Three Stars in the Night Sky: A Refugee Family’s Odyssey of Separation and Reunion

A Teacher’s Guide

By Bruce Jay Wasser

*Introduction*

**Three Stars in the Night Sky** is award-winning author Fern Schumer Chapman’s fifth book in a series that chronicles, in the words of Pulitzer-Prize nominee James B. Lieber, “the Westerfeld saga,” the gripping depiction of the life and times of Fern’s mother, Edith Westerfeld – from Edith’s childhood emigration from Nazi Germany, her subsequent assimilation to American culture, and her late-in-life decision to return to her small hometown. Taken together, these five works – one memoir, another a young-adult historical-fiction novel, and three works of young-adult narrative non-fiction – constitute an important contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust.

**Three Stars in the Night Sky**, a powerful young-adult narrative history, is designed principally for middle and high-school-aged students. This unique book will appeal to students with reading challenges; the book features sophisticated ideas with visually accessible materials. Given the sophistication and gravity of its themes, the book carries crossover appeal to an older audience as well. At its core, **Three Stars** describes the wrenching experiences of unaccompanied minor refugees, specifically the dislocating traumas suffered by Edith’s friend, Gerda Katz, who at the age of twelve, fled Nazi Germany and ventured to America. Gerda’s story of family separation gives concrete meaning to the ideas of culture shock and existential loneliness, feelings all unaccompanied minor immigrants have known as part and parcel of their migration. This powerful biographical work of narrative non-fiction also addresses the issue of racism during the 1930s and 40s in three distinct nations: Nazi Germany, the Dominican Republic, and the United States.

Beautifully illustrated and studded with extensive excerpts from the public record, this compelling book invites readers to contemplate such serious issues as the long reach of the Holocaust, the defining experience of racism, the ordeal of unaccompanied child immigration, and the enduring power of familial love.

*Thematic Questions and Activities*

As students read **Three Stars**, consider the following broad thematic questions:

Examine the front and back covers of **Three Stars**. What emotions did you experience? Then, look carefully at the end sheets. What purpose(s) do you think the end sheets serve?

What unique pressures, fears, and difficulties did Gerda Katz face as an unaccompanied minor immigrant/refugee? In what ways does her experience reflect that of other unaccompanied child immigrants/refugees? In what ways might it differ?

How much of their former culture should immigrant children give up when they come to the United States? How much of their former culture should they retain?

What differences are there between a child immigrating with his/her family and immigrating alone?

Describe the significance of letter writing in Gerda’s life. What was your reaction to her correspondence with her family?

Which individual(s) in **Three Stars** made the greatest impression on you?

Often people view child immigrants as “the other.” What does it mean to be “the other”? What “others” exist in your school and community? How are these people treated? What actions could you take on behalf of “the others”?

Design a brochure welcoming a student immigrant to your school. What would be the most important elements of your creation?

Create a school-wide program that makes your school a more caring, open, and tolerant place.

Create a dialogue between a lonely child immigrant who recently enrolled in your school and an established student who wants to welcome the newcomer.

An internal monologue is when a person expresses his/her innermost thoughts (not out loud, but to him/herself). Create an internal monologue that Gerda may have had. Present it to your classmates, using proper emotional inflection.

Interview a family member and attempt to discover as much as you can about his/her past. What unique challenges, problems, and circumstances did this family member encounter as he/she was growing up?

The Dominican Republic, under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, engaged itself in a war of “ethnic cleansing” against Haitians. Research the topic of “ethnic cleansing” and develop a project (a report, PowerPoint, poem, speech, song, or dialogue) that demonstrates your understanding of this topic. Be sure to include current examples of “ethnic cleansing.”

Dictatorships (and even democracies) invent *euphemisms* to mask actions that are illegal or immoral. Try to find examples, both in the past and present, of governmental euphemisms that hide bad intent.

Create a project that answers the following question: “What policies should the United States adopt regarding refugees?”

Read Emma Lazarus’s poem, “The New Colossus,” that is mounted on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Create a project that demonstrates your understanding of the poem and how it applies to the United States. Pay particular attention to the phrases “the homeless, tempest-tost” and “wretched refuse.” What do those phrases suggest and how, today, should the United States respond to the poet’s urgings?

