



**Hero**  
martha attema

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Consider the following question as you read *Hero*:

**How does Hero live up to his name?**

**Story**

In the last cold winter of the Second World War, Izaak is sent from hiding in Amsterdam to live on a farm in the north of Holland.

*“Jan! Move!” Els screamed. “The soldiers must not find us! We have to hide! They’ll kill us! It’s past curfew!”*

*Izaak jumped to his feet fast as a cannonball. He grabbed Els’s hand, and she pulled him down the slope of the canal that ran alongside the road.*

Els is a courier, a girl who takes Jewish children on the back of her bike to safety on farms in Friesland. When she leaves Isaak, disguised as Jan, at a farmhouse with kind people, he is miserable until he makes friends with a beautiful black horse, Hero, a Frisian wanted by the Germans. The first time the Germans come for the horse, Isaak comes up with a plan to save him, but the second time they come, Isaak can do nothing to protect the animal he loves.

**Author**

*Hero* is martha attema’s second Young Reader about World War Two. Her first was *Daughter of Light* (Orca, 2001). Hero was a real stallion owned by martha’s great uncle and stolen by the Germans just as the war was ending. A boy from the farm went with the horse and managed to escape and bring Hero home. In *Hero*, truth becomes powerful fiction. Martha and her husband have built a straw bale house, which will be both their home and an educational site.

**Curricular Integration**

**Science**

- There are many varieties of horses in the world, but they haven’t always been domesticated. Write a paragraph or two describing horses at different times in history. Compare this information with what you have read about Friesian horses. Sketch some examples of the horses you research.

**Social Studies**

- Mapping: On a political map of the Netherlands (one may be found at [worldatlas.com](http://worldatlas.com)), label the provinces, major water bodies (3 main rivers) and the capital city. Find out general information about the Netherlands such as population, area, highest and lowest points of land. Compare this information with what you know about your country and note similarities and differences.
- The Netherlands is a very low country with half of it less than a meter above sea level and some parts below sea level. It contains many canals, which serve as transportation routes. It also contains a system of dikes to protect the people from the water. At times in the past those dikes have breached, resulting in terrible floods. Find out when floods occurred in Holland in the twentieth century and what has been done to protect the country against further flooding. The map of the Netherlands has changed over the years as more land has been reclaimed from the sea. Research changes that took place in the map of Holland over the last hundred years. Have any changes taken place since World War II?
- See if there are any dikes in your area and find out their importance. In the Netherlands, dikes have been used to reclaim land from the sea. Research how the size and shape of Holland has changed in the last century and a half.
- Canals of the World: Canals in the Netherlands help people get around. Other countries have canals too. Gather information about famous canals around the world like the Panama, Grand, Erie and Suez.

**History**

- At the beginning of *Hero*, Izaak and his mother have been separated from his father and sister and are hidden in an attic. Abruptly, he must leave his mother, change his name and live on a farm. Children of war were also sent from England to Canada while others were involved in the Kindertransport Operation. Research one of the ways in which children were separated from their families and discuss the reasons for this separation. Where is this going on in our world today and why? Have a group discussion on this issue. Look for novels on this topic, such as Kit Pearson's War Guest trilogy or Irene Watts' *Remember Me*.

- Hero, the horse in the story, is a special kind of horse. He is a Frisian or Friesian whose breed originated in Friesland, a province in the Netherlands where Izaak is in hiding. These horses adapted to the climate and terrain of the Netherlands and were often ridden by knights. Today they are used for a variety of purposes. Find out more about how these horses were used in the mid-twentieth century compared to how they are used today. Create a chart or mural of the information.
- Invite a veteran from World War II to share his or her stories with students. Have the person bring artifacts like a uniform, pictures or buttons to help bring that time to life. Ideally, the veteran would have spent time in Holland during the war. If you have access to a camera, you may want to take photographs of the visit to use in the construction of a memory book. This book may include quotes from the veteran, student thoughts, information gathered through student questioning and research. Once the book is completed, you may choose to invite the veteran back to see or receive the memory book or you may use it as a classroom resource.
- Research the role that Holland played in the war. The country was occupied early on, but many Dutch people took great risks to help others and were very brave as they struggled to survive. Anne Frank is perhaps the most famous example. Do some research on Anne Frank including on her legacy. What can we learn from her?

### **Mathematics**

- The height of a horse is measured in hands. Find out what a hand equals and measure yourself to see how you compare to the average horse! Find out about other forms of measurement such as: stone, fathom, finger, furlong, mach or horsepower. Estimate, measure or convert measurements of a variety of items to test out these methods.

