

REPRESENTATION AND IMAGINATION OF THE HOLOCAUST IN YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE

by

AMELIA M. MACKAREY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English Literature
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2014

Thesis Chair: Dr. James Campbell

Abstract

The intent of this thesis is to examine and interpret the representation of the Holocaust in young adult literature. The tone, style, and emotion used to convey the Holocaust experience, both in fiction and nonfiction stories, in eyewitness and indirect accounts, affects its representation to a young adult audience. I will study the effects of sentimentality, realism, and fun and their impact on our understanding and remembrance of the Holocaust. I will analyze several texts, including *Island on Bird Street*, *The Book Thief*, and *Night*. The paradox of finding an appropriate balance between presenting a realistic portrayal of the Holocaust and understanding that we could never fathom the horrors of the Holocaust is one that plagues both writers and readers of this genre of literature and I plan to critique the ways in which different works discuss the subject. Ultimately, I will consider the conflict of how we negotiate between complete repression versus obsessive memorialization. What is the role of memory? What is the proper way to move on from the horrors of the past while still honoring the innocent people who lived and died? Through my analysis, I hope to attempt to answer these questions and, perhaps, provide suggestions for appropriate representation and memorialization.

Dedication

For the victims of the Holocaust, you are not forgotten.
Your hopes, your dreams, your memories live on.
We bear witness to your persecution so that we may truly profess,
Never Again.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all of those who made my thesis possible. This process has been such an amazing opportunity and I am so grateful that I was able to experience it. Thank you to my thesis chair and mentor, Dr. James Campbell, for encouraging me to pursue my passion, for helping me to define this project, and for inspiring me with your ideas and your intelligence. Thank you for sharing your time and your enthusiasm with me, for discussing every aspect of this project, from little details to broad concepts, for hours, and for helping me to grow as a writer and a researcher. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Christian Beck,

Dr. Anthony Grajeda, and Dr. Jeffrey Kaplan, for your thought-provoking questions and insightful suggestions. I am so fortunate to have had such incredible guidance and influence from my committee and my chair throughout this process and I am so grateful to each of you for giving me this experience and for helping me to make this project so much more than I could have ever imagined at its inception. Thank you to the English Department, especially Dr. Patrick

Murphy, Dr. Patricia Angley, and Dr. Ceclia Milanes, for helping and guiding me through the Honors in the Major program and through the English Literature track. Thank you for matching me up with Dr. Campbell and for planning my schedule and for making sure I graduate! I am so grateful for how caring and thoughtful each of you was to me throughout the project. Thank you to Kelly Astro and Denise Crisafi for always reminding me about all of my deadlines and for supporting me throughout every aspect of this process. From the initial application to the exit survey, from the poster to the press, I could not have done this without you two and your loving encouragement! Thank you to my absolutely wonderful Mom for always being there for me throughout this thesis and throughout my life. Thank you for always finding the time to read each draft of this project, for always remembering to keep an eye out for books and movies about World War II and the Holocaust, and for always reassuring me to keep reading and writing.

Thank you for giving me the confidence to do what I love and for being such a perfect role model, both personally and professionally. Thank you to the rest of my family, to my wonderful Dad and to my two flawless sisters, Aleni and Marala, for being the absolute best! You four are the most supportive, loving, compassionate family and I am so blessed to be able to share my life with you. Finally, a very special thank you to the University of Central Florida. UCF truly does stand for opportunity and, because of this, I am so fortunate to have been able to experience so many remarkable opportunities during my four years here. Thank you for giving me such an amazing college experience. Thank you for instilling in me the values of integrity, scholarship, service, creativity, and community. I look forward to representing this University and the lessons that I have learned here in every aspect of my life, for the rest of my life.

Go Knights!

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>Night</i> : Holocaust Testimony through Realism and Introspection.....	9
<i>Island on Bird Street</i> : Holocaust Memory through Fun and Adventure	23
<i>The Book Thief</i> : Holocaust Representation through Imagery and Imagination.....	37
Conclusion	54
Works Cited	68

Introduction

In this project, I will explore the way in which Holocaust literature is presented to young adults through the use of representation and imagination. I will consider the lenses of sentimentality, realism, and fun and how each of these affects the story as it is both told to and received by an audience of young adult readers. The paradox of finding an appropriate balance between presenting a realistic portrayal of the Holocaust and understanding that we could never fathom the horrors of the Holocaust is one that plagues both writers and readers of this genre of literature and I plan to critique the ways in which different works discuss the subject.

In order to approach the Holocaust, many authors have used children as a vehicle, whether it is in narrating their work through the voice of a child or in directing the content of their work to an audience of children. The juxtaposition of the innocence of children with the atrocities of the Nazi regime serves to emphasize the horrors of the Holocaust even more clearly. According to Mark Anderson, the use of the child narrator could also be attributed to the fact that “children have consistently proved to be the most moving and believable witnesses” (Anderson 2). In the case of something as unfathomable as the crimes committed at the death camps, the use of a child as the observer makes the unbelievable at least believable, even if never understandable. Anderson goes on to note that “the figure of the persecuted child turns the Holocaust into a moving and accessible story with religious and mythic associations” in a way that “transcend[s] history even as it affirms the most dreadful historical reality” (Anderson 3). Similar to the use of a child narrator, authors of literature about the Holocaust often direct their work at an audience of children. These examples of Holocaust literature are particularly

intriguing because they represent examples of unencumbered hope and sentimentality in the face of such a dark topic.

According to Jessica Lang, as the number of eyewitness Holocaust survivors dwindles, the genre is opening to “a future of Holocaust literature where imagination and history are interpolated;” in other words, “as with other historical events for which few or no eyewitnesses remain, the Holocaust is increasingly subject matter for the imagination” (Lang 43-44). In books such as Marcus Zusak’s *The Book Thief*, (2006), stories unfold about courageous child protagonists who rise above the terror and torture of the Nazi regime in order to protect the ones they love and the religion, culture, and society for which they stand. The message of hope and defiance is an honorable one, and yet it raises the question of whether or not such a message is appropriate. After finishing one of these books, the reader cannot help but feel triumphant; the mantras of “good always beats evil” and “everything is all right in the end” are suffused throughout the texts of oppression and sadness in a way that almost makes audience members forget the horrors of the real event and think only about the success of these fictional heroes and heroines. Even authors who experienced the Holocaust write about the event through a distant, sentimental lens. For example, Uri Orlev, author of *Island on Bird Street*, (1981), tells the tale of Alex, a young boy who struggles to support himself when his dad and mom are taken to a concentration camp. Alex manages to find friends that help him think of his new life as an exciting adventure and, he learns to build contraptions that liken his hiding place to a magical tree house. Children reading this book might misconstrue the time away from parents as exhilarating, the new living quarters as sensational, and the fear for one’s life as thrilling, rather than the true feelings of terror, agony, and despair. Although it is true that the message of hope

is a positive one and one that should not be completely shunned, I question the effectiveness of presenting such a dark and evil event as exciting and invigorating because of the confusing impact this message might have on children.

In addition to the problem of the child narrator or the child audience, there is also the problem of the mythicized representation. According to Erika Bourguignon, “memories are not only individual and collective, they also become transformed over time... and can even take on mythic proportions” (Bourguignon 78). Anderson compounds on this theory by analyzing Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, (1955). Although Wiesel wrote the memoir 10 or 15 years after experiencing the events that he describes in its pages, he still writes through his perspective as a child, “a choice of vocabulary that brings out his symbolic defenselessness” (Anderson 5). Anderson goes on to note that “the suppression of the adult survivor is one of the reasons the narrative is so powerful; it offers itself in a simple, almost ahistorical manner expressive of the young protagonist’s vision of reality” (Anderson 5). However, in the new preface to *Night*, Wiesel says that “having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival;” he was not using the guise of the child narrator to exploit the Holocaust story but rather to best elucidate it (Wiesel viii). He also addresses the difficulties of expressing his memories by saying that he was “painfully aware of [his] limitations” and that “language became an obstacle” (Wiesel ix). As Wiesel mourns, “to forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time” (xv). Even with these cautionary words of wisdom, the problem of how to remember the dead remains.

In a recent documentary, *Paper Clips*, (2007), directed by Eliot Berlin, students from Whitwell, Tennessee attempt to pay homage to the 6 million victims of the Holocaust by

collecting 6 million paper clips in their honor. When people heard about the project, supporters from all walks of life jumped on board. From movie stars like Tom Hanks and Bill Cosby to presidents like Bill Clinton and George Bush, from journalists at CNN and the *Washington Post*, to journalists in Germany, people from every area wanted to help with the project. The mission statement of the students was “a celebration of tolerance, respect, pride, commitment” and to “experience the enormity of the Jewish victims” (Eliot). The journalists from Germany even sent over a transport vehicle that was used for Jewish prisoners during the war. Although teaching students about the Holocaust is a good idea, this documentary provides a perfect example of how misguided our teaching and depiction of the Holocaust might be. Anderson scoffs at the fact that “none of the participants questioned the appropriateness of stuffing these paper-clip tokens of Jewish life into an authentic German railcar that had actually been used for deportation to the death camps” and that, “like many popular Holocaust representations, the Whitwell children’s memorial ultimately is more about American values and American children than about the Jewish victims” (Anderson 17, 18). Although modern readers should try to atone for the sins of the past, we cannot erase what happened nor can we change it. How does the literature that adults, young adults, and even children read extenuate the problem that we face, the problem of appropriate representation and honorable memorialization?

Arlene Stein’s research on the silencing of Holocaust victims in the decades immediately following the Second World War focuses on the importance of sharing true stories in relation to victims’ recovery and attempts to assimilate into their new worlds. Stein says that “survivors were ... confronted with the task of figuring out how to present themselves to those around them” (Stein 45). *The Book Thief* undertakes the task of using post-war memories to try to

represent the events of the Holocaust while assimilating the memories into the context of fictional World War II Europe. The conflict of honoring the past while still living in the present, expressed in the novel through the concrete character and story narrator, “Death,” is one that is expressed throughout the work. While the story of hiding a Jewish man in the basement and reuniting at the conclusion of the war is both heartwarming and inspiring, this outcome is in the small minority of all Holocaust stories and therefore skews readers’ perspectives and understanding of the event as it occurred.

I plan to examine and interpret the representation of the Holocaust in literature. I will explore the tone, style, and sentiment used to convey the Holocaust experience, both in fiction and nonfiction stories, in eyewitness and indirect accounts. I will study the effects of time and distance on our understanding and remembrance of the Holocaust. I will analyze closely the texts discussed above, including *Island on Bird Street*, *The Book Thief*, and *Night*. Ultimately, I will consider the conflict of how we negotiate between complete repression versus obsessive memorialization. What is the role of memory? What is the proper way to move on from the horrors of the past while still honoring the innocent people who lived and died? Through my analysis of literature about the Holocaust by outside parties and literature written about the Holocaust by those directly affected, I hope to attempt to answer these questions and, perhaps, provide suggestions for appropriate representation and memorialization of such a monstrous event.

In order to analyze the texts, I will use three terms: realism, sentimentality, and fun. Realistic texts depict events as they would have unfolded, whether in the ghettos, concentration camps, or death camps. These texts do not shy away from the brutal realities of the war; rather,

they focus on emphasizing the painful truth in order to enlighten the reader. Realistic texts are the most difficult to read because they illustrate the grim realities of the aims of The Final Solution and the consequences of Auschwitz as an event. In direct opposition to the categorization of realism is the categorization of fun. Fun texts represent the events of the Holocaust in an adventurous, exciting light. Characters in fun texts manage to change the dialogue of fear and horror by focusing, instead, on the adventure and excitement of evading capture and staying alive. Fun texts can be confusing to a young adult reader because they demonstrate a horrific event in a somewhat positive light. However, these texts can also be used to usher readers into the idea of the harsh topic and pique their interest in researching the event, and, ultimately, preventing such atrocities from reoccurring. The final lens that I will use is the lens of sentimentality. With war accounts, there is a tendency to illustrate the greatness of the human spirit, the triumph of good over evil. However, Holocaust narratives illustrate that at times, choosing good over evil was not really a choice; victims were stripped of all choice, of all agency, except the feeble desire to stay alive. Sentimental texts convey the heroism and love that both victims and perpetrators might have displayed in spite of the atrocious circumstances. Although it is comforting to think that even in the darkest of situations, light always manages to shine, that is not necessarily the case. Sentimental accounts of the Holocaust leave readers feeling hopeful and pleased with the good, wholesome spirit of human nature. Sentimental accounts may not be the most accurate representation of the Holocaust as it unfolded but they serve as a moral center for the lessons an author or historian would wish to impart to an audience of young adult readers. I will analyze the three definitions separately and collectively in order to determine the most effective depiction of the Holocaust to young adults.