In America today, are there examples of adults who must “parent” from afar? What unique challenges and difficulties do these adults face?

Gerda and her family experienced racism on three continents. Compare and contrast the different types of racism.

So much of **Three Stars** rotates around the letters Gerda’s family sent her. Put yourself in the place of Gerda and write a letter to “your” parents about “your” new life in Seattle. Would you be completely honest, or are there some things that you would not tell “your” parents?

Read Fern Schumer Chapman’s **Like Finding My Twin**. Create a service-learning project for your school, using the Madison Junior High School model (pages 39-40) as a model.

Select what you consider to be the most important passage of the book. Create a project (either artistic or written) that explains your selection.

*Author’s Introduction*

The author outlines the experience of unaccompanied minor refugees and immigrants and describes the pressures and traumas they encounter during their migration. An outline of child immigration to the United States highlights the ongoing nature of this demographic phenomenon. We meet Gerda Katz -- the central figure of the book -- who was but twelve years old when her prescient family sent her, by herself, to the United States to escape Nazi persecution. The author provides a personal account of how she came to know Gerda and how the author came to recognize “the unique and universal value of her experiences.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. Carefully read the epigraph (on the page preceding the introduction). What do you think that statement means? Why would we find that statement at the end of a “fairy tale”?
2. The author lists a number of reasons why children have come to the United States throughout our nation’s history. Which reason most stirred your feelings?
3. How difficult is it, do you think, for children to learn a new language and adopt a new culture?
4. Compare and contrast the photographs on pages 1 and 2. What emotions did you experience looking at the photographs?

Activities:

1. From your own family or from on-line resources, create your own photographic display of child immigrants.
2. In your own community, try to find immigrant families and interview a recent immigrant to learn of his/her experiences. With the permission of an immigrant parent, see if you could conduct an interview with an immigrant child. How is immigration different for adults than children?

*Gerda’s Childhood in Germany*

In this section, the author introduces us to Gerda Katz, whose family has lived in the small town of Munzenberg for nearly a millennium. Thoroughly assimilated, the Katz family maintained its Jewish traditions, but found their neighbors acquiescing to the Nazis during the 1930s. Gerda describes her fear at the growing Nazi terror, including being bullied at school. Increasingly isolated and in fear of their lives, the Katzes made an ominous decision; they determined to leave their beloved Germany. Gerda’s courageous brother Fritz, who had been badly beaten in the Buchenwald concentration camp, forcefully argued on her behalf to secure a spot for her in a program that will bring her to America. After saying farewell to her classmates, Gerda traveled with her family to Bremenhaven, to the ship that would take her to America on March 8, 1938. Numbed and traumatized, wearing only an identification tag around her neck, Gerda recalls the profound dislocation she felt.

Questions for Discussion

1. Gerda Katz’s family had lived in Munzenberg for nearly 1,000 years. Describe her homeland.
2. How would you describe Gerda’s childhood? In what ways is it similar/different than your own?
3. Is it true that the youngest child of a family receives different treatment than older children? Give examples to prove your response.
4. Describe how the Nazis came to power in Germany. What does the phrase “racially inferior” mean?
5. The author said that the citizens of Gerda’s small community “looked the other way” at Jewish persecution. What does that phrase signify?
6. Examine the Nazi posters on page 7. How did the Nazis appeal to young Germans?
7. School should be a place where children learn without fear. Describe Gerda’s school experiences. In what ways do you agree or disagree with Gerda’s parents’ decision to send her to a Jewish school?
8. What aspects of Kurt Mayer’s story (page 9) are most disturbing to you? Why would the Nazis burn books? What is your response to book burning?
9. What kind of man was Gerda’s brother Fritz? What did he mean when he wrote: “All children have the same value”?
10. Describe the emotions the Katz family felt on the day of Gerda’s departure.
11. As she was about to depart, Gerda’s father “reassured Gerda that she would see her family again” even though he had no way of guaranteeing it. What is your reaction to this promise?
12. How would you describe Gerda’s emotional reaction to her departure? Give specific examples from pages 11 and 12.

