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Holocaust Fact/Holocaust Fiction

The Secret of Gabi's Dresser. Kathy Kacer. Second Story P, 1999. 128 pp. $5.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-15-0. ***Greater than Angels.*** Carol Matas. Scholastic Canada, 1998. 133 pp. $17.99 cloth. ISBN 0-590-12498-6. ***Good-bye Marianne.*** Irene N. Watts. Toronto: Tundra/McClelland and Stewart Young Readers, 1998. 112 pp. $8.99 paper. ISBN 0-88776-445-2.

For the last decade or so, there has been an explosion in Holocaust literature for young people. Whatever the reason — the popularity of films like *Schindler's List*, the publicity accorded Holocaust deniers like Ernst Zundel, the determination of aging survivors to tell their stories — the shelves in children's bookstores are weighted with Holocaust books, presenting parents and teachers with the challenge of making an intelligent choice among them.

The easiest selection criterion is age-appropriateness. We don't buy Elie Wiesel's *Night* for ten-year-olds; we don't expect them to read about babies burned alive in open pits, about people going mad in cattle cars, about starving inmates hanged for stealing a potato. Instead, we select books that allude to, without confronting, the horror. Anne Frank's *Diary* ends before the capture and deportation of the hidden families. Books about rescuers — Johanna Reiss's *The Upstairs Room*, Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* — alleviate despair by focusing on the righteous gentiles of Holland and Denmark who risked their lives to save Jews. The gentle text and almost comical illustrations of Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas's *A Time for Toys* attenuate the horror of the Bergen Belsen setting.

In an illuminating analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian historical fiction for children, Sheila Egoff suggests a standard that is helpful in assessing children's Holocaust literature. Historical fiction depends, says Egoff, "on the writer's evocative skill." She is especially critical of Canadian children's historical fiction from the 1940s to the 1960s: "Its virtues," she explains, "lay in the reporting — not the recreating — of history; its failings were literary."

> Authenticity, which costs hours of work, is within the reach of almost any writer with a flair for research, but imagination is something that effort alone cannot purchase. (104)

Whether they take the form of memoirs, fictionalized memoirs, novels based on accounts by relatives or friends of the writer, or novels based on research, children's Holocaust novels marry facts with imagination. The facts must be reliable and the setting credible; at the same time, these books must convincingly evoke a world that, at the heart of its darkness, is truly unimaginable.

Survivors' memoirs convey the experience of the Holocaust with the greatest immediacy and authenticity. Who but a survivor could understand the conflicting emotions of a Polish-Jewish child who passed as a Polish peasant boy for the duration of the war? Here is how Jack Kuper (*Child of the Holocaust)* describes his inner turmoil at war's end:

> Now that I was liberated I wanted to stop this act of mine, but for some reason I didn't consider it an act anymore. I found myself going to church instinctively. My daily prayers were not simply to fool anymore, for I was saying them with conviction and sincerity.
>
> These discoveries upset me, for I now realized how far removed I was from the boy Jankele Kuperblum. It was as if there were two of me ... Janek Kochanski I could see well, but Jankele Kuperblum stood on the horizon, almost a blur in front of my eyes. (167)

At the next remove from primary records are fictionalized memoirs — novelized renderings of the author's experience. More artistically self-conscious, and lacking the immediacy and confessional quality of pure memoirs, these works maintain authenticity through a plethora of first-hand observations.

Irene N. Watts grew up in Berlin; at age seven and a half she was sent to England on one of the *kindertransports* that rescued thousands of Jewish children before the outbreak of the war. *Good-bye, Marianne* opens on November 15, 1938, five days after *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass), the pogrom that signalled the beginning of the end for German Jewry. Eleven-year-old Marianne Kohn arrives at school to discover the door barred to Jewish children. Over the next two weeks, it becomes increasingly clear to Marianne's terrified mother that her daughter is not safe in Germany. When a place becomes available on a *kindertransport*, mother and daughter make the painful decision to separate so Marianne can escape.

With considerable skill, Watts intensifies the atmosphere of Nazi terror by juxtaposing the charms of the Berlin she grew up in with the acceleration of Nazi hooliganism. The simple pleasures of a day with her non-Jewish friend Ernest at the Christmas market, sharing *weisswurst* and gingerbread, evaporate when Marianne witnesses storm troopers tossing a Jewish man out of his window onto the pavement (for Ernest, who is playing detec-

tive, this is simply the chance to see someone being arrested!). A jaunt to the Brandenburg Gate is spoiled when a parade of Hitler Youth arrives; Ernest is excited by the pageantry, but Marianne feigns dizziness to avoid giving the *sieg heil* salute. The friendliness of strangers, like the toy store owner who sells Marianne a music box: "I'm glad my work will find a good home. Come back again," (39) is tinged with irony; we know that German Jewry is about to lose all their homes, and we suspect that Marianne will not be able to "come back again."

