

Goodbye, Mr Hitler

By Jackie French

Book Summary:

Third title following on from the award-winning and best-selling *HITLER'S DAUGHTER* and *PENNIES FOR HITLER*.

This is the story of Johannes, and Frau Timmins, and the strange girl now known as 'Helga'. It is also the story of how they survived the death camps, the vast wilderness faced by refugees in World War Two, and how they eventually found happiness in Australia. The final title in the multi award-winning *Hitler* series, this compelling story follows on from Heidi's story in *Hitler's Daughter* and Georg's in *Pennies for Hitler*, and shows us that evil must be fought and won. But once you've won, the hardest and most necessary battle is to understand and forgive.

And to learn how to love and live again.

Ages: 10 years+

Curriculum Topics

Language and Literacy
SOSE

Themes

- World War II, Hitler's Germany and Nazism
- The Holocaust and Anti-Semitism
- Displaced People and Refugees
- Australia During and After World War II
- Friendship and Love Versus Hate
- Morality and Choice

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BOOK SUMMARY

'So that was what he said. 'You are not him. If you are a ... a bacterium, you spread love, not hate. That is who you are, Helga or Heidi. You are love.' (p 184)

This is the third in Jackie French's series of novels set during and in the aftermath of World War II in Germany which began with *Hitler's Daughter* and continued with *Pennies for Hitler*. It begins in 1943 and takes the characters to 1951 in Australia, and then later (as an epilogue) to 1972. It is a novel about the agonies of war, and about the power of 'words in the heart' which have given so many the strength to endure war's horrors – the 'ogres' which haunt Johannes's waking dreams.

Ten-year-old Johannes Wolcheki is living a wealthy and comfortable life in Poland in 1943 when his world changes forever. His learned and loving medico Opa dies of the gripe, leaving Mutti and Vati, also doctors, to manage the hospital themselves. But one day in 1944, Vati doesn't come home from work and when Mutti investigates she's told to pack and join him in a new hospital in Germany. She and Johannes take their belongings and then find themselves herded onto a cattle train packed with people and transported for hours in horrendously crowded conditions and amidst a suffocating, fetid body stench which leaves many dead or dying as they reach their destination – Auschwitz, a concentration camp.

Meanwhile, Frau Timmins has been in hiding since changing her identity to Nurse Stöhlich after her Jewish husband Simon was murdered. She then comes to work in a maternity hospital run by a brave and benevolent nun named Sister Colomba who has been secretly protecting Jewish children there. Frau Timmins's son Georg has been spirited away, she hopes safely, to England. Her two young Jewish charges are discovered and murdered and she is sent to nurse at a concentration camp hospital. When Sister Columba is delivered to her terribly burned by radiation experiments she knows there is nothing she can do to save her. She is forced to watch a parade of children sent into the snow and then washed in freezing water in order to hasten their deaths. But she manages to rescue one boy – Johannes Wolcheki. When she gets him back to a barracks the doctor on duty recognises him as her son. The Russians are coming so the soldiers destroy files and take the inmates away to die. Johannes escapes and then Frau Timmins and his mother do as well.

Johannes is helped by a family, but contracts a fever enroute, and is left to die. Helga Schmidt and her eight-year-old brother Hannes and ailing Mutti rescue Johannes and they shelter in a barn. They're then advised by American soldiers to make their way to a displaced persons' camp where they find Johannes's parents and Helga's father, Herr Schmidt. He decides to apply as a single man to go to Australia hoping to sponsor Helga and her mother later. Frau Timmins receives word

that Georg is safe but when she reaches England, her sister-in-law Miriam tells her that he has been sent to Australia for safety. She joins him there and then his foster parents, the Peaslakes (whose niece Mud has become close to Georg) offer to sponsor the Wolchekis. Johannes learns to love music when he is taught violin by a Mr Mittelfeld, who also survived the concentration camps. Helga finally admits her secret to Johannes, but all ends happily and Australia proves a happy home for them all.