Activities

1. Find a copy of **Grimms’ Fairy Tales**. Read at least one of the tales and create a presentation (in writing, PowerPoint, or spoken) that you could share with your classmates.
2. The author describes Gerda’s family as “Orthodox” Jews who kept “kosher.” Research each of these terms and share your findings with your classmates.
3. Research the Nazi’s attitude toward Jews and report your findings in a PowerPoint presentation or a poster. Be sure to include laws designed specifically toward Jews.
4. Does the United States have people(s) it has seen as “racially inferior”? Design a project that treats this question.
5. Create an artistic interpretation of the fear Gerda experienced from Nazi terror.
6. Try to learn as much as you can about a woman named Sophie Scholl. What was “The White Rose?” (You might consider making an artistic interpretation of this topic.)
7. Write a poem about Gerda’s brother Fritz.
8. Create an artistic representation of Fritz’s statement: “All children have the same value.”
9. Look up a recipe for *Zwetschgenkuchen* and prepare one for your classmates.
10. Design an identification tag a young Jewish child would have worn. What information do you think would be essential to place on the tag?
11. On page 12, there is a page from Gerda’s *Posiealbum* that has an entry from one of her friends. Imagine that Gerda has asked you to write in her album. Knowing that you don’t have much space, create your own entry for Gerda.
12. Put yourself in Gerda’s place on the dock. Create a dialogue between your parents and you, remembering that you may not see one another for a long period of time. Then, perform your dialogue in front of your classmates.

*Gerda’s New Home in Seattle*

In this section, Gerda journeys to Seattle, Washington, “The Emerald City,” where her new home would be a small room in a large boarding house in a mixed ethnic community in east Seattle. Gerda’s transition to American life would not be easy, and her emotional adjustment “was even more daunting.” Her sympathetic school principal helped Gerda learn essential identification information in English. Letters from her family eased her loneliness, and she diligently tried to follow the advice her parents gave her. Suddenly, in 1941, the letters ceased, causing Gerda great anxiety. The silence broke when she received a letter from her beloved brother Fritz, who informed Gerda that most of her family had been saved by relocating to the Dominican Republic. Shocked and ignorant of that nation’s existence, Gerda asked her teachers, “Where is the Dominican Republic?”

Questions for Discussion

1. Coming to the United States was like arriving in a new world for Gerda. Give some examples of her new surprising, discoveries.
2. What is a “boarding house”? Is there anything comparable to a boarding house in your city?
3. Describe the importance of letters to Gerda.
4. The author notes that Gerda’s “emotional adjustment was even more daunting” than her physical adjustments to living in Seattle. What emotional problems do you believe were most challenging for Gerda?
5. Gerda’s parents tried to “parent” her from afar. What advice did they offer her?
6. How did Gerda respond to her parents’ letters? Do you agree with her decision not to tell them “any bad news”?
7. Suddenly, Gerda stopped receiving letters from her family until, one day, she received a startling letter from her brother Fritz. What information did that letter contain?

Activities

1. Research the geography of Seattle and create a drawing or poster that shows the beauty of “The Emerald City.”
2. Create a PowerPoint presentation that shows your understanding of the word “refugee.” Be sure to include examples of refugees coming to the United States.
3. Break up into small groups. Each group must develop a “dictionary” of words and phrases – and their definitions - used by people your age that might be useful for an immigrant student to learn.
4. Write an actual letter (not an email or text) to a family member you have not seen recently and mail it to him/her.
5. Research and find as much information as you can about the Dominican Republic. Create a project that demonstrates you knowledge of this island country, and make sure you include comments about its history, especially during the 1930s and 1940s.

