

MAGICAL TRANSPORTS AND TRANSFORMATIONS: THE LESSONS OF CHILDREN'S HOLOCAUST FICTION

ABSTRACT

Holocaust fiction and film for young audiences constitute a representational and pedagogical dilemma. Such narrative conventions as fantasy and fairy tale elements offer accessibility for young audiences to learn about the brutal and incomprehensible extremes of the Holocaust. However, they may also undermine the catastrophe's grim historicity. Examining Jane Yolen's Holocaust novel *The Devil's Arithmetic* and its film adaptation alongside her novel *Briar Rose*, we address the following question: do uses of fantasy techniques such as magical transports and transformations soften, sanitize, and inevitably sentimentalize Holocaust history, or do those techniques express important historical knowledge?

KEYWORDS: Holocaust children's literature, Holocaust education, fantasy and fairy tales

“Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history,” writes Jane Yolen at the end of her Holocaust novel *Briar Rose*.¹ This claim is reflected in the graphic crowning of Yolen's tale, as well as in the violent ending of her other Holocaust novel, *The Devil's Arithmetic*, and its film adaptation.² Both climactic scenes portray the Nazis gassing their Jewish victims. Despite the inclusion of this documented historical reality, Yolen's use of such fantasy techniques as magical transports and transformations indicates a dilemma involving Holocaust representation and pedagogy. For while fantasy and fairy tale elements offer accessibility for

young audiences to learn about the brutal and incomprehensible extremes of the Holocaust, they may also undermine its grim historicity, raising the following question: does the use of fantasy and fairy tales in Holocaust fictions for young audiences soften, sanitize, and inevitably sentimentalize Holocaust history?³

This question has its origins in concerns about the ethical implications of narrative experiment in representing the extreme events of Nazi brutality and the suffering of its victims. Such concerns include the danger of wavering from documented history and providing grist for Holocaust deniers⁴ as well as eliding the validity and integrity of survivors' and victims' experiences by veering away from confronting the horrors that constitute their Holocaust realities, such as filth, asphyxiation, infanticide, and castration. For these and other reasons, the techniques of literary realism have been most widely accepted as coming closest to the testimony of victims, survivors, and witnesses. James E. Young argues that "Holocaust writers and critics have assumed that the more realistic a representation, the more adequate it becomes as testimonial evidence of outrageous events."⁵ And yet, despite this privileging of narrative realism, because of the extremes of Nazi violence, the enormous variety of experiences and responses, and the vicissitudes of uncertain and fragmented memory, many Holocaust writers attest to the need for non-realistic forms of narration to provide coherence and accessibility to their otherwise unfathomable stories. Combining fairy tale motifs with the gritty detail of her four years in hiding, Ava Kadishson Schieber's stories, poems, and drawings reflect on the reliability and fragility of her own memories:

My recollection now, of how I felt at that particular time in my life, is only fragmented. In the years of war, life didn't have much substance and reflection; it consisted mostly of fears and needs. And that shadowy existence lasted throughout the Nazi occupation. At times, however, there were islands of clarity that became etched into my memory with minute details.⁶

As our examination of the literary devices of *Briar Rose* and *The Devil's Arithmetic* will show, narrative and pedagogical tensions prevail between representing the violent realities of Nazi genocide and protecting young learners from the risk of shock and vicarious trauma. These tensions are made increasingly complex as possibilities for new stories develop with the emergence of new evidence of Nazi murderous plans and practices, as more survivor and victim testimony becomes available, and as other visual and textual media proliferate.

In the United States, five states mandate Holocaust education and many others strongly endorse it.⁷ Choosing literature and film for educational purposes is becoming increasingly complicated, however, as Holocaust representation is becoming more experimental, non-realistic, and imaginary. Novels and films such as John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* challenge arguments for the necessity

of historical authenticity.⁸ Recent Holocaust fictions reach beyond boundaries of the historical past and create narrative forms and messages that derive more from artists' imaginations and national ethos. However, criticism of these fictions reveals that for many Holocaust scholars and educators, artistic preferences must accede to ethical and political concerns, demanding that narrative forms accord with documented historical particularities. These ethical and political concerns include sensitivity to survivors, the problem of Holocaust denial and analogy, and falsified testimony.⁹ Implied in this Holocaust aesthetic is a persistent interrogation of narrative verisimilitude and authenticity. The perspectives of literary and film protagonists are also a significant concern. Bystander and rescuer actions are increasingly balanced with or overwhelm the experiences and actions, including resistance, of Jewish victims.

