki and their cousin Chava. One day, they go near the kitchens. When their Aunt Margo finds out, she is very angry because people have been killed by the guards for this and makes them promise not to do it again. Life is very unpleasant and filled with fear. The guards announce one morning that they are to be taken for showers. Everyone is terrified, which confuses Tomi and Chava because they have not heard about how

the showers are used as gas chambers to kill everyone. Luckily, they are actually showers, and everyone gets the chance to wash themselves.

Soon afterwards, they are moved to a newer part of the camp where they have a more private room because Aunt Margo is responsible for their block and has been translating orders. A girl in their dormitory dies, having given up on life. Miki and Tomi steal wood, and there is almost very serious trouble. Miki turns thirteen, and the women in the dormitory organise a small party for his Bar Mitzvah. Soon afterwards, it is Christmas, and they celebrate that as well, trying to find some happiness in their awful situation. It doesn't last long as a new commander arrives and things worsen. Then, Omama Rosalia gets ill and dies.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp. 93–4.** Why do you think Tomi is surprised by the fact that the guards were female and pretty? Were you surprised to read this?
- **Read pp. 108–9.** Tomi and his family are given more private conditions, but they are still cramped together. Why does this little bit of privacy make such a difference? Why is privacy so important?
- **Read pp. 110–11.** After Miri dies, Lydia tells the children a story, inviting them to join in. Why does she do this? Do you think it is making things worse for the children to remember the happier times?
- **Read pp. 118–19.** Judith organises a party for Miki and manages to find the positives in an awful situation. Why is this such an important skill? Have you ever been able to find the positives in a bad situation? What happened as a result?
- **Read p. 122.** Why do you think someone would betray the Hungarian girls for feeding the children? Why do you think hunger changes the way people think? Can we judge the betrayers harshly? Why?
- **Read p. 128.** Chava doesn't like playing because there are bodies everywhere, but Tomi has become used to them. What does this tell us about the situation in the camp? Is Tomi being disrespectful?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. LETTER OF COMPLAINT

Re-read pp. 92–7. Imagine you were living in the camp. Write a letter to the government complaining about conditions in the camp and how you are being denied basic human rights.

## 2. RESEARCH CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Create a report. What were the five biggest concentration camps? What happened? Why did they exist? When were they liberated? How many people were murdered in each one?

## 3. ANNE FRANK

Tomi mentions Anne Frank on page 105. Why is she so famous? Read her diary and write a book report.

## 4. SURVEILLANCE DEBATE

The people in the camp have no freedom, as they are constantly watched, not just by the guards but by the other people in the camp, who will tell the guards if they do anything wrong. Everyone is suspicious of each other. In today's society, we are watched by CCTV and other cameras. Some argue that this is a good thing, as it protects us. Others say that surveillance is bad as we can't always trust those in power. What do you think? Do some research on different opinions and write three to four detailed reasons supporting or arguing against the statement: 'Surveillance is good.' Debate as a class.

## 5. RECIPE

Everyone is starving and fantasising about food. Imagine you were able to host Tomi and his family for a three-course meal. What would you cook? Write out the recipes for each dish you would prepare.

## Section 4: Part IV, The Return, Epilogue and Afterword (pp. 131–72)

### SUMMARY

The conditions in the camp are desperate, but spring is coming, which brings hope. There are rumours of other camps being liberated and that the German army is being defeated. One morning, the guards are gone. However, there is no food or clean water. Tomi and his family cling on until the British army arrives to liberate the camp. The soldiers are sickened by the conditions and make the German guards dispose of the bodies. Things improve rapidly – they have food and freedom – then Aunt Margo gets ill. Tomi accompanies her to hospital and manages to persuade her to eat. She recovers, and they return to camp, where a letter from Tomi's father waits. He has survived and is waiting for them at home.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- **Read pp. 137–8.** The soldiers are horrified by what they see. How do you think they must have felt when they saw these camps, especially since they'd been at war with the Germans?
- **Read pp. 139–40.** Do you think the soldiers would have found it strange to see the children dressing as Nazis and playing in tanks? Why do you think they did this?
- **Read pp. 140–1.** Do you think that the local people did not know? What could they have done to help the people in the camp? Why do you think they did not do this?
- **Read pp. 144–5.** When Tomi arrives at the hospital, he loves the feeling of clean sheets. Why are clean sheets such a luxury? How do you feel when you get into bed and the sheets are fresh? Why do you think this is? What other small things in life can you think of that make you happy? Why is it important to appreciate the small things?
- **Read pp. 153–4.** Chava won't eat anything prepared by a German. Is she being silly? What do you think? Have you ever done something that seemed irrational because of fear? How did you overcome your fear?
- **Read pp. 163–4.** Tomi goes to his grandson's school to tell the children about his experiences. Why is it so important these stories are told and remembered?
- **Read p. 166.** Tomi says the evil is 'still there in the human heart, waiting for a chance to grow again'. Do you agree with him? Why?
- **Read p. 172.** We are told that the Holocaust happened because of hatred. Why do you think people hate other people so much? What can we do to try and stop this? Is there anything we can do on a smaller scale that would make a difference?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. SOLDIER'S VIEW

You've arrived at Bergen-Belsen and are shocked by what you see. Write a letter home explaining your thoughts and feelings. Try not to mention the horror in detail: use euphemisms and be respectful of the dead.

#### 2. GAMES

On p. 140, Tomi tells of the games they played in the camp. What other sorts of games could they play in the camp?

In groups, create a game that would be suitable. Make sure it is respectful to their surroundings. Write out the rules and explain to the rest of the class.

#### 3. UNSUNG HERO

Tomi is described by Aunt Margo on p. 148 as a hero. What is a hero? Can you think of a hero in history? Research those who stood up to the Nazis: Oskar Schindler, the White Rose. Create a profile of a person or group who were heroes in standing up against the Nazis – the less well known, the better.

#### 4. LETTER TO THE PAPER

On p. 151, some families return home from the camps to find their neighbours have stolen everything from them when they were imprisoned. What would you say to the people who stole from them? What sort of people are they? Write a letter to your local paper giving your thoughts on the situation and what you think should be done to make things right.

#### 5. TOMI'S FIRST DAY HOME

The story ends with Tomi falling asleep in his bed, with the rest of his life ahead of him. What do you think he will do on the first day he wakes up in his old bed? Work with a partner to plan out his day. Is there anywhere he'll visit? Anyone he wants to see?

#### 6. LETTER TO TOMI

What did you like most about the book? Why do you think Tomi's story is so important and so moving? Tell him. Write a letter to Tomi Reichental, explaining your thoughts on his story.

#### 7. CHARTER OF RIGHTS

Tomi overhears a mother talking about prejudice with her son and how we need to stand up and defend those who are victims. Who in society needs to be defended? Why are the weak persecuted? Why is it so important that we respect and defend one another? Create a charter for rights within the school that makes sure that everyone is treated equally.

#### 8. LASTING LEGACY

Why do you think this is such an important story? Write and perform a persuasive speech on why every schoolchild needs to hear the stories of children like Tomi Reichental and Anne Frank.