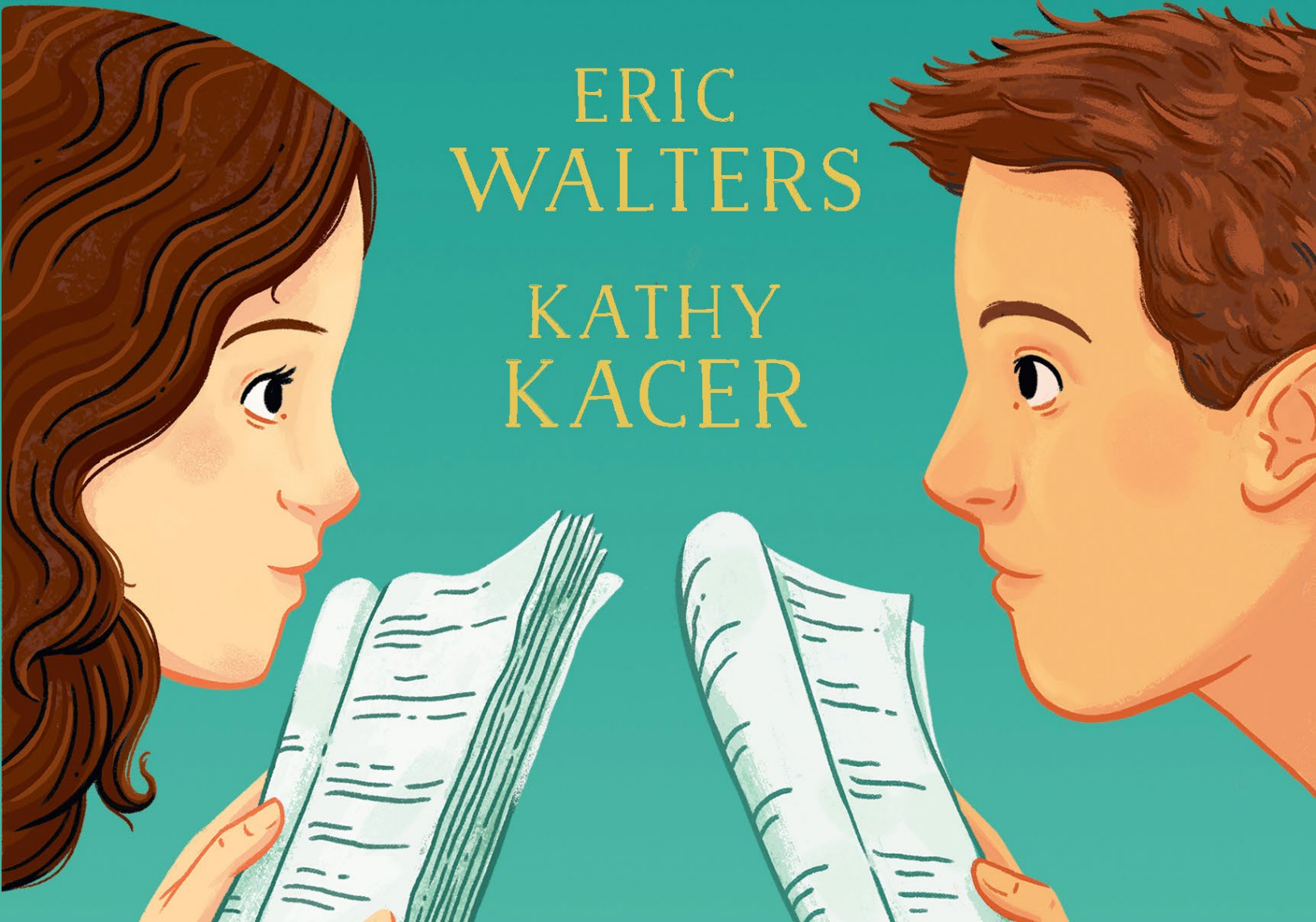


# BROKEN STRINGS

ERIC  
WALTERS

KATHY  
KACER



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

## DEAR EDUCATOR,

Set in the aftermath of 9/11, *Broken Strings* is a powerful middle-grade novel that can be used in the classroom in a number of ways, including:

**TO EXPLORE CONCEPTS AND THEMES** such as family, history, discrimination, bravery, resilience

**TO STUDY THE GENRE** of realistic fiction

**TO INCLUDE AS PART OF A STUDY** of World War II

**TO USE AS AN ENGAGING** and memorable book club or read-aloud selection

## ABOUT THE BOOK

It's 2002. In the aftermath of the twin towers — and the death of her beloved grandmother — Shirli Berman is intent on moving forward. The best singer in her junior high, she auditions for the lead role in *Fiddler on the Roof* but is crushed to learn that she's been given the part of the old mother in the musical rather than the coveted part of the sister. But there is an upside: her "husband" is none other than Ben Morgan, the cutest and most popular boy in the school.

