

Hana's Suitcase: a true story by Karen Levine

Hana's Suitcase captures the reader's interest right from the opening sentence ("Really, it's a very ordinary looking suitcase.") and holds it captive through to the last word. The big brown suitcase, inscribed with the words "Hana Brady. May 16, 1931. Waisenkind." (German word for orphan) intrigues everyone. The suitcase came from the concentration camp known as Auschwitz where millions of people suffered and died during World War Two. It is displayed at the Tokyo Holocaust Education Resource Centre, having arrived there through the persistent efforts of Centre Director, Fumiko Ishioka, to obtain authentic materials from Holocaust remembrance centers. But the story of Hana and her family is a mystery.

Hana's suitcase parallels the life of Hana Brady and her family and the quest for information about Hana undertaken by Fumiko Ishioka. The powerful story, illustrated with photographs from the Brady photo album, war time documents and sketches drawn by Hana, moves between locations in Czechoslovakia, Japan and Canada, with each chapter revealing more and more detail about Hana and what was happening around her. Eventually, Fumiko's perseverance is rewarded and the reader finally learns what has become of Hana and her family.

Karen Levine read of Fumiko Ishioka's work at the Holocaust Centre, which aims to educate young Japanese people about the Holocaust, in a newspaper article. Her interest led her to produce a CBC radio documentary called Hana's Suitcase, and to subsequently publish Hana's story for the children of the world. Readers can learn more about Hana by visiting:

Suitable for students from Year 4 up. Hana's suitcase is an excellent source for teachers wanting to teach about the Holocaust. Its strength lies in the powerful way that Hana's story is revealed to the reader. Children in a country far removed in space and time from Hana and her family are moved by an ordinary object – a suitcase. Their curiosity and concern prompt Fumiko Ishioka's quest to discover all that she can about Hana Brady. What she learns helps the reader to understand the reality of what was an all too common experience for Jewish people during World War Two. Teachers working with Secondary students could use Hana's suitcase as an introduction to work on World War Two, and/or as a springboard to further detailed research on aspects of the Holocaust and Peace Studies.

Kerry Gestier, Catholic Schools Office, NSW

Hana's Suitcase details the moving story of Hana Brady, relived through the eyes of a group of Japanese children in the 21st century who are learning about the Holocaust. Through the dedication and relentless researching of their teacher and director Fumiko Ishioka, the children learn about the early life and happy childhood of Hana and her brother George in Czechoslovakia, the darkened days brought on by World War 2 and the Nazi regime and the final tragedy that befalls the family. This little girl, who was but one of the 1.5 million Jewish children destroyed by the Holocaust, is brought to life with startling clarity and a gentle compassion by a group of totally unrelated people living on the other side of the world over a quarter of a century later.

Written in accessible language and beautifully enhanced by the black and white photographs this is a book for readers of all ages from late primary and beyond. In the same way that Anne Frank's diary reached out to millions of readers all over the world so too I believe will Hana's Suitcase.

There is endless potential for using this book in the classroom, from an introduction to the Holocaust to a full scale study of the way in which history unfolds. Accessible enough for a competent ten year old to learn about the tragedy of the Holocaust the book could be equally as useful for a senior student studying European history and looking for a personal story to add meaning to their area of study. Although the book deals with a topic of great anguish and unspeakable horrors it nevertheless maintains an aura of hope and a promise for a better future. It is hard to read a book like this one and not feel touched by it. The final few chapters in particular, are very moving. I cannot recommend it too highly.

Kate Schneider, Healesville High School, VIC

Based on a true story, this book takes us between modern Tokyo and war torn Czechoslovakia. The Holocaust Museum in Tokyo received some artifacts from children of the Holocaust. Among them is a suitcase with the name Hanna Brady on it. The director of the museum and some children, are intrigued and go in search of more information about Hanna Brady. Their search uncovers the lifestyle of Hanna from before the war to it's end. The reader is swept up in emotions of happiness, fear, sadness and joyfulness. This novel would be best suited to mature upper primary school and high school students. As an adult reader, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Kate Cross, Mt Murchison State School, QLD

Hana was a victim of the Holocaust. Her suitcase turns up in Tokyo in the winter of 2000 at the Holocaust Education Resource Centre as part of a display of children's artefacts from the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Fumiko Ishioka, the director of the centre, in response to requests from many Japanese children who visited the exhibition, undertakes to find out who Hana was. This book is the story of Fumiko's search.

Told alternatively from Hana's, Fumiko's and later George's (Hana's brother) points of view it is at times a very moving account of the search for the story of Hana.

Hana lived in Czechoslovakia in a small village with her parents and brother. They were the only Jewish children in this village but as Hitler's anti-Jewish policies increased in intensity they found themselves caught up in the most terrible episode of European history. First her mother was imprisoned, then her father was taken away and then Hana and George were sent to Theresienstadt before finally being sent to Auschwitz. Here Hana, being only 13, was sent to the gas chamber. Her suitcase of belongings was left on the railway platform with those of thousands of other children. It was this suitcase which, years later, was sent to Fumiko.

Fumiko's quest for information about Hana takes many turns and she suffers many setbacks. It is not until she goes to Prague that she finally gets some answers to her questions. It is here at the Jewish Museum that she discovers that Hana has a brother and through a fellow survivor of Auschwitz is able to make contact with him.

George moved to Canada after the war having failed to find any of his family alive. He wanted a fresh start. He was rather surprised to receive a parcel from Tokyo over 50 years later informing him of the discovery of his sister's suitcase. George was keen to contribute to the education of Japanese children about what happened during the Holocaust so gladly went to Tokyo to meet Fumiko and her keen students "the Small Wings".

This small book on a much studied topic would be most useful at any school level. The information contained in it is able to be presented in a number of ways and could stimulate many writing projects, class discussions and would be a good starting point for further research. It would be a useful companion to the Ann Frank diaries and other novels about the Holocaust. This book is highly recommended.

Lorene Furmage, Department of Education, TAS

I picked up Hana's suitcase with a little apprehension because of the content and the problems in the world today. I began reading and found it difficult to put the book down. I was learning not only about World War 2 from a Jewish perspective but also about a woman's determination to not let the teaching opportunity pass for a group of students. It makes one realise that even though the world is made up of many different people and cultures, each one has knowledge, skills and beliefs which can be passed on, learned from and shared.

I felt relieved when Fumiko's perseverance paid off. I plan to share the book with my class and maybe even contact the group to share their experiences with us, not only about what they learned from Hana's suitcase experience but life in their country and culture. We can also share our experiences about living in the remote area of north west WA.

Fiona Folland, C/- Millars Well Primary School, WA