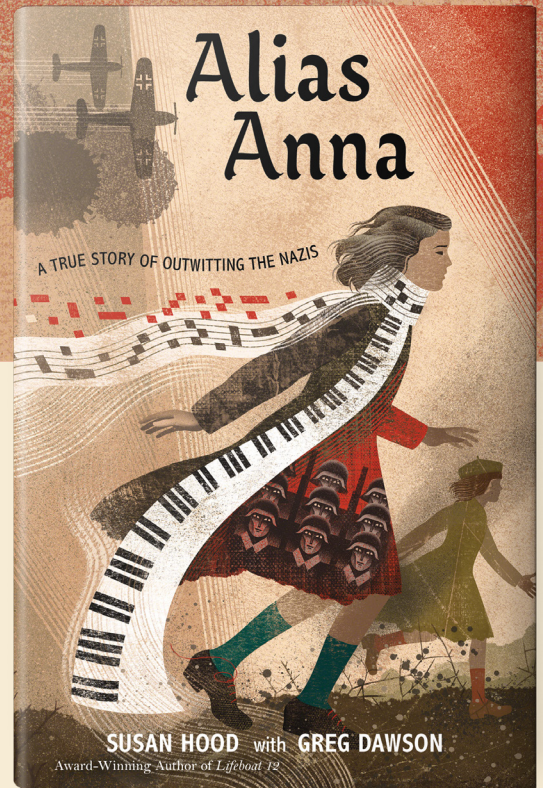


Alias Anna: A True Story of Outwitting the Nazis

WRITTEN BY SUSAN HOOD WITH GREG DAWSON



ABOUT THE BOOK

When the Germans invade Ukraine, a young Jewish girl must leave behind her friends, her freedom, and her promising musical future at one of the world's top conservatories. With no time to say goodbye, Zhanna; her sister, Frina; and their entire family are removed from their home by the Nazis and forced on a long, cold death march. When a guard turns a blind eye, Zhanna flees with nothing more than her musical talent, her beloved Chopin sheet music, and her father's final plea: "I don't care what you do. Just live." Told in verse by award-winning author Susan Hood with Zhanna's son, Greg Dawson, this is the moving true story of how piano prodigies Zhanna (alias "Anna") and her sister, Frina, outplayed their pursuers while hiding in plain sight. This incredible tale of courage, resilience, and survival includes extensive back matter with original letters, photographs, and additional materials for further reading.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Photo by Hugh Smith



Susan Hood is the award-winning author of many books for young readers, including *Lifeboat 12*, *The Last Straw: Kids vs. Plastics*, *Ada's Violin*, *Shaking Things Up*, and *Titan and the Wild Boars: The True Cave Rescue of the Thai Soccer Team*. She is the recipient of an E.B. White Read Aloud Picture Book Honor, the Christopher Award, the

Américas Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature, the Golden Kite Award, and the Bank Street Flora Stieglitz Straus Award, given annually for a "distinguished work of nonfiction that serves as an inspiration to young people." Visit her at www.susanhoodbooks.com.

Greg Dawson has been a journalist for more than fifty years, winning awards for his work as a TV critic, columnist, and feature writer at magazines and newspapers including the *Boston Herald*, *Indianapolis Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. He is