Additionally, I will examine the effects of time and distance on Holocaust representation and imagination. In my research, I will focus on each author's representation of the Holocaust events as compared to his temporal and spatial distance from the concentration camps. I believe that the more time the author spent in the concentration camps, the more gruesome his representation of the events will be. The sooner the account was written following the events, the more vivid and painful the story. Conversely, the further the author was from the camps in both time and physical distance, the less realistic the representation. In such cases, the sentimental or fun representations prevail over the realistic. The three novels that I will analyze closely illuminate both the realistic/ fun/ sentimental definitions and the spatial/ temporal distances. For example, Elie Wiesel lived in the concentration camps for several years and wrote his memoir in 1955, ten years after his liberation. His close proximity to the camps, both in time and distance, resulted in a realistic, horrifying representation of Auschwitz. Like Wiesel, Uri Orlev was a young boy of Jewish descent living during World War II. However, he spent only a few months in the concentration camps and wrote his semi-autobiographical novel in 1981, nearly forty years later. His representation is much more light-hearted and exciting. As opposed to the other two authors, Markus Zusak had no firsthand experience with the Holocaust and only knew of World War II recollections through stories his parents shared. A gentile living in Australia, Zusak wrote a completely different account of the Holocaust: an account that utilizes imagination rather than memory as a result of his spatial and temporal distance from the camps. I will try to discern the representation that results from each type of experience and the value that young adult readers glean from each reading. Which type of representation is the best? Although the obvious answer would be to represent a historical event in an accurate, historical

context, we as a society are moving further from the concentration camps, both temporally and spatially, so finding other forms of appropriate representation is key to the continued study and understanding of the events of the Holocaust. I plan to explain the importance of each type of work and the combined effect that the three can have on young adult readers.

Night: Holocaust Testimony through Realism and Introspection

In order to examine and interpret the representation and imagination of the Holocaust in young adult literature, the first book that I have chosen to analyze is *Night* by Elie Wiesel. After his release from Buchenwald in April of 1945, Elie Wiesel vowed that he would not speak of his experiences for ten years. However, “by his silence, he came to believe that he was condemning Holocaust victims to a second death” (Hernandez 54). Therefore, Wiesel decided that “a confrontation with reality, no matter how painful, must be initiated in order to prevent these events from ever happening again” (Hernandez 54). *Night* depicts the Holocaust in gruesome and realistic terms in order to illuminate this lurid segment of human history.

Of the three novels I have chosen to analyze, *Night* is the only autobiographical camp narrative. Also, in terms of the canon of Holocaust literature, it is the most well-known and widely read. In the opening pages of his novel, Wiesel states that he felt compelled to write about his experiences but was worried that “only those who experience Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know. But would they at least understand?” (Wiesel iii). Wiesel feels that it is his duty to share the story of what happened with the world, and to continue sharing it for as long as he is able. Even though there may not even be an appropriate response to a tragedy of such magnitude, Wiesel postulates that “when we speak of this era of evil and darkness, so close and yet so distant, responsibility is the key word” (Wiesel viii). It is the responsibility of the survivors to share their stories, and it is the responsibility of the future generations to listen to the stories and heed their warnings.

In order to illustrate his story, Wiesel uses the vehicle of the child narrator. Over the course of the events discussed in the novel, Wiesel would have been between the ages of thirteen and sixteen years old. He was a deeply religious boy who cried when he prayed and wanted to understand the secrets of the revelations (Wiesel 8). Although Wiesel the author wrote the memoir ten years after his release from Buchenwald, putting him at the age of roughly thirty, Wiesel the narrator remains an innocent boy. The childlike innocence and naiveté evident through the point of view of the young boy narrator serve to emphasize the complete trust and subsequent confusion and betrayal felt by the Jews of Sighet at the hands of their German occupiers. Additionally, the innocence of the child narrator contrasts sharply with the atrocities committed against him and his peers and family members. Already written with a realistic lens, *Night* becomes even more horrifying and grim when understood through the eyes of a child. Hernandez notes that “first-person narratives reveal unique insights that are not always apparent or easily comprehended by students when they read historical documents or textbook accounts of these events” (Hernandez 55). Similarly, young adults “readily make connections with the young victim/survivor/author” of Holocaust narratives since he or she so often utilizes the technique of the child narrator (Hernandez 55). So, the dual functions of both emphasizing innocence and evoking sympathy are exacted through the vehicle of the child narrator.

Night starts out in a particularly infuriating manner. In the small town of Sighet, Transylvania, all of the foreign-born Jews are deported. At first the townspeople are concerned, but they quickly become distracted by the changing seasons and pressing issues of war. Several months after that event, a man named Moishe the Beadle, a friend of the narrator’s and fellow

studier of the Kabbalah, returns and shares a horrifying story about his experience after his deportation:

The Jews were ordered to get off [the train] and onto waiting trucks. The trucks headed toward a forest. There everybody was ordered to get out. They were forced to dig huge trenches. When they had finished their work, the men from the Gestapo began theirs. Without passion or haste, they shot their prisoners, who were forced to approach the trench one by one and offer their necks. Infants were tossed into the air and used as targets for the machine guns. (Wiesel 6)

Moishe the Beadle describes the horrifying practice of forcing the Jews to dig their own graves before they were unceremoniously shot and buried, but the people of Sighet do not believe his tale. Even though Moishe the Beadle mustered the strength to come back to his hometown only in order to warn his friends and neighbors, his listeners accused him of wanting money, attention, or pity. The people of Wiesel's city waited from the end of 1942 until the spring of 1944 before they realized the truth in Moishe the Beadle's words. As a present day reader, knowing the outcome of the story before even finishing it, hearing that this community had the opportunity to escape but did not listen to the warnings is so frustrating! This portion of the story appeals to young adult readers because they are familiar with the frustration of telling a story and having either parents or peers think that they are lying or trying to get attention. Also, it heightens the emotional tension and anxiety felt by readers of all age groups.

When the Germans move into Wiesel's town, the Jews quickly begin to lose their rights and privileges. Wiesel describes the Jews being prohibited to leave their homes for three days, being forced to turn in all gold and jewelry to the German police, being instructed to wear a

yellow star, and being banned from restaurants, railroads, synagogues, and the streets at night (Wiesel 11). In order to convey the terror of losing both one's physical belongings and one's political and spiritual rights, Wiesel uses concise, factual terms so that any audience can understand the gravity of the situation. Wiesel suggests to young adult readers that their political and civil rights are fragile but indispensable; allowing themselves to be stripped of them is one of the most severe dangers they face. After losing their basic civil rights, the Jews are deported to ghettos. Wiesel once again appeals to the young adult audience by explaining that the ghetto was "not a bad thing" because he was able to live among all of his friends, something about which every middle school student certainly daydreams. Wiesel says that because only Jews lived in the ghetto, he and his friends "would no longer have to look at those hostile faces, endure those hate-filled stares.... No more fear... no more anguish" and describes the atmosphere of the ghetto as "oddly peaceful and reassuring" (Wiesel 12).

Continuing to depict the horrors of the deportation experience with a grimly realistic lens, Wiesel describes the process of packing their belongings into a single bag, standing in the street waiting for roll call for an entire day in the scorching sun, being relocated to another ghetto, and finally, being herded onto the cattle cars. Once on the cars, the Jews still maintain their hopeful attitudes, except for Mrs. Schachter, who constantly shrieks and screams that she sees "fire" and "burning Jews" in the distance (Wiesel 26). Although the other passengers in the cattle car ignore her, her prediction comes true when the group arrives at Auschwitz Birkenau. In this excerpt, the effects of time and distance play a role in the representation of the story. Did a woman in Wiesel's car really scream about the "burning Jews" that she saw in their future? Did she predict the existence of the gas chambers, the final destination for most of the passengers aboard the car?

Did Wiesel insert this episode into the story as an imaginative manifestation of the fear and foreboding that the prisoners felt as they hurtled along the tracks toward Auschwitz? Whatever the answer, the image of Mrs. Schachter screaming while her youngest son tries to soothe her is haunting and depressing. Wiesel elicits sympathy and fear in his audience, from both young adult and adult readers alike.

Upon the prisoners' arrival at the camp, the narrator acknowledges the nagging question bothering readers: how could these people not know what was going on by 1944? Especially after a warning from one of their own neighbors? The other characters in the memoir seem to feel the same way. One of the inmates admonishes the group from Sighet, saying in incredulous tones, "You should have hanged yourselves rather than come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you here in Auschwitz? You didn't know? In 1944?" (Wiesel 30). The new arrival Jews cling to their childlike innocence, replying, "We didn't know. Nobody had told us" (Wiesel 30). By casting the Jews from Sighet in the role of the flock of innocent sheep, Wiesel places the entire group in the category of innocent children. When they arrive at the camp they look up at the sign and realize that "nobody had ever heard that name" (Wiesel 27). In his article, "Child Victims as Witnesses," Anderson refers to "the political ignorance" that turns the Jewish community of Transylvania into "metaphorical children before the reality of a world whose true horror is only now being revealed to them" (Anderson 5). Could so many people have lived in the dark for so long? Conversely, is it unreasonable that a small community of Jews would have had no idea what was going on when the rest of the world seemingly had no idea either? Regardless of the truth behind this representation, Anderson suggests that the implication of the entire community as children might be an exploitation of the sentiments stemming from the

Holocaust because “however legitimate the end, however well-intentioned the motive, the invocation of young victims easily leads to rhetorical and ideological distortion” (Anderson 19).

In addition, not only does Wiesel establish the collective innocence of the group, but he also emphasizes his own personal innocence and identification as a child. When the soup ration comes around, Wiesel refuses to eat because he “was still the spoiled child of long ago” (Wiesel 42). When his father is held back for a second selection, Wiesel comments on “how kindly” the other inmates treated him, “like an orphan” (Wiesel 75). At the end of the book, when the inmates await liberation at Buchenwald, Wiesel is transferred to the “children’s block” with six hundred others (Wiesel 113). By emphasizing his status as a child, Wiesel emphasizes his innocence and defenselessness in the face of the vicious, calculating Nazi army. He also appeals to the children or young adults reading his books by including subject matter that is appealing to them.

As the prisoners march into the concentration camp, the Angel of Death, Dr. Mengele, selects who would go right, toward the crematoria, and who would go left, toward the labor camp. In this example, we see another instance of time and distance affecting representation of the Holocaust in literature. Geoffrey Hartman complains that “every Auschwitz survivor seems to have gone through a selection by Mengele, as if he manned his post 24 hours a day,” seeming to imply a sort of learned recall bias among survivors. Even so, Hartman admits that “a remarkable degree of precision remains, because the memory of evil is first and last the memory of an offence, independent of the injustice suffered” (Hartman 136). In other words, the memories of prisoners from the camps left such a scar that they can be trusted, regardless of temporal boundaries. Wiesel and his father are kept together as they pass Mengele, but Wiesel

sees a truckload of “small children. Babies! ... Children thrown into the flames” (Wiesel 32). Wiesel is floored that “men, women, and children were being burned and that the world kept silent” (Wiesel 30). Wiesel’s descriptions are so gruesome as to be reminiscent of a nightmare. His recollections are terrifying and unsettling to readers but necessary and essential at the same time. Throughout his life, Wiesel maintained that we must bear witness to the lives that were lost and we must do that by remembering the past, the truth. Therefore, Wiesel sticks with unflinching realism when describing his memories. Although his descriptions might be upsetting to young people, I think that it is important that they learn the truth. By offering his horrifying memories to young adult readers, Wiesel bears witness to the past while also teaching readers painful lessons for the future.