*Escape to the Dominican Republic*

In this section, we learn that the Katz family escaped from Munzenberg just before the Nazis rounded up all the Jews in the community. Their unexpected refuge is the Dominican Republic, one of the few nations in the world that opened its doors to Jewish refugees. (The 1938 Evian Conference revealed the world’s indifference to the plight of Germany’s Jews.) Its brutal dictator, Rafael Trujillo, turned Nazi racism on its head. If the Nazis thought Jews to be racially impure, Trujillo valued the “whiteness” of Germany’s Jews and thought that by importing them, he could “lighten” the color of his own people through intermarriage. This grand design resulted in only 645 Jews, including the Katz family, being saved from annihilation. The German Jews arrived in a country radically different than their homeland. Mostly urban professionals or craftspeople, the immigrants became immediate farmers. In the Sosua Settlement, the Katz family created a dairy farm and established a small general store. Clinging to their German roots, the Katz family set out to establish a new life in a strange land. In Seattle, Gerda became increasingly worried as she learned of the growing Nazi terror in war-torn Europe. She even wrote the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, to plead on behalf of her parents. In a poignant letter from her brother, Fritz, he stresses the importance of Gerda’s need to excel in school as a means of helping her family.

Questions for Discussion

1. Who was Rafael Trujillo and what role did he have in the Katz family’s arrival in the Dominican Republic.
2. For what purpose was the 1938 Evian Conference (page 23) convened? Discuss the reasons nations offered to justify their refusal to admit Jewish refugees.
3. The term “culture shock” refers to the deep confusion and disorientation people feel when they move from one country to another. In what ways did the Katz family suffer from “culture shock” when they moved to the Dominican Republic?
4. The Katz family tried to hold onto some of its German customs while in the Dominican Republic. What customs did they maintain? What customs do you think refugees coming to the United States today should maintain?
5. In part, Gerda learned of Nazi terror while watching “Movietone News” in the theatre. What sources does your family use in order to learn about the news? How is that similar or different from how Gerda learned the news?
6. Fritz writes about the importance of education. Why is education so important to the Katz family?

Activities

1. Create an artistic project that demonstrates your understanding of why a person of color would want to “whiten” his/her complexion. Your project may include your reaction to the idea of “whitening.”
2. Create a diorama of the Sosua Settlement.
3. On the Internet, find and watch “Movietone News” from the early 1940s and share your reactions with your classmates.
4. Write a letter to a younger brother or sister (or an imaginary person younger than you) in which you stress the importance of education.

*Three Stars in the Night Sky*

In this section, Gerda’s only contact with her family were the letters she received from the Dominican Republic. The letters from her mother were particularly poignant. In one, Jenny Katz writes her daughter, “A mother gives a part of her heart when she sends a child abroad.” In another, Jenny comforts her daughter by telling her that when Jenny looks in the night sky, the same stars that shine on the Dominican Republic shine on Gerda. The three stars become a frequent symbolic statement of Jenny’s enduring love for her child. Gerda attends an ethnically-mixed high school in Seattle but is shocked when, in 1942, the United States government demands the forced evacuation and relocation of some 127,000 people of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were loyal American citizens. This action deeply upset Gerda, as she was an “enemy alien” (see Gerda’s identification card on page 15) and wondered if she too would be arrested and imprisoned. Years pass, and Gerda graduates without any family members present. Fortunately, her brother Fritz secures a visa and joins Gerda in Seattle in 1946. He witnessed her wedding and rejoiced in the birth of her children. Gerda left the University of Washington after her first year, determined to send her tuition money to her parents. She began the process of waiting a lifetime to see her parents, who languished in the Dominican Republic due to the anti-Jewish actions of a bureaucrat who denied the family visas to travel to the United States.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the following sentence mean: “A mother gives part of her heart when she sends a child abroad”?
2. The author titled her work **Three Stars in the Night Sky**. Why did she choose that phrase for the title of her book?
3. According to Jewish tradition, the evening does not begin until one clearly sees three stars in the sky. How do you know night has begun?
4. What does it mean to be labeled as an “enemy?” Then, what does the term “enemy alien” mean? Should aliens be treated any differently during times of war? Examine Gerda’s “enemy alien” registration card on page 15. What is your opinion of the United States government requiring registration of aliens during times of war?
5. What were the consequences of Executive Order 9066? What lessons can you learn from this order about how the United States government treated minority groups during times of war?
6. Of the photographs of Gerda on pages 32-34, which is your favorite? Which one causes you the most sadness?
7. What efforts did Gerda attempt in trying to bring her family to the United States?
8. What techniques does the author use to show readers how much time Gerda spent waiting to reunite with her parents?
9. Why couldn’t Gerda’s family obtain exit visas from the Dominican Republic?