Despite the prevalence of these perspectives and representational aesthetic, Holocaust fiction and film for young audiences are judged differently; indeed they represent a countervailing agenda. Ever since the burst of Holocaust fiction for young readers in the 1980s, scholarly studies and study guides have proliferated in the United States and are readily available online. Such guides focus on ethical, developmental, and narrative issues, such as age appropriateness, problems of upbeat happy endings, sentimentalization, and platitudinal messages.¹⁰ These responses show that authors' major goals include accessible Holocaust stories while protecting young audiences from the atrocities and delivering hopeful and meaningful messages.¹¹ As a result, writers and filmmakers choose narrative strategies that rely on adjusting historical facts and eliding or softening horrific suffering. As Naomi Sokoloff asks:

What happens when the conventions of juvenile fiction combine with Holocaust themes? Will an overly simplistic, naïve message emerge? Alternatively, will there be a grotesque collision of values with narrative results too intense for younger children? Or could a convergence of concerns with children's literature and the Holocaust chart promising new artistic territory?¹²

The combination of ethical and aesthetic concerns in these texts has resulted in accessible characterizations, structures, and lessons of universal import. As Adrienne Kertzer opines, "The belief that children's war fiction only needs to communicate generalized truths about war has resulted in fantasy being far more adept at complex representations of trauma" ("Anxiety" 210). The resulting texts situate Holocaust trauma, Jewish victimhood and culture—and the occasional non-Jewish victim—within frameworks of familiar and comforting mythologies. Among those seen so often are heroic characters whose moral epiphanies and fortitude are designed to serve as role models for all young audiences, Jews and non-Jews.

The conflict of interests between fictions designed for adult and young audiences points to significant interrelated imperatives—Holocaust curriculum design and educational research.¹³ Over the last few decades, Holocaust education has become an academic field, including scholarly journals, conferences, and large research programs dedicated to its development.¹⁴ Especially because fictional media are widely used to introduce the Holocaust in schools, it is crucial to examine relationships between their narrative strategies and intended lessons.

A significant example is the widely taught novel and film adaptation of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Problematically, the text subverts history. First, Boyne creates a Jewish child who survives the selections at Auschwitz when in fact, because Nazi ideology necessitated the murder of Jewish children, those under the age of fifteen were gassed on arrival. He then misdirects audiences' sympathies away from the Jewish victims of the gas chambers and onto the Nazi family whose youngest child is accidentally swept away by the Nazis' murderous machine. Boyne's fantasy of equal suffering highlights narrative and pedagogical tensions between documented history and the prevalence of the fantastic in literature and film for young audiences. Both written and film versions of the tale distort history beyond mere inaccuracies by conveying untruths about Holocaust history. In doing so, Boyne undermines key goals of Holocaust education, namely learners' comprehension of the culpability of the Nazis and their families in genocide and the Nazis' war against all Jewish lives, including little boys. In selecting appropriate Holocaust texts, educators must ensure the alignment of narrative techniques and pedagogical goals. To illustrate this critical method, we will examine the use of magic and fairy tales in two renowned works that we recommend: Jane Yolen's 1992 novel *Briar Rose*, designed for readers thirteen and older, and the 2002 Showtime TV adaptation of Yolen's 1988 novel *The Devil's Arithmetic*, taught from sixth grade on. Notably, the protagonist of the novel *The Devil's Arithmetic* is thirteen, while her movie counterpart is clearly closer to fifteen or sixteen. For both audiences, however, because fantasy and young people's angst are familiar narrative elements, the universal lessons of the novel and film are easily accessible. This very accessibility, however, raises critical questions, and therefore we will show how these fantasy elements and ethical lessons in Holocaust education challenge and destabilize each other's purposes and meanings.

Both *Briar Rose* and *The Devil's Arithmetic* begin with contemporary American settings and then transport protagonists and readers to sites of Holocaust atrocities. The protagonists of both texts are young Jewish women living on the U.S. East Coast in the 1980s and '90s, and each has a close relative who is a Holocaust survivor, a device that generates both involvement and distance. The behavior, perspectives, and voices of these protagonists invite middle and high school students to feel involved in the unfolding stories without, as Elie Wiesel warns, assuming they can relate to victims and survivors.¹⁵ Becca of

Briar Rose is a journalist, Hannah of *The Devil's Arithmetic* a time traveler. Like Becca and Hannah, always cognizant of the present, students are kept at a safe emotional distance throughout the journey and are encouraged to think critically about the unfolding events.

Twentysomething Becca travels to Poland to investigate her grandmother's hidden Holocaust past and identity. Teenage Hannah is magically transported to a Polish shtetl in 1942. The women learn that the brutal Holocaust past makes ethical demands on the bucolic present. The texts' dual narrative methods illustrate how these messages are both historically grounded and universal. They depict Holocaust atrocities as well as rescue fantasies. The endings of both text and film depict Holocaust tragedy while ensuring happy endings for the young American protagonists. A prefatory quote in *Briar Rose*, by the scholar of fairy tales Jack Zipes, prepares us for this dual rhetorical goal:

The oral and the literary forms of the fairy tale are grounded in history: they emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways. . . . The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors. (np)

In reminding us that Holocaust extremes cannot be rendered solely in realist conventions, Zipes's message points to fairy tales' therapeutic function. Whatever terror resides in Holocaust memory and is transmitted over generations will be allayed by the two intertwined narratives. And yet as Yolen's fiction shows, this therapeutic function also points to a lingering despair deriving from knowledge about the Holocaust and memorializing its victims.