One of the unique aspects of *Night* as compared to other Holocaust literature is its focus on God. Wiesel explains that as a young boy, he was extremely passionate about the prayer, services, the Bible and its teachings. However, once he arrives at Auschwitz, the boy loses his faith. When the other men begin to pray Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, for themselves, Wiesel is incensed: “For the first time, I felt anger rising within me. Why should I sanctify his name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?” (Wiesel 33). As Wiesel lies in his barracks on the first night, he vows, “never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever” (Wiesel 34). Although in earlier Yiddish versions of *Night*, Wiesel blamed the other European nations who collaborated with the Germans in the Final Solution, in this most recent edition, the blame is placed solely on God. Anderson purports that “by fashioning a timeless narrative of innocent children led to slaughter, and by accusing God rather than the European nations of abandoning the Jews, Wiesel

moved his narrative from the contested realm of history and politics to an existential plane where Catholic and Jew could meet” (Anderson 6). It is important to note that Wiesel wrote his memoir a mere ten years after his release from the concentration camps. Europe was still suffering from the war, as evident in both the physical destruction and the spiritual devastation felt throughout the continent. Victims felt abandoned by their European neighbors as much as they felt persecuted by the Nazis. By focusing the blame on God, Wiesel manages to negotiate a type of peace, a middle ground, in which the victims could meet their silent persecutors or their willing torturers and forgive these people for their transgressions against the Jews, since, in some sense, the perpetrators were only human. By blaming God, Wiesel names a common enemy, a spiritual enemy, against which the human survivors and of the massacres of the war can unite with their human offenders in order to foster forgiveness and tolerance. The narrator continues to blame and question God throughout the book. While lying in his cot, the narrator admits that he stopped praying and although he did not doubt the existence of God, he “doubted his absolute justice” (Wiesel 45). More insults and injuries cement his loss of faith. One day, the prisoners are forced to watch a child be hung. At the sight, one of the inmates cries out, “Where is God?” To which Wiesel replies, “Where He is? There is where – hanging here from this gallows...” (Wiesel 65). The loss of God is juxtaposed with the loss of innocence. The murder of children and defenseless victims could only be possible in the absence of God, the absence of innocence. Ultimately, Wiesel seems to propose that the Nazis stole not only his childhood but also his faith because of their monstrous designs. Wiesel offers the olive branch to the transgressors by blaming God, but he still concludes by questioning humanity.

Wiesel describes the atrocities of the camp with unyielding specifics. He mentions the merchant's son who "had been forced to place his own father's body into the furnace" and the speech that the prisoners were given involving the advice, "work or crematorium, the choice is yours" (Wiesel 35, 39). The leader of their barracks, the one kindly authority figure with whom they had come in contact "was removed" because "he was judged too humane" (Wiesel 44). He discovers that in the camps, "there existed... a veritable traffic of children among homosexuals" (Wiesel 48). He makes friends with some Jewish musicians who complain that they cannot play Beethoven because "Jews were not allowed to play German music" (49). After catching one of his supervisors in a back room with a Polish girl, Wiesel receives 25 lashes for his curiosity (59). The conditions were so abhorrent that the inmates relished air raids and the prospect of being killed by a bomb (60). At one point, the inmates are crushed into such a small barracks that they begin to suffocate one another with their body weight (110). Wiesel does not soften the blows of the events he describes. He forces his readers to acknowledge and understand the obscenities that the Jewish victims endured. However, whereas the Nazi's force caused death and devastation, Wiesel's force inspires erudition and vigilance.

While celebrating Rosh Hashanah, Wiesel's anger and resentment toward his God comes to a peak. He says, "I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man" (68). As Wiesel continues to distance himself from God, he distances himself from his Jewish roots. This rebellion, this searching phase of faith, is another concept with which many young adults can identify. Although Wiesel's camp experiences are mortifying and horrifying, unique to a survivor or

victim of the Holocaust, his personal struggles are understandable and relatable, identifiable to any reader of the account. In this way, *Night* is a representation that focuses on portraying a realistic image of camp life while also inviting readers to empathize with the plight of the characters.

Wiesel also describes the deterioration of his relationship with his father due to the appalling conditions of the camp. Although his father helps to boost his son's morale and encourage him at low points, Wiesel is afraid to defend his father for fear of the consequences he himself will suffer. For example, Wiesel watches helplessly when his father asks another inmate where the bathroom was and was then "slapped with such force that he fell down and then crawled back to his place on all fours" (Wiesel 39). Meanwhile his father saves his food rations so that his son will not be hungry (44). The son, whose spirit is not as strong or as selfless as his father's, cowers when his father is beaten with a metal pole and "thought of stealing away in order not to suffer the blows." The narrator even "felt anger" at his father for not avoiding the foreman's wrath (54). Even though his son is at times angry with, at times ashamed of him, the father accepts beatings and verbal assaults for two weeks so that the narrator can keep his gold crown (56). After the grueling 20 kilometer run in the icy snow, his father refuses to let his son "be overcome by sleep" since it is dangerous and many who succumb to exhaustion never wake up. He keeps watch over the boy and forces him to move around (88). Throughout the novel, the father tries to motivate his son to keep up his physical and mental stamina, but because of the incredible mental, physical, and spiritual strain of the camps, even the father's reassurance is not enough for the unlucky pair.

The breakdown of father-son relationships is a theme throughout the book. On the run through the treacherous wintery forest, the narrator realizes that Rabbi Eliahu's son purposely deserted him because he could sense his father's draining strength and growing weakness. He prays, "Oh God... give me the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahu's son has done" (Wiesel 91). However, the misery of the camps removes all dignity and decency from its prisoners. Later, on an open rail car, a son unknowingly attacks and kills his father as prisoners fight for a piece of bread (102). At this point in the novel, Wiesel continues to lambaste his readers with overwhelming facts: of the 100 prisoners on the car at the start of the trip, only 12 exit alive (103). By the time the prisoners arrive at Buchenwald, Wiesel's own father is ready to collapse. Wiesel shrieks in anger because he knows that his father has given up and that he "was no longer arguing with him but with Death itself, with Death that he had already chosen" (105). When his father finally dies, Wiesel is mortified to discover that his conscience whispers, "free at last" (112). The overarching father-son pair of God the Father and Wiesel the Son is also destroyed due to Wiesel's loss of faith. By showing the devolution of all of the father/ son relationships in the camp, Wiesel indicates yet another thing that the Nazis took from him: his father, and for a time, his humanity.

After so much time in the camps, so much time being treated as less than human, the prisoners want to die. Wiesel thinks about how death would be the best liberation:

Death enveloped me, it suffocated me. It stuck to me like glue. I felt I could touch it. The idea of dying of ceasing to be, began to fascinate me. To no longer exist. To no longer feel the excruciating pain of my foot. To no longer feel anything, neither fatigue nor cold, nothing. To break rank, to let myself slide to the side of the road... (86)

The feeling of utter despair and devastation is almost tangible through the pages. Wiesel's realistic description pushes all notions of adventure or sentimentality to the side. I think that *Night* is one of the best Holocaust books that young adult readers can study in order to understand the truly horrifying impact of the Nazi policies. Men, women, and children were reduced to ashes because of unfounded accusations and propaganda. Children were stolen from their parents; parents were ripped from their children. While Wiesel describes the devastation of the suffering and torture the prisoners experienced in the camps, he also highlights the shortcoming of the Final Solution. The fact that the Nazis even hoped to produce a "master German race" is so ironic considering their system operated on lack of empathy or compassion. How could such a party expect to be the best, the most powerful, the most righteous, if it lacked such intrinsic human values? By shedding their own humanity in favor of stripping victims of theirs, the Nazis guaranteed their personal and collective downfall, before any battle was even fought or any war was even waged.

Anderson argues that because of the emphasis on God and the use of the child narrator, *Night* becomes "a moral tale about the sanctity of angelic children rather than a historical meditation on Nazi crimes and gentile complicity" (Anderson 6). However, I disagree with Anderson's opinion. The struggle with God serves only to highlight how much the Nazis have taken from the narrator. Not only do they take his physical support system, his mother, his sisters, his father, his relatives, his neighbors, his friends, but they also take his spiritual support system, his God. Before the camps, the narrator had been fascinated by the teachings of the Bible and the lessons of the Kabbalah. After the camps, the narrator questions the mere existence of a God, let alone the truth behind salvation found in an ancient text. So utterly

abandoned and isolated, the narrator turns on God because he has no other option. The emphasis on God does not make the book a Judeo-Christian compromise; rather, it serves to illuminate just how much the Nazis managed to steal from one innocent boy.

Wiesel concludes the novel by looking at himself in the mirror, the first time the child narrator has seen his reflection since he lived in the ghetto so many months ago. “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me” (115). With this chilling finish, Wiesel leaves readers haunted and broken, in the image of the victims they just read about. Wiesel’s account is a dreadful but realistic depiction of the atrocities committed to men, women and children at the concentration camps. Part of the horror of Wiesel’s story is that the Nazis are not the only perpetrators of the crimes. Once inside the camps, every man is only able to protect himself. The instinct to survive overpowers even the instinct to love, to care for one’s own flesh and blood. By showing humans at their most base, their most pathetic, Wiesel avoids the mystification that engulfs some Holocaust stories. It is comforting to think of people being selfless, being heroes; Wiesel illustrates that in such deathly circumstances, that is neither the case, nor even an option.

The use of both the child narrator and child-focused storyline guides the narrative arc of *Night* while also serving to illustrate the utter atrocities of the events of Auschwitz. Wiesel artfully weaves fault with blame, regret with gratitude, and strength with failure, in order to paint an accurate and heart-wrenching illustration of life for both children and innocent adults in the Nazi death camps. As compared to the other novels I analyze, *Night* is the most graphic and unsettling of the stories. It forces readers to question themselves and their beliefs and to really take a look at the feats of which human beings are capable. I think that the realistic tone mixed

with the sentimental introspection of the narrator provides an excellent combination of objective and subjective Holocaust testimony. By keeping such a heavy, serious tone throughout the memoir, Wiesel cautions readers against the failures of complacency and missing the warning signs if something similar were to happen again. This firsthand testimony to the horrors of the Holocaust serves as a guide to prevent further destruction and death, to bear witness, to ensure “Never Again.”

Island on Bird Street: Holocaust Memory through Fun and Adventure

In the continuum of sentimentality, realism, and fun, Uri Orlev's *Island on Bird Street* falls much more on the "fun" end, particularly because of its use of the innocent, adventurous child narrator. It is interesting to note that the novel is semi-autobiographical and based on the author's personal experiences growing up as a Jewish boy in the Warsaw ghetto during World War II but was not written until many years later. The novel follows the story of an eleven-year-old boy named Alex who is left on his own in the Warsaw Ghetto and needs to learn to fend for himself in order to survive. During his adventures in the ghetto, Alex comes across other inhabitants, some of whom help him to survive. Alex spends most of his time either playing with his pet mouse, Snow, reading his favorite book, *Robinson Crusoe*, and looking out his window, waiting for his father's return. *Island on Bird Street* both represents and imagines the Holocaust in terms to which young adult readers could readily relate. Through exciting searches for food and supplies, thrilling plans to build safer hideouts, and rousing displays of chivalry and heroism, the novel depicts life during the Holocaust in a fun, and at times sentimental, light. Orlev uses simple language, exhilarating anecdotes, and innocent musings to describe the horrors of the Holocaust to his audience of young adult readers.

In the Introduction, added to the book two years after its original publication date, Orlev describes the terror of living as a Jew in Poland during World War II. He brings the terror to a level that children can understand, illuminating the fear and confusion that gripped the Jewish people during that time using the simplest terms and comparisons. In order to describe the concepts of the ghettos, Orlev assumes the role of child narrator and implores the readers to "imagine all of your city occupied by a foreign army that has separated part of the inhabitants

from the rest” (Orlev vii). He explains that the people inside the walls were not allowed to leave and the people outside were not allowed to send any food or supplies. Even within the ghettos, the hierarchy of rich and poor still existed. Orlev also draws attention to the vast disparity between the classes at the time because “the difference between being rich and poor is not just a question of how you live or dress or eat;” rather, “it is a question of life and death” because “the rich have food while the poor die of hunger and no one is able to help them” (Orlev viii). Orlev admits that he was on the better end of this system, mentioning that he was “a well-dressed child” and his aunt who owned a bakery gave him a pastry every day; meanwhile, there was “a boy who lay for a long time on the sidewalk outside her shop until he died” (Orlev ix). After the first several groups were evacuated from the Ghetto, he and his aunt and brother worked in a factory building until they were eventually deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (Lynch-Brown 21). Orlev explains that he drew his inspiration for the book from his own experiences; however, the setting of the novel “doesn’t have to be the Warsaw Ghetto, because there were other ghettos, too” (Orlev x). Although based on Orlev’s personal memories, the novel also has a far-reaching impact because of the similar stories that so many other survivors and victims could also share.

