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Fiction from fatality: creative exploration of the Holocaust in fiction for young people

Abstract
Overwhelmingly, the fictional protagonists in recent Holocaust literature for children and young adults are survivors or rescuers (a historically misleading representation); likewise, Jewish characters have been shown as the sole victims. This paper explores the political, ethical and personal issues of researching / writing Holocaust fiction for young people in which the protagonist is not Jewish, whose persecution by Nazis begins well before the Second World War is declared, and whose death - at this stage of writing - is more likely than not. Do the authorial motivations identified by Orwell still apply? Can an aesthetic motivation be asserted for a story of brutality, and is the writing of such fiction - particularly when the intent is to make it as historically accurate as possible - in effect a mediated reproduction of that brutality on contemporary readers who may identify personally with the protagonist? What line should an author for young people take between envisaging and revisioning history?

Psychologist Bruno Bettleheim, who had been imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps in 1938-1939 before coming to Australia and then the USA, criticised children's books of the post-war era for avoiding what he called 'the dark side of man'. Perhaps paradoxically, he also advocated happy endings (1975). His groundbreaking book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, advocated a return to the more brutal, original folk tales collected by the Brothers Grimm and others, rather than sanitised versions, as he believed that if children are allowed to read about the trials, tribulations, successes and failures encountered by the heroes of fairy tales, this will better prepare them for the challenges that they will face in their own lives. While he was talking about fairy tales and the cathartic effect they could have on readers who are left to interpret them by themselves, his comments also have resonance when it comes to realism - such as war and Holocaust stories.

The use of the Holocaust in fiction will always be controversial for a number of reasons, but Holocaust fiction for young people is particularly fraught. Among the key political and ethical concerns for writers are 'whose story is it?', 'what can we say?' and 'what responsibility do we have as tale-tellers', and 'to whom (or what) must we be responsible?' Can Orwell's four motivations for authors, and specifically the aesthetic imperative, be applied to those writing Holocaust stories - in particular, can it be applied to me, and the novel I have commenced?

In the last decade or so, and especially in the last few years, there has been a marked increase in the number of novels available to young people about the Holocaust, a trend that children's literature critics largely put down to the fact that the survivors themselves are dying off (Rochman 2006). We can see the same process in Australian literature; for example, we had a number of novels published about Gallipoli from the 1980s on, and now increasing numbers about Kokoda. Those who experienced it first-hand are not, or soon will not be, able to bear witness themselves. There is an authorial imperative to ensure the next generation knows about events of the past that have affected the present, and Australia's identity is strongly connected with its participation in past wars. The Holocaust, however, is a more universal story. Fiction provides an acknowledgement and form of remembrance for those who died, and those who experienced it but survived; but there is also a widely-held belief in George Santayana's maxim, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (1905). The fear that the Holocaust could be repeated if future generations are unaware of what, how and why it happened is the most commonly nominated motivation for writers in this field. Fiction makes individual and human what histories can distance us from through the sheer scale of what they explore. Good historical fiction brings together both information and an understanding of the effect on individuals. Through relating to the micro, the humanity of the millions becomes clearer: not numbers, but people, suffered and died.

As we move further and further in time from what happened, that knowledge of the Holocaust is threatened in more than one way. Lipstadt warns:

> The deniers' window of opportunity will be enhanced in years to come. The public, particularly the uneducated public, will be increasingly susceptible to Holocaust denial as survivors die ... Future generations will not hear the story from people who can say "this is what happened to *me*. This is *my* story." For them it will be part of the distant past and, consequently, more susceptible to revision and denial. (1994 p. xii)

How 'historical' should 'historical fiction' be? Is there a greater need for responsibility on the author's part when telling particular stories about particular events, or does the author have the right to write anything at all? Making things up is, after all, what fiction writers do. It is a right most of us hold dear, and that some see as absolute. Do authors for young people primarily owe their duty of care to the readers, who may be upset or even traumatised by the truth? Is there a duty of care also to those who lived through the Holocaust, and *were* traumatised by their experience? Which duty of care should take priority if they conflict? To answer these questions, it is necessary to ask another: whose story is it? Those who experienced and witnessed it? Their children? Is it a story that belongs only to people of a particular religious or national background? Is it, as is widely believed about other stories, something that belongs to the reader or listener? Is it the author's? They are not easy questions to answer.

Jerry Spinelli, who wrote *Milkweed* (2003) about a young orphan in the Warsaw Ghetto, expressed doubt about whether - as an American and non-Jew - he should be writing about the subject, but said he thought it was important to keep writing about the Holocaust 'Because there is no statute of limitations on humanity. Because history sits on the shoulder while story unlocks the heart. Because to those involved, there was not a Holocaust of six million, but six million Holocausts of one' (Teachervision n.d.). Yet it was not six million killed - a point I will come back to.