Dustin Hoffman's introduction to the film *The Devil's Arithmetic* prepares all audiences for Yolen's metaphorical method. As producer, Hoffman presents a critical stance toward the film's "magical elements of fable" and the "problem of fantasy without consequences." This reference to "fantasy" highlights the narrative methods of both texts and contextually, the Nazi fantasy of an exclusionary master race. Like *Briar Rose*, *The Devil's Arithmetic* depicts the consequences of Nazi fantasy by investing realist conventions with fantasy, but differently. In contrast to Becca's planned trip to Poland, magic transports Hannah to a Polish shtetl moments before Nazi enforced deportation. From boredom at her family's Passover Seder, Hannah is catapulted into relentless suffering. Joining her lost family, she is taken for Chana (Hebrew for Hannah), her lookalike ancestress, whose name, meaning *God has favored me*, becomes a transformative force. It transforms the Jewish princess into a heroine who sacrifices her life to save her cousin Rivka, yet Hannah is also saved through magical transportation.¹⁶ The film differs from the novel in its representation of this transformation. The novel's narrator keeps reminding readers that the story is about Hannah by referring to her name throughout the shtetl scenes. Without narrative or other cinematic

or dialogic devices, Hannah's identity remains ambiguous. The cinematic effect therefore supports Hannah's transformation as magical and coherent. Moreover, because Hannah is not of that world, this device challenges students' identification with Holocaust actors.¹⁷ Instead, it supports students' engagement in meaningful historical analysis.

Unlike *Briar Rose*, which investigates a mystery, *The Devil's Arithmetic* focuses on Hannah's willful ignorance. She learns the significance of Holocaust history when, as Chana, along with her community, she is subjected to sadism and finally gassing. At this point the dual meanings of *transport*, connoting both historical fact and gritty realism and magic and fantasy, cohere in tension. In contrast to Nazi history, magical transport suggests a narrative power that supersedes that of the Nazis and thus offers an alternative life saving resolution where there was neither for the actual victims. By design, Hannah's fantastical transport creates narrative, ethical, and pedagogical tensions between depicting unimaginable and inescapable terror, magical rescue, and the moral transformation of Hannah's character. These tensions produce counterfactual lessons that educators must help learners avoid. Problematically, learners may interpret Hannah's physical and ethical transformations as representing hopefulness in the Holocaust experience. These moral and psychological lessons are typically found in fairy tales, but are inapplicable to Holocaust education.¹⁸

In contrast to the film's "magical elements," the use of gritty detail denotes the consequences of Nazi fantasy. Whereas scenes in the present are shot with vivid, hyper-realistic primary colors, camp scenes suffuse the prisoners and their surroundings in shades of gray, as though already engulfed by the camp's brutal topography. The contrast informs young audiences that their own lives, full of open-ended possibility, are haunted by the impossibility of the victims' rescue. In fact, the only possibility of rescue is signified by whether or not Hannah—as Chana—can escape the Nazi camp by time traveling back to 1990s New York. However, Hannah's frequent longing for home makes explicit the gap between what actually took place in the Nazis' camps and this magical solution. This disconnect is both problematic and productive. Just as Hannah's rescue depends on time travel, so does her understanding of the camp experience. Educators can help students see that while time travel is a problematic device, its impossibility demonstrates the difficulties of imagining Holocaust victims' experiences. The horror of the film's darkest scenes is softened by Hannah's distance and the audience's expectation that she will escape. Intensifying this expectation, magic intervenes when the camp's ominous coloration bleaches into reassuring lightness. Inside the gas chamber, as Nazi officers pour Zyklon B pellets from above and Chana and the other women and children struggle with asphyxiation from the fumes, they fall against one another as if under a spell. As Chana magically transforms into Hannah and travels through time to the New York apartment, the screen fades to black, and the pile of corpses around her disappear. Yet, when the film resumes, Hannah's unconsciousness and bodily positioning

remain the same, suggesting that she has absorbed the lessons from history. Performing these lessons as Hannah in the colorful present, she resumes her place at the Seder table but now as a mature and joyous participant.

Among the film's many narrative transformations, Hannah's dual identities remain ambiguous, even beyond the ending. Learners are led to ask: Has Hannah been transported through time and been inserted into history as Chana, a new actor in history, or has she been transported into the body of Chana, as an actual character who was murdered by the Nazis? These questions cohere when Hannah saves the life of Rivkah, a fellow prisoner, suggesting to young learners that one individual can—almost magically—affect individual and collective history. Hannah's failed attempts to affect the fates of those around her position the film as resisting the claim that Holocaust victims could save themselves.¹⁹

The connection between agency and victimization is reinforced by the film's framing. Hannah leaves and returns to a Passover Seder. Connecting the film's use of legendary history and historical realism, the Seder's message in Hannah's present is reinforced and yet questioned by her participation in a makeshift Seder in the camp. While magic propels the action in both Passover and Holocaust narratives, the primary agent of Jewish survival and continuity is not Hannah's individual efforts and rescue fantasy. Instead, Yolen borrows the meta-narrative of the Israelites' self-determination. The prevailing power of the Passover story lies in its model of collective Jewish fortitude in the face of destruction. As the film shows, the annual recitation of the Haggadah reinforces the Jews' historical consciousness and continuity as a people. As Seder participants point to the bitter herbs, the Haggadah tells us, "In every generation we must look upon ourselves as if we personally had come out from Egypt." Emphasizing both the Exodus and Holocaust stories, the film questions their metaphorical relationship to Jewish collective identity and memory.