### **Drama**

- Famous Dutch artists include Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh, M.C. Escher and Rachel Ruysch. Locate pictures of their work in books or through online museums. Read about their techniques and style of art. Choose a Dutch artist whose work you like and create a picture using their style.

- World War II posters contain sayings and pictures that help bring a different perspective to this time in history. *The United Nations Fight For Freedom* and *Join American Red Cross* are two examples of war posters. These posters are available at [www.philaprintshop.com/warpost.html](http://www.philaprintshop.com/warpost.html). The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration has a poster analysis worksheet available on their website you may use with the posters.
- Courage plays an important role in *Hero*. As you read the story, make an individual or class chart describing events that depict courage in some way. Illustrate two or three of these times using brown pencil or charcoal as the medium. Mount the pictures together and use a famous quote about courage as the caption. An example is: “The great virtue of life is real courage that knows how to face facts and live beyond them” (D.H. Lawrence). You may also decide to use a passage from *Hero* as well.
- Create a mural of the farm where Jan is in hiding. Look up pictures of Dutch countryside and farm buildings for references. The following excerpts from *Hero* can be used to develop the scene: “Standing on top of the dike, Izaak could see the real dike in the distance. Farm buildings lay scattered between the two dikes” (p. 58); “They neared the village square where the church stood high and proud. Just past the church and the cemetery stood the small brick school” (p. 60); “Izaak crawled up the grassy slope, lay on his stomach and peered in the direction of the farm. His eyes narrowed into slits as he observed the farm buildings” (p.89); “‘There are three dikes,’ Gabe said. ‘The sleeper. The dreamer.’ He patted the ground they were sitting on. ‘The next one,’ he said, pointing at the dike ahead of them, ‘is the watcher. The watcher is the highest and has to protect the land from the sea’” (p. 85).

### Language Arts

- As they read *Hero*, have students write journal entries from the perspective of one of the secondary characters. You may want to divide the class into character groups (for example, one group would be one character, another would be another and so on) or have students make their own choices. These entries would start after students have read two chapters (*The New Dramathemes* p. 117). See the drama section below for an extension activity using this information.
- Many accounts of World War II are available online and in history books. Choose an event from the story and use it as the basis for a headline

newspaper story. For example, when the soldiers come to the street where Izaak and his family live, Izaak and his family must flee down the fire escape and through the alleys to Mrs. Waterman's house (p. 10). Two other good parts to make into newspaper stories could be when Els takes Izaak by bicycle from the city to the farm where he will be staying (p. 27), or when the war is over (p. 93).

- Use other sources to find out historical details that will add to your story. Illustrate the story and include a caption.
- How many heroes are there in the story? What makes them heroes? Who is the most important hero? Why? What are the qualities of a hero that are depicted in *Hero*? Have students write answers to these questions on their own or in pairs, then in a group setting share their responses and try to come to a consensus.
- Gabe and Hero miraculously survive and escape from their German captors. Izaak hopes for a miracle to occur too, to be reunited with his family. In what ways do his miracle come to be? In groups, discuss this and present the findings in a round robin format.

### Drama

- How would you feel if you had to hide whenever someone came over to your house? Find scenes from *Hero* that involve quick actions and hiding. For example, "Motorcycles. German motorcycles. His heart froze. Panic gripped him. 'We have to hide!' Izaak screamed"(p.94); "In the next moment, Els jumped up from the slope of the canal and screamed at him, 'Jan! We have to hide! A truck! Soldiers!'"(p. 31). Choose a few to role-play. When in real life are such quick actions required? *Among the Hidden* is an excellent novel to book talk with the class when doing this activity.
- Fictional journal entries: after students have completed the journal entries described in the language arts section above, have them participate in a Character Convention. This activity has the students sharing their journal entries in the role of the character they have chosen to write as. Pair students up or have them in groups who share different entries in the form of a conversation (*The New Dramathemes* p. 116).

## Suggested Resources

### Fiction

Attema, Martha. *Daughter of the Light, A Time to Choose, When the War is Over.*

Carmi, Daniella. *Samir and Yonatan.* (Children of war in the Middle East).