Historian Inga Clendinnen said 'Encroaching onto unfamiliar territory - especially this territory, so jealously guarded - is an anxious business, lacking as I do the local languages, local connections and local knowledge of the terrain' (1998: 6-7). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman is more blunt:

> Time and again it has been narrated by Jews and non-Jews alike as a collective (and sole) property of the Jews, as something to be left to, or jealously guarded by, those who escaped the shooting and gassing, and by the descendants of the shot and the gassed. ... Some self-appointed spokesmen for the dead went as far as warning against thieves who collude to steal the Holocaust from the Jews, "Christianize" it, or just dissolve its uniquely Jewish character in the misery of an indistinct "humanity". The Jewish state tried to employ the tragic memories as the certificate of its political legitimacy, a safe-conduct pass for its past and future policies, and above all as the advance payment for the injustices it might itself commit. Each for reasons of its own, such views contributed to the entrenchment of the Holocaust in public consciousness as an exclusively Jewish affair, of little significance to anyone else. (1989: viii-ix)

He believes it a 'perilous' approach:

> *The Holocaust was born and executed in our modern rational society, at the high stage of our civilization and at the peak of human cultural achievement, and for this reason it is a problem of that society, civilization and culture.* The self-healing of historical memory which occurs in the consciousness of modern society is for this reason more than a neglect offensive to the victims of the genocide. It is also a sign of dangerous and potentially suicidal blindness. (1989: x, italics in original)

In 2007, when I presented a paper on picture books about the Holocaust (Page 2008a), a man forcibly grabbed my arm as I was on my way out of the auditorium. The first thing he said was that he came to the symposium because he had seen the title of my paper in the programme and was angry. He had wanted to challenge me publicly. When I asked why, he said it was obvious from my name that I wasn't Jewish (an interesting argument, given that Judaism is passed down matrilineally). His parents were Hungarian, both survivors of concentration camps. He worked with the survivor community in Adelaide. As far as he was concerned, I had no right to discuss the Holocaust. However, after hearing the paper he was assured that I was not trying to steal or deny or minimise the events of the era. Following that, we had several friendly discussions during the symposium, and several emails and conversations since. But the incident reinforced for me the fervent sense of ownership and protectiveness that some people demonstrate about the Holocaust even now, maybe particularly now, more than 60 years after the war ended. That 'ownership' is constantly reinforced - think of Elliot Perlman's review of a recently-published collection of notes and illustrations by teenager Petr Ginz, who died in a concentration camp. Perlman said in his review: 'It is not possible to remember six million people. We can remember the number but not the people' (2007: 9). Yet he has not remembered the number accurately. More than 11 million civilians were killed by the Nazis; Morse (1968) put it as high as 20 million. We will never know an exact figure. Of the total killed, about six million were Jews, one and a half million of whom were children.

Some authors do have personal connections with the Holocaust story. Morris Gleitzman, author of *Once* (2005) has a connection through his heritage: 'My grandfather was a Jew from Krakow in Poland. He left there long before that time, but his extended family didn't and most of them perished' (postscript, n.p.). Others, such as Jerry Spinelli, John Boyne - and me - do not. I have a lot of empathy for Clendinnen's concerns - my experience with the audience member has reinforced the potential dangers. But like her, like Bauman, I do not think it only a Jewish story. It is particularly a Jewish story - only they and the Gypsies were picked out for total annihilation - but not only a Jewish story.

Just as it was not only Jews who were slaughtered by the Nazi machine, I believe it is not only Jews who should pay attention to what happened in our so-called civilised society. But when the Holocaust is associated so fully with one particular group, how can we tell other people's stories without in some way diminishing the impact on the group most affected?

There is another aspect to this issue that I believe is related, because it, too, can mislead young readers as to the impact and extent of the killing. Most novels for young people end with a hopeful conclusion: reunification with loved ones, such as in Ann Holm's *I am David* (1965) or Ian Serraillier's *The Silver Sword* (1956); escape and survival, such as in *Once* (Gleitzman 2005) or *Daniel Half-Human* (Chotjewitz 2005); or stories of rescuers, such as *Hitler's Canary* (Toksvig 2006) or *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2005). Why? Is that minimising, even devaluing what happened in reality? For readers exposed to the repeated survivor / rescuer theme, the impression given may be that the Holocaust was not as bad as all that, because so many people managed to survive by hiding or even by escaping from ghettoes, camps and death trains; because so many kind and brave people were protecting and rescuing the vulnerable; because the Nazis lost in the end and were punished by the courts for what they had done. Justice theoretically prevailed. Bad things may have happened, but everything came out well in the end. In effect, the Holocaust is being minimised, re-visioned and therefore misrepresented not by any single children's book, but because so many of them provide reassurance for young readers at the expense of realism. This is an argument I have taken up in more specific detail in another paper (Page 2008b), but it is important to consider in light of this article's examination of authorial motivations.

