

# The Fiftieth Gate:

## A Journey Through Memory

### MARK RAPHAEL BAKER

ISBN 9781925498615

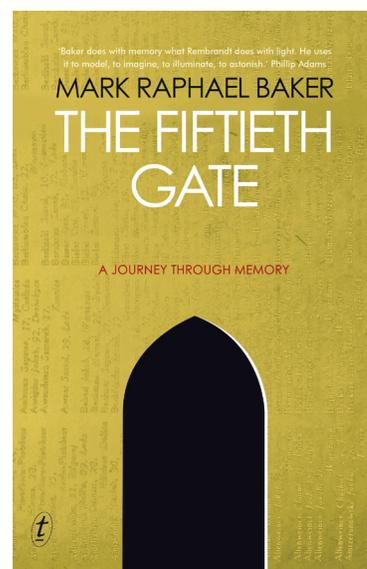
RRP AU\$24.99

Non-Fiction

RECOMMENDED FOR YEARS: 11–12

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#### CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning, and connect it to audience, purpose and context. They aim to encompass a range of forms and include a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they include the integration of ICT and life skills.

#### SYNOPSIS

*What right did I possess, as a child of survivors, to recreate an account of the Holocaust as if I was there?*

In writing *The Fiftieth Gate*, Mark Baker describes a journey from despair and death towards hope and life; it is the story of a son who enters his parents' memories and, inside the darkness, finds light. In his evocative prose, Baker takes us to this place of horror, and then brings us back to reflect on these events and remember: 'Never again'.

Across the silence of fifty years, Baker and his family travel from Poland and Germany to Jerusalem and Melbourne, as the author struggles to uncover the mystery of his parents' survival: his father Yossl was imprisoned in concentration camps and his mother Genia was forced into hiding after the Jews of her village were murdered.

Twenty years after its first publication *The Fiftieth Gate* remains an extraordinary book. It has become a classic and has now sold over 70,000 copies. In his new introduction, Baker recalls his motivations for writing this important memoir, and highlights how the testimonial culture in Holocaust studies has spread to awareness of other genocides and our responsibility (and failure) to prevent them.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Raphael Baker is the author of *The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory*, a best-selling and seminal book on his parents' experience during the Holocaust which won a NSW Premier's Literary Award. His most recent novel *Thirty Days* is a fearless and moving memoir about death and dying. He is Director of the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation and Associate Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies in the School of Historical Studies at Monash University, Melbourne.

#### ISSUES AND THEMES

1. The power of traumatic experience in shaping a person's life
2. The experiences of Jewish refugees in Australia after the Second World War
3. The struggle of the children of Holocaust survivors to understand, respect and move on from their parents' experiences
4. The cultural life of Jewish Australians
5. The effect of the Holocaust on Jewish thought, culture and community
6. The role of memory and remembrance

#### STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE

The novel is essentially a biography of Baker's parents narrated by its author, Mark Baker. As its subtitle, 'A Journey through Memory' suggests, the book is comprised of reminiscences from his parents about their lives and experiences during the 1930s and 1940s. Baker, a Melbourne writer and academic, supplements their stories with material from his own research into the period to paint a more complete picture of his parents' lives. Baker frequently reflects the heavy accents of his parents in his spelling, which forges a stronger bond between the reader and two elderly Jews reliving their

horrific Holocaust experiences. The author is involved with and affected by the project at every stage so that there appears to be no authorial distance between Baker and the material he records. Baker includes documents from his research in the book, as well as reconstructions of events, records of his parents speaking about their memories on tape and records of his conversations with them.

## RELATED RESOURCES

### Contextual Study

1. *The Reader* by Bernard Schlink
2. *Klata's Diary* by Zlata Filipovic
3. *The Endless Steppe* by Esther Hautzig
4. *Elli* by Livia Bitton Jackson
5. *Davita's Harp* by Chaim Potok
6. *The Diary of Anne Frank*
7. *If This is a Man* by Primo Levi
8. *The Hand that Signed the Paper* by Helen Darville

### Film:

1. *Shoah* (developed from filmed interviews with survivors)
2. *Schindler's List*
3. *Europa*
4. *The Killing Fields*

## STUDENT ACITIVITES

1. Working in small groups, use the resources of the Internet and library to find out about the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. Once you have read enough to gain an overview of events, select aspects of the Holocaust and present an in-depth examination of them in a form which can be presented to the whole group. Include a bibliography and suggestions for further reading. (The TV series *The Holocaust* is a useful reference.)
2. Working in pairs, develop a list of the different ways in which Mark Baker responds to his parents' experiences. Use your reading journal to describe how the author can "bear the wounds of unresolved guilt" (p. 100) as a child, as an adolescent and as an adult.
3. Discuss why Mark Baker has written this book, when, as a relative warns him, it is a very public record of the family 'forever'? Consider how Baker might have kept the manuscript for family members only? What effects might publishing the text have on members of Baker's extended and immediate family? As Yossl, describe your reaction to a newspaper interviewer who has read the novel and is now asking you about your role in the story.
4. The Holocaust has had a profound effect on Genia and Yossl, for example p. 37 and p. 107. Make a list of the ways in which the events of the Holocaust are an ongoing presence in the lives of Baker's parents.
5. Genia suffers differently from Yossl. Working in pairs, make a list of the ways in which her Holocaust experiences were different from those of her husband. How do these experiences affect her? As Genia, write a letter to Rachel (Baker's daughter) in which you describe your hopes and dreams for your granddaughter.
6. *The Fiftieth Gate* refers to the Jewish custom of placing pebbles or stones on gravestones. The end of *Schindler's List* shows survivors of the Jewish Holocaust observing this ritual. Consider why the film ends with this sequence. In what ways are the film *Schindler's List* and Baker's book 'stones on Holocaust gravestones'? Write an article for Baker's journal, 'Generation: A Journal of Australian Jewish Life and Thought' in which you discuss this metaphor. Submit the article for publication.
7. How do counsellors help people to get over traumatic experiences? Using the resources of the internet and library, find out how victims of trauma are helped in Australia. List some of the countries from which refugees come to Australia. Suggest ways in which their experiences might be similar to those of Genia and Yossl. Now consider how Genia and Yossl deal with their traumatic past. Writing as either Baker's father or mother, write a letter to your son while he is in Jerusalem about how you have coped throughout your life with your terrible past. What role has the Jewish community played in your life? What personal resources have you had to draw upon to survive during the years?
8. Why does Baker research the stories of his parents? What responses might his parents have to his decision to find out more about what they are telling him? Would *The Fiftieth Gate* be as successful without Baker's research? Form small groups, with one group acting as Baker. Explore these questions thoroughly, then put the Baker group in the hot seat to answer some of your issues.
9. 'Don't interrogate me. I'm your mother, not your prisoner' (p. 151). What effect does Baker's project of uncovering his parents' past have on his relationship with them? While in Jerusalem, Baker writes an email to his father apologising for overstepping the mark in digging up an event in the past. As Yossl, write a reply to your son in which you talk about how you are coping with his questioning and research.
10. Phillip Adams has commented that *The Fiftieth Gate* 'has the dignity and depth to undo the damage of Demidenko'. Using the resources of the library and internet, find out what happened when Helen Darville was discovered to have invented a false identity in relation to her novel, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, published under the name 'Helen Demidenko'. Having made a thumbnail sketch of the issues raised by the case, write a letter to the newspaper arguing whether someone who was not involved in the Holocaust in any way can write a book about the event. Does your case hold for every person speaking about a life experience in which they were not directly involved.