Deciding to throw herself into the role, Shirli rummages in her grandfather's attic for some props. There, she discovers an old violin in the corner — strange, since her Zayde has never seemed to like music, never even going to any of her recitals. Showing it to her grandfather unleashes an anger in him she has never seen before, and while she is frightened of what it might mean, Shirli keeps trying to connect with her Zayde and discover the awful reason behind his anger. A long-kept family secret spills out, and Shirli learns the true power of music, both terrible and wonderful.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**ERIC WALTERS** is one of Canada's best-known and most prolific writers of fiction for children and young adults. His books have won over 120 awards, including thirteen separate children's choice awards, and have been translated into thirteen languages. He lives in Guelph, Ontario, and is the co-founder of Creation of Hope, a charity that provides care for orphans in the Mbooni district of Kenya. In 2014, Eric was named a Member of the Order of Canada "for his contribution as an author of literature for children and young adults whose stories help young readers grapple with complex social issues." For more information, go to [www.ericwalters.net](http://www.ericwalters.net)

**KATHY KACER'S** award-winning list of Holocaust fiction and non-fiction for young readers includes *The Secret of Gabi's Dresser* (winner of OLA Silver Birch Award), *The Diary of Laura's Twin* (winner of the National Jewish Book Council Award [US] as well as the Canadian Jewish Book Award), *Hiding Edith* (winner of the OLA Silver Birch Award; the Sydney Taylor Book Award [Association of Jewish Libraries], Notable Book for Older Readers; and the Yad Vashem Award for Children's Holocaust Literature [Israel]), and *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* (a Sydney Taylor Honor Book for Teens). Her books have been published and translated in twenty countries. She is the child of Holocaust survivors and the parent of two actors and musical theater performers. For more information, go to [www.kathykacer.com](http://www.kathykacer.com)

## PRE-READING DISCUSSION

**THE MAIN STORY** is set in New York City in the recent past. What historical tragedy occurred in the United States in 2001? What do you know about this event?\*

**THE STORY ALSO** discusses some of the events that happened during the Holocaust. What do you know about the Holocaust?

**ONE OF THE STORY'S THEMES** is about the idea of resilience. What does it mean to be resilient?

\*Note: The subject matter in the story may be difficult at times for some students, particularly those students who still are affected by the tragedies discussed in the story or who suffer from secondary traumatic stress. It is important to be sensitive to the feelings and emotions students may experience as they read and discuss the story.

## LEARNING ACTIVITIES

**KEEPING A JOURNAL** *Broken Strings* deals with powerful and relatable themes and concepts, many of which may be familiar to middle school students, even if the world they currently live in looks different from the worlds in which the characters of the story lived. Encourage students to reflect and make connections to the story by keeping a journal about the book as they read. Students may write reflections in their journals after reading each chapter, or after reading particularly meaningful or important parts of the book. Consider providing guiding questions and prompts for students to think about and respond to as they read. For example:

WHAT NEW INFORMATION did we learn about the characters' personal histories?

HOW DO YOU THINK the characters were feeling at particular points in the story?

TRY TO THINK OF A TIME when you have experienced a similar feeling in your own life.

WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE if you were in the characters' place at this point in the story?

The concept of resilience is throughout the story (see the next activity). Consider talking about resilience prior to students reading the book (see the pre-reading discussion) and encourage them to note examples of resilience in their journals. It is important to note that some students may not be comfortable sharing their journal entries.

**FINDING COMFORT IN BEING RESILIENT** In Chapter Six, Zayde begins to tell Shirli about what happened to him and his family when Germany invaded Poland in 1939. Ask students:

**HOW DID ZAYDE** and his family avoid being arrested and sent away for as long as they did?

**WHY WAS IT SO IMPORTANT** for Zayde and his family to protect their instruments?

**BEING ABLE TO FIND COMFORT** and sometimes even joy in difficult times is part of being resilient. If you feel comfortable, talk about what resilience means to you, then have a class discussion about resilience as it was shown in the book and as it applies to the students. Consider using the following questions/prompts:

- What does “resilience” mean to you?
- How did Zayde show resilience during the Holocaust and again later in life? What helped him be resilient?
- How is the production of *Fiddler on the Roof* connected to the school community showing resilience? Why did Ms. Ramsey select *Fiddler on the Roof* to be the school musical this year? How does the story told in *Fiddler on the Roof* connect to Shirli and her family?
- How did the people of New York City show resilience on 9/11 and in the days that followed?