A concentration on heroic, uplifting stories is not the only way in which Holocaust children's and young adult fiction is re-visioning history. Israeli commentator Eva Tal (2004) said: 'By idealizing Jewish victims and turning them into martyrs or victors over evil, Holocaust literature for children fails to provide exactly the type of witnessing it professes to impart.' I would add to that: by not telling other people's stories - other victims, whether black, disabled, gay, Jehovah's Witness, Catholic, Polish non-Jews, socialist, Gypsy, pacifist, intellectuals; also those who may have collaborated, been active members of Hitler Youth, neighbours of camps, or so on - we are silencing, even erasing, everyone else who was killed, and providing no rationale for how the Holocaust could happen, or why ordinary people let the killing occur through omission or commission. The lack of broader contexts, I contend, means we are doing both the Holocaust victims and the children of the present and future a disservice.

If the Holocaust becomes a story that is associated only with Jews, rather than a story with universal implications, why do we as adult writers and buyers of books for young people think future generations would recognise or act against a similar situation with different targets? We are fooling ourselves, as well as young readers.

But they're only children. Why burden them?

Eisen recognises the gap between reality, and what we want to think about 'children':

> In our world view children possess an air of innocence. Clinging to innocent childhood, just like clinging to life or to a hope, is a reflection of humanity to us. The children of the Holocaust played, hoped, and succeeded in coping momentarily with ever-present death. But they saw everything that grown-ups saw. (1988: 116)

Gillian Lathey, among others, makes the point that it is contemporary adult views, rather than anything else, that dictate what appears in children's literature. This is a point particularly relevant to Holocaust fiction and the stories that are told: 'The present, then, determines the past, just as surely as the past determines the present, when childhood is redefined by the knowing - or falsifying - adult' (2003: 143-44). Alexis Wright, in her article on the politics of writing, said:

> To me, writing is like taking the snake out of the hole. The snake that has killed, maimed and stolen. ... Writing is about crawling down the hole to see what we have all inherited. It is about dragging our memories, realities and losses up to the surface and letting the whole world see them in the full, glaring light of day. (2002: 18-19)

That 'full, glaring light' seems to be missing in much of the recent children's and young adult literature about the Holocaust.

To clarify: I am not arguing in favour of graphic, unmitigated 'warts and all' depictions of life in that time and those places, or books that traumatise rather than sensitise; what I contend is that a greater adherence to historical facts and experiences is needed. For example, young survivors and rescuers did exist - but they were a tiny, tiny minority in reality, who have become the most highly represented groups in Holocaust fiction for young people. No topic, *per se*, is unsuitable for fiction. How the author depicts any subject is key to how that material is interpreted, and how the reader perceives the issues at the heart of the novel. Belgian author Anne Provoost (2003) argued:

> What we do for children, how we approach them, what we tell them ... it is all in the vision. Whether our story affirms or denies the child's innocence, protects or exposes the child, informs or deceives the reader, depends on how we see children. ... We do not always distinguish very clearly between what children are in need of and what we judge necessary for them.

Writing is, as Orwell says, a political act. In this case, we see how the adult construct of the child has a marked effect on what is written and how; what is disclosed and what is concealed. Adults 'own' the knowledge and therefore have the power to make decisions about what information will be distributed to children and young adults. This has always been the case with children's literature (and, come to that, education in the broadest sense). It is an example of how power is exercised, and can easily be related to Foucault's analysis of the powerful and powerless (Page 2005).

Therefore, two key elements are involved that affect Holocaust literature for young people: that adults determine on the basis of their social construct of 'the

child', 'childhood' and 'children's literature' what is appropriate for young readers (i.e., *what* stories can be told); and that the Holocaust has become the province of one sub-set of victims, which therefore (consciously or unconsciously on the part of authors) affects *whose* stories are told and who is omitted.

Awareness of both of these aspects inevitably affects my praxis, and my motivations to write in this field. George Orwell, in 'Why I Write' (1946) said:

> Putting aside the need to earn a living, I think there are four great motives for writing, at any rate for writing prose. They exist in different degrees in every writer, and in any one writer the proportions will vary from time to time, according to the atmosphere in which he is living.

He lists these as 'sheer egoism', 'aesthetic enthusiasm', 'historical impulse' and 'political purpose.' In terms of attempting to write a book about the Holocaust and its context, I clearly share his 'historical impulse' and 'political purpose'. These have been demonstrated in the first part of the article. I also admit to 'sheer egoism', and agree with him that this applies to all writers, for all ages, of all genres. But it is the question of 'aesthetic enthusiasm' that made me wonder most about whether it could be applied to my work. He put this motivation second, behind egoism. In his words, 'aesthetic enthusiasm' is:

> Perception of beauty in the external world, or, on the other hand, in words and their right arrangement. Pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story. Desire to share an experience which one feels is valuable and ought not to be missed ...

