



WHAT
— THE —
NIGHT
SINGS

A NOVEL

VESPER STAMPER



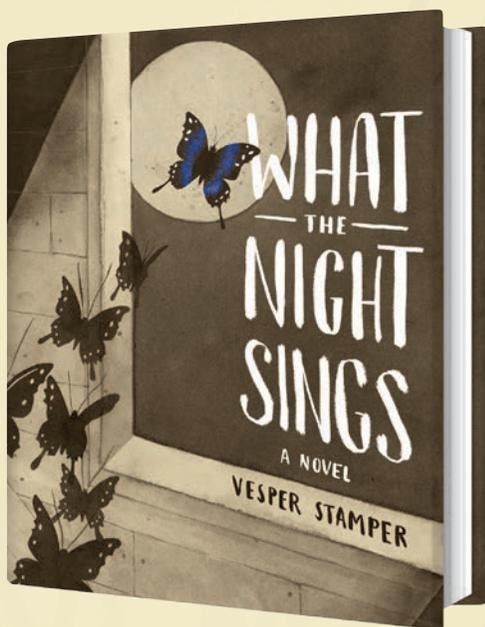
Discussion Guide

ABOUT THE BOOK

For fans of *The Book Thief* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* comes a lushly illustrated novel about a teen Holocaust survivor who must come to terms with who she is and how to rebuild her life.

After losing her family and everything she knew in the Nazi concentration camps, Gerta is finally liberated, only to find herself completely alone. Without her papa, her music, or even her identity, she must move past the task of surviving and onto living her life. In the displaced persons camp where she is staying, Gerta meets Lev, a fellow teen survivor who she just might be falling for, despite her feelings for someone else. With a newfound Jewish identity she never knew she had and a return to the life of music she thought she'd lost forever, Gerta must choose how to build a new future.

Vesper's moving portrayal of Gerta's experience only scratches the surface of what makes this book so special. Her stunning illustrations work with the text to create an unforgettable narrative, which digs deep into the heart of what it meant to go through something so unspeakable at such a young age and the strength it took for survivors to go on. In that way, *What the Night Sings* finds the space between light and dark, hope and tragedy, love and loss.



Grades 7 and up | HC: 978-1-5247-0038-6
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vesper Stamper is an author-illustrator living in Connecticut with her husband, filmmaker Ben Stamper, and her two fairy children. She has an MFA in illustration as visual essay from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Follow her on Twitter at @Vesperillustrat, on Facebook at @vesperillustration, and learn more at vesperillustration.com.



Katrina Sorrentino



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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

BRAINSTORMING

Moderate a brainstorming session about the following questions:

- What character traits help us to overcome challenges?
- Who are some figures in history who embody the ability to persist and overcome challenges?
- How important are personal relationships in overcoming adverse events?

FREE-WRITE

Using these prompts, ask students to write about living through significant events in history.

- To what extent are our lives a product of the time that we live in?
- For young people, what are the circumstances of history and daily life that are most challenging to endure? How do they do it?

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Break into groups and discuss first impressions about the book.

- What do you glean from the title and cover art?
- What can you learn about the story from the jacket copy?
- Read the author's dedication page. Can any conclusions be drawn from the dedication?
- Based on this assessment, what is the book going to be about? How do you know?

"LIBERATION"

Students should read the first chapter of *What the Night Sings* and break into small groups to discuss the events that take place. Based on what they already know, what kinds of things do they expect the characters to be confronted with? What themes do they expect?



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WHILE READING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND WRITING PROMPTS

THESE QUESTIONS CAN BE USED AS WRITING PROMPTS OR FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION.

- As the novel opens, readers witness the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on April 15, 1945. What are your immediate reactions to the descriptions given?
- After describing the typhus sweeping away those inflicted or the hard labor killing so many, Gerta states, “I may as well die singing.” (p. 3) What can readers infer from her statement?
- Gerta describes the death of one of her bunkmates at the camp, stating, “There was no time to learn her name.” (p. 5) What does this startling statement indicate?
- Why is Rivkah’s death particularly difficult for Gerta to bear?
- Gerta shares, “The soldier lays me down on the ground inside a green tent, looks at me—looks away. . . . I see why: I am contagion. I am a threat to his life even as he saves mine.” (p. 9) Discuss the reactions of the British soldiers that liberate Gerta’s camp. Why is this work so challenging to them?
- What are some of the lasting impacts of World War II?
- As she overhears the soldiers and relief workers questioning why the camp prisoners didn’t rise up or take arms, Gerta thinks, “As though we could have fathomed the intricacies of the Nazi web: the reinvention of language, the animalization of human souls.” (p. 13) What does she mean? Why is this point essential to understanding the experience of these prisoners?
- How are children affected by war? Can you provide some examples, whether from war in general or World War II specifically?
- As she describes her recovery after her camp is liberated, Gerta shares that she comes back to herself. What does she mean by this?





