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## Reader's Guide

Resources for Teachers and Students



# STUMBLING ON HISTORY

AN ART PROJECT COMPELS A SMALL GERMAN TOWN TO FACE ITS PAST

FERN SCHUMER CHAPMAN

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241 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue North, Minneapolis, MN 55401

PB: 978-0-9964-7251-7 \$17.99

Ages 10+ | Grades 5+

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# ***Stumbling on History:*** ***An Art Project Compels A Small German Town To Face Its Past***

## **Introduction**

*Stumbling on History* is Fern Schumer Chapman's fourth book in a series that chronicles, in the words of Pulitzer-Prize nominee James B. Lieber, "the Westerfeld saga," the gripping depiction of the life of Fern's mother, Edith Westerfeld – from Edith's childhood emigration from Nazi Germany, her subsequent assimilation to American culture, and her late-in-life decision to return to her small hometown. Taken together, these four works – one memoir, another a young-adult historical-fiction novel, and two works of young-adult narrative non-fiction – constitute an important contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust.

*Stumbling on History*, a powerful young-adult narrative history, is designed principally for middle and high-school-aged students. However, given the sophistication and gravity of its themes, the book carries crossover appeal to an older audience as well. At its core, *Stumbling* describes the impact of a conscientious artist and his moving public memorials to victims of the Holocaust. In particular, the author analyzes the purpose and impact of commemorative plaques, called *Stolpersteine*, placed in the sidewalk outside of Edith's childhood home in tiny Stockstadt am Rhein. Beautifully illustrated and studded with extensive excerpts from the public record, this compelling book invites readers to contemplate such serious issues as the long reach of the Holocaust, historical responsibility, atonement, and public memorialization of victims of social injustice.

## **Thematic Questions**

As students read *Stumbling on History*, consider the following broad thematic questions:

Is it important to remember the past? Why do we study history?

Nobel Prize winning Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once noted that the opposite of the future is not the past, but the absence of a past. What did he mean by that comment?

What is atonement? What does the atonement process entail? What are the differences between personal and public atonement?

Describe the term "historical responsibility." To what extent does a nation bear responsibility for its past? When does "the past" truly become "the past"?

Does the United States have any responsibility to atone for any of its past actions?

In our current lives, are there any communities of people in the United States who are suffering? What are our obligations towards these communities?

What is the difference between guilt and responsibility?

What are our obligations today towards an understanding of the Holocaust? To what extent does the Holocaust influence contemporary attitudes towards human suffering and societal injustice?

How may art influence our social and political attitudes?

Why do societies create public memorials? What purposes do public memorials serve?

Which individual(s) in the book left the greatest impression on you? Why?

To what extent do the *Stolpersteine* link Germans with the past? To what extent do these Stumbling Stones link them with the future?

Agree or disagree: What a nation chooses to forget about its past is as important as what a nation chooses to remember about its past.

## Introduction

The author outlines the purposes of *Stumbling on History* and poses several thematic questions that she work will attempt to answer. The central issue is how Germany deals with the “shocking legacy” of the Holocaust. “How should this nation recognize and atone for mass murder?” Students receive a concise description of the *Stolpersteine* project.

Questions for discussion:

1. Analyze President Lincoln’s quotation that serves as an epigraph. What does he mean by the statement: “Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history”? Do you agree or disagree with him?
2. Analyze author William Faulkner’s comment: “The past is never dead. It is not even past.”
3. Of the four questions posed in the second paragraph, which is the most important?
4. Research the word “Holocaust.” Why do historians uniquely reserve this word to describe the mass annihilation of innocents by Nazi Germany during World War II?
5. The final paragraph of the introduction provides a definition of *Stolpersteine*. What is the purpose of this public art project? Which sentence provided the most information?
6. What questions will you want the author to answer in the rest of the book?

Activities

1. Create your own artistic interpretation of the title of the book: “Stumbling on History.”
2. Create an artistic interpretation of President Lincoln or William Faulkner’s quotations.

## Memory

In this section, the author introduces us to her mother, Edith Westerfeld Schumer, and provides historical background that explains Edith’s emigration to the United States and her subsequent return visits to her childhood home, Stockstadt am Rhein, “a town so small it doesn’t appear on most maps.” Edith is haunted by fears that the Holocaust may be forgotten. We meet her extraordinary childhood protector, Mina Lautenschläger, who, despite her relatively young age, resisted Nazi persecution of the Westerfeld family and denounced those who were complicit. A Christian, Mina suffered greatly for her resistance. Nazis labeled her as “politically undesirable,” and they “harassed, fined, and spat on her.” In 1990, Edith and Mina reunited with each other; by that time, Mina lived as a recluse, shunned by her former townspeople. For refusing to “howl with those wolves,” Mina paid for her politics all of her life. She was embittered by what she considered to be deliberate German amnesia of the Holocaust.

