

History in the Making

Volume 9

Article 12

January 2016

Past, Present, and Future: Connecting to the Holocaust through Literature

Danielle Demke
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [Holocaust and Genocide Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Demke, Danielle (2016) "Past, Present, and Future: Connecting to the Holocaust through Literature," *History in the Making*: Vol. 9 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol9/iss1/12>

This Notes from the Classroom is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

Notes from the Classroom

Past, Present, and Future: Connecting to the Holocaust through Literature

By Danielle Demke

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived “racial inferiority”: Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals.¹

The Holocaust is an important and complex historical event, and it is one that cannot be ignored. In the present moment, it is vital that students be correctly and responsibly taught in order to prevent future genocide. By using quality Holocaust literature in the classroom, students will be able to emotionally connect to the events, and respect and remember the historical details that will drive home the lessons of the Holocaust. It is through excellent literary choices that students will be able to take the lessons of the Holocaust to heart and “never forget” what they will come to know.² Therefore, by effectively using appropriate and historically

¹ “Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://www.ushmm.org/educators/teaching-about-the-holocaust/general-teaching-guidelines#define>.

² “Museum Motto,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://www.ushmm.org>.

sound Holocaust literature in the classroom, students will better be able to grasp, learn, and emotionally connect to the events of the Holocaust, and thus, further work to prevent future genocides.

Recommended Literature

Not all books are written with equal value or merit. In discussing and teaching about the Holocaust, it is important to understand and decide which books are suitable for a classroom lesson. The following books are appropriate for classroom use.

Night by Elie Wiesel is the memoir of Wiesel and his father as they survive in the concentration camps of Buchenwald and Auschwitz from 1944 to 1945. Wiesel's personal thoughts and fragmented moments invite readers into this moment in time and into this particular era in history. As Wiesel contemplates further on the reality of his situation, readers see the father-son relationship change with Wiesel becoming a reluctant caregiver and his father regressing into a helpless state in the face of the atrocity they endure. Wiesel's *Night* is the first book of his trilogy, and while reading all three books may be overly ambitious in a classroom, the first book is ideal for introducing or furthering Holocaust education. Wiesel's account is a first-hand experience, and his point of view as a frustrated teenager can relate to students. The purpose of Wiesel's book, as he has made clear in many interviews, is to inspire people and drive home the message that the horrors that transpired during the Holocaust must never happen again. As students emotionally relate and empathize with the protagonist, they will be further tied to the outcome. The goal of Wiesel's writing is one that can be achieved in every classroom.³

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen follows twelve-year-old Hannah. She is tired of every Passover (and every holiday) being spent reminiscing about the past with her relatives, especially when she would much rather spend time with her friends. A frustrated Hannah finds herself transported back to 1942 where she is known as Chaya (her Hebrew name) and is eventually ushered into a concentration camp. Hannah's experiences in the Holocaust and in the camp force her to understand the relevance of

³ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 115 pages.

the memories her family insists on reliving. The past and its horrors are not irrelevant. While Yolen's book is fictional, the author is able to investigate the Holocaust from a modern point of view. Hannah is not a girl from 1942; she is from the present. Her attitudes, concerns, and ideas about human decency are ones that students and readers today can relate to. As she undergoes the horrors of being transported in a cattle car, having her head shaved, and eventually dealing with the realities of life in a concentration camp, students will be able to emotionally connect to this protagonist. Her life as a frustrated teenager who would rather spend time with friends than family is not a foreign concept to modern students. As the novel concludes and Hannah comes back to her family at their Passover meal, she is an altered girl. She has seen, felt, and experienced the nightmare. Hannah sees the value of remembering and reverencing the past. Her misadventures in 1942 can help readers feel the reality of life in a concentration camp, and thus further empathize with Hannah. This book appeals to modern readers, and the time traveling portion, while not realistic, will allow modern sentiments to be transported to the past as well. Making emotional connections is essential because it allows the readers to ask themselves how they would have acted or responded.⁴

French Heroines, 1940-1945: Courage, Strength, and Ingenuity by Monique Saigal is a compilation of stories about eighteen women who are not well known yet stand out because of their incredible deeds of heroism during the Holocaust. The book is broken up into different sections based on the heroic actions the women performed. The women interviewed in these chapters stood up for what they believed in, and while their motivations may have varied, their goals were the same. They saw the atrocities of the Holocaust taking place around them, and it was not acceptable. These outstanding women were brave and noble in their fight to save lives and nurture souls. Many of the narratives of World War II and the Holocaust come from men, soldiers, victims, or young girls who kept diaries. However, Saigal's book provides the unique point of view of eighteen bold women who fought from the outside. They were not in camps, but their homeland had become occupied by German forces. The official explanation of the book sums up its purpose well – "Reading these texts takes us back to a