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WHILE READING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND WRITING PROMPTS *continued*

- What causes people to consider other groups in society to be “undesirable”? Why is this mindset so dangerous?
- Compare Lev and Michah. How do their understandings of their realities capture the differences in their core beliefs about resistance? What is it about each of them that Gerta clings to? How does that change as time goes by?
- What would you identify as being Gerta’s survival mode?
- Describe the parent / child relationships in *What the Night Sings*. To what extent are these relationships shaped by the world around them? Do you think these relationships, in turn, shape the world? How are Papa and Maria able to protect and preserve Gerta’s innocence? How does the loss of family impact the survivors?
- Describe the ways characters in *What the Night Sings* resisted the Nazis?
- How did the Nazis use Theresienstadt and the artists and musicians imprisoned there to deceive the Red Cross? How does this camp change after the international visitors leave?
- Consider the marriage of Lev and Gerta. How have their experiences prepared them for this commitment?
- After returning to Lev’s childhood home, Gerta and Lev discover that the persecution and murder of Jews has continued. Examine their reactions to this knowledge. How does this understanding finalize their decision to create a future home in Palestine?

WHILE READING: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND WRITING PROMPTS *continued*

- At the kibbutz, Gerta states, “I eat for more than myself—I eat for six million. It is soul food, eternal nourishment—served, as it is, alongside bitterness. But I love to fill my mouth with the sweetness of freedom.” (p. 238) Analyze Gerta’s statement; why is it so profound?
- Discuss the character traits that allow Gerta and Lev to persevere. How are these characters similar to each other? In what ways are they different? Do you have any of these traits?
- What makes the Holocaust such a unique event in history? Can you argue that it is not unique? How? What have we learned from the Holocaust? Are there things that we have failed to learn? How do we address them?
- Think of five words to describe *What the Night Sings*. Explain your choices.
- On the dedication page before the opening of the novel, Stamper simply states, “Remember.” Why do you believe she has chosen to do this, rather than going with a more traditional dedication? Given the current climate in the US and throughout the world, why is remembering this event more important than ever?

Correlates to Common Core Standard Reading Literature: Key Ideas and Details R.L. 7.2.; Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration S.L. 7.1., S.L. 8.1., S.L. 9-10.1., S.L. 7.2., S.L. 8.2., S.L.9-10.2., S.L. 7.3., S.L. 8.3., S.L. 9-10.3.



AFTER READING: EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

MUSIC AS HEALER

Throughout the novel, Stamper details the complex role that music (particularly singing) plays in Gerta's life. Examine and explore that role of music throughout the book. To what degree does it connect, save, curse, and bind Gerta to those she loves and to the world at large? Create a playlist that is reflective of Gerta's life, and explain your selections.

OVERCOMING THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

Stamper's novel takes place during a poignant period of our history, and the characters must overcome great challenges. Reflect on and analyze how the characters manage this task. Think about how it affects their relationships, how it causes them to change or adapt as the story unfolds, and how things might have been different in other circumstances. Finally, consider how each of us must manage trials in our own lives.

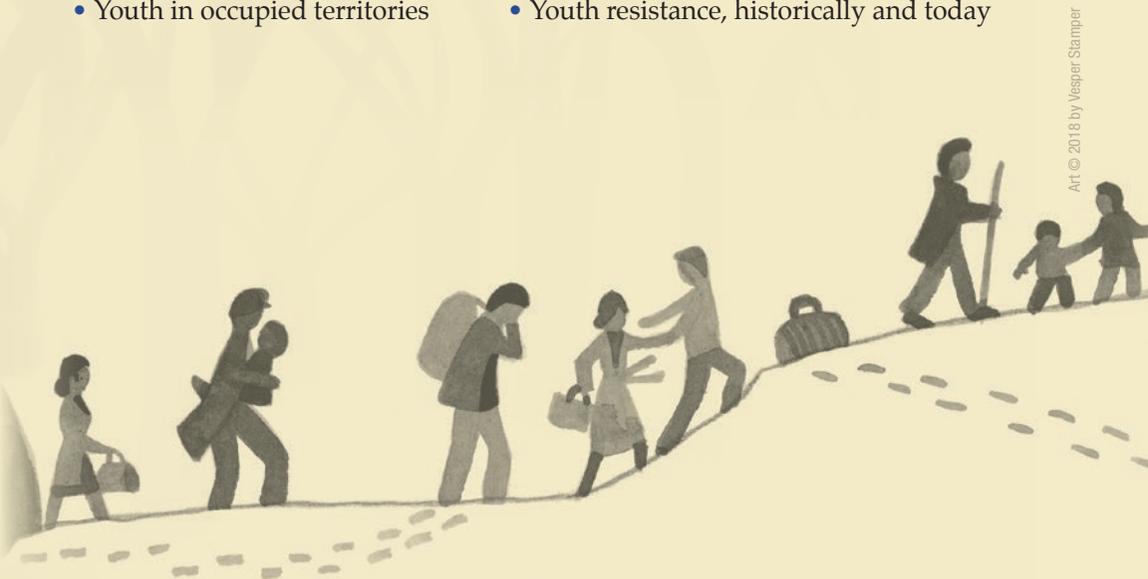
HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

