



I'll Keep You Close

Jeska Verstegen

February 2022

ISBN 9781760526917

Format: Paperback

Recommended for: 8 to 12 year olds

Themes: Intergenerational trauma, World War II, the Holocaust, family, war, loss, grief and grandparents.

Applicable to learning areas: English literacy, literature and language; Humanities and Social Sciences

Summary

Jeska doesn't know why her mother keeps the curtains drawn so tightly every day. And what exactly is she trying to drown out when she floods the house with Mozart? What are they hiding from?

When Jeska's grandmother accidentally calls her by a stranger's name, she seizes her first clue to uncovering her family's past, and hopefully to all that's gone unsaid. With the help of an old family photo album, her father's encyclopedia collection and the unquestioning friendship of a stray cat, the silence begins to melt into frightening clarity: Jeska's family survived a terror that they've worked hard to keep secret all her life. And somehow, it has both nothing and everything to do with her, all at once.

A true story of navigating generational trauma as a child, *I'll Keep You Close* is about what comes after disaster: how survivors move forward, what they bring with them when they do, and the promise of beginning again while always keeping the past close.

About the Author

Jeska Verstegen is an author and illustrator living in Amsterdam. She is a descendant of Emanuel Querido, the revolutionary Jewish–Dutch publisher who was captured and killed by the Nazis in World War II.

Jeska began her career in 1990 as an illustrator for magazines and children's books. The white sheet of paper feels to her like a stage where you can perform any role, and one day she decided to paint pictures with words as well. Writing *I'll Keep You Close* reacquainted her with herself and also gave her a new colour palette of diligently chosen words. It is her debut novel, based on the true story of her own family history.

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Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

Before reading

- Ask students to share what they know about the following topics:
 - World War II
 - Hitler and the Nazi party
 - Antisemitism
 - The Holocaust
 - *The Diary of Anne Frank*

Explain that the book they are about to read is set many years after the Holocaust but that it will show how history (and our memories of it) can affect people in many different ways over generations.

Language

- In this excerpt from the opening chapter ('Journey'), what two literary devices has Jeska Versteegen used to open her novel? [Answer: personification and simile]

A school is a kind of monster with a belly full of children. In the morning it gobbles children up, and in the afternoon it spits them all out again. Me included. (page 3)

Can you find other examples of these devices in this chapter? What sort of person do you think Jesje might be based on your reading of the opening chapter?

- What tense and narrative form (first, second or third person) is *I'll Keep You Close* written in? Why do you think Jeska Versteegen chose to write the novel in that tense and narrative form? How might the book's title and the concept of keeping someone close, in particular, support your answer?
- A common 'rule' of writing is to show not tell readers about a character. This means that a reader learns about a character through their actions or thoughts rather than the author explicitly describing the sort of person they are. Find examples in the chapters entitled 'Doorbell' and 'Island' that 'show' that Jesje enjoys childhood and is in no hurry to grow up quickly. [Answer: slipping through the railings on her staircase, not wanting to say goodbye to her old jacket and not wearing her wristwatch.]

Can you find examples that show Jesje is a very imaginative person? [Answer: drawing on the chopping board, creating the island with Lienke] Now find examples that show she is quite a lonely person? [Answer: talking to Moz] Give examples of other characters in the novel whose actions told you something about their character?

- Consider this extract:

This morning, all of a sudden, Irene wasn't the usual Irene anymore. And everyone behaved differently. Me included. We treated Irene as if she'd become dirty. Blue and dirty. (page 25)

How does Irene's story 'mirror' what we later find out happened to Bomma's family a generation before? What literary term best describes Irene's story in relation to Bomma's story? [Answer: analogy] What do you think Jesje learned about herself and her classmates from this episode?

- Consider this extract from the text and answer the question below:

Even when you don't speak, you're still saying something. (page 89)

Why do you think Jesje's mother behaves the way she does and is so reluctant to discuss her family's past with her own children?

Point of view

- Retell the story from the viewpoint of Jesje's mother Branca. In the retelling, explain how her cold and angry exterior differs from her inner feelings.
- Consider this extract from the text and, in your own words, describe how Bomma's experience of the war influenced the way her daughter – Branca – behaves as a parent to Jesje and her sister.

'How did you manage to survive the war?' I ask.

'By keeping quiet,' says Bomma. 'By staying inconspicuous. Being silent became the norm.' (page 121)

Do you think that Bomma continued 'being silent' throughout her life and that this might have something to do with the trauma that she suffers in the nursing home?

Remembering and memories

- Our memories – good and bad – are an important theme in the novel. Reflect on this extract and consider the question below:

You're in my head. That's where I'll keep you close.

Where exactly in the head are memories kept? I make-believe a nice room with royal-blue wallpaper and a stylish lamp that emits a warm light. Along with other nice things, I'd keep my memories there: Moz, Bessie Blue, good books, flowers, the spring, colours and now, of course, Bomma as well.
(page 158)

Do you think Jeska Verstegen is suggesting we should bottle up bad things that happen in life – as Branca does – or bring them out in to the open, discuss them and try to find what happiness we can in them? Use scenes in the book to support your answer.

- 'Lest we forget' is a phrase commonly used in war remembrance services and commemorative occasions in English-speaking countries. What do you think it means and how might it relate to discussions about the Holocaust as an event, and the individuals caught up in it?
- Interview a parent, carer or older friend about their childhood and ask them if they can think of anything that shaped the person they became. Consider asking about their parents, school, childhood friends, the hobbies/sports they enjoyed, international or national events happening at the time.
- Watch the following video on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website: <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1004649> and discuss with another student:
 - Does it seem similar to the sort of home movies people make today of their children?
 - What is being shown in the clip?
 - What does it tell you about being a young child back then?

- After this, a teacher or librarian should inform students that the child is the real-life Hesje in the novel. Ask students to discuss:
 - How does knowing what happened to Hesje change how you feel about the film?
 - Should home movies, such as this, be preserved for later generations to watch and better understand what happened to real people?

Further Reading

- Find out more about Emanuel Querido, who Jeska Verstegen is descended from, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emanuel_Querido

In the Author's Own Words

'My grandfather loved stories. We walked frequently in the park near my grandparents' house. He told me stories about fairies and dwarfs. Together we searched for them endlessly in the tight shrubbery. We never found one, but it was the beginning of my creative career, I'm sure.

'I was always a child with my head in the clouds. I was a loner, and perhaps I still am. However, I love creating with other creative people because it's such a positive side of being human.

'Our family moved a lot [when I was young] because of my father's work. He was a journalist. One day we moved to Eersel, a small village in the Netherlands. I felt really out of place there. This fact has a prominent part in the book.

'The sad silence at home was another reason for me to prefer staying in my fantasy world. The strong realisation a few years ago, that my upbringing made me into who I am today, urged me to write about this story. A tale that has its regretful beginning several generations before me.

'It's intriguing to know everyone carries around their family history. It's a part of who you are. It's valuable to cherish this, the sadness and the beauty of this fact.'



– Jeska Verstegen