Watts captures the family's peril in an image that runs through Marianne's head the night after her father, in hiding from the Gestapo, makes a fleeting visit to her and her mother before slipping away:

> She closed her eyes. There was a Ferris wheel going round and round in her head, and she was on it. When she reached the top she was happy, but the wheel never stayed still long enough before turning again, so the happiness didn't last. She could see it, but she couldn't hold on to it ... (67)

This is a fitting metaphor for Germany's Jews, atop a Ferris wheel of fortune heading inevitably downward!

At the next remove from survivors' memoirs is Holocaust fiction rooted in the experience of a close friend or relative. A classic example is Marilyn Sachs's *A Pocket Full of Seeds*, based on the wartime experiences of Sachs's good friend Fanny Krieger (the Nicole of her story). Sachs has an uncanny eye for what makes France so French (the proprietress of the neighbourhood *crémerie* insists that Nicole buy the Camembert, not the Brie her mother had ordered, because "the Camembert is delicious today"). Imperceptibly, she introduces just the facts needed to make sense of her story (the rise of Maréchal Pétain, the German occupation of Vichy France, the deportation of French Jews). But Sachs keeps her focus squarely on the development of her heroine Nicole — a strong-willed adolescent who learns to tame her high spirits to last out the war in hiding.

For her story, Kathy Kacer's informant was her own mother, who hid in a dresser to avoid deportation. Unfortunately, *The Secret of Gabi's Dresser* falls into the Egoff trap; it is long on history, short on literary skill.

The book follows a familiar pattern. A happy childhood (in this case, in Slovakia) ends with the arrival of the Germans: school is closed to Jewish students, friends desert them, soldiers raid the family home, the family talks of going into hiding.

The impact of this gripping story is diluted by historical information clumsily delivered:

> 'Well,' Papa began. 'Let me try to explain. You know about the Nazi Party, the political party ruling Germany now, and about its leader, Adolf Hitler. And you know that the German army has already invaded Poland, Denmark, Norway and other countries."

I nodded. In school we had learned about the government in Germany, and about how Hitler's army was taking over much of Europe.

Papa continued. 'Hitler and his Nazis despise the Jewish people. There have been reports in the papers about Jews in Germany being forced to give up their businesses. But it's hard to believe these rumours can be true.' (30)

Kacer chose to retell her mother's experience in the first person. It takes considerable skill, however, to round out a plot while maintaining a child narrator's viewpoint. Hidden in the dresser, for example, Gabi can't hear how Mamma keeps the soldiers away, so Kacer tells the event twice — first, in chapter Twelve, from Gabi's perspective:

I was frantically worried about Mamma and her safety. What would the soldiers do if they didn't find me? Would they take her instead? Would they hurt her?... What would the soldiers do once they got their hands on me? I knew I would be taken away, but where? Would I be harmed? Would I ever see Mamma again? Each minute felt like a lifetime. (100)

Then, in Chapter Thirteen, from Mamma's:

Tears gathered in Mamma's eyes at the memory of her terror. 'One of the soldiers, a young one, noticed the kitten and headed for the dresser. It was as if he suddenly realized that it was there, and that it hadn't been searched. I didn't know what to do. I thought for sure they would find you.'

'How did you stop them?' I asked.

'Well, you won't believe this, Gabilinka, but just then I remembered something I once saw in a movie. The character in the movie was trying to get people on the street to look at her, so they wouldn't notice her friend stealing from a store. In the middle of the street she started yelling and yelling, and everyone ran towards her to see what was ... so I started yelling and wailing like a crazy woman.' (107)

Johanna Reiss's *The Upstairs Room* demonstrates that two perspectives (once again, inside and outside a hiding place) can be kept in the same narrative plane:

My mouth was dry, yet I didn't dare breathe through my nose. They might still be there ...

There were noises on the stairs again. They're coming back? No, only wooden shoes this time.

'They're gone, girls.' Dientje removed the piece of wood. "We were lucky. One of 'em was standing right here. I was afraid he would hear you breathe.'

We didn't move. Dientje bent in front of the hole. 'They're gone.'

'Girls, I brought you a drop of coffee,' Opoe said. 'You can come out now. They were nasty people. They took the pig we were going to kill, and the cloth I've been saving for years." (127)

At the furthest remove from memoirs are novels based largely on research. Although critic Lawrence Langer questions "whether writers who did *not* possess empirical evidence of this universe [can] recreate its atmosphere convincingly," (20) masterpieces like Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* and André Schwartz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* prove that this can be done.

Carol Matas has done extensive research about the Holocaust for her growing list of period fiction: *Lisa* and *Jesper* on the Danish resistance; *Daniel's Story* on Auschwitz; and now, *Higher than Angels*, on the heroic and successful effort of the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, in the Haute-Loire region of (Vichy) France, to resist the Nazis and hide Jewish and political refugees.

With an eye on her young adult audience, Matas opts for first-person narration. To provide a "you are there in the thick of it" perspective, she prefers the present tense and short, choppy sentences.