'It is not easy fighting ogres. No one who fights an ogre comes away unscarred, even if you cannot see the wounds. And so you owe the ogre hunters this. When the ogre has been vanquished, sit down upon the quiet earth and try to understand the ogre's anguish and his twisted fear. Only by understanding can we stop them rising in our midst. When you understand, forgive. And then stand up, and live. Live well.'
(p 194)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie French is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide-range of topics. Of her books she says on her website that:

There were over 140 at last count, slightly more than we have varieties of apples. If something is worth doing you may as well go heart and soul and boot leather ... I write for kids and adults, fiction, history, gardening, pests control, chooks and some that must be a nightmare for book shops to work out what genre they are.

Jackie was the Australian Children's Laureate (2014–15)
<http://www.childrenslaureate.org.au/>

Her website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work.
<<http://www.jackiefrench.com.au>>

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

Jackie French writes of her inspiration in her Author's Note (pp 195–6) and Acknowledgments (pp 197–202).

CHARACTERS

- **The Significance of Character:** Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In this work there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor ones.

Discussion Point: Discuss the characters of Johannes and Helga.

- **Major Characters:** Johannes Wolcheki; Dr and Dr Wolcheki, Johannes's parents; Helga Schmidt; Marta and Ernst Schmidt, Helga's parents; Frau Timmins; Georg, Frau Timmins's son; Maud ('Mud') Mutton.

Discussion Point: Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why?

- **Minor Characters:** Opa Wolcheki; Hannes Schmidt, Helga's brother; Sister Colomba; Hilde, Frau Timmins's sister; Miriam, Frau Timmins's sister-in-law; Mr Mittelfeld; Ron and Thel Peaslake, Georg's foster parents.

Discussion Point: Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? eg Miriam or Mr Mittelfeld. Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?

- **Character Arcs** are the curve on which key events show how a character grows or develops in response to events and to interactions with other characters in the novel.

Activity: Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour.

THEMES

- **World War II, Hitler's Germany and Nazism**

Activity: Research the build-up to WWII and how Hitler came to have such terrible power. For example, Germany's loss of WWI was one factor, and growing unemployment was another.

Discussion Point: What was the philosophy behind Nazism?

Activity: Discuss the role of the allied countries which opposed Hitler's Germany.

Activity: Trace the history of occupied Poland and how the country fared during and after the war?

- **The Holocaust and Anti-Semitism**

Activity: Trace the growth of Anti-Semitism and how Hitler was able to generate such evil actions implemented by so many supposedly 'ordinary' people.

Discussion Point: It is said that some six million European Jews were killed by Nazi Germany. How did deaths on such a scale escape the attention of ordinary people? Or did many simply refuse to acknowledge the evidence?

Discussion Point: People who harboured those who were Jewish were treated very harshly so that often people like Hilde were fearful for their own families if they assisted a Jewish person. Research the role played by those who worked secretly to shelter Jews during World War II.

Discussion Point: After the war a nurse refuses to feed a Jewish woman in the ward and Vati exiles her from the hospital (p 99). Why did people continue to resent the Jews even after the extermination of millions had become so well-known?

Activity: Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) about her experiences as a Jewish child hiding during World War II is a classic. Read other such memoirs revealing the persecution of Jews. [See **Bibliography**.]

- **Displaced People and Refugees**

Discussion Point: 20 million people were said to be displaced in Europe and had to be re-settled. Research the plight they found themselves in and how various countries responded to their need for re-settlement.

Discussion Point: 'That was when Herr Schmidt sat on his bunk with Frau Schmidt and Helga and Johannes one night and said, 'I must become a single man.' 'No,' said Frau Schmidt faintly. 'Please ...' He took her hand. 'I must. It is the only way to get a home for us.' (p 110) Several countries passed laws allowing only single men to emigrate as labourers to work (as Ernst Schmidt) does on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. What challenges did these men and the families that followed them confront when they were re-united?

