

when she ruined Naomi's birthday party. "I'll never trust Chris and Betty again," she remarks, "so why should Naomi ever relax her guard with me?" Such seeming confusion between unfeeling behaviour and downright hatemongering is one of the reasons why Kirsh's novel can be deemed questionable at times. More questionable still are the means by which she has chosen to denounce the virulent anti-semitism of her fictional city. Since no particular reasons are given and no incidents occur that would at least explain how childhood playmates suddenly become vicious antagonists, her young readers will most surely conclude that those children's Catholic upbringing is solely responsible for their behaviour. Though Kirsh exposes the evils of racial and religious prejudice, by portraying hateful children, she just as surely fosters another kind of discrimination.

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*Claudine Pope writes in Toronto.*

### The Children's War

*The Old Brown Suitcase: A Teenager's Story of War and Peace.* Lillian Boraks-Nemetz. Ben-Simon, 1994. 148 pp. \$9.50 paper. ISBN 0-914539-10-8. *A Time to Choose.* Martha Attema. Orca, 1995. 165 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-045-2.

In *The Old Brown Suitcase*, Lillian Boraks-Nemetz finds subtle ways of dealing with the challenges that arise when one writes about the Holocaust for younger readers. A coming-of-age story, *The Old Brown Suitcase* introduces us to Slava Lenska as she arrives in Montreal with her family in 1947, and then depicts her struggle to adapt to Canadian life, alongside flashbacks of her family's treatment by the Nazis in occupied Poland. Slava — or, as she is called in Canada, Elizabeth — comes to terms with her own burdensome history as part of a larger effort to discover who she is and how she will contend with adult life.

The novel's portrait of the Lenskas' wartime experience is spare and evocative. Each short chapter depicting the war focuses on a different stage of the transformation of Polish Jews from citizens into hunted enemies of the German state. Without slowing down her narrative with too much historical detail, Boraks-Nemetz succeeds at accurately depicting what historian Raul Hilberg has called "the machinery of destruction"; the reader gains a clear sense of the movement from exclusive laws, to random arrests, to life entrapped in a ghetto, to the experience of hiding, escape, and finally liberation by less-than-heroic, drunken Russian soldiers. These scenes are carefully inserted into the narrative of Slava/Elizabeth's first two years in Canada,

where the experience of being held at arm's length by Canadian-born kids, of being, in one case, harassed for being Jewish, and the difficulties immigrant life pose for Elizabeth's parents, threaten to mark her indelibly as an outcast from the everyday society she longs to join. Ultimately, Elizabeth manages to affirm her ability to cope with both her Canadian present and her difficult Polish past.

At the outset, the novel's use of a fragmented narrative and repeated flashbacks may pose a challenge for young readers familiar with more conventionally told tales. But the effect of this back-and-forth movement between past and present is well-suited to a story of the Holocaust, since it conveys the way traumatic experiences can remain troublingly present years after the fact for those who undergo them. Boraks-Nemetz's way of working with her material presents the challenge, to those who teach her book, of introducing such issues to students.

Martha Attema's *A Time to Choose* is, like *The Old Brown Suitcase*, a coming-of-age story played out against the backdrop of World War II, but as Boraks-Nemetz's novel may appeal most readily to female readers, Attema's novel is built around the scenes of adventure and heroism that often captivate male readers. Attema's story is set in the occupied Netherlands, and centres on the challenges faced by sixteen-year-old Johannes van der Meer, whose father is a collaborator with the occupiers. Our sympathies are with Johannes as he comes to know himself — his national pride, his desire to commit himself to a cause, his growing love for a childhood friend, as well as his deep shame over his father's betrayal of friends and country. The novel takes a melodramatic — and at times unrealistic — turn, as Johannes and his father keep a wary distance, each working for drastically different causes without getting in each other's way. While the father is committed to helping the Nazis and the son is a committed resistance supporter, Attema gives us the impression that in some deeper way each still loves the other.

Attema's fiction, though suspenseful and historically detailed, is far less aggressive in its portrait of the ugliness of wartime life than Boraks-Nemetz's novel. *The Old Brown Suitcase* is graphic in its portrayal of a ghetto suicide, the squalor of Jewish life under the Nazis, and the brutality of deportation scenes. Attema's war is a more courtly matter, where resistance fighters urge one another to avoid bloodshed at all costs, and Nazis are so impressed by a resistance operation thought to be a "masterpiece" that they refuse to retaliate out of comradely respect. These touches, reminiscent of the kind of war stories British authors once wrote about respectable men in honourable battles, give *A Time to Choose* a slightly sanitized feel; this is not helped by the nameless Jewish family whom we only come to know by their "black hair and dark, piercing eyes." It may be that a boy's story about the war must inevitably rely on the contrast between the heroic and the dastardly, on the codes of honour and self-respect that were by no means at the

centre of wartime survival. Attema's Johannes is a compelling figure, too young to understand the world his father helped make, but dedicated to changing it for the better.

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