⁴ Janet Yolen, *The Devil's Arithmetic* (New York: Puffin, 2004), 170 pages.

time of terror when women fought back with every ounce of strength and wit at their disposal. What a splendid example they provide for today's youth who are searching for meaning in their lives!"⁵ Advantages of using this book in the classroom are that readers will benefit from the different points of view of the women, and students will have the opportunity to read about the many ways that people took a stand. This book has the designed purpose to inspire, to help readers feel what the heroines felt, and, hopefully, stand up for what is right themselves. Through these voices from the past, students will have the chance to learn about a different side of history. Most importantly, the reader will develop his or her own conscience to stand boldly while others sit by and allow the tragedy.⁶

Survival in Auschwitz by Primo Levi is the first of his Auschwitz trilogy. In 1943, Primo Levi was twenty-five years old and a talented chemist. He was arrested in Italy and taken to Auschwitz, where he endured systematic cruelty in addition to showing and witnessing amazing endurance for ten long months. His story is complex, detailed, and unique in its openness with nuances. Levi named these complex nuances "grey zones" and aptly explains the reality of life inside a concentration camp and how it was never as clear-cut as it has been made out to be today. Levi openly discusses bullies amongst the victim prisoners and kindness from the typically villainized guards. These grey zones are emotionally draining to comprehend and upturn many previously held beliefs. For these reasons, the book *Survival in Auschwitz* is unique and important in its point of view and also for its hard look into the pragmatic truth of human interaction. Human nature does not naturally polarize into categories of "good" and "bad" during wartime; it is more complicated than that. Levi's bluntness with the cruelty he witnessed makes this memoir ideal for older, emotionally mature students.⁷

⁵ Monique Saigal, *French Heroines, 1940-1945: Courage, Strength, and Ingenuity* (Los Angeles: S.N. Publishing, 2010), back cover.

⁶ Saigal, *French Heroines, 1940-1945*, 184 pages.

⁷ Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (La Vergne: B.N. Publishing, 2004), 187 pages.

Not Recommended for Classroom Use

The following books are entertaining and may be enjoyable to read for entertainment, but they should not be used in the classroom as teaching tools.

The Extra by Katherine Lasky is about a fifteen-year-old Gypsy girl, named Lilo, who is chosen, along with her family, to be extras in Hitler's propaganda films. Lilo describes life on the film sets as twisted and fragmented as she "acts" in beautiful places, yet is kept in a barn along with the other extras where they are given little food and are guarded like prisoners. Lilo decides to escape, and the novel follows her daring attempt. The issue with *The Extra* is in Lasky's softened and idealized descriptions of the Holocaust. The author down plays the horrors of the Holocaust and often does not describe it at all; using the Holocaust as a "backdrop" cheapens the event's magnitude. The book is also problematic in that the main character struggles with feelings of attraction towards the abusive and violent guard that is in charge of keeping the Gypsy extras in the barn. While the book can be read for enjoyment, it is not accurate and should not be brought up in lectures.⁸

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas by John Boyne follows the story of Bruno, a nine-year-old German boy, whose father has been granted the assignment to be in charge of the concentration camp "Outwith" (Auschwitz). Bruno soon ventures to the edge of his new home and finds another little boy on the other side of a fence. To the reader, it is obvious that this little boy is a Jewish prisoner in the concentration camp. What begins as a playful relationship culminates when Bruno decides to sneak under the fence to play with Schmel, and the boys are led to a gas chamber. Bruno's parents are horrified at what has happened and begin to question their actions that have led them to this point. While the book is emotional and entertaining for mature readers, it is also fraught with historical inaccuracies and factual impossibilities. This novel does not convey an accurate tone of the Holocaust, nor does it enlighten the reader of the father's role in these atrocities. This book can be read for entertainment value for readers of young

⁸ Katherine Lasky, *The Extra* (New York: Candlewick Press, 2013), 320 pages.