In *What the Night Sings*, though at times she feels that all is lost, Gerta is driven by hope. Create a hope chest for characters in the novel. Select items representative of their hopes and dreams, and provide explanations for your suggestions. Identify objects or symbols that serve as sources of hope for you.

YOUTH AND HISTORY

Stamper gives us the opportunity to consider the experiences of young people during a major historical event. Research more about the roles they have played in the following:

- Youth in Nazi Germany
- Youth in the midst of political turmoil
- Youth in occupied territories
- Youth resistance, historically and today



AFTER READING: EXTENSION ACTIVITIES *continued*

ART AS STORYTELLER

Throughout *What the Night Sings*, the sepia-toned illustrations offer readers rich insight to the events of Stamper's novel. Reflect on the following questions:

- In your opinion, what does Stamper's art add to the story?
- What do you believe would be lost without the art?
- How does the art tell a story the text doesn't?
- Are there any particular scenes that weren't illustrated that you wish were?

Have small groups of students discuss how Stamper's art impacts the story or write an essay evaluating the role the art plays.

CHARACTER STUDY

What the Night Sings takes us through a riveting narrative. Imagine that the novel is being made into a movie. Choose actors to play the key characters, but do this with a twist! The actors must not be actual performers, but instead characters from other books, movies, or TV shows. For each character pair, provide a rationale for linking the characters.

BEATING THE ODDS

Characters in *What the Night Sings* must not only overcome the events surrounding them, but must also reckon with aspects of their own backgrounds. Develop a poster, short video, or some other product that emphasizes the personal traits that help these characters overcome the parts of their identity that are not of their making but must be dealt with as they move on with life.



GEOGRAPHY AS CHARACTER

Give students the following prompts to demonstrate the importance of setting to this story. "I Am" poems allow students to show understanding of characters. The lines of the "I Am" poem below have been adapted so that students can focus on where this story takes place. They should complete each line of the poem from the perspective of the setting.

"I Am"

I am *(name the setting)*

I wonder *(something the setting finds curious about the events of the story)*

I hear *(sounds the setting hears or sounds that those beyond it cannot)*

I see *(sights the setting sees or sights that those beyond it cannot)*

I know *(something the setting can claim to know based on events that occur within it)*

I am not fooled by *(something those in the setting try to do or hide)*

I feel *(something the setting experiences due to events that unfold within it)*

I touch *(some unique way in which the setting connects to those interacting with it)*

I worry *(something the setting might fear will happen if events continue as they are)*

I cry *(something tragic that the setting knows or suspects will happen)*

I am *(the first line of the poem repeated)*

I understand *(some point of wisdom the setting has due to its broad point of view)*

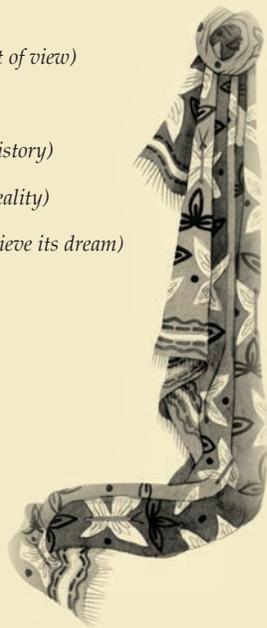
I say *(something that the setting would claim due to its history)*

I dream *(something the setting might wish would happen based on its history)*

I try *(something the setting might try to do if it could make its dream a reality)*

I hope *(something the setting hopes those who interact with it will do to help achieve its dream)*

I am *(the first line of the poem repeated)*



HOLOCAUST RESEARCH

Using the resources of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and others from the list below, work with partners to uncover and better understand the complexities of this watershed event in history.