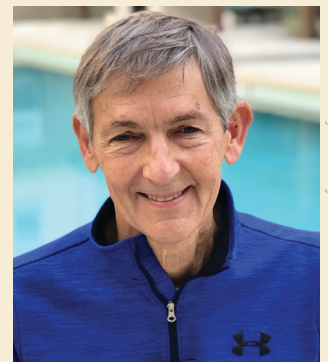


Photo courtesy of Candy Dawson

the author of two books on the Holocaust, *Hiding in the Spotlight* and *Judgment Before Nuremberg*, and *Busted in Bloomington*, a collective memoir of the '60s written with his wife, Candy Dawson. To learn more go to www.gregdawsonbooks.com.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Zhanna realizes she must “hide behind a new identity... She wouldn’t be Zhanna. She’d use an alias” (p. 6). What comprises a person’s identity? How is one’s name an integral and important part of personal identity? Over the course of the book, how does Zhanna as Anna struggle to maintain her true self while still pretending to be someone else? Zhanna connects her alias, Anna, with the word “alive.” Discuss how Zhanna’s character traits described in the early pages of the book—intelligence, empathy, defiance, curiosity, fearlessness—become tools of survival.
2. *Alias Anna* is a nonfiction story told in free verse. Discuss the definition of *free verse*, a form of poetry that does not rhyme or have a regular meter. Although the majority of the book is written in free verse, some of the work does indeed rhyme, such as *A Candy-Coated Childhood* (p. 10). Other chapters are written in different poetic forms, such as haiku or concrete poetry (also known as shape poems). Discuss various selections and why you think the author made specific decisions about how to present the text. Which selections do you feel are most effective and why?
3. In Part II, Prelude, readers learn how deeply the Arshansky family loved and valued music. Discuss how the author conveyed Zhanna’s relationship to music. Provide examples of how music was the family’s “spiritual refuge” (p. 11). Reread the quote by Soviet-era Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich that appears in the opening pages of the book: *Can music attack evil? Can it make man stop and think? Can it cry out and...draw man’s attention to...vile acts to which he has grown accustomed?* Do you agree with Shostakovich? Why or why not? Use examples from the book to support your position. How can music remind us what it is to be human?
4. Zhanna and Frina are piano prodigies. Discuss how their musical gifts are both a blessing and a curse. During Zhanna’s first radio performance, she has to complete her piece in total darkness. How does this scene foreshadow what is to come over the next few years? How is her steely ability to proceed a metaphor for her resilience?
5. Throughout *Alias Anna*, readers encounter horrific examples of inhumanity that can be overwhelming to process. Acknowledging how difficult much of the content in the story is to read, discuss some of the tactics that Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler used in their plans to exterminate Jews and other people they deemed to be “undesirables” (p. 85). Connect this discussion to contemporary examples of dictators and the rise of nationalism across Europe and other parts of the world. In contrast, discuss examples of the selfless acts of kindness and compassion bestowed on Zhanna and Frina by ordinary people. In *Back From the Dead*, Zhanna writes that she “counted on [the pharmacist’s] humanity” (p. 171). What does the concept of *humanity* mean to you?
6. A *stereotype* is a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing. Stalin’s forces and then later Hitler’s gestapo used baseless stereotypes to target Jews: “He [a Russian policeman] said to my father, ‘You are Jewish—you’ve got to be rich. Where is the gold?’” (p. 51). Why are stereotypes so dangerous? Consider how Stalin and Hitler used their power to spread prejudice and hate through stereotyping. Discuss the significance of these lines from *The Marchers Marched On*: “Hitler had claimed Jews were to blame for the war and some believed him. Flames of hostility and prejudice flared, fed by hatred for some, by fear for others” (p. 103). What can young people do to counter the harmful and potentially life-threatening effects of targeting people based on groundless assumptions? To read more on this topic, visit: www.annefrank.org/en/topics/prejudice-and-stereotypes/.
7. Multiple times throughout the book, Hitler and Stalin are referred to as bullies. What is your definition of a bully? What do Hitler and Stalin have in common with the bullies of today? How did the people around these dictators enable them to carry out their heinous acts? Why do you think so many people condoned, tolerated, or looked away from the brutality of Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes? Discuss passages from the book where you felt the most fear for Zhanna, Frina, and their family. Try to imagine yourself in these same situations and discuss how you would cope with the fear. How did Hitler and Stalin use fear as a weapon? How did fear “[suffocate] sympathy” (p. 104)?
8. *Alias Anna* is organized into seven parts, and each part’s title is a musical term: overture, prelude, fugue, invention, variations, bridge, and finale. Discuss the definitions of these terms and how each represents or symbolizes the events and themes in that part of the story.
9. Discuss the scene in which Frina lies down in the snow and refuses to go on. How is the trauma that Frina experiences on the death march present in this scene, even though the authors don’t explicitly describe what Frina endures after Zhanna’s escape? How does this scene underscore the love and devotion the sisters have for one another? In what other parts of the book can you identify this sisterly connection?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION (CONT.)

