

Holocaust Novels: Authenticity or Travesty?

Candles. Lynne Kositsky. Roussan, 1999. 95 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-896184-44-8.
Remember Me. Irene N. Watts. Tundra, 2000. 174 pp. \$8.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-519-X.

Scan the shelves of any public school library, and you will likely see a cluster of Holocaust novels aimed at middle readers. Visit a class, and you may find a teacher reading aloud a popular Holocaust book. It is a credit to our schools that they are cultivating an interest in this pivotal event, for the Holocaust poses tough questions about Western civilization: How could Germany, the nation that gave us Goethe and Beethoven, unleash forces of slaughter and destruction unparalleled in human history? What happened to reason, justice, tolerance and morality from 1933 to 1945? No one expects elementary schools to address these complex issues in their classrooms, but many teachers take a literary route — through Holocaust books — to teaching their students about the extreme consequences of racism those years saw.

What kinds of Holocaust books do this best? The range of titles — and of quality — is daunting. And while many of these books tell gripping stories, not all do so with literary skill.

If Judy Blume wrote a Holocaust book, it might read like Lynne Kositsky's *Candles*. Anya is a whiny preteen who complains incessantly about her mother:

Tonight, as she was quick to tell me through her clenched pearly whites, we were definitely having guests, and I wasn't going anywhere....

"But I've promised to go to Matty's tree-decorating party.... Why do we have to have stupid old Chanukah?"

"Watch your mouth, young lady. You'll just have to unpromise." (14)

It is Christmas time, and Anya resents Chanukah. In a Holocaust variation on this tired theme, the menorah (candelabra) Anya is given by her grandmother has the power to teach Anya who she is. At each night's lighting, she moves back in time to the war years, where she takes on the persona of Estie, a German-Jewish girl. As anti-Jewish measures take effect in Germany, Anya/Estie is smuggled off to England where she endures schoolyard anti-Semitism, an abortive evacuation, and the Blitz, until the war ends and she emigrates to Canada.

If the bare facts of the story ring true (Irene N. Watts tells a strikingly similar one in *Goodbye Marianne* and *Remember Me*), *Candles*, in its past and present narrative planes, does not. What mother would let her Jewish child — travelling on false papers with friends who are risking themselves to smuggle her out — hide the family's menorah at the bottom of her suitcase? When was the last time you heard a kid call her best friend her "closest pal" who comes over to "dish the dirt"?

Candles is about Anna's transformation — from a petulant child who resents her Jewishness to a girl who learns "what it means to be Jewish" from her experience as Estie in Nazi Germany. But if "what it means to be Jewish" is merely a function of learning about the Holocaust, then Jewish identity is defined by Judaism's enemies rather than by the enormously positive forces within the faith itself: its uncompromising ethical code, its concern for the weak and the poor, its

emphasis on Torah study and observance, and its long and rich history.

Unlike Lynne Kositsky, Irene N. Watts writes about what she experienced first-hand. She was in one of the first *kindertransports* — rescue missions that saved 10,000 European children from Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1939. At the age of seven-and-a-half, she landed in England, where she lived out the war in safety. Watts makes her heroine, Marianne Kohn, a few years older, but her clear recollections of her experience lend authenticity to her story.

Remember Me picks up where *Goodbye Marianne* left off, with Marianne's arrival in London. She is placed with a childless couple who had expected an older girl (to perform free domestic help). Unfortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Abercrombie Jones are no Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert. Marianne's emotional needs are ignored, while she is expected to act with perfect propriety. As she struggles with a new language and school, Marianne is also beset by persistent loneliness and insistent worries about her parents' safety.

Watts skilfully evokes the insular English world Marianne has stepped into — where, as the young refugee notes, the word "foreigner" is pronounced as though it were a disease. After she interrupts her guardian's bridge game to advertise her parents' domestic skills as potential hired help (in hopes of getting them into England), Marianne is reprimanded:

"It is wrong to try save my parents?" Marianne asked softly.

"Don't exaggerate, Mary Anne. They must wait their turn like other refugees. It is not a question of saving, but of good manners." (49)

It is a nuanced picture that Watts paints: of a teacher's barely concealed anti-Semitism — "You are taking advantage. Your kind always do" (163) — balanced by the sensitive headmistress who helps Marianne come to terms with this insult — "We don't live in a perfect world, I'm afraid, and wars don't transform ideas overnight" (165).

Although Marianne never presents the fully-rounded character that more accomplished children's writers realize in their Holocaust novels (I think of Nicole Nieman in Marilyn Sachs's *A Pocketful of Seeds* and of Alan Silverman in Myron Levoy's *Alan and Naomi*), Watts awakens sympathy by keeping her focus squarely on the human drama of her story: the clash between Marianne's unhappy inner life and the English society she must adapt to.

The Holocaust is too important a subject to trivialize by popularization. Young readers deserve to be touched, not manipulated, by stories of those terrible years.

Marjorie Gann teaches English at the Toronto French School. Her publications include Discover Canada: New Brunswick (Grolier) and Report Writing: Books I and II (Educators Publishing Service).