## Questions for Discussion

1. This section treats the issue of historical memory. Some have said it is best to let go of past pain and focus on the present. Others argue that by forgetting the past, one gives wrongdoers a final victory. What is your opinion about remembering past pain and injustice?
2. Why is Edith so worried about people remembering what happened to her family?
3. The author provides an extensive description of Edith's history. List what you consider to be the three most important facts about Edith's background.
4. What values does Mina represent? Of those values, which is the most important to you? Why did you select that particular value?
5. Of the many photographs in this section, which had the greatest impact on you? Why did you select this photograph?
6. In her old age, Mina was quite embittered. What caused this feeling? Why will she "never make peace with the people of Stockstadt"?
7. What is the symbolic significance of the tea set?

## Activities

1. Research the rise of Nazism in Germany and analyze the different types of discrimination Nazis inflicted on Jews.
2. Create a word collage about Mina. The collage should include Mina's name and an artistic representation of words that best describe her character.
3. Create an artistic interpretation of Mina's statement: "I will not howl with those wolves."
4. Write a poem or song about the meaning of memory.
5. Find a photograph of your childhood (or take a photograph of one of your most important childhood possessions). Mount the photograph and write a brief description of why that photograph has significance to you. Consider describing how you would feel if the object of your photograph disappeared.
6. Describe a person in your life whom you admire. Be sure to include an explanation of why that person is so significant.

## Recognition

This section describes the Stumbling Stones project, an ambitious series of public memorials dedicated to victims of the Holocaust. Created by a German artist activist, Gunter Demnig, the project has placed tens of thousands of memorial plaques throughout Europe. Demnig said that the project creates "a place of memory for people where there was nothing before." He deliberately places the plaques "prominently in sidewalks" so that passers-by must "stumble" with their "heads and hearts" and not just their feet. The installation of the Stumbling Stones is not without controversy, however, and the section includes an eloquent speech by Stockstadt's *Bürgermeister* Thomas Raschel. His advocacy caused Edith's hometown council to vote unanimously in favor of the installation of several Stumbling Stones in front of Edith's former home.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Try to provide a concise definition of the Stumbling Stones project. In your opinion, what aspects of the project are the most important?
2. What words would you use to describe Gunter Demnig, the creator of the Stumbling Stones project?

3. Analyze the opposition to the installation of Stumbling Stones. How would you try to convince an opponent of the project of the worthwhile nature of the memorial stones?
4. Reread *Bürgermeister Raschel's* speech. Select the three most important sentences of his speech and explain why your selections.
5. Interpret the statement: "A person is only forgotten if his name is forgotten."
6. Is a Stumbling Stone the best way to memorialize a victim of the Holocaust?

### Activities

1. Create your own Stumbling Stone memorial plaque for a member of your family, school, or community. If you could choose a location for your stone, where would you place it?
2. Do some research on artists who tried to influence people's attitudes on a particular issue. Create a display of your artist and his/her work.
3. Write your own speech that would attempt to convince others of the need for a Stumbling Stone in front of Edith's former home.
4. Find a work of art in your school that speaks to you. Take a photograph of that piece of art and create a project that describes your response.

## Atonement

This concluding section describes the Stumbling Stones installation ceremony in Edith's hometown of Stockstadt. This event serves as a type of funeral for Edith, who never has had a location in which she could mourn the loss of her family. An unexpectedly large crowd gathers for the installation; before the ceremony begins, Fern and Edith are thrilled to see Mina's son, Jürgen, arrive. With great conviction, Jürgen tells the two that he "had" to participate, out of personal conviction and out of respect for the memory of his mother. Edith's brief speech concludes with an admonition: "You must speak up to stop hatred."

Then Jürgen delivers an extraordinary speech, one that he "has yearned for his entire life." His eloquent words remind those present of the past and of the dangers of historical amnesia. He said, "History doesn't have a zero hour. We are linked to our history." Invoking Mina, he thanked Edith and Fern for their courage, "open hearts," and friendship. After the ceremony concludes, two representatives of Stockstadt's Lutheran parish beg Fern and Edith to visit their church before returning to the United States. During the visit, minister Christiane Seresse sends the two off with a moving German song and reads a heartfelt prayer that contained an apology and a wish for reconciliation. Until the events of the past days, Edith had not received that which she most desired: an acknowledgment of her "betrayal and terrible losses." The Stumbling Stones, for all time, will remind those who live in Stockstadt of what happened in their community.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What does "atonement" mean? How difficult is the process of atonement? What are the differences between personal and social (a community or a nation) atonement?
2. Why do so few communities and countries engage in acts of atonement?
3. The author comments, "There are no burial sites for those murdered during the Holocaust." What emotional challenges does that fact pose for survivors of the Holocaust?
4. What emotions do you think Edith and Fern were experiencing on the day of the installation of the Stumbling Stones?
5. What significance is there to the new owners of the Westerfeld home tearing down the former structure and replacing it with a new home and shop?