Ask students to think of a time when they have had to show resilience. Remind your students that resilience doesn't always have to be connected to tragedies that are of the same scale as the Holocaust or 9/11. Have students write a short story about their experience(s) being resilient.

**ZAYDE AND SHIRLI** Zayde and Shirli have both lived through traumatic and life altering events. Research how the Holocaust affected the lives of Zayde and others who survived. Do you think Shirli's experience of having witnessed 9/11 has made her particularly sensitive to those who might have experienced tragedies? How does she demonstrate this sensitivity?

**SHAPED BY OUR HISTORIES** To a certain extent, the experiences we have as children shape who we are as adults and what is important to us. How might the following character traits have been influenced by Zayde's experiences as a child?

- Zayde is reluctant to speak of his past
- Zayde didn't want to hire a cleaning lady because he didn't want a stranger in his house
- Zayde does not like to waste food
- Zayde can speak five languages
- Zayde had not gone to any of Shirli's musical performances before

**CONNECTING TO ART AND LITERATURE** In Chapter Eight, Zayde describes his mother to Shirli and tells her that his mother acted tough but had a really kind heart. Shirli compares Zayde's mother to Golde in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Making personal connections to art and literature can be an important way of understanding ourselves and those around us. Have students select a book that they have read in the past that they have made a significant personal connection with and present their book to the class. If you have students who are unsure about which books have been significant to them, have them think of the story told in *Broken Strings* and identify a part of the story that they made a personal connection to.

**BEING BRAVE** Complete a mind map on the board with the word "brave" as its centerpiece. Have students brainstorm what they think of when they hear the word "brave." In the story, Zayde tells Shirli that he thinks she is brave because she gets up in stage in front of an audience. Have students imagine they are Shirli, and ask them to write Zayde a letter in which they explain to him why they think he is brave. Encourage students to consider Zayde's experiences at Auschwitz and his decision to begin playing the violin again as they write their letters.

**THE POWER OF MUSIC** In Chapter Nine, Shirli and her mother are talking about how Zayde refused to let any music be played in the house when Shirli's dad was growing up. Shirli's mother says, ". . . hardly anything brings back memories and emotions like music." Ask students, "Do you agree or disagree with this statement?" Encourage students to support their thinking by referring to personal experiences or to events in the book. In particular, have students reflect on Shirli's statement that, "he felt that somehow his music was the soundtrack for . . . death."

Have students think about a piece of music that makes them feel an emotion strongly (good or bad). Ask for student volunteers to share their selected piece of music with the class, but not to share how the music makes them feel. The class can listen to the music and try to guess what emotion the music makes the person presenting the music feel.

**ZAYDE'S VIOLIN** In Chapter Ten, Shirli reflects on Zayde's broken violin: "This was more than an instrument. It was a time machine, a link to his past, and my history." Read these lines out to the class and ask students to explain what Shirli means. Then have students think of an object in their own lives that has meaning and is important to them, an object that may already or will one day represent a link to their own histories. If you feel comfortable, share a significant object of your own with the class and explain its importance. Reinforce that the object is something that they imagine they will try to always keep. Have students draw or paint a picture of this object and then write about the object's significance.

**CONNECTING TO THE STORY** The story touches on some major events in history: the 19th and 20th century attacks on Jewish people in Russia, the Holocaust (including Auschwitz), and 9/11. Have students read the Author's Note at the end of the book and then research one or all of these events further. After researching the events, have students think again about the characters in the story who were involved in these events. Ask students, "How has your thinking about the character changed and/or stayed the same after learning more about the historical events that helped shape them?" Depending on the age group, you may need to monitor the research process carefully given the sensitive and disturbing nature of the topics.

## OTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

ZAYDE MEETS AMIR at his convenience store, and the two strike up a friendship. In spite of their age difference, what do Amir and Zayde have in common? Why do they understand each other very well?

IN CHAPTER EIGHTEEN, Zayde finally begins to pack up some of Shirli's Bubbie's things. Why is this action on Zayde's part significant? What does it represent?

ZAYDE IS ABLE to relate to Mohammed's experiences as a Muslim in a post 9/11 world. What is their shared experience? Why is Zayde so pleased that Mohammed is playing a Jewish character? ?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT to study events in history such as the Holocaust or 9/11?

HOW DID ZAYDE AND SHIRLI change as characters from the beginning of the story to the end?

HOW DID GOLDE make Shirli feel more connected with her past, heritage, family, and who she is?