Reciting the Exodus story in the Nazi camp underscores Hannah's developing sense of Jewish belonging and forbearance. Does Hannah's newly awakened Jewish identification depend on her Holocaust experience, magical transport, and transformation? To respond, we must consider that the Exodus story also relies on magical transformations, as it includes a perpetually burning bush, the turning of Moses's staff into a snake, God's ten plagues on the Ancient Egyptians, and the parting of the Red Sea. Nonetheless it emphasizes the ancient Israelites' agency as they struggle with the challenges of cohering as a distinctive people.

By contrast to the particularities of Jewish legend, Hannah's struggle begins with the film's universalized plotting of teenage rebelliousness. Whatever challenges she faces about identifying with her family and more broadly with Jewish culture, are solved as she awakens from a brief fainting spell state to embrace moral maturity in a magical instant. Hannah's passage into Jewish reconciliation and responsibility is complete and her dual identities reconcile the Holocaust past with the ritual performance of Jewish survival and continuity. Her transformation reinforces the film's universal message of "conquering terror through

metaphors” but also begs the question, how do young audiences take away a sense of their own ability to develop moral agency? Moreover, given the historically specific story of Jewish persecution, how are young audiences supposed to relate to Hannah’s experience in the realms of both fantasy and the realities of cultural and social differences? Hamida Bosmajian notes the contradictory expectation of young readers who are “expected to understand the Holocaust and empathize with its victims, but admit that she or he cannot possibly understand what the victim endured” (245). To ameliorate the realities of identity differences, she insists on the importance of cultural context for young readers. But Bosmajian also worries that as such contexts change, so perceptions will shift and therefore the problem of “*how to remember*” will remain (xv). Given the intractable, horrific nature of the historical Holocaust, a constantly unstable and tense relationship between authors, young audiences, fictional characters, and teachers emerges. While the transformation of Hannah into Chana represents her escape from historically specific traumatic memories, her tale becomes both a teaching opportunity and a pedagogical mantra.

Yet problems remain. The film ends with a science-fiction paradox pointing to the question of what impact Hannah had on the Nazi-occupied world she visited. That the only answer can be none is reinforced by Hannah’s failed attempts, in the past, to warn her new family and friends of their impending fates. Likewise, the stories she tells her fellow inmates—including the tale of a girl called Dorothy whose battle with a Wicked Witch ended happily at home—are designed to provide escapist comfort but must also fail. By choosing to introduce Dorothy to her peers, Hannah attempts to give hope to those she knows will likely be murdered.²⁰ At the same time, Hannah’s incarnation as Dorothy represents common themes of false hope Holocaust writers too often impose on Holocaust history. Her fellow prisoners refuse to listen to her warnings about the Final Solution and they attribute her stories to her overactive imagination. This relationship between Hannah and Holocaust history is vexed. Hannah’s transformation into Chana can have no real impact on that world, yet audiences must accept the film’s conclusion that her Holocaust experience has a life-changing effect. According to David Russell this would include young audiences who “may also emerge with a deeper sense of the ethical and moral obligations that lie ahead for themselves” (278).

Yolen’s *Briar Rose* engages narrative patterns of fantasy differently. The novel alternates between social realist scenes in the present and the past and a survivor’s fragmented version of “Sleeping Beauty,” which she recounts to her three granddaughters as her personal story. When Gemma the grandmother dies, leaving only a box of unexplained papers and objects, her youngest grandchild, Becca, travels to Poland to decipher the fairy tale as encoding Gemma’s identity and experience.²¹ As Becca’s journey to uncover her grandmother’s secrets begins, Yolen raises critical questions that enhance learners’ experiences of Holocaust study. Readers might ask what the relationship is between Gemma’s fate and

that of Briar Rose, a princess who lived in a castle. This question underscores the importance of Holocaust survivors' past lives, as well as their postwar identities in relation to the social and cultural construction of Holocaust memory. Asking who was her prince leads readers to question the themes and possible circumstances of rescue, as well as resistance, escape, and survival. The question remains, however, about the gendered norms implied by a romance and a magical kiss between a princess and her prince, as well as the imposition of a fairy tale castle and all too easy dichotomies of good and evil on the Holocaust narrative.

Fairy tales as a vehicle for popular Holocaust storytelling is not uncommon. For example, Louise Murphy overturns the story of abandoned children and a wicked witch in her novel *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* by renaming a sister and brother Gretel and Hansel, to hide their Jewishness, and transforming the witch into a kind, old, Romani woman. Karel Kachyna also draws on the tale of Hansel and Gretel in the climactic sequence of his film *Poslední motýl* (*The Last Butterfly*). But Kachyna's witch, unlike Murphy's, is undoubtedly wicked, wringing her hands as children burn alive. While fairy tales can be transmuted to convey the horrors of Nazi atrocities, we ask if their magical twists and turns can accentuate, trivialize, or even exaggerate the realities of history. Can the use or revision of a familiar fairy tale symbolize the Nazis' destruction of its targeted victims? Yolen's text argues that the symbols and themes of *Sleeping Beauty* can be altered to accentuate the impact of Nazi ideology and oppression on her characters.