Activity: During WWII children were sent to Australia to escape the air raids and the war. Georg Timmins is one of the lucky ones placed with a kind and generous family. Many were not so lucky and were sent to homes where they were abused. Research this topic.

Discussion Point: Mud finds that Georg is being bullied at school for being a 'reffo' and then takes him to a milk bar for a treat where: 'They discussed Freud and his theories of the subconscious mind as they spooned up ice cream and sauce, and how people who felt insecure were more likely to be the ones who subconsciously feared the stranger, or anyone who they thought had more than they did, money or intelligence.' (p 149) Discuss this theory about those who bully newcomers. Does this excuse their behaviour?

- **Australia During and After WWII**

Discussion Point: 'Australia had only been bombed a little, in the war, but most of its men and many women had fought, instead of building houses, cars or furniture, so there were not enough houses for everyone to have their own now, nor had houses been repaired or tended much during the war.' (p 146) Research the part Australians played in war both in conflict and on the homefront. How did the country recover and respond to housing shortages and manufacturing challenges after the war?

Activity: 'But she had been happily German, *was* still German, even if she was becoming Australian too, hummed German songs and had to stop herself, longed to recite the German poems that George's father had loved so much, that the child who was now George had once loved too. She could not. Instead she was grateful that she and her son bore an English surname, so those who met them assumed

their background was English, and they now were 'dinkum Aussies, through and through'. (p 160) Many citizens of countries defeated in war find themselves ostracised in countries which were aligned with the victors. After both WWI and WWII Germans had to assimilate in order to make a new home in Australia. Research this topic further.

- **Friendship and Love Versus Hate**

Discussion Point: It was difficult for those who had been through the hatred of Hitler's Germany to resist the temptation to hate; they also had difficulty expressing love. But when Frau Timmins sees Georg again her hard heart melts. 'She held her son, her loving son. She held her son with love.' (p 126) This was the lesson Sister Columba had taught Johannes as well through the stories she told him in the camp. Frau Timmins's letter to her sister Hilde. (pp168–9) is another step in her recovery from the disease of hate. How difficult would it have been to write that letter?

Discussion Point: Helga's guilt is finally assuaged by Johannes' ardent belief in her capacity for love.

- **Survival and Hope**

Discussion Point: Words and books are powerful metaphors for hope in this and other Holocaust narratives such as Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2006) and Morris Gleitzman's *Once* series. Discuss how writing and reading can be a panacea to suffering, referencing Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) and other such narratives.

Discussion Point: 'We are slaves here, but we are not mad, like those outside,' said the older boy. 'Soon — if we can live — we will be free.' (p 42) This sort of statement is indicative of the indomitable spirit which allowed some to survive even the horrors of Auschwitz.

Discussion Point: What else gives the characters in this novel hope?

- **Morality and Choice**

Discussion Point: Frau Timmins eventually forgives her sister Hilde for refusing to harbour her and Georg after Simon was murdered by the Nazis. Discuss Hilde's actions and how you might have responded in the same situation. How easy is it to be 'brave' in war?

Discussion Point: What other moral issues are canvassed in this novel?

KEY QUOTES

The following quotes relate to some of the Themes above. You might like to present any one of them (or two related quotes) to your students as a catalyst for further discussion, or as the subject of an essay outlining how the quote reflects a theme which is central to this novel:

