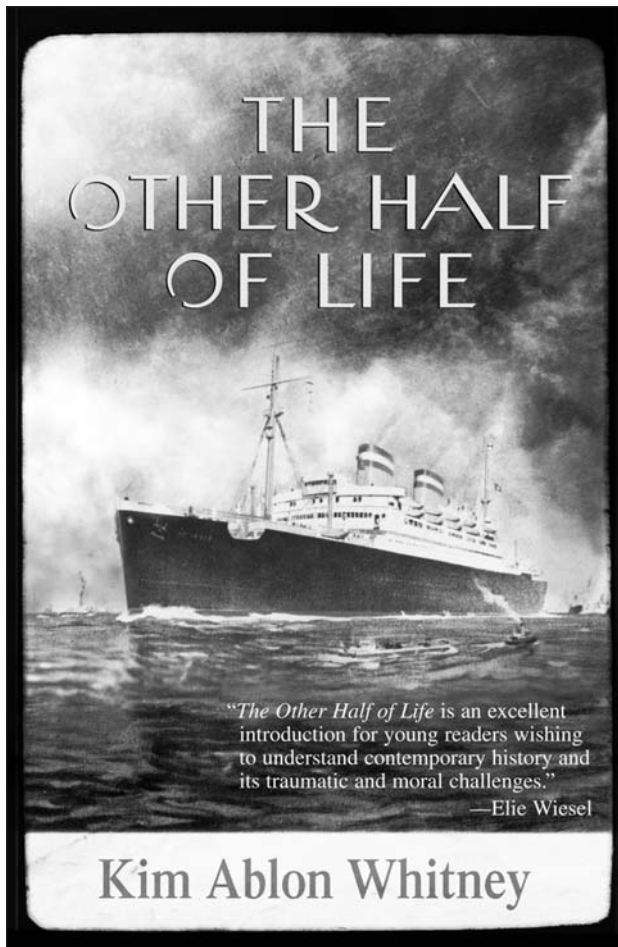


# BOOKNOTES

## readers guide



Alfred A. Knopf HC: 978-0-375-85219-0  
GLB: 978-0-375-95219-7

### THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Holocaust Studies  
Escape • Hope • Friendship  
Equality • Memories

GRADES 7 UP

### ABOUT THE BOOK

A heartbreaking novel based on the true story of a World War II voyage.

Nine hundred and thirty-seven Jewish passengers board the MS *St. Francis* in Hamburg, Germany, on May 13, 1939, bound for Havana, Cuba, and freedom from the Nazi reign in Germany. Among the passengers, Thomas, a young man traveling alone, falls in love with Priska, a young woman accompanied by her affluent Jewish family. Initially, the trip is filled with adventure, fun, games, and opportunities to spy on other passengers and the Nazis. The captain of the ship issues orders that the Jewish passengers be treated with the dignity and respect afforded every passenger, and the Jews receive first-class treatment and food, though the Nazis on the ship, clearly irritated, do their best to ignore them. But upon arrival in Havana, the journey turns menacing as the Cuban government will not allow the passengers to disembark because of new immigration laws. When the ship then sails to America and is once again turned away to return to Germany, Thomas and Priska must separate.

"We need to live to fight.  
Not fight to live."

—Mr. Werkmann (p.52)

"*The Other Half of Life* is an excellent introduction for young readers wishing to understand contemporary history and its traumatic and moral challenges."

—Elie Wiesel

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

To set the stage for reading the novel and to show the students how Hitler slowly stripped away the rights of the Jewish people, share the time line that is provided in the back of the book. Then ask students to define the following German words that are used throughout the book: *Reichskristallnacht*, *Konzentrationslager*, *Reichskulturkammer*, *Ortsgruppenleiter*.

## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- As Thomas works his way through the ship to the upper deck, he listens to people talk about what they used to have—a home, possessions, a business, a profession. He wonders why people insist on clinging to memories of what used to be, memories that only seem to bring pain. Do the memories of the Jews' past lives and what they have lost only bring pain to them? Why or why not?
- Though attracted to each other, Thomas and Priska have differences that seem to make it impossible for them to be together. What are these differences? How do they finally overcome their vast differences?
- The captain is a good man and insists on equal treatment for his Jewish passengers. What problems does this create? How does the captain maintain control of the Nazi officers on the ship?
- One of the lessons Thomas learned from his father was to trust his intuition. How does this prove to be valuable in light of what Thomas and Priska discover about the Ortsgruppenleiter? Does their discovery help the passengers?
- What is the basis for the competition between Manfred and Thomas? How do the young men try to prove who is the better man? Why does Manfred have the upper hand? Why does Manfred save Thomas from Kurt when he could have beaten him up?
- Thomas has a difficult time restraining himself from talking back to the Nazis on the ship, a difficulty that causes trouble for him and the older Jewish men who try to keep Thomas in line. Thomas finally begins to understand what his father taught him, "We need to live to fight, not fight to live." (p. 121) What did this mean to a Jew in 1939? Does the meaning change for our society today?
- Thomas knows little about the Jewish religion, but he learns a great deal from Priska and her family. Thomas feels at peace when he attends Shabbat, but he does not understand the rabbi's words, "More than the people of Israel have kept Shabbos, Shabbos has kept the people of Israel." (p. 109) What does the rabbi mean by this statement?
- Even though Priska's family has status, and they travel first class, they are discontent and face problems. How does Priska's family compare to Thomas's? What impact have their families had on each of their characters?
- On page 167, Priska explains the difference between faith and hope to Thomas: "Hope is wishing for something. Faith is believing in something." But on page 179, Thomas realizes that faith is something you feel innately, not something you will yourself to create. In light of what happens in the book, which of these definitions is most true? Why?
- Why is a chess tournament a good idea to keep the passengers occupied while they wait for news of disembarking? What events occur during the tournament that could prove to be disastrous? What does Thomas learn about Manfred that gives him insight into Manfred's actions?
- Why do the officials in so many countries refuse sanctuary for the Jews aboard the MS *St. Francis*? Would the officials have refused if they would have known they were sending the passengers to their death?

## WRITING ACTIVITIES

### CHARACTER LEARNED BY EXAMPLE

Even though the reader doesn't meet Thomas's father, the reader knows the kind of man he was through the reflection of his character and integrity in Thomas. With a partner, have students draw a character map of Thomas's dad, including his work for the underground, his interest in German literature, his excellence as a chess player, his trade, and other pertinent details of his life and death gathered from reading the book. Then ask each student to write an obituary of Mr. Werkmann utilizing the facts they have put together from their character map.

### LETTERS OF WOЕ

When the ship is refused at both Cuba and the United States, the *MS St. Francis* begins its journey back to Europe. The passengers are devastated, their feelings ranging from fear to anger and everything in between. Ask students to select any character from the book and ask them to write a letter to the person who was waiting for them in either Cuba or America, expressing that character's feelings and including information about the events that precipitated those feelings. Collect all the letters and place them in a book for the class to share with other classes.

### CAPTAIN'S SHIP LOG

The captain of the ship orders the Jews to be treated like any other passengers, but he is also privy to all of the events that transport them on a voyage bound for safety but destined for tragedy. Students should decide whether or not they think the captain knew the ship would be turned back and the voyage was just a plot of the Germans and reflect that in their journal entries. Have students write a series of entries in the captain's ship log that reflect the metamorphosis of the ship and its passengers from the beginning of the voyage to the end of the book. Have students add maps and other personal touches as they bind their logs.



## POST-READING ACTIVITY

- The students would benefit from knowing the true background of the *MS St. Louis* and what actually happened to the 937 Jews that were on the ship. Ask students to visit the following Web site: [www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/stlouis](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/stlouis)
- Have students read through the brief article. The related links to the left of the article will allow the students to visit several sites about the *MS St. Louis* and to discover background information about the passengers and their fate. Then discuss with the class the implications of the event. Have students write a reaction paper to share with the class.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kim Ablon Whitney** is the author of *The Perfect Distance* and *See You Down the Road*, both novels for young adults. Kim moved back to her hometown of Newton, Massachusetts, where she lives with her husband, two young sons, and a greyhound. She is a graduate of Tufts University, and has an M.F.A. in creative writing from Emerson College. She is a member of the PEN New England Children's Book Caucus and is the coordinator of the PEN New England Susan P. Bloom Discovery Award.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

### The Hall of Witness in the Holocaust Museum

[www.ushmm.org/museum/a\\_and\\_a/inside1/](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/a_and_a/inside1/)

### Tracing the Fate of the St. Louis Passengers

[www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/stlouis/](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/stlouis/)

### The History of Chess

[www.essortment.com/all/chesshistory\\_rmct.htm](http://www.essortment.com/all/chesshistory_rmct.htm)

### Emanuel Lasker—World Chess Champion

[www.chesscorner.com/worldchamps/lasker/lasker.htm](http://www.chesscorner.com/worldchamps/lasker/lasker.htm)

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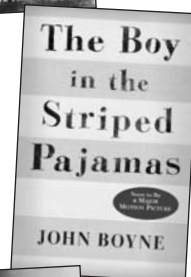
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Jerry Spinelli

Survival • Identity • Fear • Family • Friendship

Grades 5 up

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