Yet her narrators often sound like caricatures. Here, Matas's latest heroine, fourteen-year-old Anna Hirsch, describes her first kiss:

> Slowly he tilts his head and I feel paralyzed, or hypnotized or something, because I can't move, and then he kisses me. His lips just touch mine, so softly, I had no idea he was capable of such gentleness. Then he looks me in the eye again, both hands on my shoulders ...
>
> 'Did he kiss you?' Klara asks.
>
> 'You saw.'
>
> 'I'm not surprised.'
>
> 'You're *not*?'
>
> 'Oh, no. I've known he's been nuts over you for ages now.' ...
>
> 'I'm not going to be able to sleep a wink tonight,' I say to her as we go into the house ...
>
> But it's not because we're leaving. Well, it is of course. But it's also that kiss. I keep feeling Rudi's lips on mine and I can't get it out of my mind because I liked it. I really liked it. Why did he have to wait until just before I leave to do it? Honestly, he's maddening, really maddening. But what eyes! (106-108)

Maddening, indeed — the intrusion of cheap American idiom into 1940s Europe. For comparison, here is an authentic adolescent voice of the period:

> Last night at eight I was sitting with Peter on his divan and it wasn't long before he put an arm around me ... He moved so far over he was practically in the corner. I slipped my arm under his and across his back, and he put his arm around my shoulder, so that I was nearly engulfed by him.... He wasn't satisfied until my head lay on his shoulder, with his on top of mine.... Oh, it was so wonderful. I could hardly talk, my pleasure was too intense; he caressed my cheek and arm, a bit clumsily, and played with my hair....
>
> How I suddenly made the right movement, I don't know, but before we went

> downstairs, he gave me a kiss, through my hair, half on my left cheek and half on my ear. I tore downstairs without looking back, and I long so much for today. (265-266)

Nothing cheap here — a fresh style, closely observed details, perfect cadence. The voice, of course, is Anne Frank's.

Like the Canadian historical fiction Egoff criticizes, *Greater than Angels* is well-researched — and ever-so-anxious to instruct. Whole scenes are contrived to make sure the reader is well informed. We learn about the infamous "Rafle du Vél d'hiv" (the roundup of French Jews in Paris) from a refugee who happens to arrive at a farmhouse in Le Chambon where Anna is staying, and who disappears from the plot as inexplicably as she appears:

> 'There were thousands — one guard told me eight thousand in that place. We were there five days! They'd turned off the water, so there was nothing to drink and no water in the bathrooms ... Mothers gave birth. They weren't taken to the hospital, they were left to do it in public, in the filth. People got dysentery from what little food there was.... You had to do your business right in the open — what choice did you have? The smell, the stench." (89-90)

Troubling theological questions posed by the Holocaust intrude in the same awkward way. Jewish education did persist even in detention camps, so it is not surprising that there was a Torah discussion group in Gurs, where Anna is held until she is sent to Le Chambon for safety. And, indeed, there is ample precedent for embedding theological discussion in the body of a novel (one need look no further than Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor). But in *Greater than Angels* this discussion has a tacked-on quality, with a different, well-articulated argument carefully assigned to each participant:

> Someone else piped up. 'Are you saying this is all Eve's fault?'
>
> 'Yes,' the young man insisted. 'Without knowledge, we'd still be in a state of paradise.'
>
> 'And maybe,' said the professor, 'there would then only be Adam and Eve in the world. After all, what use are people, an entire planet full, if only to live in a state of unconscious bliss? ... Did God create a perfect world? And if not, why.'
>
> 'Professor, God created a world that needs to be completed. We must mend the world. *Tikkun Olam.* That is our job." (45)

The content of these discussions can be as anachronistic as the language:

> 'One of the reasons we have so much trouble seeing God as something other than a big powerful human' is that 'you keep calling God Him. Isn't there something else we could call Him? I mean, It? I mean ... you know.' (49)

If it's hardly surprising that a girl who utters the quintessentially 1990s "I mean ... you know" would import a trendy contemporary issue to a 1940s detention camp, it's no less surprising that *Higher than Angels* is not as convincing as the best of these three novels, *Good-bye Marianne.*

In the light of the recent mass murders in Rwanda and Burundi, Bosnia and Kosovo, the value of Holocaust education is indisputable. The Holocaust is the ultimate argument against intolerance and tribalism. In my own classroom, I find literature an indispensable tool for teaching about history. Nothing, for example, gave my class a better understanding of the experience of Japanese Canadians in World War II than *Naomi's Road.* And nothing will engage students more powerfully in the Holocaust period than a well-written novel. If, however, the story becomes a mere *device* for teaching the facts, if the novel is *didactic* rather than *evocative,* it will not ring true.

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Beyond Imagination

Beyond Imagination. Ed. Jerry Grafstein. McClelland and Stewart, 1995. 265 pp. $29.99 cloth. ISBN 0-7710-3506.

While it is imperative that we continue to explore the Holocaust, both historically and philosophically, writers who seek to express their thoughts