<p>'Even in times like these,' said Sister Columba, 'there are those who cheer the Führer with their mouths, but mercy still sings inside their hearts.' (p 5)</p>	<p>'We cannot give our children safety,' Sister Columba had said a year earlier. 'We cannot give them laughter, for they must be quiet. We cannot properly feed their starved bodies. But we can give them joy.' (p 12)</p>
<p>'The soldier was billeted because the house lived in a country called 'war'. War kept changing, in ways too complicated for Johannes to understand. First Germany was an enemy and then it became their leader, a country of culture and courage that would lead the world. The house and the people who lived there with it had to change as the country called war changed too.' (p 13)</p>	<p>'I helped you because ...' Her face twisted in anguish. 'Because I must,' she said at last. 'I ... I can't say more. But I have to help people. I must.' (p 78)</p>
<p>'Every person must go home. If you could not go home because the Russians had occupied your homeland, as they occupied Poland, and the part of Berlin where the Schmidts had lived, you were 'a displaced person'. Displaced people would have new camps, created especially for them. Displaced, thought Johannes. It was a good word. He had been displaced from the real world, swallowed.' (p 92)</p>	<p>'But what you did in this world was less important than where you were or what you were, like being jüdisch.' (p 101)</p>
<p>'Johannes saw pity in the major's eyes, and anger and guilt, and all the feelings of a good man who had seen too much</p>	<p>'It was as if Helga had wiped the professor's box of sand smooth, with no memories left on it at all.' (p 111)</p>

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<p>and could do nothing, or not more than he had done.’ (p 104)</p>	
<p>‘But where Helga worked, so did Johannes. Where Johannes worked, Helga came too. Partly it was to talk English together for Helga would need English if — when — she and Frau Schmidt could join Herr Schmidt in Australia. But mostly it was because they had faced death together and chosen life, and worked out how to keep it; and every day that they survived in this camp was another that they survived together. We fit together, me and Helga, thought Johannes.’ (p 113-14)</p>	<p>‘But what if America or Canada or Brazil will not let you be doctors?’ demanded Johannes. ‘They are older nations than Australia, more civilised. There would be more choice of jobs there. Perhaps I might be a salesman for medical supplies.’ Vati lifted his chin. ‘We have survived, Johannes. Whatever is before us now, we will survive that too.’(p 117) ‘But they were primitive in Australia, she knew that ...’(p 120)</p>
<p>‘Is Australia beautiful?’ ‘Can I be an architect there, as I was before the war?’ ‘Don’t worry about it,’ said the Australians. ‘Of course you can practise your professions in Australia. Australia is the best country in the world. The weather is as warm as Naples and there are beaches everywhere, with sunshine and golden sand. Australians believe in a fair go for everyone. No worries! In five years you will become Australians too!’ (p 138)</p>	<p>‘Most of her own life was a kind of secret now. She would not burden George with what she had endured in the concentration camp, or had been forced to do there to survive. Neither her son nor his children should ever have to carry memories like that.’ (p 160)</p>

CURRICULUM TOPICS

Language and Literacy

- ***This novel is a work of Historical Fiction or 'Faction' — it tells a story set in the past including real and imagined people.***

Discussion Point: Jackie French uses historical research as the background to this fictional text in a creative, lively and imaginative way. She also admits in her **Author's Note** (pp 195–6) that she has used some creative license in telling this story. [See also **SOSE** below.]

Activity: Read some of the historical fiction about this era listed in the **Bibliography** and compare to this novel.

- **Suspense in a story hinges on the intended ending and also on what the reader or audience expects to happen.**

Discussion Point: Helga's secret is one suspenseful aspect of this narrative. What others were there?

Activity: What was the most suspenseful moment in the novel, in your opinion?

- ***Narrative Structure — Relies on chapters leading the reader from one to the next, and requires both strong chapter beginnings and endings.***

Activity: Chapter endings are dramatic turning points. Choose a chapter ending. What might have happened immediately after the ending of that chapter?

- ***Narrative Perspective*** — this story is told in third person, past tense, with a first person Prologue by Johannes, and with the end of Chapter 45 also written in first and second person, present tense, by Johannes. It also contains some letters: from Ernst to his wife Marta and daughter Helga Schmidt (pp 114–5); from Georg to his mother Frau Timmins (pp 119–120); from Frau Timmins to the Wolchekis (pp 127–9); from Johannes to Helga (pp 143–4); from Frau Clementine, Sister Columba's niece to Frau Timmins (pp 167–8); from Frau Timmins (Annaliese) to her sister Hilde (pp 168–9).