- Do you think Frina could have survived without Zhanna? Zhanna without Frina? Explain your thoughts. Reread *A Sister's Nightmare* on pages 256–259 and discuss what Frina might have been processing at the thought of returning to Russia.
10. Discuss how the juxtaposition of the author's text with excerpts from Zhanna's letter and interviews strengthen and clarify the overall meaning of the narrative. On page 228, what does Zhanna mean by "Too much beauty in hell"? To Zhanna, why is "humiliation worse than death," and "honor is life itself (p. 279)"? How is life an honor?
 11. For as long as she can remember, Zhanna has been a risk-taker. Discuss examples of how risk, taken willingly or without choice, benefits Zhanna and her sister.
 12. *Alias Anna* is a survival story. Discuss examples of how the sisters are able to carry out their father's final wishes for them: "Just live" (p. 122). Reread *The Other Side* (p. 123). Put into your own words Zhanna's description of the moment she last sees her parents: "I could feel the eyes and good wishes of many souls on their last march. It was like they were holding me up in the air above the danger so I would not be harmed. Our hearts were connected."

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Dear Reader. Take some time to read this letter from the authors: www.bit.ly/AliasAnnaAuthorLetter. Lead a discussion on the meaning of anti-Semitism and identify contemporary examples of this hate. Present the following link and review its contents with the class: www.annefrank.org/en/topics/antisemitism/. Give students time to research one recent example of anti-Semitism in the United States, as well as a recent example from abroad. Consider inviting a rabbi, Judaism scholar, or an antidiscrimination expert to speak to the class, to explain the realities of anti-Semitism and hate-based ideologies. In addition, consider inviting a German (who could be any of those three) to provide that unique perspective on the Holocaust. Remember that not all Germans were Nazis (and indeed many German Jews were among the 6 million). Finally, challenge students to devise a plan to combat anti-Semitism and other forms of hate in their school and community.

Dear Z. When Aimée wrote her grandmother Zhanna a letter asking "what was going on" (p. 3) in Zhanna's life at age 13, little did she know what she would get in reply. Inspired by Aimée's school history project, have students write a letter to a grandparent or elder relative, inquiring about their life as teenagers. As Aimée did, encourage students to ask specific questions. For students who do not have a grandparent or other relative to write to, partner with a local nursing home or senior community center to pair students with a letter writing buddy. Students can also conduct an oral history with an elder relative. For inspiration and guidance, introduce students to StoryCorps: www.storycorps.org/.

What's in a Name? On page 9 of *Alias Anna*, readers learn that Zhanna's real name came from literature, that her mother chose "her newborn's name from the Russian translation of Mark

Twain's *Joan of Arc*... Sara chose the Russian name closest to Joan. Zhanna." Have students ask parents and relatives about their name's origin. How was it chosen? What is the name's literal meaning? Does the name hold symbolic significance? What family anecdotes accompany the name? Students can assemble the information and write a short essay about their name. Allow time for students who wish to share their piece. Students can visit this website to find basic information on common and uncommon first names: www.behindthename.com.

Prized Possession. On page 101, Zhanna bursts into the family home to retrieve her favorite sheet music, Chopin's *Fantaisie-Improptu*, and tucks it inside her shirt before rejoining her family on their way to a factory that would temporarily shelter 16,000 Jewish people. Challenge students to think of one thing they would take if they were in Zhanna's situation. Ask students to bring in the object (or a picture of the object) and explain to the class what it means to them. Read *The One Thing You'd Save* by Linda Sue Park for extra inspiration and further discussion.