Orlev also uses the child narrator as the speaker of his story. The child, Alex, is innocent but inventive, and manages to salvage an existence amid the wreckage of the Warsaw Ghetto. The vehicle of the child narrator infuses a feeling of inexperience and sadness throughout the text that serves to both alert and inspire readers. However, the child also exhibits excitement and a thirst for adventure that occasionally allow one to forget the horrors of the world in which the protagonist actually lives. For example, when Alex mentions his confusion over whether or not

the Germans were good or bad, he comments that in World War I, they were relatively nice so “maybe that was why no one in this war had wanted at first to believe that the Germans were really killing Jews and taking them away to special camps” (Orlev 4). In the narrator’s childish naiveté, he refers to the camps as special camps rather than concentration camps or death camps. Although Orlev knows all too well the history of the events that occurred, he chooses to utilize an innocent narrator in order to represent the complete shock and terror that descended on the Jewish population during their persecution.

One of the most frustrating questions about the Holocaust is the haunting cry of why? Why didn’t anyone do anything? Why didn’t someone stop it? Through the child narrator, Orlev attempts to answer the questions with the explanation:

Only Father couldn’t use his gun any more than Boruch could use his knife, because if anything ever happened to one single German in the Factory or the street, the Germans would kill lots of men, women, and children to make sure it didn’t happen again. A retaliatory action, it was called. And so no one dared do anything. How could you be responsible for so many lives just because you felt like killing a German? (Orlev 6)

Through these words, inaction becomes action. Rather than failing to defend themselves, the victims become heroes for refusing to sacrifice others in the name of their own personal salvation. A previously cowardly act is suddenly seen as strong and heroic. By representing silence as a stand, Orlev indicates to his readers that, sometimes, peaceful protest is more powerful than violent uprising. I think that this is a positive lesson to teach young adult readers, especially during the trials that many face in middle and high school.

The effect of time and distance between the actual events and the writing of the novel is evident through some of the conversations that the characters hold with one another. For example, when Alex talks with Boruch at the factor, Boruch compares Hitler to Napoleon, but contrasts the two in that “Hitler is doing something that has never been done before. He is building factories in which to slaughter human beings like cattle. That is the difference. That’s why he’ll lose the war and die like a dog. Germany will be razed to the ground and his name will be a curse until the end of time” (Orlev 7). Alex’s father replies that it might be better to just obliterate Hitler from the history books altogether to which Boruch firmly replies, “No it wouldn’t. All this must be remembered so that other peoples will know what can happen when a madman is elected to be a leader. And so they will realize that there are times when even children must be taught to bear arms” (Orlev 7). The message is plain and unmistakable. Orlev is not risking his audience misunderstanding the purpose of his novel: he is writing in order to bear witness to the past and protect the future. Although the combination of the blatant phrases and child narrator make the delivery a little rough, the significance of the conversation is clear to and understood by audiences of any age group, including young adults.

Since the novel is only semi-autobiographical, Orlev is able to, and does, take liberties with the accuracy of many of the other conversations and feelings that he attributes to the time of the novel (1943) but might actually be attributable to the time that he is writing the novel (1981). Alex mentions that his mother and father often argued about “Zionism” (Orlev 13). The young narrator describes the argument as “awfully complicated, one of those arguments that never ends” (Orlev 13). While Alex’s mother wants to move to Palestine because Poland “denies her roots,” Alex’s father refuses to believe that “whenever anyone sticks out his tongue it’s aimed at

you” (Orlev 13). In hindsight, the narrator realizes that his mother was right (Orlev 14). The insertion of the Zionist debate is slightly jarring in the context of the story. Is Orlev inserting his present opinion under the guise of the child narrator? Or did his parents really argue about possibly immigrating to Palestine? On the one hand, it is legitimate that his family might have discussed leaving their current circumstances in favor of a Jewish state. From 1937 to 1944, the Zionist movement organized escapes for about 18,000 central and eastern European Jews (Escape 4). However, in an interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, Orlev admits that, as a boy, he “didn’t know anything about Palestine except that my aunt had said we’d get food and new clothes” (Klein 2). Today, Orlev lives in Israel and is an advocate for the Return to Zion movement. I think that the introduction of this topic into the seemingly simplistic, child’s tale is Orlev’s subtle way of asserting his present-day opinion about the necessity of a Jewish state and the establishment of strong Jewish identity. Much later in the novel, Henryk mutters about how the plight of the Jews is that “they have no country of their own” (Orlev 118). In his delirious state, Henryk:

talked on and on, as though he... could actually see the Jewish state that we would have one day, with a flag and a president of its own. Of course, I would have preferred a king, but I didn’t interrupt to tell him that. It was strange to think of a whole city being Jewish. You’d walk down a street, for instance, and everyone you saw would be a Jew: the taxi drivers and the coachmen, the porters and the mailmen, the chimney sweeps and the policemen, the children and the doormen- Jews, every last one of them. No one would have to be afraid to go outside because he had a Jewish face and big, sad Jewish eyes.

No one would make fun of him or pick on him. No one would laugh or say he had a Jewish nose. (Orlev 118)

Henryk describes Israel as a Jewish utopia, and yet, if Jews need to be separate in order to be equal, are they really equal at all? Although the idea of a Jewish state sounds positive, the concept that a Jew could only feel safe going outside because everyone else around them would be a Jew is very upsetting. If the only environment in which a Jewish person would not feel fear, would not be picked on, would not be made fun of, is an environment in which only Jewish people reside, then the lessons learned from the Holocaust, the very purpose of representing the Holocaust in literature, fail. It is also interesting to note that the sentiments expressed by Henryk are an echo of the thoughts of Wiesel the narrator in *Night*. Wiesel felt that the ghetto was not terrible at first because it was comfortable to “live among Jews, among brothers” (Wiesel 12). The feeling that in order to live contentedly and peacefully, Jews need to live alone in their own isolated community, is unique and yet understandable. Jews are faced with the choice of challenging their oppressors and continuing to live in an inhospitable climate, or walking away from their tormentors and living in a place that only friends inhabit. I’m not sure which reaction is right but the fact that both Jewish authors who experienced the ghettos and the camps choose a community of only Jewish people is very telling.

Orlev also utilizes the child narrator in order to explain the sheer fallacy of labeling one group of people as a “master race” while another group is labeled “scum” and “vermin,” worthy of extermination. Alex muses about which people he would save if he had the opportunity, or the responsibility:

Sometimes, when I was alone in the hideout, I'd think about what it would be like to be someone on whom others' lives depended. I'd think, for instance, that if it were up to me, I'd decide to save anyone who had a big space between his front teeth, because I had one myself. But Father and Boruch didn't have spaces. It would have to be something else, then, like blue eyes. Only I'd also have the right to save three people who had brown eyes. One, of course, would be mother. Father and Boruch were no problem. All the rest of the brown-eyes people would have to pass before me. Next I'd pick little Yossi, who was the nicest of the Gryns. But that was ridiculous. How could I pick one child out of a whole family? I'd have to give myself the right to save ten lives. In the end, I'd just get depressed... (Orlev 17)

By describing the frustration the child feels in terms of trying to choose who to save, Orlev emphasizes how impossible it is to decide that one group of people should be saved and another destroyed. Orlev breaks the miserable concept down to terms with which a child could empathize. Although Orlev masks the exercise as a game, a way that Alex passes the time while he waits for his father to arrive home, the lessons that it imparts are much more serious. In this example, I think that Orlev effectively weaves realism and fun in a way that illustrates the results of irrational evil in simple terms for a young adult audience.

Alex's father is taken to a labor camp and the Nazis kill his mother, but the young boy still continues to keep happy memories at the forefront of his mind. In order to survive in the abandoned ghetto, he strings together advice from all of his guardians. Tips such as making sure to find an emergency exit in every hiding place, keeping the element of surprise on your side, and trusting in the kindness of helpful strangers keep Alex alive throughout the book (Orlev 30).

Orlev keeps the novel exciting for a young adult audience by describing Alex packing to go into hiding as “packing for summer camp” and the cellar where he hides as “a place to investigate” (Orlev 45). Alex discovers a “secret passage” that leads from his hiding spot, Number 78 Bird Street, to the house next door (Orlev 46). Alex enjoys traveling into the different apartments so much that “for a while [he] even forgets where [he] was and begins to play with the toys” (Orlev 47). Even communicating with his father is an adventurous endeavor; Alex leaves “a message for him on a brick in a secret code of [theirs] made up of numbers” (Orlev 51). In order to discover food, Alex plays a game where he unleashes Snow into the lofts on a search for food like a little bloodhound mouse. He walks from building to building whistling and searching. He even manages to become friends with a looter named Bolek by telling jokes, “being confident,” and “even a little bit cheeky” (Orlev 70). Although the necessity to find food is prevalent, the feeling of covert excitement is also pervasive throughout the novel.

In addition to scouring the neighboring houses for food, furniture, and clothing, Alex also searches for appropriate hiding places. Like the savvy survivor that he is, he wants to fortify his refuge. Alex plans to relocate to the abandoned third floor of the destroyed home in which he is living. Fortunately, Alex is “an expert” on ropes so he engineers a thick and a thin rope ladder, one for carrying heavy furniture and supplies and the other for setting up a quick escape route (Orlev 58). Alex’s descriptions of how he builds his fort and keeps himself alive are ingenious and inspiring. Readers cannot help but put themselves in Alex’s shoes and wonder if they, too, would be so resourceful and intelligent.

Using a rock, a rope ladder, and a make shift wooden ladder, Alex manages to hoist himself to the third floor of the decrepit, abandoned building. Alex is very meticulous about his

secretive plans and even thinks to light “a candle inside to see if the light showed through any cracks” (Orlev 74). He camouflages his entrances and exits as electrical wires rather than ropes (Orlev 76). Functionality is not the only goal of his hideout; he also considers aesthetic value. By adding an inconspicuous metal ladder between the third and fourth floors, Alex creates “a home with two larders and a terrace full of birds” (Orlev 78). Alex enjoys watching his neighbors on the Polish side of the wall by lifting his air vent and peeking through with his binoculars. He learns their habits and patterns and even identifies those who can be trusted from those who cannot. (The notion that simply giving someone a once over with binoculars is enough to determine whether or not he or she is reliable is both childish and fantastic, an element that only works in the context of the story.)

Throughout the novel, Orlev emphasizes the difficulty between trusting friends and avoiding rats. Although some Jews tried to avoid capture by building makeshift hidden rooms or serious underground bunkers, someone always had to be trusted to seal the entrance. Alex states his disdain, and probably the author's, for rats with the explanation:

You knew the Germans couldn't be trusted. They didn't try to hide that they were murderers. They even wore skull patches on their uniforms. But a rat smiled and talked to you like a friend and then went and squealed behind your back. He thought he'd gain time for himself. Like the Germans, who thought they'd win the war- though in the end they'd pay for what they had done. The rats would pay too. Only sooner. That's what Boruch said, and he knew. Because the Germans would kill the rats themselves, even before they lost the war. No rat would get away from them. (Orlev 18)

Being betrayed by classmates, neighbors, coworkers, or even friends was one of the most devastating aspects of life during World War II. Alex watches both the Gryn family and the family that lives in the basement of 78 Bird Street be taken away. Although their hiding spots were camouflaged with the utmost secrecy and preparation, the manipulative power of the rats could not be avoided. Orlev illustrates the horrible consequences of a society in which every man is willing to betray his neighbor in order to protect his own interests. Eventually, even the victors become the losers.