A key alteration in Yolen's version is Becca's discovery that her grandmother's life was actually saved by two princes and that one of them was Josef Potocki, an intellectual and homosexual Christian Pole who pieces together much of Gemma's story. Potocki had kissed Gemma awake when she was discovered, barely breathing, by one of his partisan comrades in a mass grave at Chelmno. The novel establishes a critical relationship between the fragmented fairy tale and the linear, detective tale of Becca's search by narrating them separately. This relationship questions whether these genres can be combined or serve as mutually explanatory glosses. Neither fantasy, no matter how extensively explicated with historical experience, nor realism, with its gritty detail, can even approximate Holocaust terror. Yolen shows her concern with problems of Holocaust representation in her afterword, where she confirms the fictionality of her text, reminding us that no women are known to have survived Chelmno, only four men. However, choosing to set her novel in an absent presence offers her a space where the few shards of material and testimonial evidence do not restrict her imagination.

Absence becomes a key metaphor in Yolen's method. Much of Gemma's story remains beyond what can either be fantasized or realistically depicted. In fact, a number of threads in Gemma's story remain unresolved. Josef Potocki summarizes how prisoners were shoved into vans, gassed, and tossed into mass graves. Unlike Hannah's dramatized experience in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Josef's

suffering here is that of an onlooker, not a victim. That Gemma never narrates her own story indicates an absence that serves the purpose of positioning readers at an emotional distance from these instances of Holocaust suffering. Thereby, readers of *Briar Rose* have fewer opportunities to identify with or relate to the absent narratives of victims and survivors. Josef's narration of Gemma's story avoids the invitation to identify with the young Gemma and her Holocaust experiences. In turn, Gemma's detachment in *Briar Rose* emphasizes the absolute barrier between that past and our present despite the past's imposition on the present generation of Gemma's grandchildren. The novel's depiction of that imposition, like that in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, raises other social and psychological questions about the characters' relatedness. Hannah's ornery response to the annual Passover Seder and her survivor family's repeated Holocaust stories is easily attributed to stereotypical adolescent irritation at adults' retrogressive nature. Unfortunately, young audiences may see this characterization as patronizing and could limit their empathy with Hannah. At the same time, Hannah's stereotypical portrait gives educators the opportunity to address problems of apathy about genocide, even though many young people today may not be as politically unaware as the text implies.

That Becca's two older sisters express only irritation in response to their grandmother's tale tells a similar story: "Oh God," Sylvia said, her voice tight, 'not *that* again'" (*BR* 11). Sylvia's and Shana's irritation only confirms their abundant self-expressiveness. In contrast to Gemma's mysterious fragments, the sisters' designer purses and mink coats are transparent, coherent, and holistic clues to their characters. Unlike the ironic disconnect between Gemma's fairy tale princess identity and her experiential reality, Sylvia's and Shana's treasured objects define their character. They are Jewish princesses. Adrienne Kertzer argues that this stereotypical and casually antisemitic portraiture is disrupted by Becca's quest, which creates an "ironic distance" from "the 'Jewish-American Princess'" (69). We maintain that Becca's character and quest are too far distant from the stereotypical portrait of her sisters to provide a critical gloss. Becca's character is so thoroughly empathetic, even to her odious sisters, as to be uncritically one dimensional in itself. Compounding this portrait, the narrative creates an additional distance between Becca's journey through history and moral responsibility and her sisters' materially moral stasis. If one function of Holocaust fiction for young readers is to bring them safely and empathetically close to the site and subjects of historical suffering, both magical transports and transformations serve as protective guarantees. The morally and socially successful journeys of Hannah and Becca reinforce this safety net. Serving as comforting intermediaries between unlikeable characters like Shana and Sylvia and young readers, Hannah and Becca offer enticing opportunities to identify with moral growth without struggle. Using such characterizations, educators can lead learners to ask questions about apathy, social responsibility, action against injustice, and the absence of political will to prevent and stop contemporary atrocities (USHMM).

Yolen interjects recurring moments of absence and instances of stereotypes. She also defies them. Her storytelling choices necessitate analysis of Josef's role and raise two questions: How does Yolen's inclusion of a central homosexual character affect readers' perceptions of Holocaust history? More generally, how does the inclusion of the Nazis' non-Jewish victims alter framings of Holocaust history, as well as goals and boundaries of Holocaust education? To answer, we must consider the mainstream Holocaust narrative that is understandably Judeocentric in that, by the early 1940s, it was the Jewish people and culture in all corners of the globe that Hitler's regime aimed to decimate, reflected in Nazi rhetoric, such as propaganda films and cartoons (Bergen 1–52). Yet, as the Jewish Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal reminds us, European Jews shared the Nazi camps, gas chambers, and mass graves with millions of people from other minority communities.²² In addition to people of Jewish descent, the Reich systematically targeted, sterilized, incarcerated, tortured, raped, and/or murdered Africans, alcoholics, so-called asocials, Communists, criminals and so-called criminals, dissenting Christian clergy, the mentally and physically disabled, Freemasons, male homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, lesbians, pacifists, Poles, political dissidents, prostitutes, Roma and Sinti (or Gypsies), Slavic and so-called Asiatic peoples of the Soviet Union, Soviet prisoners of war, and trade unionists.²³ In response to Elie Wiesel and others who highlight the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust story and called for omitting non-Jewish victims from Holocaust definitions and exhibitions, Wiesenthal argued that non-Jewish victims should all be included in Holocaust commemoration and official definitions (quoted in Novick 215).