Activities

1. Create an artistic interpretation of the sentence: “A mother gives part of her heart when she sends a child abroad.”
2. Create an artistic interpretation of the phrase: “three stars in the night sky.”
3. Write a letter or a poem that has a central metaphor. Ask your teacher if you don’t understand the idea of a “metaphor.”
4. Re-read the last sentence on page 30. What is the author’s opinion of Executive Order 9066 and the forced relocation of Japanese and Japanese-Americans? Create a project (either written or artistic) that offers your own opinion of this order.
5. Research the consequences of Executive Order 9066. Write a letter to the President of the United States that provides your opinion of the relocation of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during World War II.
6. Ask one of the older members of your family if you could use some photographs (and other documents) to create a collage or poster of that person. What photographs (or documents) would you want to include in order to portray his/her life?

*The Katz Family Reunited*

In this concluding section, Gerda’s family finally received exit visas from the Dominican Republic in 1959 and flew to Seattle to reunite with Gerda and Fritz. Gerda was thirty-four years old, and her parent were in their seventies. Gerda initially could not recognize her parents when they deplaned; her mother and father appeared to be old, sickly, and terribly weather-beaten. The elderly parents live only a few more years. The author describes the fate of the Munzenberg’s Jews during the Holocaust and includes a fascinating history of the town’s synagogue. Although most Jews have left the Dominican Republic, their dairy-producing settlement of Sosua continues to supply most of the island republic’s butter and cheese. In 2011, Gerda had a tearful reunion with her former dear friend, Edith Westerfeld Schumer (the mother of the author) – whom she met onboard the ship that brought both traumatized children to the United States in 1938. The reunion was the result of a remarkable service-learning project initiated by middle-school students who made it their mission to reunite the two best friends. Gerda and Edith shared a bond forged in suffering, isolation, and loss; the two remained in contact with each other for the rest of Gerda’s life. Gerda understood that “her childhood immigration and losses defined her.” She never left the United States and felt uncomfortable even leaving her home. The final page of the book is a beautiful, but mournful, photograph of Gerda Katz, who died in 2017.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have any of your family members been separated and then reunited? If so, describe the circumstances? What emotions did your family experience during the separation and reunion?
2. Describe Gerda’s response when she first saw her parents after a separation of over two decades.
3. What kind of relationship do you think Gerda had with her parents after their arrival in Seattle?
4. What happened to the Jews of Munzenberg who did not escape Nazi Germany?
5. Describe the circumstances of Gerda’s reunion with Edith Westerfeld Schumer.
6. How is it possible for two unrelated people to consider themselves family members? (In Gerda’s case, she referred to Edith as “her sister.”)
7. What does the author mean when she claims that Gerda’s “childhood immigration and losses defined her”?
8. What are your feelings at the conclusion of **Three Stars**?
9. Examine the photograph of Gerda Katz Frumkin on page 41. How would you describe Gerda?

Activities

1. Create a dialogue between Gerda and her mother when they reunited.
2. Imagine yourself to be the producer of a television documentary on the Munzenberg synagogue. Write a script for the documentary and try to discover photographs that you would include of the history of the synagogue.
3. Create and act out a scene where two family members reunite after a long absence.
4. Describe a relationship you have with a non-family member that is so important and dear to you that you consider that person to be a family member.
5. Create an artistic project that “defines” you.
6. Design a project that compares/contrasts the way you see yourself and how others see you.
7. Find a photograph that includes your best friend and you. In some form of written project (essay, dialogue, poem, or song), describe the nature of your friendship.
8. On page 40, the author has included an illustration of a fairy tale figure and a quotation from a fairy tale. Find any line from the text in this section and create your own illustration of an imaginary figure that represents the quotation.
9. Find a photograph that best captures “you.” Share it with your classmates, and, in one or two sentences, describe why you chose that photograph.

*Bruce Jay Wasser, the author of this guide, received numerous honors during his three- decade tenure as a middle and high school history and English teacher in Newark, California. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Princeton University, Mr. Wasser has shared his insights on bringing conscience into schools with administrators and teachers. You may contact him at bruce3306@aol.com.*