

GRADES 7-12 CCS/ELA/SS Alignment for *Gifts from the Enemy* by Trudy Ludwig

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Trilling, the literary critic, observed that youth is the time “when we find the books we give up, but do not get over.” Trudy Ludwig’s *Gifts from the Enemy* is that type of a book. This succinct nonfiction story, based on *From a Name to a Number: A Holocaust Survivor’s Autobiography* by Alter Wiener, reaches out from its pages to share an insight Wiener credits to his survival: the importance of seemingly small acts of kindness and their power to transform and, in Wiener’s case, to empower our lives. As Trilling also noted in his commentary about the power of literature: “A real book reads us.” This is a work so deceptively simple and true that students grades 3-6 can grasp its emotional and psychological messages about the necessary conditions for surviving life challenges while students in grades 7-12 can use its bare sequenced chronology as a platform for reflecting on human nature and the range of human responses to laws and to rationale which defy basic moral tenet.

For grades 7-12 use of this seemingly simple picture book can serve as a platform for fulfilling CCSS ELA Reading for Information-Standard 9, beginning with the autobiography of Wiener that inspired this work and other works such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Inge Auerbacher’s *I Am a Star*, and Hannah Rigler’s *13 British Soldiers Saved Me*. All of these works include specific mention of how ordinary acts of kindness helped them to survive. By including an afterword from Alter Wiener that details his purpose in having students read about his struggles, this nonfiction work immediately adds another middle school and beyond reading, writing, speaking, listening, and citizen reflection dimension for teens and beyond. Of course the geographic setting and the political context of the laws which sadly justified many atrocities of the Holocaust make this work meaningful and one that Newcomers can contextualize in light of some of their political, cultural, personal, or familial experiences. Background material can also allow this work to be studied as part of middle school eighth grade American/World History, and High School Global Studies Courses.

Lesson Plans for Grades 7 -12:

Teens and beyond have the developing maturity of thought and physicality to appreciate, as Trilling puts it, how this story “shapes the material of pain.” They can also empathize and project as teens to the situation and challenges which Alter faced as a teen suddenly torn from a loving, close-knit family circle.

Before the students review *Gifts from the Enemy*:

(Activities 1 and 2 address Language Standards –Vocabulary Acquisition and Use particularly with a focus on nuances in word meaning.)

1. First, ask students to brainstorm, as a whole class, their associations to the word “enemy.” **(CCSS ELA Speaking and Listening Comprehension and Collaboration, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas)**
2. Have them list political US enemies, cultural enemies (i.e., gangs, Ku Klux Klan, prisoners in federal prisons, etc.). Once the list has been shared, direct students’ attention to the title of the book and ask them if they can think of kinds of gifts these enemies or even those whom they’ve labeled as their own personal enemies might give or have given them. Furthermore challenge them by asking them if they can brainstorm conditions under which these gifts from “enemies” might be happily received. Should students have difficulty with these questions, give them a start by pointing out humanitarian gifts and support from Russian and other ‘enemies’ during times of Haitian Earthquake, Hurricane Sandy, World Trade Center, Tsunami, and other disasters. In addition, some prison populations volunteer for medical experimentation to help cancer and other terminal populations.

3. Next, ask students what they feel might constitute “acts of kindness.” Have them share whether they have heard or read about this in any other work of fiction or nonfiction. Bestseller *Wonder* deals with acts of kindness explicitly and *The Absolute Value of Mike* also deals with a deliberate community act of kindness. Ask students to explore the concept through reference to fiction or even by doing short online research.
4. Read or have the students read Ludwig’s book. Focus them on how she obviously made her text succinct and sharp so that younger students could grasp the suffering and insights in it. Challenge them to go through the text with the purpose of compiling a list of additional WWII details, facts about the settings, special domain words used in connection with Jewish Culture, timelines and maps, Ms. Ludwig could add to make this work more detail rich for teen readers. For each additional graphic or chart or fact or glossary word suggested, have them explain in a sentence or two why this addition would broaden the appeal and usefulness of this work for teens.
5. Tell the students that as they know from having read works like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Boy in Striped Pajamas*, *The Upstairs Room*, *Night*, *Maus I* and *II* and others, there are many memoirs and works of fiction that deal with peer and younger peer Holocaust experiences. Ask them to provide Ms. Ludwig with an annotated bibliography list of fiction and nonfiction works to include on her website, so that teens can read a range of other works on the same topic. **(CCSS ELA Writing Research to Build Digital and print Knowledge-gathering relevant information from digital and print resources)**
6. In his afterword to Ms. Ludwig’s biography, Alter expresses a hope that children today will make an effort to make the world a better, more caring place. Challenge teens to write to Ms. Ludwig and/or Mr. Wiener about whether they feel their efforts can make this world a better, caring place and how they, as youth, hope to do so. Students could also create as part of their technology web design or by their own skills a “Practicing Random Acts of Kindness” site, to share with others great things youth can do to help make a positive difference in others’ lives. **(CCSS ELA Writing-Production and Distribution of Writing using technology to produce and publish writing)**
7. Have students decide, after reading the text, the extent to which they feel that simple acts of kindness can help others get through political, racial, religious, and ethnic turmoil and travesty; natural disaster; personal loss; and terminal illness. Are the insights of this book only true for the 1940’s and those caught in the Holocaust? Have the students include the counterclaim to their arguments and some points to support them. **(CCSS ELA Writing Argument Writing/Reflections)**
8. Opposite the copyright page Alter Wiener talks about those who claim the Holocaust never happened. Have the students research Holocaust deniers. Ask that they cite the digital, primary, or secondary source of their reports. **(CCSS ELA- Literacy in History- Short Research Paper)**
9. Some publishers feel there have been too many books on the Holocaust and that the market is “oversaturated.” What would the students, many of whom have already read one to three full books about the Holocaust **(CCSS ELA Reading and Writing Short Research to Build Knowledge Projects)** say to a grade supervisor or principal who stated they have already read at least 1-3

books on this topic and any new book, however well written and illustrated, is a waste of reader time? Was the time spent reading this book and reflecting on it a waste for a teen who knows what the Holocaust was and has read 1-3 books? Why or why not?

10. Alter Wiener feels that “how those you meet in life treat you is far more important than who they are.” After reading this story, do you agree or disagree with him? Explain the reasons you would give to support your agreement or disagreement. Use at least one secondary or one primary source to back up your argument. ***(CCSS Literacy in History/SS Reading primary/secondary Sources CCSS Literacy in History- Writing)***

11. Act Now- Accessing Opportunities and Options to be Kind: Challenge students to develop an online or posted locally in school and/or mall/and/or public library annotated directory of Acts of Kindness organizations, centers, hospitals, veterinary centers/rescue settings, initiatives, or relief funds. Students can go online or use public directories to find such listings. They can annotate their directory ***(CCSS ELA Range of Reading, Writing)*** with brief descriptions of at least one or two ways peers can actually perform an act of kindness personally or at least contribute to one. What is neat about this act of kindness research ***(CCSS ELA Writing Research to Build Knowledge)*** is that the act of compiling it is already an act of kindness and teens are often able to officially volunteer or intern in some capacity at many of these organizations. They can go from reading about acts of kindness to being part of them themselves.