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English 112B

Dr. Warner

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Book Talk: *A Night Divided* by Jennifer Nielsen

Author’s Webpage: <https://jennielsen.com/>



<https://jennielsen.com/about2>

Nielsen usually writes young-adult science fiction/fantasy novels, but *A Night Divided* marks her first historical fiction novel and is about a young girl and her family escaping from East to West Berlin in the 1960s. Nielsen’s second historical novel *Resistance* is about a girl in living in Nazi-occupied Poland and was released in 2018.

Quick Facts:

* Favorite movie(s): *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy
* Favorite author: JK Rowling
* Favorite food: Phở

*A Night Divided*: Summary

Four years have passed since August 13, 1961, the day the Berlin Wall was erected to prevent East Berliners from escaping to the West. Those trapped in the East include twelve-year-old Gerta Lowe, who has not seen her father Aldous in over four years. One day, during a dreary stroll along the wall, she sees her father gesturing “digging” on the other side and she realizes she has to tunnel beneath the Wall to freedom in the West!

So much depends upon this tunnel: Gerta yearns for a life free from fear and manipulation for herself, her brother Fritz, and her mother. But the Stasi, the East German secret police, keeps close ears on her, literally—they have bugged her family’s home! Who can she trust? Can she evade the soldiers who seem to be everywhere? And will her cautious mother join her on her journey to freedom?

1. “We need to get to the west, to be with them,” I said. […] “Peter is going to the west tonight. Nobody knows about it but me” (37-8).

* Why it is important: This is the first time in the novel we hear about serious attempts regarding escaping to the West. We also get a personal moment between Gerta and Fritz—or so we think; it turns out that the Stasi are listening to this very conversation and use this information to foil the plan and it ultimately costs escapee Peter his life. In today’s age of social media, we are very concerned about our privacy; imagine living in a society where privacy nonexistent. Further, what you say goes into a file to consider whether you are or will become an enemy of the state. Gerta and Fritz learn this damning fact the hard way in this scene.

1. But we did have a tunnel. […] “There is more for your family in the west. It’s the life you would want for them, if you could choose” (196-7).

* Why it is important: Inevitably, the tunnel is discovered by a prying soldier named Muller who receives a tip from Gerta’s neighbor. In this moment, all hope should be lost for the Lowe children, but Gerta is able to make a pathos appeal to Muller, telling him his family could have a better life in the West and should join them the night they escape. Instead of spending what could have been her last moment seeing the evil in Muller, she sees his virtue and appeals to that side of him. For the first time, she trusts her enemy and it turns out to be a courageous decision.

1. Muller mumbled something to me about letting him go, but I ignored him and kept dragging. […] We might not be out of the tunnel, but we were in the west (313-4).

* Why it is important: Gerta and Muller trust each other completely; they will both do anything for each other. Muller shows what it means to give up everything for his family, something a father should never have to do. Further, we see Gerta’s character complexity; she does not initially trust in Muller and it cause her guilt when he gives his life for her and his family. This excerpt shows what it means to make sacrifices. Also, did I mention Gerta and her family successfully escape to the West?

How might you use this book in a classroom?

**Teaching Ideas/Resources:**

1. A book about a definitely point in history: historical fiction, and that is what *A Night Divided* is. Coordinate with the social studies/history teachers at your school to see how this novel could fit into a unit about post-WWII/Cold War history.
2. Each chapter begins with either an inspirational quotation or proverb. Have students choose one of the forty seven chapter headings and present on the history of the quotation/proverb; what was the context, why should we care, and why did Nielsen choose it to preface that specific chapter?
3. We get this story from the first person perspective of Gerta. But how would a different character see a similar story based on what we know from the novel? Rewrite a chapter of the novel from an appropriate character for that chapter. How would have Fritz seen it? Her father on the other side? Her mother with her anxiety? Muller who worries about his family? A Stasi agent spying on the Lowe family?
4. A popular text at the middle school level is *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James Houston. Compare and contrast the two texts. How are the protagonists similar? What does this tell us about oppression existing so close or within places where liberty and freedom are expectations?
5. If the book is taught a higher level where showing rated-R films is not an issue, the film German film *The Lives of Other* can be shown as a complementary piece, which explores East Berlin from the perspective of a Stasi agent. What insight about the Stasi is illuminated by this film that is only alluded to in the novel?