Discussion Point: How might the story have changed had it been written by Helga in first person?

Discussion Point: Write a letter as if written by Hilde to Frau Timmins in reply to hers.

- **Symbolism**

Discussion Point: The 'ogre' of fairy tale is a central trope or symbol in this story:

'And finally Johannes realised. This was the belly of the ogre, and there was no escape. For the ogre was called Hitler.' (p 37)

'Perhaps when an ogre swallows you there never is a true escape. He was too old to think about ogres now, he told himself. But the ogre had gripped him too long.' (p 139)

How does this symbol convey meaning throughout this novel? Were there other symbols employed in the narrative?

- **Use of Ornate, Poetic Language, and Devices such as Simile and Metaphor**

Activity: The novel often employs suggestive language. Choose other quotes which include effective usage of literary devices and add to the table below:

Simile	
Metaphor	
Personification	'Explosions snorted great gleams of red and yellow snot into the air.' (p 58)
Alliteration	
Other	

- **Setting**

Discussion Point: Setting is evoked via all the senses. Find examples in this text of description which employs sight, hearing, taste, smell and feeling.

- **Critical Literacy**

This text might be used to encourage students to use critical literacy skills.

Activity: Discuss for example, early hints that Helga is not quite who she seems.

Discussion Point: If there were a fourth novel in this series of companion novels which suggested event or character (from any of the three novels) might it further explore?

- **Visual Literacy**

Images can enhance text in a variety of ways.

Activity: The cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents, and a marketing tool as well. Examine the cover of this book. What does it suggest about the narrative?

Activity: Create a new cover for the work, drawing on either theme or incident to create the image. Use techniques such as collage. Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

Activity: Create a Book Trailer based on this book. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)

SOSE

- **History**

Although this is a fiction, it also gives you insights into its historical background.

Activity: One of the points Jackie French makes in her **Author's Note** is that the war was so complex that any rendering will be different in detail to another one. Choose a particular event and read various historical accounts of it.

Activity: Brainstorm the aspects of history revealed in this text and make a list of topics. Then invite the class in groups to research any aspect of history which is outlined in this text.

Activity: Much of what an historical fiction writer does is to take the reality and to elaborate on it imaginatively, for example, Helga is not a real person, and the question of Hitler having foster children is still shrouded in secrecy, but Jackie French has made these details suit the story she wanted to tell. Read what other writers of historical fiction say about the role of the imagination in illuminating history.

Activity: Choose any historical figure introduced in this text and make a study of their lives.

- **Social Class and Culture**

This is another aspect of the historical context explored in this novel.

Discussion Point: The Wolchekis are both doctors; Frau Timmins is well-educated, her husband was an academic, and his sister, Miriam, a senior bureaucrat in Britain. She later discovers that she has enough money to buy property in Australia, albeit in a slum area. The Wolchekis are sponsored with her assistance, but arrive with nothing. How difficult must it have been for such intelligent and well-to-do people to arrive in Australia with no property, and then to live in such straitened circumstances? How much does social recognition determine a person's self-esteem?

Discussion Point: Without sponsors like the Peaslakes and assistance from people like Miriam they might have found themselves without work and struggling to survive. Many refugees were (like Herr Schmidt) unable to work in their chosen professions and forced to work as labourers because of immigration laws. It is little wonder that often migrants settled near their own people – language and social barriers made them desperate to experience the sense of community they had enjoyed in their own homelands.

Discussion Point: Their customs (such as the food they ate) set these immigrants apart from white Australians who had emigrated long before, largely from the UK. How did the arrival of such post-war immigrants change Australian culture?

- **Values**

This novel conveys a strong sense of moral values.

Discussion Point: What values are particularly evident in this text?

