

2006/March MORRIS GLEITZMAN - Publishing News

It is possibly an overused word, but what else other than the zeitgeist can explain two children's novels about the Holocaust appearing at about the same time? Because, following hard on the heels of John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (David Fickling) we now have *Once* (Puffin) from award-winning Melbourne-based author Morris Gleitzman. Set in 1942, *Once* is about a Jewish boy named Felix - a storyteller, almost an *alter ego* - and his journey through Nazi-occupied Poland to try and find his parents. While Gleitzman has tackled difficult subjects before - childhood cancer in *Two Weeks with the Queen* and attitudes towards immigrants in *Boy Overboard* (both Puffin) - this is unlike anything he has ever written.

"I've wanted to write this book for almost ten years, and what made me start was that I finally thought I knew how to do it," says Gleitzman. "I hadn't been sure about writing a story with a Holocaust background for the age of readers I wanted to write it for, and I also didn't feel I knew enough about it. But I knew it was something I wanted to do one day."

It was only after an intense period of research, during which he read much that had been written by Holocaust children, many of whom did not survive, that he felt able to begin. "Some of the things I read had survived against all the odds. They were found on screwed up pieces of cardboard alongside the railway tracks to Auschwitz - the desire to leave something, a few words, behind."

There are any number of books and memorials to the victims of the Holocaust, but, as is evidenced all too often, we need to be continually reminded, because memories are short. Was this, then, his way of personally adding to the record? After a long pause he says that he's never thought about it like that. "If that's true it is an *entirely* personal thing. Never before have I had such a strong sense of the difference between fiction and actuality."

A note in the back of the book says that the novel is a product of his imagination but that the real stories are the *real* stories. “I’m very aware that Elie Weisel, and others, have very eloquently said that if you weren’t there, don’t write about it, and I absolutely respect that. The tricky thing that I hope I’ve negotiated is to be true to the Holocaust, as well as writing a story about the best that we’ve got as a species - the ability to survive in the most awful of circumstances. What I wanted to write about the Holocaust for younger readers was to write about what I thought were our strongest and most important good qualities.”