Along with the fun and sentimental elements of the novel, Orlev also adds a bit of romanticism. Alex becomes a fearless hero in the face of danger. At one point, Alex saves a damsel in distress. As he is searching for food and supplies, Alex hears a young girl struggling and screaming. Instead of running away, he aims and fires his pistol at her assailant and shouts for the man to leave her alone, using an uncharacteristically deep voice. Alex is victorious as “the big oaf threw down his sack” and “ran for dear life” (Orlev 61). Another time, a Nazi holds a wounded man and his son at gunpoint but Alex shoots him quickly three times and kills him. Unfazed, Alex comments that it “amazed” him “how little [he] cared that he was dead” (Orlev 102). Later on, the doctor delivers an interesting wartime lesson to the young boy:

People shouldn't kill each other, son. People should help each other to live. Killing human beings is the most terrible of crimes, although unfortunately it's become a common one lately. But if you're saving the life of a friend or someone in your family, or defending your country, or just trying to keep yourself alive, there's nothing to be ashamed of. It's no disgrace to kill a murderer like the soldier you told me about. On the

contrary, I think you were very brave. I want you to know that, just in case no one's told you yet. (Orlev 116)

Many young students reading about Alex's adventures would love to picture themselves attacking a bad guy and coming out on top. Although the doctor attempts to give Alex sound advice, I'm not sure that his reasoning behind acceptable murders make sense. What separates good from evil if anyone can kill with acceptable reason? How do you make a distinction between a Nazi following orders to keep his own family alive and "a murderer like the soldier you told me about?" Although I see the reasoning behind absolving a young boy of his guilt, the doctor's lesson is still questionable.

On top of finding a hidden tower in which to live and firing a gun at an evil soldier, Alex even attempts to join the Jewish uprising in the ghetto. However, the revolt led by adults is not the focus of the narrative. Rather, Orlev merely references the uprising and then focuses on Alex's own person defiance to the Nazi regime. Instead of joining the adult resistance, Alex ends up on a mission that only a child could execute, a mission to save his wounded friend, Henryk. Alex dresses up as a regular Polish school-boy in order to procure medicine for Henryk. Alex sneaks through a tiny underground passage in the ghetto wall, whispers a secret code to the doorman, and convinces the doctor to come back to his hideout to remove the bullet from Henryk's shoulder. Because of his stealth, bravery, and incredibly good luck, Alex is able to save his friend's life. The anxious excitement of this passage resonates with young adult readers eager to be the hero or heroine in their own tales. Children love acting out scenarios in which "bad guys" chase them as they rush to save the ones they love. Although this passage exploits

the idea of fun and adventure, the subtle undercurrent of fear and necessity is still somewhat apparent.

That incident is not the only time that Alex spends on the Polish side of the wall. Instead, he travels back and forth at will and his travels become more and more extravagant, in the eyes of a Jewish boy in hiding, and normal, in the eyes of the gentile children in daily life. The feeling of fear and urgency is gone. Rather, Orlev illustrates happiness and contentment. Shopping at Polish grocery stores, sitting on park benches, playing in soccer games, leading snowball fights, and going on dates with Stashya are all common occurrences in Alex's life (Orlev 127-130, 133). Stashya, his girlfriend, even admits that she, too, is a Jew in hiding. The two become closer because of their shared secret. Of course, none of this could have happened during World War II. People were constantly being stopped on the streets and asked for their papers and rats were always willing to sell anyone out for a quick profit. Why, then, does Orlev depict such a peaceful, happy world? Perhaps it is wishful thinking; perhaps it is to engulf the audience in the enchantment of the story. Either way, the novel emphasizes fun and happiness rather than confusion and sadness and young adult readers are affected accordingly.

Because of these episodes illustrated throughout the book, hiding successfully in the abandoned ghetto seems not only possible but also exciting and thrilling. Although the innocence of the narrator was a positive attribute in some of the other examples I mentioned, I think that by illustrating life in the ghetto as a game, Orlev makes the idea of hiding in order to stay alive too appealing. Something that is horrible and terrifying suddenly becomes fun and alluring. I do not advocate that we should terrify children and young adults with the cold, graphic facts. However, I am not sure that rewriting the experience as a sort of fairytale is

effective, either. This delivery can be confusing and misleading to children. Yet, no delivery at all could be even more detrimental. So, how do authors find a balance between writing stories that young adults want to read and telling stories that young adults need to hear? In an interview with The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, Orlev made a comment that sheds light on the upbeat, exciting nature of his novel, saying, “Writing about my childhood during the war is like walking on a frozen lake. I mustn’t tread too heavily, I must think about what happened to us only as it was engraved in my memory as a child. Otherwise I would break through the ice, sink down, maybe forever” (IFCJ 2). In other words, the use of the child narrator and the balance between realism, sentimentality and fun is not only effective in terms of audience perception but also in terms of authorial well-being. At the end of the novel, when Alex and his father reunite after five months of hiding and surviving, Alex concludes that “crying can be catching, just like laughter” (Orlev 162). The decision to laugh or to cry is one that rests with each victim and perpetrator, each survivor and casualty, each friend and foe, each author and reader. As an author, Orlev decides to laugh, favoring fun and sentimentality rather than realism.

Uri Orlev has written thirty books that have been translated into more than thirty-five languages and is credited as being one of the first authors to write about the Holocaust for children and young adults (IFCJ 2). Although his books are thrilling and upbeat, he still manages to illustrate that people are capable of doing horrible things to one another, especially during desperate times. Renate Schulz from the University of Arizona notes that teachers “have an obligation to deal with this period in history, not only because it has deeply influenced nearly all realms of present-day German culture, but also because we have a moral obligation to foster

our students' critical insight in order to reduce the chance of repeating such a catastrophe" (Schulz 138). Therefore, Orlev's presentation of the Holocaust in a more adventurous light is still effective because it introduces the Holocaust as an event to students and allows them both to start a dialogue about what they are reading and to try to understand the concepts that are mentioned. Even though this book is much more fun and exciting than the other two books that I am analyzing, it still provides valuable insight into the lives of people trying to survive during World War II.

The Book Thief: Holocaust Representation through Imagery and Imagination

The two previous examples of Holocaust literature were books that depicted Holocaust literature through memory and representation. However, in the case of *The Book Thief*, author Markus Zusak depicted the events of life in Europe during World War II through the lens of his parents' experiences layered with his own imagination. His mother, Lisa, grew up in Germany while his father, Helmut, was raised in Austria. In an interview with Random House Kids, Zusak explained that he was inspired to write his novel because of "hearing stories of bombings" and imagining the struggle of having to get "up out of the ground in bomb shelters in Munich and Austria" (Random House Kids). Zusak was particularly moved by one of his mother's stories in which she remembered hearing a noise in the street that reminded her of cattle stampeding through the fields. When she looked out of her window, she realized that the noise was coming from people being herded down the road to the concentration camps. Zusak's mother recalled an old man who could not keep up and was staggering in the street. A teenage boy ran forward and offered the man a piece of bread. The old man was so grateful that he cried and thanked the teenager. Minutes later, a soldier confiscated the bread and whipped them both, punishing the man for taking it and the teenager for giving it. Zusak commented, "That story really inspired the book because its got pure beauty, the boy giving the bread, and pure destruction, which is the soldier doing what he did. You bring those things together and you've got humans and what we're capable of" (Random House Kids). The anecdote also becomes one of the most powerful moments in the book itself, a moment of total selflessness juxtaposed with utter helplessness.

Zusak's understanding of World War II Germany and his inspiration for writing his novel fall into the paradox of illustrating the Holocaust from a removed, yet effective perspective. Zusak's interpretation is distanced through source since he had to glean understanding from his parents' interpretations. Also, their interpretations were distanced through time as years pass and memories change. As Tim Cole notes in his article, "Scales of Memory, Layers of Memory: Recent Works on Memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust," this source and time distance is central to the problem of representing the Holocaust through literature since "writing as a member of the postwar generation for whom the Holocaust has only been experienced vicariously... [Artists] make up a generation no longer willing, or able to recall the Holocaust separately from the ways it has been passed down" (137). Similarly, in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, James Young notes that while it may be received as "self-indulgent or self-aggrandizing for [artists] to make the listener's story part of the teller's story," to do otherwise would be "unimaginable" (Young 44). Young continues, "These artists can no more neglect the circumstances surrounding a story's telling than they can ignore the circumstances surrounding the actual events' unfolding. Neither the events nor the memory of them take place in a void" (Young 44). So, each memory from a primary source is subject to a unique reception and interpretation by the secondary source. Cole explains this cycle by saying, "With each individual memory, a collective memory of sorts [is] created- albeit one which [is] far from consensual" (Cole 137).

In order to convey his interpretation of his parents' experiences and the events of the Holocaust, Zusak relies on dark humor and vivid imagery. Because of the witty conversational tone paired with the ominous historical references, Zusak's writing can be read on both a young

adult and adult level. The book employs allusions, foreshadowing, and personification in order to illustrate the terrifying times to modern day readers. Zusak takes a somewhat optimistic approach in order to best convey his message to his audience. As April Brannon notes, “*The Book Thief* is set in the bleakest of circumstances but is a surprisingly hopeful story about the atrocities that occurred during the Nazi years in Germany” (Brannon 726). As compared to the other novels discussed, this novel uses a more equal distribution of sentimentality, realism, and fun, in order to convey its Holocaust story to a young adult audience.

The novel follows 9-year-old Liesel Meninger and her life during World War II in Nazi Germany. During her little brother’s funeral, Liesel steals a book from the snow, *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*, a manual for morticians and gravediggers. Liesel holds on to the book like a treasure and sets a goal that she will learn to read it. Days later, Liesel is placed with the poor Hubermann family in the small town of Molching outside of Munich. Her foster mother, Rosa, is always cursing at Liesel, forcing her to do chores, and even beating her with a wooden spoon. Beneath this gruff exterior, however, lurks an affectionate soul who wants the best for Liesel. Hans, on the other hand, is outwardly gentle and compassionate. He plays the accordion and paints. When Liesel wakes up each night with terrifying nightmares, Hans teaches her how to read and write. After a while, Liesel becomes comfortable in her new surroundings, learns her school lessons, makes friends with local children, attends Hitler Youth meetings, and plays soccer. Her life settles into a regular pattern. Under the direction of her foster father, she avoids expressing opposition to Hitler. However, at a town book burning, she steals a book from the pile and sneaks it home to add to her collection. The mayor’s wife witnesses her actions and invites Liesel to read books in her library. Around that time, a Jewish prizefighter by the name

of Max goes into hiding in the Hubermanns' basement. Max and Liesel become special friends and Liesel nurses him during his sickness by reading to him. Eventually, Max has to leave because his presence is too dangerous for the other inhabitants of the house. During a bombing, Liesel's entire town, including her foster parents and her friends, are obliterated. Liesel is left alone at the age of 14.

The Book Thief is unique from other Holocaust novels I have analyzed in that, rather than a child narrator, the character of Death narrates the novel. Death is omniscient, and especially in this context, omnipotent. The character is witty, irreverent, and humorous— an interesting way to approach such a somber topic— and it serves to break down some of the barriers that have arisen in terms of explaining and discussing the Holocaust with young adult readers. Additionally, Death is direct, even blatant about the approach with which it will tell the story. In the opening lines of the novel, Death admits, “I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic” (Zusak 3). This sentence is particularly interesting because it emphasizes that there is an inherent difficulty in how to present the tragedy of the Holocaust to an audience, and then it turns that difficulty on its head by presenting the story in a unique way. As Peter Novick notes in his essay, “The American National Narrative of the Holocaust: There Isn't Any,” people often shy away from writing about the Holocaust because “it is impious or immoral to even attempt to explain it” (Novick 35). However, if we do not attempt to explain it, this silence, this ignorance, “serves to discourage explanatory narrative” (Novick 35). Zusak does not shy away from the difficulty of the topic at hand, nor does he glorify it by making it sacred and unmentionable. Instead, he attacks the topic through humor, at times touching, at times sarcastic, but always honest and forthright.

Death narrates the novel in a series of flashbacks. Because of this, the narrator often drops hints as to what will happen and what the fate of certain characters will be. Death states things simply, in basic terms that any reader of any age level could understand. However, the simplicity of the statements, although often delivered in a joking or sardonic tone, is chilling in its grim accuracy. As it introduces the story, Death offers a list of topics that will be covered. “It’s just a small story really, about, among other things: a girl, some words, an accordionist, some fanatical Germans, a Jewish fist fighter, and quite a lot of thievery” (Zusak 5). With this brief list, Death simultaneously minimizes and pinpoints the focus of the novel. People say that if you want to teach someone something, break it down to the simplest terms and discuss it in a way that even a child could understand. Throughout the novel, Death does just that. The narrator tackles the gravest topics with dark perseverance and witty strength. Death reduces the Nazi party and its legion of loyal followers to “some fanatical Germans,” the heroine to “a girl,” and her desperate pursuit of knowledge to “some words.”