Yolen's inclusion of a homosexual victim of Nazism as meaningful and necessary to her plot aligns her with Wiesenthal's position in opposition to Wiesel and others. Yolen's Josef represents the gay and lesbian community's defiance against accusations of having jumped on the Holocaust bandwagon and argues that the Nazis' incarceration, abuse, castration, and murder of homosexuals is anything but trivial.²⁴ Yolen's text stands out from popular Holocaust texts, such as *Number the Stars* and *Schindler's List*, as well as from canonical texts such as Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *The Drowned and The Saved*, by featuring non-Jewish victims and Nazi policies and actions against them.²⁵ Yolen's inclusion of Josef, a homosexual victim of Nazism, bucks the trend of ignoring non-Jewish victims. In fact, Yolen's novel is one of only a handful of popular Holocaust texts through which teenagers can learn about non-Jewish victims.²⁶ In *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Yolen focuses only on Jewish victims of the Holocaust, and so her integration of a homosexual character into *Briar Rose*—in ways that are both historically precise and vital to resolving Becca's quest—alludes to her pedagogical intentions. In fact, two-thirds of the way into the novel, Josef becomes the narrator of his own story as a homosexual victim of Nazism. This is a significant counterpoint to the emotional distance achieved in his narration of Gemma's story. He recounts to Becca his love affair with Adam, an "Aryan-looking"

young man who happens to be Jewish (*BR* 164). Josef's narrative illustrates the Nazis' amendment of penal code Paragraph 175 to develop policies against homosexuals, a backdrop for his deportation to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. No coincidence, Josef escapes from Sachsenhausen and joins Jewish partisans. A homosexual, Yolen suggests, is neither weak nor afraid; he is capable of active resistance against his oppressors. Josef's alliance with the Jewish resistance also dramatizes the interdependence of Jewish and homosexual Holocaust narratives and complicates the Holocaust stories for young readers.²⁷ That Josef's lover, Adam, identifies as both Jewish and homosexual draws readers' attention to historically documented intersecting victimhood and study of all victims.²⁸ Focusing on this history leads learners to consider the complexity of victim identity and its implications for understanding relationships between the Nazis' different prejudices.²⁹ Moreover, Yolen allows Josef to narrate his own story, unlike Gemma who does not. Readers are therefore given permission to connect and empathize with a non-Jewish Holocaust victim's experiences of struggle and survival.

The revisionary content and structure of *Briar Rose* negates the tendency of some Holocaust educators and commentators to perpetuate "destructive hierarchies of suffering" (Bergen 2004, 46). Josef's narrative prevents learners from making destructive "comparisons of pain,"³⁰ because while the suffering of the gay prince and the Jewish princess are quite different, their convergence renders them equally significant. Josef's place front and center supports Wiesenthal's reminder that the Nazis' victims shared "common graves" and suggests the need to commemorate all victim groups. The inclusion of non-Jewish victims is also driven by our understanding of how pedagogy alters learners' perceptions of the Other. Significantly, Yolen foreshadows Becca's encounter with Josef by providing her a backstory that includes her passionate support of gay rights. And in the final sentences of Josef's story, the Princess herself demonstrates her acceptance of Josef's sexuality. There is no doubt that Yolen is trying to instill in her young readers empathy for Josef and gay people more broadly. In describing his experiences as a pink triangle branded prisoner of a Nazi camp, Yolen writes: "If you had asked Josef Potocki to describe himself before he entered Sachsenhausen . . . he would have said, 'I am a Pole . . . a poet . . . a master of five languages . . . a gourmet cook' (*BR* 176). He would never have mentioned his sexual [orientation]. After Sachsenhausen he would have said, 'I am a fag' (*BR* 176). By using the term *fag*, Yolen appeals to young readers to consider their prejudices and actions. Because Josef's narrative is interwoven with tales of Jewish partisans and Jewish victims of Chelmno, Yolen explicitly relates antisemitism and homophobia, and the general relationship between oppression and survival in the past and present.

While this complex structure suggests that teenagers can be sophisticated readers, as Yolen's historical afterword indicates, the novel necessitates pedagogical intervention. For example, educators may need to provide ancillary materials

to contextualize the Nazis' persecution of homosexuals, as well as information about how Paragraph 175 laws remained on the books until 1969,³¹ how homosexuals were refused reparations and faced continued persecution and incarceration after the war, and how the German government refused to recognize homosexuals as victims of the Nazi regime until 2002.³²

That *Briar Rose* focuses on a survival story highlights another significant absence. In both Gemma's version of "Briar Rose" and Josef Potocki's narrative, there are no Nazis. Although Nazis perpetrated Chelmno as well as killing the partisans who Josef and Gemma join, the two narratives hide them behind their searchlights and machine guns. Fairy tale language also creates invisibility in Gemma's fairy tale as it disguises the brutality of Nazism. Instead of depicting Nazi practice, the SS is represented as "the wicked fairy" in "black with big black boots and silver eagles on her hat," while Chelmno's gassing operation is figured as an all-encompassing "mist" (*BR* 33, 19, 58). The SS and camp operatives remain invisible monsters, their treatment of prisoners kept at a comfortable narrative remove. Yet their invisibility reflects documented history. The Nazis' logic behind gas as a murder weapon distanced the murderers psychologically; with the exceptions of peepholes on gas chamber doors and screams from inside the chambers and gas vans, they did not have to witness the full extent of their victims' suffering. In fact, as if to intensify the impossibility of understanding their character, Yolen's murderers are also concealed by "thorns as sharp as barbs" (*BR* 45). The metaphor's dual meaning is reinforced by the Nazis' facile self-concealment in referring to the gas chamber as "the rose garden" (*BR* 128). Both *Briar Rose* and the film *The Devil's Arithmetic* represent Nazis only in conventional outlines, as silhouettes of evil. As a result, the perpetrators are not subjected to investigation of the contingencies and complexities of human social and political psychology, such as community, religious, and family influences.

