***If I Should Die Before I Wake***

**by Han Nolan**

Book Talk by Ariana Martin



<http://www.hannolan.com/index.htm>

**Author Biography:**

Helen Harris Nolan was born in Birmingham, Alabama. However, she spent her childhood and teenage years in New York. She was a very active child and recalls that she, “liked her own thoughts best.” Her fondest memories are when her father read to her at bedtime. This led to her making up her own stories, even though she did not start to write them down until she was older. She states that she did not do well in school until she was in sixth grade, the year she received her first creative writing assignment. Her English teacher made her feel smart, so after that she decided to do well in school, as simple as that. Fast forward to college and graduate school, and Nolan attended the University of North Carolina and Ohio State as a dance major.

After she got married, she felt that too much “wrong” time was spent dancing. She stopped dancing and went back to her “first love,” writing. Then her and her husband adopted 3 children. *If I Should Die Before I Wake* was Nolans first novel. She was inspired by news articles stating that there was a, “resurgence of Neo-Nazis in a neighboring town.” This brought up feelings she had when she first learned about the Holocaust. She knew she would be able to express those feeling at her older age.

***If I Should Die Before I Wake* Summary:**

Hilary is a teenage girl who swears she hates Jews. Her father died on the job working for a Jewish man, a building collapsed and crushed him to death because his boss did some dirty dealing with the construction. This forced her to grow up at five years old, her mother was not there for her, and she joined the Warriors, a neo-Nazi gang to fill the void she has in her heart. Hilary wakes up in a Jewish hospital after a motorcycle crash with her boyfriend, yet he is not there. Hilary is in a coma, and in this coma, she becomes a 13-year-old Jewish girl living in Poland. Chana witnessed her father murdered in front of her, and since that day forward Germans have been destroying the lives of innocent people all around her. Chana is experiencing the Holocaust. During this time Chana questions why God has put her and her people through these hardships and battles as she lives a life of poverty, starvation, and cruelty.

As the novel goes on, Hilary has a light shined on the current hate she has in her heart for Jewish people as she witnesses the life Shana had and as their souls and minds become one. This story is about hatred and survival, but it is also a story of compassion and empathy. One girl is on a journey of survival while the other is on a journey away from hatred.

**Quotes:**

““Death to Jews, Heil Hitler,” and you never felt such power. Like we owned the world. We owned it. I swear we held it in the palms of our hands, and it was up to us whether we were going to crush it or hold it up. Were like a real family. I knew I would die for any one of them if I had to. I would die for the cause” (27).

This quote is significant because the readers get an inside look as to *why* Hilary is so proud of being a Nazi. She has found a sense of belonging with the Warriors, the neo-Nazi gang. Hilary reveals that she feels power when she chants the hateful words. She calls them her real family; this makes the reader think about Hilary’s actual family and why she may not consider it her real family. Since her father passed away, Hilary has starved for her mother’s attention. However, her mother is in horrible shape and attempts suicide. She states she would die for any of them, which is a parallel to Chanas family dying around her. Overall, this quote reveals the why as to Hilary being so happy to spread hate.

“God is not on our side. God is nowhere!” “Hardships and suffering should not lesson our love for God.” “Do not confuse the things people do to one another with what God does and is, it is their sins that make God seem so far away” (197).

Shana is fed up with living in fear and constantly being on the brink of starvation. Her grandmother, since her mother has gone, is constantly reminding her to have faith and to remember everything happening around her in this tragic time. Shana questions Gods existence if he allows such evil to happen. Her grandmother tells her that these hard times do not define them, therefor it does not lesson their love for God. God and the people are separate, separate actions. Shana is confusing the evil people’s sins with Gods actions, and she must keep in mind to hold God close. However, as the novel comes to an end, Shana overcomes the unfortunate adversities that have been placed on her.

“If you can understand a person, you can love them. I remember it all, it’s my life too now, you and me we share the same past. Everyone shares the same past and the same future, but some will see it better than others” (281).

In the final chapter of this novel, Hilary comes to understand Shana. Readers are left with a breath of fresh air as they witness Hilary coming around and no longer hating Jewish people. All it takes is understanding to turn hate into love. Everyone does share the same past and future, and it is true that some will see it better than others. This quote is extremely significant because Shana wants to right her wrongs instantly. She reveals that she is scared that she will not be able to influence others to see as she can now see. But she is reminded that she has changed and that is all that matters.

**How to Teach & Why to Teach:**

This novel would be most appropriate for young adults in high school, since there is heavy material on all aspects of the Holocaust. Students would need to be mature to read about concentration camps, starvation, Nazi hate, and death. There is a young Nazi girl wishing death on Jewish people, and there is a young Jewish girl wishing death on German soldiers, Nazis. The main themes in this novel include religion, racism, death, and survival. Teenagers should read this book because it is a tragic part of history that needs to be discussed, it teaches true understanding of differences, and it reveals suffering and surviving that real people went through. Also, the characters are the same age as high school students. With presenting this book in a classroom, it is important to make sure all students are comfortable with participating in the discussion of this novel. Nolan offers graphic detail about the suffering Jewish people endured. However, it is an extremely useful novel that can teach anyone going through these emotions, good or bad, how to love and accept those that are different. Overall, this book is easy to read, which makes it better for comprehension and interaction. *If I Should Die Before I Wake,* offers themes that offer valuable knowledge that will be taken into a young adults adult life.

This novel fits into these categories of books, from *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning.*

* Books about Real-Life Experiences
* Books about Facing Death and Loss
* Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions
* Books about Courage and Survival

**Text Complexity:**

Lexile.com gives this novel a 410L-600L. overall, this novel was rated for middle schoolers. For Qualitative Complexity, even though there are some Jewish words, the vocabulary was straight forward as were the sentences. The sentence length was on the shorter side and that created an easy-to-understand novel that touched on complex ideas and history.

For Reader-Task inspiration, it is important to note that this novel is historical fiction. History does not always appeal to young adult readers, such as adventure or creative fiction novels. When considering the match between student and novel, students are typically introduced to European history in middle school. Therefor, students will most likely have that outside knowledge about the Holocaust and will not have to research further. Students should be motived to read this text because it is an opportunity to learn about something that happened to young adults the same age as them. A student’s life experience will most likely not match up to those in this novel, since they are all Holocaust survivors trying to make it out of mass genocide. However, the overall message of hope and faith can be relatable to student to text.

When considering Implicit Complexity, it is important to acknowledge the themes that go along with this story since they are some heavy themes, coming of age, survival, hope, faith, death, mass genocide, and anti-Semitism. Both Hilary and Chana are experiencing these themes as one, and the novel does it in such a way that allows the readers to experience and understand those themes as well. This novel show cases why those who spread hate and how those find the strength to go against it.

**Exeter Qualities & Problem Novel Qualities in *If I Should Die Before I Wake:***

* Imaginative and well-structured plots going beyond simple chronologies to include time shifts and differing perspectives,
* Characters who reflect experiences of teen readers, something that is not found in much of the literary canon, especially when it comes to strong female protagonists.
* Characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use the fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives.
* Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns.
* Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues.
* A strong, interesting, and believable plot centering on a problem that a young person might really have.
* The power to transport the reader into another person’s thoughts and feelings.
* Rich characterization: the characters “come alive” as believable with a balance of good and negative qualities.