Deedy, Carmen Agra. *The Yellow Star. The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark.*

De Vries, Maggie. *Chance and the Butterfly.* (Foster child moving to a new home)

Haddix, Margaret Peterson. *Among the Hidden.* (Futuristic society where families may have only one child)

Hesse, Karen. *The Cats in Krasinski Square.*

Hort, Lenny. *The Boy Who Held Back the Sea.*

Propp, Vera W. *When the Soldiers Were Gone.*

Roos, Stephen. *The Gypsies Never Came.*

Sewell, Anna. *Black Beauty.* (Classic adventure of a horse)

Wells, Rosemary. *Streets of Gold.* (Russian Jewish immigrant girl comes to the United States at the turn of the century)

Wishinsky, Frieda. *Just Call Me Joe.* (Russian Jewish immigrants coming to the United States at the turn of the century)

### Nonfiction

(Dewey Decimal Classification numbers appear in parentheses where applicable.)

Adams, Simon. *World War II* (940.53).

Galloway, Patricia (comp.). *Too Young To Fight: Memories From Our Youth During World War II* (940.53).

Greer, Colin and Herbert Kohl (eds.). *A Call To Character* (808.8).

Harrison, Michael and Christopher Stuart-Clark, (selected by) *Peace And War: A Collection Of Poems* (808.81).

Heller, Ruth. *A Cache Of Jewels And Other Collective Nouns* (428.1).

Hodge, Jessica. *Rembrandt* (759.94).

Hoyt, Linda. *Make it Real: Strategies for Success With Informational Texts*. (372.6).

Jorgensen, Norman and Brian Harrison-Lever. *In Flanders Fields* (823).

Mochizuki, Ken. *Passage to freedom: The Sugihara Story* (940.53).

Swartz, Larry. *The New Dramathemes* (372.6).

Tremblay, Hélène. *Waiting for Sinterklaas: A Family in the Netherlands* (306.85).

Wilkinson, Philip. *The Art Gallery Stories* (759.94).

### Online

“Good Character.Com” [www.goodcharacter.com/TeacherResources.html](http://www.goodcharacter.com/TeacherResources.html)

“The Random Acts Of Kindness Foundation” [www.actsofkindness.org](http://www.actsofkindness.org)

“World Atlas.Com” [www.worldatlas.com](http://www.worldatlas.com)

“How Many? A Dictionary of Units Of Measure”  
[www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/](http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/)

“A Dictionary Of Units” [www.ex.ac.uk/cimt/dictunit.htm#history](http://www.ex.ac.uk/cimt/dictunit.htm#history)

“Friesian Horses” [www.imh.org/imh/bw/friesian.html](http://www.imh.org/imh/bw/friesian.html)

“Hints and Things: Terms for Groups of Animals”  
[www.hintsandthings.co.uk/kennel.collectives.htm](http://www.hintsandthings.co.uk/kennel.collectives.htm)

“The Holocaust History Homepage” [www.holocaust-history.org/](http://www.holocaust-history.org/)

“World War II Poster Collection”  
[www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwwii-posters/](http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govpub/collections/wwwii-posters/)

“Powers of Persuasion: Poster Art From World War II”  
[www.archives.gov/exhibit\\_hall/power\\_of\\_persuasion/powers/  
Powers\\_of\\_persuasion.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/power_of_persuasion/powers/Powers_of_persuasion.html)



## A Few Words From the Author

Dear Readers,

When I was visiting my parents in the summer of 2000, my father handed me a newspaper article. It told the story of the Friesian horse, Held (Hero). After reading about my great uncle's stallion, I knew right away that I had to write a novel. This was family history.

During that time I was researching the war couriers for my young adult novel, *When the War is Over*. I was struck by the courage of the young girls and women who carried out dangerous actions to fight the Nazis during the Second World War. When I read about a young girl taking Jewish children on her bike from Amsterdam to farms in Friesland, my "Hero" story was born. I combined the story of Held with the one about the courier.

I grew up on a farm in Friesland, a province in the northern part of the Netherlands. My father used horses for farm work. But, unlike my great uncle who bred Friesian horses, we never had these beautiful black horses. I loved horses, and at the age of nine I started horseback riding.

The Friesian horse is bred for shows and often used in the circus. The purebred horse is all black, has a long mane and hooves that are covered with hair. They look like they are wearing socks. If you visit my web site you can see a picture of Held.

I was really excited about this novel and enjoyed writing it. I sent the manuscript to my editor, Maggie de Vries. After she read the story, she called me. She told me that her father had spent the last winter of the war on a farm in Friesland and that his name was Jan de Vries, just like the little boy in my novel. What a coincidence! Now we were both excited about this book.

As a grade one teacher, I often get inspired by the books that I read to my students. The children also give me ideas for stories. I am fortunate in that I have the opportunity to read many, many excellent books in class, to work with young children and to write for young people.

I hope you will enjoy reading about my heroes!

With friendly regards,

martha attema  
[www.marthaattema.com](http://www.marthaattema.com)