One of the slightly fantastic elements of the story is that the Hubermanns hide Max, a Jewish fist fighter, in their basement for several years during the war. Max hides in the basement under the staircase with a painter’s tarp and some discarded cans as his only coverage from prodding Nazi search parties. At one point, Max becomes deathly ill and moves into Liesel’s room for 7 months until he is fully recuperated. The story hinges on the relationship that develops between Liesel and Max and their interactions shed light on the situation and its consequences, but the idea that a struggling, poor family would be able to help a Jewish man to live unnoticed in a virtually open manner for so long seems extremely unlikely. However, Zusak

focuses on the theme that good things can happen during bad times and the successful hiding of Max is central to that theme.

Death approaches the historical events that are woven into the plot in a jocular way. Throughout the novel, when Zusak brings up certain topics, the character of Death approaches the subjects in a joking or simplistic manner. For example, when Death references the concentration camps, it comments that “Germans loved to burn things” or when Death discusses Hitler’s birthday, it says “there would be fire” and “a day full of burning and cheering” (Zusak 84, 101-102). Death describes the Nazis saying “people may tell you that Nazi Germany was built on anti-Semitism, a somewhat overzealous leader, and a nation of hate-fed bigots, but it would all have come to nothing had the Germans not loved one particular activity: to burn” (Zusak 84). Death rattles off a list of things that Germans loved to burn, “shops, synagogues, Reichstags, houses, personal items, slain people... book” in such a matter-of-fact way that the description almost takes the horror out of the action (Zusak 84). In short, Death sums up the whole of the Nazi party as a group of vicious pyromaniacs. Occasionally, Death allows a somber tone to creep into its description. When Liesel and Hans study *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*, Death narrates that the pair “made their way back to the Amper River, which flanked the town. It worked its way past, pointing in the direction of Dachau, the concentration camp... they say maybe thirty meters down from it, in the grass, writing the words and reading them aloud” and, for a moment, the reader’s perception of her peaceful reading lessons with her Papa are invaded with the sinister horrors of the outside world (Zusak 70). However, Zusak brings the focus back to the small kindnesses that everyday people were able to do for one another. So, even in the shadows of the crematoria, the reading lesson ends pleasantly: “she was enjoying it” (Zusak 71).

However, in its simplistic description of historical events, Death manages to convey multiple layers of meaning. For example, when Death describes Liesel's ride on the train car with her mother and little brother, it refers to the soldier stationed inside and meant to keep the peace in the car: "when the trouble did start, he simply sat there and watched. Perhaps he was only the last resort, the final solution" (Zusak 29). The Final Solution refers to the Nazi plan to eliminate the Jews of Europe. Death reassigns the word to the German soldier. The Final Solution, in this context, refers to the perpetrators of the crime rather than the crime itself. Also, by describing the soldier as indifferent at a time when he should have acted, Death indicates the fault of people who watched the crimes be committed and did nothing. At another point in the novel, Death describes the relationship between leaders and followers as the equation that "when it came down to it, one of them called the shots. The other did what he was told. The question is, what if the *other* is a lot more than one?" (Zusak 29). Through simple sentences, Zusak explains difficult concepts in an understandable way. His target audience, school students, can identify with the pain of bullying and the complicit harm of those who join in, or even, who stand and watch in silence. Zusak illustrates that those who commit the crimes are just as wrong as those who idly watch the crimes be committed.

Zusak continues to offer more historical explanations through the jesting tone of Death. The irony of the character of Death being fun is prominent throughout the novel, especially when this is contrasted with the harsh realities of the war-torn world. Death mentions the practice of saying "Heil Hitler" and muses, "It actually makes me wonder if anyone ever lost an eye or injured a hand or wrist with all of that. You'd only need to be facing the wrong way at the wrong time or stand marginally too close to another person" (Zusak 111). Zusak manages to tear away

any vestige of legitimacy from the Nazi party by making a joke even of their greeting system. What the Nazis did with such steadfast assuredness is nothing more than a joke in the eyes of Death.

However, Zusak also adds sentimentality and realism to the mix of emotions at play throughout his novel so that fun and jokes do not overshadow the true purpose of the text. For example, when Death discusses the gas chambers in more detail about halfway through the novel, it describes the choking terror of the innocent victims:

When their bodies had finished scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. When their fingernails had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by sheer force of desperation, their spirits came toward me, into my arms, and we climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into eternity's certain breadth. They just kept feeding me. Minute after minute. Shower after shower. (Zusak 349)

Zusak graphically depicts the horror of the showers and the sheer numbers of the concentration camp victims. He does not shy away from the scope of the crimes committed in favor of writing a more romantic or acceptable novel for school students. Because of the unexpected transitions between complete seriousness and casual joking, the horrific events described have an even more jarring and devastating impact on readers.

In order to explain Hitler's power over his willing followers, Zusak uses the metaphors of a boxing match, a word shaker, and thievery. Zusak uses the imagery of a boxing match to symbolize the plight of the Jews and the goals of their aggressor, Hitler. He uses the language of the ring to illustrate Hitler's evil propaganda to a downtrodden German people. In his daydreams, Max imagines fighting the Fuhrer. Even though the Fuhrer strikes him and knocks

him down time and again, when Max strikes back on the final bell, Hitler snatches the situation as an example and uses words to incite the crowd. The Fuhrer shouts to his supporters, “Can you see that this enemy has found its ways— its despicable ways— through our armor, and that clearly, I cannot stand up here alone and fight him?” (Zusak 254). Even though the argument does not make sense, the crowd immediately rallies around the idea that they are the underdogs; the Jew is the attacker. Zusak seamlessly weaves another history lesson into the story as Hitler continues:

As we speak, he is plotting his way into your neighborhood. He’s moving in next door. He’s infesting you with his family and he’s about to take you over. He will soon own you, until it is he who stands not at the counter of your grocery shop, but sits in the back, smoking his pipe. Before you know it, you’ll be working for him at minimum wage while he can hardly walk from the weight in his pockets. Will you simply stand there and let him do this? Will you stand by as your leaders did in the past, when they gave your land to everybody else, when they sold your country for the price of a few signatures? Will you stand out there, powerless? Or will you climb up into this ring with me?

...

In the basement of 33 Himmel Street, Max Vandenburg could feel the fists of an entire nation. One by one they climbed into the ring and beat him down. They made him bleed. They let him suffer. (Zusak 254)

Although the concept of a boxing match is fun and easy for young adult readers to understand, Zusak illustrates Hitler’s rhetoric and charisma in a way that shows the realistic horrors of the times. The discouraged and humiliated German people’s thirst for revenge, Hitler’s captivating

power, the Jews utter helplessness, all leave a chilling reminder of the evil that lurks in our world.

Next, Zusak uses the metaphor of the word shaker. Max writes a “fable or a fairy tale” about “a strange, small man” who “decided three important details about his life: he would part his hair from the opposite side to everyone else, he would make himself a small strange mustache, and he would one day rule the world” (Zusak 444). The fictional Hitler character spreads ideas like seeds throughout Germany until the simple thoughts have taken root and grown into a mighty forest, a forest of hate. One young girl, representative of Liesel, plants her own seed in opposition to Hitler. Her tiny sapling grows into an immovable, towering tree. When her tree is finally chopped down, it “was laid out among the rest of the forest. It could never destroy all of it, but if nothing else, a different-colored path was carved through it” (Zusak 450). Zusak does not sugar coat the truth and imply that one person can take down an entire army; instead, he suggests that even the seed of an idea, the suggestion of a thought, could develop into something that leaves a lasting, positive mark, even in the darkest of places.

Finally, when Liesel and her best friend, Rudy, join a band of thieves in order to scavenge for extra food, Death describes the dynamic of the group of submissive followers under a vicious leader. The group had “no qualms about stealing” but “needed to be told... liked to be told. And Viktor Chemmel liked to be the teller. It was a nice microcosm” (Zusak 244). The group of eager followers is the members of the Nazi party; Chemmel is Hitler, a metaphor that young adult readers could easily identify and understand. Middle school and high school students are used to the idea of a social hierarchy and thus identify with the pressure to fall in line and follow suit. Zusak’s tragic story of what happens when people do just that serves as an

admonishment for young adult readers who might otherwise lose themselves in their pursuit of fitting in with others.

One of the most prominent uses of imagery throughout the novel is that of color. Death states that it relishes colors and the distractions they bring with them. It continues, “People observe the colors of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it’s quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single hour can consist of thousands of different colors. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them” (Zusak 4). This introduction sets the stage for hundreds of references to colors and their meanings throughout the novel. In an interview with The Mother Daughter Book Club, Zusak noted that the metaphor of color used throughout the book is “particularly appropriate” (Interview with Markus Zusak 2). Zusak continued, “Death was almost breathing colors in to distract himself from all the misery that surrounds him. That in a way was a metaphor for the idea that this book is about people doing beautiful things in a really ugly time. And that’s what Death is trying to seek out” (Interview with Markus Zusak 2). So, Zusak approached his novel with the mindset of mixing beauty with betrayal, hope with despair, and violence with peace. Although the message is powerful, does it portray the events in an accurate way?

Through colors, Zusak once again manages to intertwine historical events with the fictional happenings of the novel. Death comments that when “I recollect her, I see a long list of colors, but it’s the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds toward clarity” (Zusak 14). Death’s words have a layered, double meaning. They are applicable

not only to Death's memory of the book thief, Liesel, but also to victims' memories of the Holocaust. "I hang suspended, until the septic truth bleeds toward clarity" could refer to the pain and suffering that survivors must undergo every time they recollect the atrocities of their past. With this phrase, Zusak pays tribute to both the survivors who could not tell their stories immediately following the war due to social stigmas, and the survivors who cannot tell their stories today due to personal guilt, the guilt, as Zusak proclaims, "for wanting to live" (Zusak 503).

The three colors that Death recalls when he thinks of *The Book Thief* are red, black, and white: the colors of the Nazi flag. Death uses childish terms such as "the scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red" to describe the swastika imprinted onto the circular white center of the red flag, the symbol of the atrocities of the adult world (Zusak 14). It is interesting that Death thinks of the colors of the Nazi party when he thinks of Liesel Meninger, the Book Thief herself. Throughout the novel, Liesel is a symbol of hope and justice. By aligning her symbol of innocence with the symbol of evil, Zusak subverts the Nazi colors and appropriates the symbolism for good rather than evil. In this way, Zusak weaves sentimentality with realism so that the message delivered to young adult readers is one of simultaneous hope and truth.

Zusak's use of colors is powerful and effective, especially to young adult readers, since it brings horrific events to a much more manageable level. The concept of using colors as strong imagery to convey a feeling or idea is also evident even in the American Justice system. As one of the armies that liberated the Nazi death camps, America stands as a beacon of hope and justice in the face of such unmitigated evil and devastation. However, some believe that America might

exploit its past position as protector in order to promote its current global agenda. Our representation of the Holocaust as part of our national narrative makes us comfortable, and in some cases, complacent. Peter Novick expresses this tension when he quoted previous Attorney General Janet Reno explaining the two paintings that hang suspended in the Attorney General's Conference Room in the Department of Justice, saying "One is Justice Granted- an optimistic, hopeful sign of people coming into a new world with hope, with prosperity, with justice. On the other end of the room is Justice Denied, and there is a barren slope with people being led off into bondage by brown-shirted troops, violins being taken, papers being torn" (Novick 33). Novick scoffed that "whatever the failings of the US criminal justice system, we are being told, we don't have brown-shirted troops taking violins" (Novick 33). Although colors elicit a strong emotional response and understanding, are they an appropriate metaphor in all situations?

Similar to the multiple, sometimes contradictory, purposes that colors serve throughout the novel, the importance of books and words function as both positive and negative catalysts. As Liesel began to take an interest in reading, Death summarized that "she was a girl in Nazi Germany... how fitting that she was discovering the power of words" (Zusak 147). The power of propaganda and rhetoric was evident in every aspect of German life at that time; the messages were inescapable, but not indomitable. For example, although Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, (*My Struggle*), was one of the books that incited the German people to join the Nazi party and torture and kill anyone who did not fit into the "master German race" category, the book was used as a tool of salvation in the novel. Hans Hubermann delivers Max a map of Molching and a key to his front door within the covers of the wretched book, "of all things to save him" (Zusak 100). Zusak took the work of the oppressor and empowered the oppressed through it. The message

that any power can be harnessed for good or for evil is evident. Young adults reading the novel are faced with the question of what kind of person they would be, what kind of choice they would make with their own struggle: my struggle.