6. As you examine Edith's speech, what do you believe was her essential message?
7. Describe the tone and content of Jürgen's speech. Was his an effective address?
8. "We're Sorry" concludes this section. Why did the author include minister Christiane Seresse?
9. Our current culture often focuses on the idea of "closure" for psychological wounds. Do you think Edith experienced "closure" through the Stumbling Stones experience? Justify your answer.
10. Define the following words: **complicity**, **redress**, **apology**, and **reconciliation**. How do these words reflect themselves in this section?

## Activities

1. Create a word collage using any one or more of the following words: complicity, redress, apology, reconciliation, memorial, justice, or sanctification.
2. The author considers Mina to be a "Righteous Gentile." Research this term and create a project (written or artistic) that demonstrates your understanding of the phrase and how/why Mina should be considered a "Righteous Gentile."
3. Imagine yourself to be a journalist. Write an objective news article describing the installation of Stumbling Stones in Stockstadt.
4. Try to imagine yourself as a survivor of the Holocaust. What comments would you deliver at a Stumbling Stones installation?
5. Create an artistic project that demonstrates your understanding of Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel's comment: "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."
6. Is there a song, photograph, or work of art that captures your emotions as you read this section? Bring your selection to class and share it with your classmates and teachers.
7. If you were asked to create your own memorial to victims of the Holocaust, what creation would you develop?
8. Describe a time when you had to apologize and atone for one of your actions. Was the process an easy or difficult one? What were the results, if any, of your apology and atonement?
9. Create an art project that demonstrates your understanding of the differences between apology, atonement, and forgiveness.
10. Write a letter to either Fern Schumer Chapman or Edith Westerfeld Schumer that describes your reaction to "Stumbling on History."

## Afterword – Coming to Terms with a Nation's Crimes

This brief, concluding section describes the recent phenomenon of nations recognizing ethical responsibility for the past and the "need for historical responsibility about...as yet unacknowledged" acts of social injustice.

### Questions for Discussion and Activities

1. Create a project that demonstrates understanding of Aeschylus' question: "What atonement is there for blood spilled on the earth?"
2. Create a project that demonstrates understanding of one of the categories the author lists as social wrongs.
3. The author lists five examples of nations assuming historical responsibility. Research one of them and create a project that demonstrates understanding of the action and response.

4. Explain Elie Wiesel's comment: "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." What does it mean to "bear witness...for the dead and living"?
5. With a partner, explore your own community's past. Are there wrongs that need to be explored and redressed?
6. Has your attitude toward the past changed after reading *Stumbling on History*? Re-examine President Lincoln and William Faulkner's statements on the past. What insights have you gained from these comments.

### **About Fern Schumer Chapman**

Fern Schumer Chapman has written four award-winning books. The first, *Motherland*, is a memoir that describes Edith Westerfeld Schumer's late-in-life decision to return to her childhood home in Germany, a place she had not seen since her forced exile in 1938. *Is It Night or Day?*, a historical novel written primarily for young adults, describes Edith's life as an immigrant in Chicago in the late 1930s through World War II. Written as a consequence of middle-school students' questions about Edith's long-lost friend, Gerda Katz, *Like Finding My Twin* details the moving reunion of Edith and Gerda, two women who had not seen each other for over 70 years. This inspiring work of historical non-fiction (designed for young adults) extols young people whose inspiring example serves as a model for service learning. *Stumbling on History* is the fourth work in the Edith Westerfeld saga.

As a public speaker, Ms. Chapman receives numerous requests to share her mother's story with schools, civic organizations, book clubs, and churches and temples. For more information, access the author's website at: [fernschumerchapman.com](http://fernschumerchapman.com).

### **For Further Insights**

The single best resource for students to research the Holocaust is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Its extensive on-line archive contains an extraordinary amount of accessible information and encourages further investigation and research. You may access it at: [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org).

*Bruce Jay Wasser, the author of this guide, received numerous honors during his three-decade tenure as a middle and high school history and English teacher in Newark, California. A Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Princeton University, Mr. Wasser has shared his insights on bringing conscience into schools with administrators and teachers. You may contact him at [bruce3306@aol.com](mailto:bruce3306@aol.com).*