The story I am writing is about a young musician (for convenience, let's call him Karl, although that is unlikely to remain the character's name), supporting his mother and sister by playing at night in a club. His father is either dead or has run off, and the three of them have been struggling financially for years during the devastating depression and inflation that crippled Germany. His mother cleans, and his sister has learned how to sew through a Catholic school for the deaf. She is a couple of years older than the protagonist.

The story starts in late 1932, when he is 14 or 15. The Brown Shirts have been the bully boys for a few years, and are growing in power under Erich Roehm, their leader - who is also renowned for his homosexuality. Because of this, some of the people who work in the nightclub believe that the anti-gay rhetoric of the Nazis is not really going to result in things being any worse than they already are. Others are less complacent. The protagonist is not necessarily gay but he works with many, most of the customers are gay, and when the raids start in 1933, he is picked up with the rest and is arrested, charged and sent to Dachau with others. After three months he is released, and promptly re-arrested as a 'political prisoner' - a common occurrence.

I have set the book much earlier than most because - among other things - it provides a context for what became known as the Holocaust. The persecution of particular groups had been going on long before the war began. The concentration camps existed from 1933. The deaths in such camps were commonly reported in the newspapers of the time. But I have yet to read a novel that provides this historical and political context. Many young people think the killings began during the war; they also are unaware of the range of people affected, and the range of 'punishments' inflicted for being who they were. At seventeen, Karl's sister Eva is forcibly sterilised so she cannot pass on

her deafness to the next generation. Her name, with others, had been given to the authorities by the teachers at her school. Again, this was common. 'Between 1934 and 1939, between 350,000 and 400,000 people lost their ability to have children in this unjust and unscientific program (Friedman 1990: 64). But I have not read about that particular cruelty in any novels, including novels for young people.

In the pre-war days, prisoners were allowed to receive parcels and letters. His mother breaks the news to Karl. When he is offered the option of castration, which many gay men accepted in order to get out of camps and - sometimes - even out of Germany, he refuses - one in the family is enough. But to survive in camp will mean he has to do things that he never thought he could, or would. He is not heroic. But I hope to write him sympathetically.

To return to Orwell: there may be very little 'beauty' in a story of brutality, betrayals and fear (although they are not the only things shown); however, creating the 'firmness of good prose and rhythm of a good story' is - of course - one of my aims. The experiential aspect is a more difficult one. It is an experience I have only had at second and third hand - mediated through books, films, and television for the most part. I have met survivors, but not many. My relatives were safe on the other side of the world. I was born decades after those who lived through the era. The experience, for me, has been intellectual and emotional - but yes, I do want that to be shared. I want other generations to recognise, and care.

Why focus on what happened to homosexuals and the disabled? Because they are among the ones whose stories are least known. Even historian Ina Friedman, who wrote the nonfiction book *The Other Victims*, said:

> It is estimated that between five and fifteen thousand homosexuals perished in the camps. ... Fifty years after the Holocaust I was unable to obtain an interview with any homosexual who had been interned in a camp. The life span of the survivors was shortened by their terrible suffering during their internment. Most are now dead. The prejudice against homosexuals still exists and the few survivors are reluctant to come forward to tell their stories. (1990: 28)

With the exception of Gad Beck's (1999) *An Underground Life: The Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin*, and two slim histories, *The Men with the Pink Triangle* (Heger 1980) and *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi war against homosexuals* (Plant 1986), all of which I had to import, personal accounts of the experiences of gay men during the Nazi era are notoriously scarce. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington has some brief biographical notes outlining the experiences of several homosexuals. Otherwise, there are brief mentions of the concentration camp treatment of gay men in memoirs by other survivors, such as Lengyel (1995). Young adult contemporary fiction with homosexual or disabled protagonists is also extremely rare, and of the novels available with homosexual protagonists, few make it to the shelves of high school libraries. In combining the Holocaust, homosexuality and disability in one story, I may well be creating a publisher's nightmare. But I am deeply involved emotionally in the story and already like the characters so much, I am continuing regardless.

To provide a voice and a context is clearly a political motivation; there is also the historical impulse of wanting to tell a story that is consistent with the lived reality of persecution before and during the Holocaust. It is my aim to make it as well-written, as aesthetically appealing, as emotionally strong as it can be, in

order to share the experience with younger readers. As for the motivation of ego - true. I am writing it because I think - I hope - I can. Orwell's arguments are, in this case, incontrovertible.

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