**Five reasons to read this book/present it to a teen:**

1. Because it is about “Real-life Experiences”: Yes, this book is historical fiction but many of the details about Berlin during the Cold War are accurate. Many people tried to escape in various ways from the East to the West over the span of almost forty years. Their experiences and struggles may be different in the details, but the Wall was a very real barrier that literally split family, friends, and neighbors. This book is for those “who made it out. And for all those who didn’t.”
2. Because it is about “Facing Death and Loss”: Gerta has to deal with the guilt of knowing that her best friend’s brother death was partly her responsibility. But her ultimate personal struggle is finding a way to cope with the loss of her father and one of her older brothers. Everyone speaks as if Aldous Lowe is dead even though he lives less than a few miles from her. Additionally, she faces the threat of death constantly. Do not look over the wall for too long. Do not say anything about the tunnel. Do not tell your best friend too much because she might be spy. Living in East Berlin means facing death every day.
3. Because it is about “Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”: If everyone is a Berliner, why are some of us free while some of us are oppressed? This is what Gerta must think every day. Few moments in history are better paradigms for discrimination on the basis of (for the lack of a better word) address. Further, while twelve year olds may never have to consider the decision of to dig or not to dig, all have to deal with the effects their decisions have on parents, siblings, and friends.
4. Because it is about “Courage and Survival”: Perhaps this is where *A Night Divided* fits the strongest because its plot revolves around this theme, but this is only one of the categories the novel fits in (as shown above).
5. Because it could be an “Allegory, Fantasy, Myth, or Parable”: People who can hear what you say without being near you? A long wall that divides two superpowers? A tunnel that symbolizes hope and a path to freedom? Berlin in the 1960s is a place you have to be to understand; Jennifer Nielsen takes us there in *A Night Divided*.

Text Complexity

**Lexile Level**: 810. Recommended for Grades 4-6. Can be adapted for middle school.

**Dale-Chall Formula worksheet**

Raw score 1.773 [ ? ]

Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 1.773) [ ? ]

Final Score: 5.4 [ ? ]

**New Dale-Chall Readability Index:**

Grade level: Grades 5 – 6

Qualitative complexity: This novel possesses several of the Exeter qualities, but it excels in the third Exeter quality of “reflecting teen experience,” especially that of strong female protagonists. Gerta definitely is one of those characters who is strong when she needs to be as well as someone who has learn from her flaws. It adds a complexity to her character, which makes her a protagonist who “go beyond typical experiences,” which is Exeter quality four, which I believe is the most important quality.

Reading this novel as an adult, one can see how this novel is fit for the late-elementary/early middle school reader; its language is specific and the vocabulary is appropriate for those grades. The chronology is linear with the exception of the events of the first few chapter which are flashbacks on the night before the Berlin Wall is erected; this make it intuitively easy to follow the events of the novel without having to keep notes. The knowledge demands that student know that terrible things do happen to innocent people, but spares the details that may not be so pleasant (such as brutal violence and torture). Knowing this, this book should not be introduced to a reader in the primary grades of elementary school. Additionally, there is a certain amount of history that the reader must know from studying the Cold War. The plot is simplistic in certain passages; this does not mean that conflict is not present; however, the conflict solutions are sometimes best-case-scenario to prevent convolution. These are the reasons why I believe the book is not an award/honor book. However, that does not mean that this book is not an influential book for its target audience; it is a page-turner with many larger-than-life themes.

Reader-Task considerations: Jennifer Nielsen prefaces each chapter with a quotation/proverb, which often serves as a thematic lens for when the chapter plans to go. This device draws in readers as these quotation/proverb are always insightful and seeks to put the chapter’s words into a larger context. If nothing else, this novel is classified as a thriller which means readers are primarily trying to find out what happens next; this is perhaps one of the strongest qualities the books has in term of accessibility and readability for its target audience.

Implicit complexity: This books does do an outstanding job of showing more than it tells. Telling happens most often when the narrator has to because she is unsure of the situation; for example, when she tells about her feelings towards her friend or her mother. It is almost as if telling is used as a device because if it is shown, the Stasi will know it happen and thus things will end gravely.

There are always liberties that must be taken when writing about such a sensitive topic; many atrocious things happened as a result of the Berlin Wall and this novel seems to encapsulate it into a single example of Peter’s death. However, this novel is not trying to speak for everyone even though it can be interpreted that ways since it is one of the few narratives about the Berlin Wall and its effect written in English. It should not have to serve as the novel that gets to all the nitty gritty of the Berlin Wall because it is the story from the eyes of a twelve year old girl. It capture the details that a twelve year old girl would notice: family, friendship, fear, feelings, foibles, and freedom. *A Night Divided* stands out in this way: it gets the specifics right.

Even though *A Night Divided* is a middle school text, it addresses some of the high school Reading Standards for Literature very well:

* **Grade 9-10, Standard 3**: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
* **Grade 9-10, Standard 7**: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

Reading Standards for Literature (Middle School):

* **Grade 6, Standard 3**: Describe how a particular story’s or drama’s plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.
* **Grade 6, Standard 5**: Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.
* **Grade 6, Standard 6**: Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.