adult literature yet should not be recommended in a classroom setting.⁹

Hitler's Secret by William Osborne revolves around teenagers Otto and Leni who have escaped from Nazi Germany to England only to be sent back as spies for the Crown. Their secret mission is known as Wolfsangel. Their purpose is to find and kidnap a special girl who could be the key to bringing down Hitler. Osborne's novel is fast paced, action packed, and a great read for a reader who is timid to learn about the Holocaust. The author further incorporates real people such as Winston Churchill, and Rudolf Hess into the story to interact with the two protagonists. While the book does contain facts about Germany and the structure of the Third Reich, it offers an inaccurate image and understanding of the Holocaust and its lasting effects.¹⁰

The Book Thief by Markus Zusack is an intriguing and quirky book about a young girl named Liesel Meminger as told through the perspective of Death. The novel tells the story of Liesel as she is shuffled onto a train car bound for a concentration camp with her mother and sister but is let off due to a misunderstanding. She is then cared for by a German family, assimilates into village life, and eventually helps to hide a Jewish man in the family basement. While the novel is creative and uniquely written, it is not accurate, nor should it be used as a teaching tool in a classroom setting. Liesel is not in a typical living situation nor are her experiences based on fact, and thus, she should not be used as an example of a typical, young girl living through the Holocaust. By being able to leave the train car when she did, Liesel circumvented Death until later in her life. *The Book Thief* is entertaining and well written, but is not appropriate for an educational setting.¹¹

⁹ John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (New York: David Fickling Books, 2006), 224 pages.

¹⁰ William Osborne, *Hitler's Secret* (New York: Chicken House Publishing, 2013), 333 pages.

¹¹ Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 552 pages.

Suggestions

It is crucial to remember to “strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs [a student’s] study of the Holocaust.”¹² This is especially important in dealing with Holocaust literature, as it is easy to assume the books the students read will tell the whole story. No single piece of Holocaust literature will offer the full depth and breadth of the Holocaust. It is essential that teachers convey this information to their students. It has been too often assumed that by reading *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* they have been given the scope of the Holocaust; however, this conclusion is incorrect.¹³ By following this advice, students will be able to better see that history has many different viewpoints and perspectives. The pieces of recommended literature outlined previously offer different points of view and thus allow students to read about a variety of protagonists that interacted with the events of the Holocaust differently.

Conclusion

The words “Never Forget” are the motto put forth by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.¹⁴ Many concepts of the Holocaust are not understood by people today; most people cannot even define the Holocaust. The complexity of the Holocaust needs to be appreciated by educators who can then pass on their knowledge to a new generation of students. By adopting responsible literature in the classroom and properly handling the topic of the Holocaust with young learners, students today can become primed to become the strong leaders of tomorrow. They will be better equipped to see wrongs in the world and will be educated in identifying the first steps that can lead towards genocide.

The Holocaust’s foundational lessons are that understanding and growth lie in the fact that all people are living

¹² “Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed February 29, 2016.

¹³ Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 283 pages.

¹⁴ “Museum Motto,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://www.ushmm.org>.

History in the Making

and breathing creatures and have more in common than those who seek power want to acknowledge. Once those similarities are revealed, people realize in the end all are human.

Bibliography

- Boyne, John. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. New York: David Fickling Books, 2006.
- Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Bantam, 1993.
- Lasky, Katherine. *The Extra*. New York: Candlewick Press, 2013.
- Levi, Primo. *Survival in Auschwitz*. La Vergne: B.N. Publishing, 2008.
- Osborne, William. *Hitler's Secret*. New York: Chicken House Publishing, 2013.
- Saigal, Monique. *French Heroines, 1940-1945: Courage, Strength and Ingenuity*. Los Angeles: S.N. Publishing, 2010.
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Translated by Marion Wiesel. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.
- Yolen, Jane. *The Devil's Arithmetic*. New York: Puffin, 2004.
- Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

Author Bio

Having two B.A. degrees, one in English literature and another in history, and loving them both, Danielle Demke combines her loves into one with this paper. Helping our youth emotionally connect with history through literature is a passion of Danielle's. She is able to make this goal a reality as she works with today's youth as a librarian. Names and dates become real people with amazing adventures as she reaches hundreds of children weekly through book talks, personal interactions/recommendations and choosing appropriate literature for her library. She will continue her educational pursuits with a Master's program, as learning is her passion. Danielle is immensely grateful to Dr. Pytell for teaching with such feeling, inspiring her to dive into the tough subjects without fear, and for his help throughout her history studies.