Throughout the novel, food is referenced excessively. From Rosa Hubermann's watery pea soup to Ilsa Herman's sticky sugar cookies, from Frau Diller's hard candies to the thieves' sacks of potatoes, food is a constant presence. When food is not being described specifically, Death compares inedible objects to it. For example, when Liesel listened to Max's story, "she could see the burning light on Max's eggshell face and even taste the human flavor of his words" (Zusak 218). Rudy's hair is described as "lemon-soaked" and the sun as "breakfast-colored" (Zusak 201, 502). What does it mean that food is so studied, personified even, over the course of the work? One of the obvious reasons is to emphasize the hunger that people felt at that time: both the physical hunger for nourishment and the spiritual hunger for finality. The desperation for food was felt not only by the Jewish prisoners but also by the German perpetrators. Additionally, Death questions what it means "to live" several times. Through the constant mention of food, Zusak implies that having enough to feed one's family is another tenant to human life. The War and the Holocaust took away this ability from so many families. I think that the emphasis on food serves to emphasize the misery of life during World War II, both within the confines of ghettos and concentrations camps, and in the streets of the crumbling European homes and towns.

A final point that I would like to discuss is the multiple victims that Zusak describes throughout the novel. The most prominent victim pairing is that of Liesel Meminger and Max Vandenburg. Liesel is a young German girl with dirty blonde hair and blue eyes. Max is a

twenty-four year old Jewish man with brown hair, brown eyes, and a big nose. However, from there, Zusak only mentions similarities between the two. Both arrived to the town of Molching by train and felt incredible dread and terror about what was in store for them: as Death noted, “Both arrived in a state of agitation on Himmel Street” (Zusak 206). Both wake up every night from wrenching nightmares. Both feel extreme guilt for living in safety while their families do not enjoy such a luxury. Both love the arts: Max, his painting; Liesel, her literature. However, neither is afraid to defend him or herself with his or her fists. Liesel attacks bullies in the schoolyard while Max boxes Hitler in the basement. By indicating the similarities between the two unique characters, Zusak implores us to realize that, regardless of religion, race, gender, or social status, we are all human beings. When the Jews are lead down the streets of Molching to Dachau, Liesel occasionally makes eye contact with men and women in the group of prisoners and Death inserts, “they were not men and women; they were Jews” (Zusak 393). How are the men and women being dragged down the street different from the men and women watching the parade? When Liesel trips while walking down the street, “the Jew, the nasty Jew, helped her up” (Zusak 510). Through irony and sarcasm, Death indicates that the Jews were not the nasty sub-humans that Hitler made them out to be. Rather, they were people just like the people who watched them walk down the streets, like the people who tripped. As Death concluded about the victims of the gas chambers in the death camps: “they were French, they were Jews, and they were you” (Zusak 350). The Nazis were guilty of crimes against Jews, gypsies, Poles, Soviets, Afro-Germans, those with disabilities, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and asocials: ultimately, crimes against humanity.

However, Zusak is careful to show that the Jewish people were the true victims. At one point Death notes the stark contrast between Jewish and German victims, saying, “Liesel Meminger had it easy... compared to Max Vandenburg. Certainly, her brother practically died in her arms. Her mother abandoned her. But anything was better than being a Jew” (Zusak 161). When the neighbors on Himmel Street are forced to take cover in their bomb shelter, Death comments:

I pitied them, though not as much as I felt for the ones I scooped up from various camps in that time. The Germans in basements were pitiable, surely, but at least they had a chance. That basement was not a washroom. They were not sent there for a shower. For those people, life was still achievable. (Zusak 376)

Death mixes realism with sentimentality. Although it is sad to see people die, Death indicates that it is much more devastating for defenseless men, women, and children to die at the hands of an evil dictator and a willing army. The German people hiding in the bomb shelter at least had the chance to escape, the illusion of a life waiting on the outside. Meanwhile, the Jewish people were led to their deaths with complete disrespect and disregard. The topic of addressing the humanity on both sides is one with which many authors grapple. Zusak approaches the concept with clarity and decisiveness. To die an undeserved, inescapable death is a horrible thing; to die six million undeserved, inescapable deaths is an atrocity that no amount of claustrophobic, uncomfortable air raid drills can quite erase. Death addresses the concept of punishment for the Nazis by saying that everyone had to take their turn. “For some it was death in a foreign country during the war. For others it was poverty and guilt when the war was over, when six million discoveries were made throughout Europe” (Zusak 416). It is comforting to think that each of

the perpetrators got the punishment that he or she deserved. Zusak allows readers to draw the conclusion that justice will eventually be served while also admitting that it will not. In this way, Zusak blends realism and sentimentality in order to illustrate the events to his audience of young adult readers.

One of the ways the book thief, Liesel, challenges the Nazis is by cultivating her mind with words and ideas other than the propaganda they try to force upon her. The idea that words hold the power, that people can make a difference, is powerful and promising to young adult readers. Jessica Lang suggests that the Holocaust as an event, as a historical phenomenon, changes our understanding of reality such that “the challenge to the literary imagination is to find a way of making this fundamental truth accessible” (Lang 43). Zusak makes the truth of the Holocaust and life during World War II accessible to young adults through a combination of realism, sentimentality, and fun. The joking tone of death combined with the heavy subject matter produces a result that forces readers both to reevaluate the actions of the past and to reinvestigate the choices of the present. Zusak does not shy away from topics that are difficult to broach. Rather, his clear, concise language and vivid imagery serve to illuminate the horrors of the past so that there might be hope for the future. In her diary, Liesel writes, “I have hated the words and I have loved them, and I hope I have made them right” (Zusak 578). I think that this simple sentence encompasses both the weaknesses and the strengths of literature representing and imagining the Holocaust. Although it might seem impossible to write exactly the “right” thing, the most appropriate thing, one can at least hope to make a small part “right.”

Conclusion

For personal and collective reasons, it is important not to suppress the past but rather to acknowledge, to understand and to cope with it. In our struggle to make sense of our experiences we tell each other, and ourselves, accounts of the events-- accounts that fit our cosmological understandings. Such accounts not only give events meaning, they also help us gain a distance from the events and afford the possibility of constructing new lives. The past has consequences. The victims may be gone and soon will the last of the survivors. The next generation now questions and seeks to explore what has been silenced, if not forgotten. Silence is looking away, unwillingness to confront reality. Ignoring, denying the past, we risk madness... (Bourguignon 84)

Erika Bourguignon indicates that by repressing the events of the past, we risk everything. But learning to confront reality, to understand the stories of victims and survivors and to assimilate these stories with our worldview and our understanding of humanity, can be an equally daunting risk. The choice is clear, though: it is the duty and the right of each of the successive generations to acknowledge the past in order to impact the future. Our children, our young adults, our students are the future. By focusing on the affect that the imagination and representation of the Holocaust has on them, we are acknowledging not only the importance of Holocaust education but also the necessity of it.

One of the themes in the novels that I analyzed for this project was the agency that the authors assigned to the Jewish protagonists. Rather than meek, cowering victims, the authors of *The Book Thief* and *Island on Bird Street* depict the Jewish men as strong, capable individuals who are not afraid to stand up for themselves. In *Island on Bird Street*, Alex never leaves his

hiding place without his pistol. He is comfortable aiming and shooting. So comfortable, in fact, that he kills a Nazi soldier when one of his friends is in danger. Alex's father and his father's friend, Boruch, are described as "big and strong," powerful men who carry weapons that they are prepared to use against Nazi assailants (Orlev 10). Even when Alex's father is being taken away, "he wheeled around and the policeman backed off" (Orlev 18). Similarly, Max is a Jewish boxer who continues to sign up for matches even when his record is 5-10. He talks about fighting the Fuhrer in a boxing match and punching him right on the mustache. Death comments that although "in those days, they said the Jews preferred to simply stand and take things. Take the abuse quietly and the work their way back to the top," Max was different, a trait that Death explains as "obviously," since "every Jew is not the same" (Zusak 161). These characters stand in stark contrast to the inhabitants of Elie Wiesel's village in Sighet. Even though returners warned them and they were left in unguarded buildings, the Jews in *Night* never tried to defend themselves or evade the Hungarian police or Nazi officers. Although their refusal to give up hope that things would work out is inspiring, their simultaneous refusal to take control of their situations and try to change their fates is equally infuriating. Uri Orlev explained that "after the war and the ghetto, [he] was so disappointed in adults who couldn't save themselves or their children. They were helpless" (Klein 2). Zusak illustrates that same frustration of those hearing about the Holocaust after it happened. "Where's the fight" and "where's the will to hold on" are questions that both Max asks as a character and readers ask as an audience (Zusak 189). Rather than continuing the representation of Jewish victims as helpless and submissive, these authors chose to give agency and purpose to their protagonists. I think that this is such an important move, both for the characters in their respective stories, and for readers in their respective

situations. It is important for young adults to know that standing up for yourself is a positive attribute. Realizing that you are worthy of respect and consideration is imperative to successful development. By depicting characters that tried to maintain their dignity in the face of such inhumane events, these books inspire young adults to defend themselves and their peers in the face of persecution and injustice.

Another similarity was the desire to find a place and call it home. In *The Book Thief*, death mentions the address, “33 Himmel Street,” dozens of times throughout the novel. Similarly, Alex is always making his way either to or from “78 Bird Street.” Wiesel refers lovingly and longingly to his small hometown of Sighet, Transylvania, but for the majority of the memoir he refers to “Block 57” as home. This focus on the specific addresses that the victims inhabited highlights the mundane details of everyday life, the desire to cling to reality, to normality, by even the thinnest of strings. The notion that “this person has a home with an address, just like you” resonates throughout the texts. Young adult readers of any descent or background can understand the horror of being torn from their homes and thrown into concentration camps, or worse, hiding in someone else’s home while the rest of your family is tossed in a camp. By emphasizing the humanity of the victims, the authors draw parallels between characters and readers that allow young adults to empathize with the situation more readily and easily. However, the addresses can also be used to further differentiate the types of texts. The sentimental and fun texts employ addresses with dual meanings to convey both the representation and imagination of the Holocaust in the novels whereas the realistic text uses an unforgiving, unembellished address to convey the reality of the concentration camps. For example, “himmel” in German means “heaven.” Due to the sardonic tone of the narrator, Death,

it is not surprising that *The Book Thief* incorporates even more irony into the story with its setting on “33 [Heaven] Street,” a place quite the opposite of heaven, quite closer, in fact, to hell. Similarly, *Island on Bird Street* describes the feeling of wanting to escape, to fly away, with its location on “78 Bird Street.” Meanwhile, the realistic text offers a standard, unadorned address to indicate the painful truth of the concentration camps. “Block 57” described in *Night* is just that: a cold, lifeless block where victims suffer as they await their fate in the Auschwitz death camp. Therefore, addresses can be used to both define the texts in their unique categories of realism, sentimentality, and fun, and combine them in their collective category of Holocaust literature.

In all of the novels, the use of the child narrator and/or child-centered text makes the stories relatable to children but also worthy of their sympathy. Of the six million Jewish people killed during the Holocaust, one million of them were children. Although it is hard to fathom why any of the people were murdered in the name of the Third Reich, it is even more impossible and abhorrent to understand the murder of children. The authors of Holocaust books utilize the child narrator in order both to indicate the utter helplessness and confusion of the victims and to evoke our sympathy and compassion for their plight. A society that does not value the lives of its children, its future, is not a society but rather a complete failure, a breakdown of human rights and decency. Young adults enjoy reading about people with whom they can sympathize. Because of the child narrators and child-centered nature of the texts, young adults can put themselves into the situations of the characters and realize the horrors of the Holocaust and the necessity of ensuring that such an event is never repeated. The child narrators and child-centered texts serve to elicit sympathy for the victims and empathy from the readers.

