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Heroes of the Secret Underground

By Susanne Gervay

Summary

Twelve-year-old Louie lives with her brothers, Bert and Teddy, and their Hungarian grandparents, in the Majestic Boutique Hotel, an old-world establishment surrounded by magnolia trees and an aura of peace. But when Louie finds an old rose-gold locket covered in mysterious writing, she learns that it isn't just the magnolias her grandparents have carefully cultivated at the Majestic - with their peace and tranquility comes secrets they would prefer remain buried.

And as Louie and her brothers attempt to discover the truth, they are thrown back in time to 1944, into the middle of their grandparents' experiences in Nazi-occupied Budapest.

The old locket holds the secrets of the young heroes of Budapest's secret Jewish underground, and the history Louie's grandparents want to keep hidden. And until these secrets are revealed, there can be no peace for anyone - in the past, present or future.

Key Learning Outcomes

ACELA1500, ACELA1489, ACELT1603, ACELT1607, ACELT1608, ACELY1694, ACELY1700

Key Concepts

Bravery, Family history, World history, Racism, Identity, Acts of kindness, Justice

Recommended Ages: 9+

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Genre

Heroes of the Secret Underground is a timeslip novel. A timeslip novel weaves together two similar stories from different moments in history to show the similarities and differences between the two. Characters in timeslip novels often have to overcome an obstacle in the past to resolve an issue in their present.

- What is the issue Louie is dealing with in the present? What obstacle does Louie have to face in the past to resolve it?
- Which are the two moments in history the story is set in?
- Who is Louie's guide in the past? Are they similar or different to her guide in the present?
- What does Louie's journey to the past teach her about her family?

Imagine that you are going to write a timeslip novel of your own.

- Which other moment in history would you set your story in and why?
- Who would be your guide in that time? Are they the same as you or different?
- Write a character profile about your guide. What is their life like?
- What challenges might you face?
- What would connect the two of you?

Literary Techniques

When Louie finds the necklace, she is intrigued by the 'n' symbol on the front.

- What does the 'n' mean?
- How does she discover what it means?
- What symbol does Louie decide she will add to the necklace?
 - How do her experiences in Budapest influence this?
- What other objects and symbols in Louie's present are significant in her past?

Choose an object that has been handed down through your family.

- Describe it – what does it feel like and look like?
- What shape is it?
- Where did it come from?
- How has it been handed down?
- Interview another family member for whom this object has meaning. Write up the story of your chosen object and its significance to your family, and share it with the class.

'Louie treads carefully. There are huge twisted tree roots along this street that make the pathway rough. Some people complain about the trees and cracked paths and the leaves that cover the ground. They want the trees down, but Louie loves them.'

(p. 7)

- Why do people want to get rid of things that they don't like?
- Should they be allowed to?
- What other scenes in the book do you see this attitude in?

A metaphor uses a word or phrase to describe an object or action that it is not literally applicable to.

- How is the tree a metaphor for racism in the book?
- What other metaphors can you find?
- Come up with your own metaphor for feeling sad, or feeling afraid.

Characters

Louie discovers a quote from *Our Mutual Friend*:

'No one is useless in this world,' retorted the Secretary, 'who lightens the burden of it for anyone else.' (p. 46)

- What does this mean?
- How do each of the characters in the book lighten the burdens of the world for others?
- Reflect on a time when you've done something to make life less of a burden for someone else.

Cover

We are often told 'don't judge a book by its cover', but often the cover is the first thing that tells us what a book is about and whether we'll enjoy it.

- What elements of the story do you see included on the cover of this book?
- What is your first response to the cover? What kind of story do you think the novel will be, based on the cover?
- Does the cover make you want to read the book? Why or why not?
- Identify three techniques the designer has used on the cover to tell you about the story.
- What kind of cover makes you want to read a book?

Design your own cover for *Heroes of the Secret Underground*. What elements of the story will you include? What kind of text will you use? Which colours? What information needs to be included on the cover to make it work?

The Holocaust

- Why do you think stories about the Holocaust are so important?
- Why are they hard to write and read?
- Why do you think Louie's grandma finds it difficult to talk about her past?

Fact vs Fiction

Read the information segments at the back of the book where the author shares the facts of the real people and places mentioned in the story.

- How are they written differently?
- Is *Heroes of the Secret Underground* a true story?
- What is the difference between a non-fiction book and a book that is based on real events?
- What different choices might the author have to make when writing in each genre?

Choose a section of the book that mentions one of these people or places.

- What information is included in the story that you think might be imagined?
- Which parts are real?
 - How do you know?

The author wrote this book because of her own connection to the real events described in *Heroes of the Secret Underground*.

- Which historic events interest you and why?
- What kind of story do you think you would write if you were to write something set during this time?
- All good historical fiction starts with research. Make a list of things you'd need to find out to make your story accurate and interesting. (Think about things like what people wore or ate, how they spoke, how they got around, what jobs they had etc).
 - Put together a presentation to share with the class that answers some of your questions (include pictures if you can).

While much of *Heroes of the Secret Underground* is based on real people and events, there are elements of fantasy as well.

- What parts of the novel could be considered fantasy?
- Why do you think the author chose to incorporate ideas that belong to the fantasy genre, like time travel, into a novel that has so many real people and events?
- What effect does this combination of fact and fantasy have on the reader?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a child of refugees, books were a safe and special place for Susanne Gervay to explore the world and ideas. She wants that for all young people. You'll find her planting mangroves in Kiribati; in Istanbul speaking to thousands of kids about no bullying; in remote indigenous schools bringing literacy to kids; touring with her *I Am Jack* play, adapted by Monkey Baa Theatre across Australia and the USA.

Susanne's acclaimed books are widely endorsed by the Cancer Council NSW, Variety and The Children's Hospital Westmead. She is an ambassador for Room to Read, bringing education to the children of the developing world; a role model for Books in Homes, taking books to disadvantaged and indigenous children in Australia; and a literacy ambassador for many campaigns. Susanne is also Regional Advisor for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), promoting the community of writers and illustrators in Australia and internationally.

She has been awarded the Lifetime Social Justice Literature Award by the International Literacy Association, an Order of Australia, and was nominated for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.

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