

The Merit of English Section

Junior Division

Name of Winner : Sze Pak Lun Alan

Name of School : Carmel Divine Grace Foundation

Secondary School

Book Title : *Then*

Author : Morris Gleitzman

Publisher : Square Fish

“Why do people start wars when they know so many sad things are going to happen?” *Then* is a heartbreaking yet thought-provoking historical novel written by Morris Gleitzman, narrating a real story about a Jewish boy Felix and his best friend Zelda, who escaped from the train that drove them to a concentration camp during the German occupation of Poland in World War II. From the day they escaped, a chain of alarmingly dangerous adventures started.

Then began when Felix and Zelda, the two small kids who scrambled up the hill's slope, trying to get away from the German train which took them to a horrible death camp. Zelda, however, let out a loud sob suddenly as she saw the dead children who had been killed by the Nazi soldiers. The Nazi soldiers threw away their cigarettes and shouted at Felix and Zelda, and they started to chase them.

Fortunately, the two kids were able to hide themselves. After that, they met a kind woman named Genia and she agreed to look after them and keep them safe. Don't all of us know that a sweet dream is short-lived? I guess yes. Cyryl, a boy from a shop, arrived where Felix lived and invited him to join his gang. Felix joined. Cyryl then forced Felix to pull his pants down to prove that he was not a Jew. The brave and quick-thinking Felix let out a pool and the problem was solved. Although at the same time the Nazi soldiers took everything from Genia, all of

them remained safe.

Before the first wave subsides, a new wave rises. The Nazis ordered everyone had to be in the town square at ten o'clock on the dot. During the meeting, Zelda went up to the Jewish man and woman and devoted herself to them as replacement of their dead kids. Genia yelled frantically to tell Zelda to come back. To protect Zelda, Felix stood out. The Nazi soldiers turned angrily to him and smashed him. The good news was that Felix was still fine.

Finally, the story comes to an end. Genia and Zelda went to the town for Felix's birthday gift while Felix stayed at home, pretending he was ill. Lamentably, when Felix went to find Genia and Zelda, Cyryl informed him that the two had been dragged away by the Nazi police. They were killed. Eventually, Felix planned and prepared to kill as many Nazis as he could.

Throughout the whole story, what intrigues me the most is that the writer does not state his messages explicitly or just gloss over them, like a dragonfly skimming the surface of the water. The concrete messages are simply left on certain pages. This allows readers to reflect more deeply on the main theme of the novel. What does the writer want readers to take away after reading? For me, the writer is trying to deliver some in-depth and intricate questions. The impacts brought by war is the central theme. As mentioned at the very beginning, “Why do people start wars when they know so many sad things are going to happen?” What are the ‘sad things’? Destruction and casualties? Probably yes. And yet why do people choose to start wars? In my view, various countries fight with each other because of territories, resources or national glory. Considering political interests, the leaders of each country would be likely to sacrifice their citizens. To me, letting loose the

bullets is definitely not a desirable way to compete. Only if all people around the world can judge rationally. It is wise of the writer to add inspiring questions to the book, making it more captivating, but not just talking about history solemnly or plainly. Moreover, this is a harrowing, haunting and depressing book that always keeps readers guessing and wondering to sustain their interest. The writer does a great job as he mixes the sweetness and bitterness, joys and tears together, refusing to let the plot remain one-sided.

Everyone must have faced adversity. The pivotal point is whether we can find a way to solve it or just leave it behind. I fell in love with the protagonist Felix when I was reading this story. He was a Jewish boy, a very ordinary boy. What actually makes him stand out and appealing are his bravery and love. Being a ten-year-old kid, Felix broke all the walls which blocked him. He confronted the Nazi soldiers, hunted rabbits for

his family and defended himself against Cyril. I wondered how a tiny fellow could overcome all these obstacles calmly. Furthermore, he was willing to protect his family by leaving them, bearing the risk of being caught by the Nazi soldiers. All these fragments shape him to become a hero of the story.

Then does not only serve as a heart-wrenching historical story which touches the deepest side of my heart, but also explores the topics which not many people notice, such as the relation between wars and human beings and death. I highly recommend this novel to students or people who have not ever experienced wars. They will probably go on an ups-and-downs journey. The story almost brought tears to my eyes and a lump to my throat. I have learnt that wars are indeed damaging and living in wars is like enduring pain in the hell. Everyone has only one life, so nothing is more important than cherishing ours and enjoying the time being with our

beloved ones, showing the bright sides of humanity like the protagonist Felix.