School 13. On page 79, readers learn that Zhanna's school is "transformed into a refugee center for those whose homes had been destroyed." Lead a discussion about what it means to be a refugee. Discuss areas of the world where people are seeking refuge from war, oppression, starvation, political upheaval, the climate crisis, or other life-threatening situations. Encourage students to choose and read about one current refugee crisis and report the information back to the class. (The following lesson plan from 2019 provides excellent resources to introduce this topic to young people. Even though the content focuses primarily on the Syrian refugee crisis, the overall information is still relevant. www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/understanding-global-refugee-crisis).

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

Back Matter Matters. Readers can learn a great deal of additional information in the back matter section of any nonfiction book, and this one is no exception. Continue reading beyond page 283 of *Alias Anna* to the book's back matter. Assign pairs or small groups a section of the backmatter each to read and report back to the whole class any additional information about Zhanna's story and the events of World War II in Europe.

World War II History. Throughout *Alias Anna*, readers encounter glimpses of important events from the war, such as the killing fields of Ukraine, the Blitz, Pearl Harbor, D-Day, the bombing of Berlin, and V-E Day. Use *Alias Anna* as a jumping off point to learn more about these and other key events of World War II. Search and share newsreel footage as primary source documents to begin longer term research projects.

Migrant and Displaced Children. At the end of *Alias Anna*, Zhanna and Frina find themselves homeless and far from home. They are fortunate to meet people who care about their future, and who eventually resettle them in the United States. Learn more about the current global outlook for migrant and displaced children at this webpage: www.unicef.org/migrant-refugee-internally-displaced-children/. Brainstorm ways in which you can help displaced children in your community.

Poetry Study. While *Alias Anna* is mostly written in free verse, a variety of poetic forms round out the book. Read Poetry Notes in the back matter of the book. Reread the examples listed there, and experiment writing in some of these forms. Poems can reflect on aspects of Zhanna's story, subjects and events featured in the text, or a topic of the students' choosing.

Nonfiction Study. Continue reading nonfiction books related to the Holocaust as experienced by young people. To begin, visit www.annefrankhouse.org, read *The Diary of A Young Girl*, by Anne Frank, and research additional titles that provide readers with an intimate glimpse of what it was

like to be a young Jewish person or "undesirable" in WWII Europe (for some suggestions, check out: www.hbook.com/story/reading-for-holocaust-remembrance-day). To read short, first-person accounts of Holocaust survivors, visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at: www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections-testimonies/behind-every-name-a-story/.

Classical Music Exploration. Introduce readers to the classical musicians referenced in *Alias Anna*, including Bach, Bizet, Brahms, Beethoven, Chopin, Rossini, and Tchaikovsky. Play excerpts from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Chopin's *Fantaisie-Improvisation*. You can watch Zhanna playing her signature piece here: youtu.be/gelXBCtZKdg. Watch videos online of orchestras performing these works of music and discuss the emotional impact of the experience. If possible, take a field trip to view a local symphony orchestra, opera, or other musical performance.

Cultivating Resilience. Zhanna and Frina demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of profound adversity. Resilience is defined as "the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness" (source: Oxford Languages). Discuss how the sisters display resilience in the story. Read the following resources on how to cultivate resilience, especially during adolescence, and share some of the key takeaways with readers: www.raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/development/social-emotional-development/resilience-in-teens/; www.apa.org/topics/resilience/guide-parents-teachers/; and www.childmind.org/article/foster-resilience-kids/.

Human Rights for All Humans. Share the history of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, drafted in 1948, which today is the most widely translated document in the world: www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf. Analyze a few articles at a time of this illustrated version with your students. Discuss how the illustrations help to clarify the meaning in each article. Encourage readers to choose one article that they find most meaningful and create an accompanying illustration.

This guide was created by Colleen Carroll, literacy specialist, curriculum developer, reading teacher, and author of the *How Artists See* series. Learn more about Colleen at www.about.me/colleencarroll.