As historically sound as *Briar Rose* may be, one aspect hints at historical inaccuracy. Throughout Josef's account, he encounters institutionalized homophobia from the Nazis and their collaborators, but never from the developed characters he meets. To prove his victimhood when he first encounters the partisans, Josef introduces himself as "a faggot. A 175er" (*BR* 190). His new comrades respond with a derogatory comment or two, but they immediately accept him. When the Princess makes clear that she also accepts Josef's sexuality, we are reminded that this novel was published in 1992 and that Yolen is projecting present-day progressive values onto 1940s European society. Furthermore and regrettably, with the exception of a stone-throwing incident perpetrated by townspeople, Yolen portrays her invisible Nazis as the only source of harmful prejudice, which may prevent learners from understanding that fear and hatred of the Other pervades all aspects of society. Yolen overlooks, therefore, how, without the tacit support and indifference of ordinary people, the Nazis could not have murdered so many.

Briar Rose tells the story of the Holocaust from the viewpoints of the Nazis' victims and does not give a face to their oppressors. Nonetheless, granting Josef his own narrative and an expressly homosexual identity remains an important inclusion of Nazi gendered persecution. The Nazis' faces are hidden by mist and magical forests, yet they are dramatically present. Yolen vividly expands our understanding of Nazi ideology and policies by depicting the consequences of their gendered and racialized web of brutality and murder.

This begs the question, through which perspectives should the Holocaust be taught, and for what purpose? The answer depends on the learning goals educators are working to realize. If a primary goal is to commemorate the lives of the murdered, then teaching through the perspectives of the victims and survivors of Nazism makes sense. If another goal is to encourage exploration of prejudice, apathy, and the role and viewpoints of bystanders and consider their activation in their own lives, then teaching the Holocaust through victims' perspectives seems insufficient. Of course, these themes can be addressed in classrooms by framing victims' experiences as the result of deep-rooted hatred. However, teaching through the perspectives of bystanders, collaborators, and even perpetrators may expose psychological and emotional complexities that lead ordinary people to turn a blind eye or even participate in marginalizing and oppressing others.

By individualizing the characters of Josef and Gemma, the novel exposes the traumatizing effects of both perpetration and collaboration. Yolen endows Gemma's traumatized memory with a language and genre that at least attempts to express her horrific experience. Although Gemma's silence about her Holocaust experience is partially explained by the physical effects of gas-sing, it also represents her repeated telling of "Briar Rose" as an emotionally fraught traumatic symptom. Unlike the magical transformations and platitudes that structure *The Devil's Arithmetic* and so many Holocaust fictions for young readers, Becca's journey to Poland combined with Josef's narrative purposefully confronts us with understanding the Holocaust as an urgent question with only partial answers. Instead of a happy, heroic ending for Gemma and a fully comprehensive story that explains her character and suffering, readers of all ages are led to understand that Holocaust stories defy both.

Engaging motifs of magical transformation and fairy tale conventions in children's Holocaust fiction and film is emerging as a popular narrative strategy. Its conventions engage young learners through retold fantasy and tropes resembling the darkest ordeals of science fiction. But with a difference. Castles are gas filled and the sleepers are mostly dead. Instead of melting away, wicked witches may prevail. Incarcerated princes share narrative space with dead princesses. These texts take us on journeys that try to come close to the terrifying events of the Holocaust and, at the same time, their wishful fantasies keep us at a safe distance. Yolen is absolutely right in her assertion that the Holocaust can have no happy endings. Yet, even though we know the tragic destination of these

fanciful Holocaust texts, for readers of all ages, that tale beginning, “Once upon a time” remains irresistible.