JEWIS IN PRE-WAR GERMANY

Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust

The Boycott of Jewish Businesses

Kristallnacht

Voyage of the *St. Louis*

Antisemitism

The Nuremberg Race Laws

The Evian Conference

NAZI RULE

Hitler Comes to Power

SS Police State

Nazi Racism

The Murder of the Handicapped

The Nazi Terror Begins

Nazi Propaganda and Censorship

World War II in Europe

German Rule in Occupied Europe

THE FINAL SOLUTION

Ghettos in Poland

The Wannsee Conference

Deportations

Mobile Killing Squads

At the Killing Centers

Auschwitz

NAZI CAMP SYSTEM

Prisoners of the Camps

Forced Labor

Liberation

The Nuremberg Trials

Enemies of the State

Death Marches

The Survivors

RESCUE AND RESISTANCE

Rescue in Denmark

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

The War Refugee Board

Jewish Partisans

Killing Center Revolts

Resistance Inside Germany

Write your reflections, and be sure to regularly do self-checks to determine what you understand and what you may need to research further.

After completing your research, create something that expresses the synthesis of what you have learned.

RESOURCES

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—Resources for Educators
(ushmm.org/education/foreducators)

The Alliance Against Genocide
(againstgenocide.org)

Florida Center for Instructional Technology Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust
(fcit.usf.edu/Holocaust)

**University of Minnesota Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies
Educational Resources**
(chgs.umn.edu/educational)

Simon Wiesenthal Center Library & Archives
(wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=lsKWlBpJLnF&b=4441267)

Yad Vashem Holocaust Resource Center
(yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/index.asp)

Southern Law Poverty Center Teaching Tolerance Project
(tolerance.org/teach/?source=redirect&url=teachingtolerance)

University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute
(college.usc.edu/vhi)

US National Archives Holocaust-Era Assets
(archives.gov/research/holocaust/index.html)

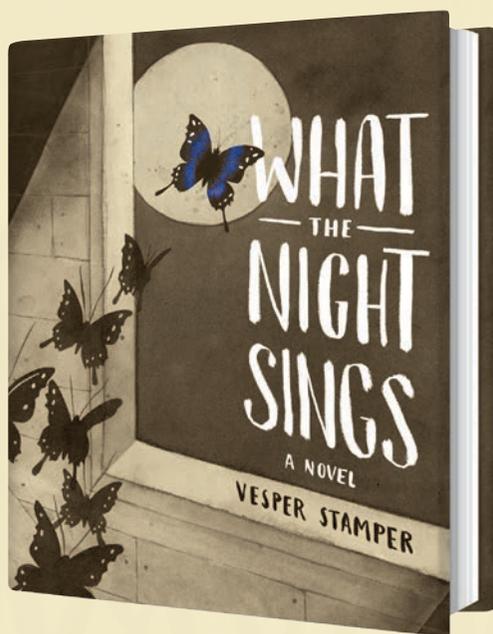
Internet Modern History Sourcebook—Holocaust Sources
(fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook44.html)

Internet Jewish History Sourcebook—Jewish History Since the Enlightenment
(fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/jewishbook.html)



Correlates to Common Core Standard Literacy in History/Social Studies: Key Ideas and Details R.H. 7.1, 7.2, 7.3, R.H. 8.1, 8.2, 8.3, R.H. 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3. Research to Build and Present Knowledge W. 7.7, W. 8.7, W. 9-10.7.

This guide was created by Dr. Rose Brock, an assistant professor of library science at Sam Houston State University, where she specializes in children’s and young adult literature. Dr. Brock was selected by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a national teaching fellow and is a member of a national corps of educators who serve as the core of the museum’s efforts to ensure quality Holocaust education in secondary schools.



PRAISE FOR *WHAT THE NIGHT SINGS*

★ “Evil that is impossibly difficult to comprehend and filled with word-images that will leave readers gasping. The author’s dedication says it all, in both Hebrew and English: ‘Remember.’”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

★ “Generously illustrated with Stamper’s haunting spot images and larger scenes. . . . The book is a strong addition to the bookshelf of Holocaust fiction.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

“A tour de force. This powerful story of love, loss, and survival is not to be missed.”

—Kristin Hannah, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Nightingale*

“*What the Night Sings* is a book from the heart, of the heart, and to the heart. Vesper Stamper’s Gerta will stay with you long after you turn the last page. Her story is one of hope and redemption and life—a blessing to the world.”

—Deborah Heiligman, award-winning author of *Charles and Emma* and *Vincent and Theo*



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