Another concept that is evident in all of the novels is the unshakeable feeling that any of the characters could easily be any of the readers. You could be a victim or you could be a perpetrator: the choice is yours. As Death mentions, “a few cars drove by, each way. Their drivers were Hitlers and Hubermanns, and Maxes, killers, Dillers and Steiners” (Zusak 550). The decision about whether to be on the side of good to the side of evil is both personal and profound. The lesson to modern day readers is that each person has a choice to make about what decision he or she would make, or would be comfortable making. By emphasizing the choice to be on the side of good or the side of evil, authors teach young adult readers that history is in their hands. They have the power to change their futures. They have the power to deliver abuse, observe abuse, accept abuse, or stop abuse. Which position will you choose? Which driver are you? At the same time though, by offering these apparent “options,” authors run the risk of trivializing the historical event in favor of teaching a moral lesson to present day readers. To what extent do we construct our society and to what extent does it construct us? By asking the readers to put themselves in the positions of the characters, we are assuming a certain amount of humanist choice: we are assuming that the character in question would have free choice of all available options. In reality, certain choices were just not accessible, to victims or perpetrators, because of laws, grudges, history, torture, and fear. So, literature that reappropriates the geopolitical history of Nazism as analogous to bullying risks reducing the atrocities of the historical event to an anti-bullying campaign. Even still, I believe that people do have a choice and I believe that that is an invaluable lesson for young adult readers. At some point in history, someone could have made a different choice. That choice could have then inspired others to make the same choice and on and on until the ripple effect was a community of acceptance rather

than racism, love rather than hate, life rather than death. As modern readers, we might not always have all of the choices but we always have a choice. It is important for young adults to absorb that message and allow it to inspire them to do good rather than evil, in every aspect of their lives.

Since Orlev writes using a tone of fun and excitement, Zusak, a tone of irony mixed with sentimentality, and Wiesel, a tone of grim realism, all three authors manage to convey unique representations and imaginations of the Holocaust. I believe that in order to most effectively illustrate the events, consequences, and lessons of the Holocaust, a collection of books using a combination of the three tones should be read. In order to understand one type of book, a reader needs to also be familiar with the other two. For example, in order to recognize the more serious, pensive sections of *The Island on Bird Street*, a reader needs to be familiar with a more serious, thoughtful Holocaust work, such as *Night*. In order to understand the sentimental side of *Night*, to fathom the atrocity of murdering innocent children and adults, one needs to realize the humanity of the victims as depicted in *The Island on Bird Street* and *The Book Thief*. The victims were children who played with pigskin soccer balls and read hand-written books, people who cared for pet mice and skated with their girlfriends. In order to understand the beauty and selflessness of the characters in *The Book Thief*, one must understand the sinister evil of the characters in *Night*. Perhaps a perceptive reader could gauge each of these realizations from individual books alone. However, I think that most readers would value the complementary works when reading and learning about the Holocaust. In conjunction with one another, the tones of fun, realism, and sentimentality take on an even deeper and more effective meaning that is beneficial to young adult audiences in both a shocking and explanatory way.

Unfortunately, the Holocaust as a genocide is not an isolated event. Today, there are people in the Central African Republic, Syria, and Rwanda being massacred in vicious conflicts and bloody wars. In her essay about using Young Adult Literature to teach the Holocaust, Schulz proposes that although the Final Solution was “unique in its awfulness,” “Stalin’s purges, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the Hutu-Tutsi catastrophe in Rwanda and Burundi, the Khmer Rouge takeover in Cambodia, the treatment of the American Indian by white settlers and the U.S. government, and the experiences of enslaved and later freed African-Americans in American history are all examples of the human capacity to commit genocide when the political climate seems favorable” (Schulz 138). In other words, the events of the past can, and will, repeat themselves in the present and future. Unless we learn from the lessons of the past and instill plans to avoid such atrocities in the future, more victims will suffer the wrath of malicious leaders and their policies.

When I started this project, I thought that my thesis would demonstrate that we are not doing enough to remember the Holocaust, that we are not fulfilling our directive of “Never Forget.” I thought that the books that our young adults read are too watered down, too gentle, for such a vicious topic. I thought that by depicting the lives of World War II civilians and victims in a fun or sentimental light, literature offered a misconstrued representation to its young adult audience. However, the more I read and the more I researched, the more documentaries I watched and essays I studied, the more devastated I felt. The materials, even the softest representations, moved me to tears. It became difficult to sift through even the fun or sentimental accounts because I realized the gravity behind the words, the allusions, and metaphors that the authors included in order to divulge the atrocities without explicitly spelling

them out. Once again, we arrive at the difficulty of finding a balance between literature that readers *want* to read and literature that readers *need* to read. After experiencing so many literary versions of the Holocaust story multiple times, I believe that the best balance is a combination of the three tones, not necessarily in one literary work, but definitely in each reader's literary experience. Only with all three versions, the realistic, the sentimental, and the fun, do we avoid the pitfalls that any one representation would have by itself.

I have always been fascinated by the Holocaust because I could not believe that it happened. I could not believe not only that people were capable of such atrocities but also that no one stepped in to stop them from happening. Still, the thing that soothed my fascination, my discomfort, was the unerring belief that good people will eventually intervene and save the day. I realized that it is this belief that allows me to research and try to understand the devastation of the Holocaust. Without the hope that such a crime could ever happen again, without the conviction that each of us would never allow it to happen again, my pursuit of knowledge would become a futile endeavor. Because of this understanding, I realized, theoretically, we want to illustrate realistic, blunt depictions of the Holocaust in order to scare people into caring and safeguarding against repetition of the event. However, realistically, even the most dedicated students of Holocaust literature can only handle so much before it becomes too much. Therefore, I no longer discriminate against works that are less serious or realistic than their counterparts. I feel that each genuine attempt at illuminating the darkness surrounding such a horrific event is a positive step in the direction of understanding rather than oblivion. Even those sources that erred on the side of fun rather than realism or those sources that exploited sentimentality rather than

subjectivity, each of the sources contributed its own unique fingerprint to the study and memory of the Holocaust.

I believe that learning about the Holocaust in terms of all three tones, realism, fun, and sentimentality, is the key to effectively elucidating the Holocaust to modern day students. In terms of my project specifically, the three books can be read as a complementary trio in order to best represent the event. In order to introduce young adults to the concept of the Holocaust, Uri Orlev's *Island on Bird Street* could be used to interest students in studying event and encourage them to do more research into the subtle setting and time period details that are mentioned in the story. *Island on Bird Street* is a semi-autobiographical narrative set in the Warsaw Ghetto that utilizes the fun and adventurous tone in order to represent the Holocaust. Orlev romanticizes the concept of survival through young love and heroic episodes and even concludes with a happy ending in which 9-year-old Alex is reunited with his father. Young adults reading Orlev's account would be intrigued about the Holocaust and would be interested to learn more about the allusions masked in the adventure and excitement of the novel. After "reeling students in," in a sense, with the fun and exciting representation, the realistic representation could then be used to teach students about the history of the event. As the only autobiographical camp narrative of the group, Elie Wiesel's *Night* illustrates the grimly realistic representation of the Holocaust. The memoir outlines the breakdown of spiritual, familial, and personal relationships due to the horrors of the camps and the torture of the Nazi party. Through the eyes of the child narrator, Wiesel recounts the slow, methodical loss of Jewish rights and liberties leading up to the systematic removal and murder of the European Jewish population. Through the realistic representation, Wiesel horrifies readers and teaches them about the truth of the Holocaust as a

historical event. Readers would learn about the historical event through the autobiographical narrative but since they have previously been exposed to the fun, adventurous representation, young adults would not think of the Holocaust as an isolated event; rather, students would be repulsed by the horrors of the realistic account but would be able to relate to the will to survive and evade as described in the fun account. Finally, the sentimental novel, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* could be used to teach moral lessons about the Holocaust that could apply to students' current situations. *The Book Thief* is the sentimental, imaginative version of the Holocaust that depicts both the German and Jewish perspectives. It uses the imagery of color and the metaphors of food in order to illustrate the atrocities of the Holocaust. Since the novel is told from the perspective of Death, the narrator uses dark humor, biting sarcasm, and keen wit to deliver painful truths. The sentimental nature of the novel emphasizes the importance of storytelling and books as vehicles for social justice and social change. *The Book Thief* illustrates lessons that are applicable to both the historical event and the situations in which modern readers might find themselves. In this way, the novels can be used collectively to find an appropriate balance between studying the Holocaust as an isolated historical event and reappropriating the novel as an anti-bullying narrative. By situating the lessons about scapegoating and bullying in the proper historical context, the stories about the Holocaust can be appropriately used to illustrate the modern affect of the historical event. After concluding their Holocaust research with the fun, realistic, and sentimental accounts of the Holocaust, students are interested in the event, are aware of the history of the event, and are empowered to never allow such an event to happen again. Together, the books confront the fact that the Holocaust as a historical event happened and extract appropriate lessons from it.

For further research of this thesis, I would want to analyze more examples of each of the three types of texts in order to better understand the purpose and effects of each. I would be interested to test my theories about the impact of the child narrator, the different tones, and the effects of temporal distance on middle school students' understanding of the events of the Holocaust. I would like to set up a curriculum in which students read one of each type of book and then are quizzed with questions and essays about their readings. I would be interested to see which books resulted in the highest knowledge retention by students, which books were comprehended the most clearly, and which books were most effective in illustrating the true events of the Holocaust. I would also like to explore the relationship between the representation of the Holocaust in film and the representation of the Holocaust in literature. Do the same themes from the books translate into movies and what type of reactions do these themes evoke from the audience? I would also like to highlight the similarities and differences between adult and young adult representations of the Holocaust. Finally, I would be interested to explore how the Holocaust is represented to young adult audiences of different nationalities. How is a German student's understanding of the Holocaust different than an American student's understanding? How do these differences affect the collective education of young adult readers and their knowledge of the historical event as a whole?

In conclusion, the challenge of Holocaust literature is to find an appropriate balance between the purely isolated, historical account and the completely reappropriated, anti-bully narrative. Through my analysis of the various texts, I believe that the Holocaust, as a memory, is affected by temporal and spatial factors. The realism, sentimentality, or fun of the accounts seems to be relative to the author's time and distance from the death camps at the time of

authorship. As time passes, due to the dwindling number of survivors able to share their firsthand accounts and experiences, representations of the Holocaust are moving away from realism and more toward imagination. Regardless of the tone of representation, it is imperative that we continue to educate our youth about the event because genocides are still occurring today. Although the mantra of Holocaust representation is, “Never Again,” we will not have fulfilled that decree until we learn to address our past and change our future. I believe that educating young adults on the horrors of the Holocaust is one of the key elements in creating a more just, accepting, and free society in the future. Based on my research, I feel that the best way to represent the Holocaust to young adults is to use a combination of the three tones: realism, sentimentality, and fun. The fun representation can be used to intrigue students and pique their interest in the historical event of the Holocaust. The realistic representation can then be used to illustrate the horror of the crimes that were committed against the innocent victims. Finally, the sentimental representation can be used to instill hope in readers to that, in spite of the evil of the past, they are inspired to prevent repetition in the present.

I think that it is so important to represent the Holocaust to a young adult audience in as accurate and realistic a way as possible. But, as the years pass and the number of eyewitnesses decrease, the accounts are lending themselves more and more to imagination. Instead of resenting that some imaginations are more fun, others are more sentimental, I am grateful that people are still trying to understand this event, that people are still bearing witness to this event, that people are still committed to never forgetting the carnage that resulted from this event. During his 1986 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Elie Wiesel remembered himself as a

boy, entering the fiery confines of Auschwitz and responded to the queries of his former self with the following words:

And now the boy is turning to me. ‘Tell me... what have you done with my future, what have you done with your life?’ And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must-- at that moment-- become the center of the universe. (Wiesel 118)

Regardless of the tone or style, the age of the narrator, or the time of the writing, stories about the Holocaust need to continue to recognize and remember the event. Otherwise, we are guilty of joining with the transgressors in obliterating the lives and memories of victims and the survivors. In order to accomplish “Never Again,” we must pledge to “Never Forget.” Therefore, I think that any literary endeavor that opens the eyes of young adults to the simultaneous atrocious horrors of the Holocaust and the inextinguishable hope of humanity is beneficial in representing and imagining the Holocaust. Literature plays a crucial role in memory, in allowing both victims and perpetrators to move on from the horrors of the past while still remembering to honor the

innocent people who died and the devastated victims who lived. By representing the Holocaust to young adults using a combination of realism, sentimentality, and fun, I believe that we can most effectively bear witness to the past while simultaneously preventing such atrocities in the future.

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