Activity: Create a table and list some of the values demonstrated in any of the scenes or events in this book with a corresponding quote to illustrate it.

FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discussion Point: The prologue is written in Johannes's voice and details what happened when the 'ogre' swallowed him, Helga, Frau Timmins and 44 million others. Why does he then say that: 'This is the story of how we three learned to live' (p 1)?

2. Discussion Point: After the prologue, the novel opens with: 'On the corner by the park lived a house of love and stories.' (p 3) How does this establish the novel and its themes?
3. Discussion Point: 'Frau Timmins had seen patients like this before. Radiation experiments, one of the many kinds performed on prisoners there.' (p 44) Why were such experiments conducted? Research this topic (taking care to ensure that your students are mature enough to consider such harrowing material).
4. Discussion Point: One of the tenets of Hitler's code was that a perfect Aryan Race needed to be developed by 'refining' the population and exterminating the 'imperfect'. (Helga feels she has disappointed this ideal with her facial birthmark and limp, which she assumes is why he has so rarely acknowledged her.) The concept of 'eugenics' inspired the Lebensborn Program which encouraged women of Aryan extraction to bear 'perfect' children. Such concepts seem appalling today, but consider in relation to the rise of Neo-Nazism throughout the world, and the views of right wing figures and groups which are currently becoming more prominent in Europe such as Geert Wilders, a Dutch leader of The Party of Freedom <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geert_Wilders> or Marine le Pen, French leader of the National Front <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_Le_Pen> What drives people towards such extreme views?
5. Discussion Point: Georg's life in Australia is a mystery to Frau Timmins who was separated from him for some years, and in this book we meet him when he is a young adult. However, readers can find out more about his life by reading Pennies for Hitler (2012) one of the three books in the series. Read and discuss it in relation to the other two books.
6. Discussion Point: 'Because our soldiers, the Germans, killed their soldiers even after they surrendered. Because German soldiers did terrible things to Russian people, so when the Russians come, they'll do the same.' (p 73) Abuse often causes people to abuse others in revenge; how can we prevent such cycles of violence? How can damaged people be taught to love instead of hate?
7. Discussion Point: Unfortunately those traumatised by war often keep their experiences secret. This novel suggests that in telling a story to your family members you can share and thus mitigate or ease its pain.
8. Discussion Point: The Wolcheki family and Frau Timmins survive largely because the end of the war was approaching when they were interned. The longer one lived in

such camps the less likely you were to survive. Research the number of fatalities during this conflict.

9. Discussion Point: The prejudices of the Germans, and of the Australian children who bully Johannes at his first school might be compared to those shown by some members of the general populace in confronting the refugee issue today in Australia.

10. Discussion Point: What does this novel suggest about life in post-war Australia?

11. Discussion Point: Read *Hitler's Daughter* (1999) which is Helga's story told in the present day by a girl named Anna who is telling her friends a 'story'. How does it illuminate what you have read in *Goodbye, Mr Hitler*?

12. Discussion Point: Did you find the ending resolved the narrative or did you wish to hear more of the time between 1951 and 1972 when these characters were establishing their lives in Australia?

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE TEXT

Jackie French's Author's Note (pp 195–6) refers to the historical and cultural issues suggested by this text.

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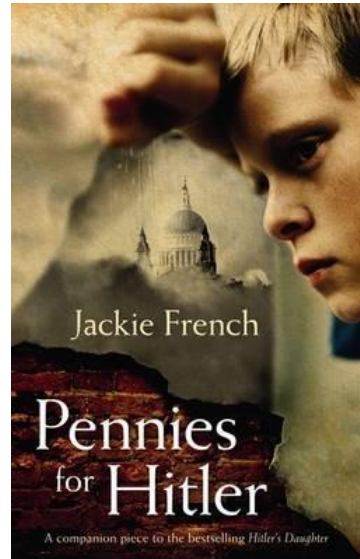
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