

## HETTY: A TRUE STORY

HETTY VEROLME

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YEAR LEVEL: Y7–12

### ABOUT THE BOOK

An extraordinary story of the struggle and survival of a group of children in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, this autobiographical tale details the motherly role adopted by the adolescent author during her time in the camp.

This moving memoir reveals how Hetty and her siblings survived after they were taken from their parents and imprisoned at the Children's House in Belsen, Germany.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hetty Verolme was born in Belgium in 1930. In 1931 her family moved to Amsterdam in the Netherlands. In 1943, she and her family were rounded up and sent to the Nazi concentration camps.

After surviving the war and working for a time in the fashion industry, she emigrated to Australia in 1954. She worked in many jobs, from waitress to bus conductress, from door-to-door retailing to selling real estate. She eventually established herself as a successful shopping centre developer.

In 1972, Hetty Verolme was presented with 'Most Successful Migrant' award. In 1977 she was appointed to the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council, and for many years she was actively involved in a wide range of community and charity organizations.

### THEMES

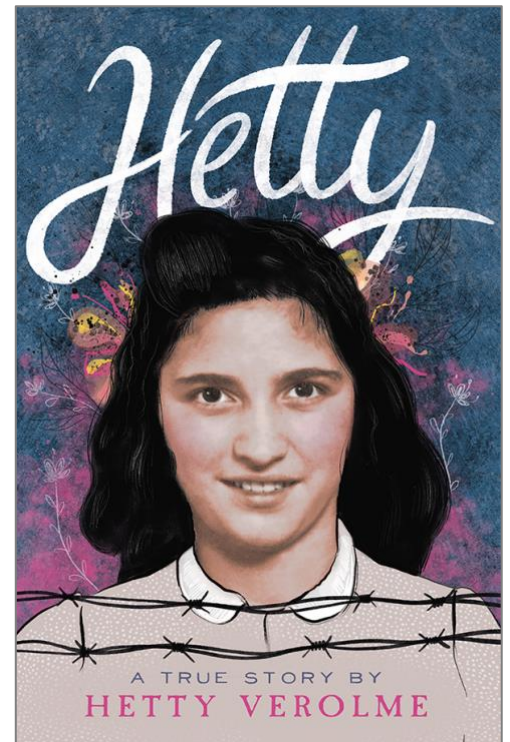
- World War II: fear, suffering and hope
- Resilience and survival
- The kindness and cruelty of humans
- Growing up

### AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Y7–12 English
- Y10 History

### USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: [hetty.com.au](http://hetty.com.au)
- Bergen-Belsen website: [bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en](http://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en)
- Facing History: [facinghistory.org](http://facinghistory.org)
- Holocaust Encyclopedia, Bergen-Belsen: Maps: [encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/bergen-belsen-maps](http://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/bergen-belsen-maps)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: [ushmm.org](http://ushmm.org)



## CLASSROOM IDEAS

### Establishing Context

1. Pre-reading discussion:
  - a. Explore students' existing knowledge of WWII / The Holocaust / concentration camps (e.g. think-pair-share or create a whole-class brainstorm on the board).
  - b. Why is it important in modern society that we learn about the Holocaust?
2. Identify key locations from the text on a map of Europe (e.g. Amsterdam, Bergen-Belsen).
  - a. Where were other WWII concentration camps located? Provide students with a map of Europe and ask them to add in locations of concentration camps. Highlight Bergen-Belsen. It is situated on the Lüneburger Heide (English: Luneburg Heath), between the small towns of Bergen and Belsen, 25 kilometres from the town of Celle, and 65 kilometres from the city of Hanover.
3. View the following 10-minute video clip to introduce the Holocaust and antisemitism: War of Annihilation: Targeting the Jews of Europe [facinghistory.org/resource-library/war-annihilation-targeting-jews-europe](https://facinghistory.org/resource-library/war-annihilation-targeting-jews-europe) (viewer discretion – contains confronting images).
4. Ask students in small groups to look up definitions of important vocabulary in the text that may be unfamiliar, e.g. SS (p. 14), gentile (p. 17), bayonet (p. 17), guilder banknote (p. 20), macabre (p. 217).

### Discussion Questions

1. The story of Henny, who tries to help Hetty's family, is an example of resistance against the Nazis. Describe another example of resistance in the text.
2. Write down how you feel at different points in the story, such as:
  - a. the arrival at Westerbork (p. 33);
  - b. the separation of children from their parents (pp. 99–101);
  - c. when Phillipje dies (p. 167);
  - d. the English soldier's arrival at Bergen-Belsen (p. 219);
  - e. Hetty's reunion with her parents (pp. 273–274).
3. Many different nationalities and cultures came together at Bergen-Belsen. What do we learn about the Dutch tradition of Christmas in Chapter 2?
4. Jewish prisoners were forced to wear the yellow Star of David (p. 41). Research what other symbols existed for different types of prisoners.
5. Explain the encounter that Hetty describes as **'the start of the degeneration of our values'** (p. 45). Find another example in the text where Hetty must compromise her values for the sake of survival.
6. When Hetty's Uncle Max hoarded food and did not share, Hetty explains **'This is how it was in Belsen. People became very mean, only thinking of their own survival.'** (p. 66). Find other examples in the text where the difficulty of life in the camp turned people to cruelty or selfishness.
7. The SS are described as being greatly amused by watching the **'human misery'** (p. 71) they caused. Which event in the text is this referring to?
8. When Hetty discovers a hole in her front tooth, she visits the Bergen-Belsen dentist and receives fillings with no anaesthetic (p. 76). Can you find another example of Hetty's immense resilience?
9. Draw a timeline of events in the novel.
10. Find a map of Bergen-Belsen ([encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/bergen-belsen-maps](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/bergen-belsen-maps)) and try to locate different parts of the camp described in *Hetty*.
11. How different would Hetty's story of the children at Bergen-Belsen be if it was told in the style of a report, instead of as a memoir?
12. Interview a grandparent, older relative or neighbour about a historical event they remember or were involved in. If they remember World War II, ask questions about that. Record your conversation, then transcribe the interview.
13. **'Uprooting people en masse was a cunning and sadistic technique that created panic in our hearts.'** (p. 87). Where is this happening in the world today? What are some examples of modern antisemitism?

## Creative Writing

1. Imagine that you are one of the younger children separated from their parents and write from their perspective of being taken away and abandoned in the SS garage where Hetty took charge (Chapter 7, p. 102).
2. Write from the perspective of the first English soldier who came to liberate Bergen-Belsen and include the atrocities he would have encountered (p. 219).

## History

1. Choose one of the following topics to research, then write a summary of key points and present it to the class:
  - a. The Nazi Party
  - b. Antisemitism
  - c. The Allies in WWII
  - d. The Holocaust
2. Research The Netherlands pre-WWII: what ethnicities lived there at the time? How has this changed over the last 80 years?

## Health and Physical Education

1. In the inhumane, unsanitary conditions of the Bergen-Belsen camp, many prisoners battled and often succumbed to serious diseases. Assign different student groups to research the following:
  - a. dysentery
  - b. typhus
  - c. tuberculosis



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