NOTES

1. Jane Yolen, *Briar Rose* (New York: Tor, 1992). Hereafter cited as *BR*.
2. Jane Yolen, *The Devil's Arithmetic* (New York: Puffin Books, 1990). Hereafter cited as *DA*. *The Devil's Arithmetic*. Dir. Donna Deitch, 1999.
3. This question applies to all fictionalized Holocaust representation because of exploitation by Holocaust deniers. To glamorize or eroticize Holocaust representation trivializes the atrocities and suffering endured by people who were constructed as a race to destroy. Victims were imprisoned and murdered for the sole purpose of constructing the master race. See Phyllis Lassner, “Testing the Limits of the Middlebrow: The Holocaust for the Masses,” *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 1 (2011): 178–95, esp. 183.
4. In addition to individuals, Deborah Lipstadt's research reveals a startling network of international Holocaust denial groups who embed their false statistical data with antisemitic canards based on the notorious forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).
5. *Writing and Re-Writing the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 17.
6. Ava Kadishson Schieber, *Soundless Roar: Stories, Poems, and Drawings* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 57.
7. “Educating Students.” See *United States Holocaust Education Report*.
8. John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2006), and *IngLOURIOUS BASTERDS*, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino (Weinstein Company, 2009).
9. Lydia Kokkola proposes “ethical criticism” to show the effects of texts “on readers’ ways of being.” *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12. Sue Vice and Gwyneth Bodger note pitfalls of “an ethical approach to teaching the Holocaust,” including leading students to a single, certain line of thinking. “Issues Arising from Teaching Holocaust Film and Literature,” in *Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film*, ed. Robert Eaglestone and Barry Langford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15–27, esp. 17.
10. Eaglestone and Langford address how teachers’ “different” views of Holocaust victims’ extreme suffering leads to their “self-censoring” and students’ reluctance to question ideas. *Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film*, 2. See the teaching guidelines from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Imperial War Museum.
11. Citing *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Kenneth Kidd argues that children's Holocaust literature has changed by exposing young readers to evil and its traumatizing effects. “A is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the ‘Children's Literature of Atrocity.’” Goodenough and Immel, eds. 161–79, esp. 161, 162.
12. Naomi Sokoloff argues that despite its low status, “kiddie lit” teaches how history is presented to young students and that Holocaust literature should be culturally contextualized, “Review,” *Prooftexts* 25, no. 1–2 (Winter/Spring 2005). 174–94, esp. 175.

- Lydia Kokkola expresses “fear that children will not recognize the factuality of what they read.”
13. Since we focus on Holocaust education, we do not include Holocaust museums and memorials. Kertzer observes that “young adult” is an elastic category that libraries apply to readers aged twelve to eighteen when those books are read by children ten to fourteen. She critiques the overlap between books marketed for mature and not-so-mature audiences, *Mother’s Voice: Children, Literature, and the Holocaust* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2002), 67.
 14. Notable journals include the British *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* and *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, a collaborative project of The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Oxford University Press. Important research on Holocaust education includes Brown and Davies (1998), Donnelly (2006), Gallant and Hartman (2001), Schweber (2004), and Short and Reed (2004).
 15. Sue Vice analyzes the direct expression of a child’s voice in Holocaust fiction as mediated by “an adult narrator, editor, or even reader,” calling attention to the “absence and loss in children’s Holocaust texts,” “Children’s Voices: and Viewpoints in Holocaust Literature,” *Children of the Holocaust*, ed. Andrea Reiter (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 11–24, esp. 22–23.
 16. Eric Tribunella finds that child protagonists’ loss of precious objects acts like a “sacrifice,” producing “an enabling” trauma that makes “a certain kind of mature adulthood possible,” and translates into lessons for young readers, *Melancholia and Maturation: The Use of Trauma in American Children’s Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), xiv. Our reading of Holocaust texts tests this analysis. Denise Dick studies how Holocaust trauma is transmitted to children and grandchildren who in Yolen’s writing, investigate their Holocaust past and make narrative choices that illustrate “normalization strategies,” “Inheriting the Holocaust: Transfer of Trauma in Doron Rabinovitch’s *Suche nach M.*” Reiter, 103–15, esp. 104.
 17. Stacey Mann and Danny M. Cohen discuss how asking “learners to imagine themselves as participants in violent episodes of history . . . risk[s] manipulating their emotional responses in ways that may stifle their engagement in historical analysis,” “When a Boxcar isn’t a Boxcar: Designing for Human Rights Learning.” *Exhibitionist: The Journal of the National Association of Museum Exhibitions* 30, no. 2 (2011): 26–31, esp. 28; also see Samuel Totten and Nicola King.
 18. Lawrence Baron notes that many involved in the film production “considered it a tribute to the lost world of European Jewry” (“Imagining the Shoah in American Third Generation Cinema,” *The Jewish Role in American Life: An Annual Review* 6 [2008]: 103–18). Its popularity has made it available to schools through Showtime’s Cable in the Classroom system.
 19. Significantly, some prisoners in the Nazis’ ghettos and camps resisted by taking up arms, including the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of Apr. and May 1943, the successful revolt and escapes from Sobibor, in Oct. 1943, and the successful explosion of crematorium four at Birkenau, Oct. 1944.
 20. The film *The Wizard of Oz* was released in 1939, and so Hannah introduces a text possibly known among some Holocaust victims.
 21. Although Kertzer finds that “from a realistic perspective, the novel is absurd,” she approves its “sophisticated interplay between . . . the reality of historical facts and the

- difficulty such facts pose for representing this particular history for young people,” *My Mother’s Voice*, 69, 67.
22. Interview excerpt with Wiesenthal conducted in 1979 by Michael Getler, “The Hunter’s Remembrance,” *Washington Post* (Apr. 1, 1979), cited in Novick, 215.
 23. See Doris L. Bergen (2003); *Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust and Genocide* (2007).
 24. See Tony Marco and Eric Jensen.
 25. Many Holocaust museums and educational programs in different countries do not address non-Jewish victims meaningfully and many exclude them. The USHMM definition of “The Holocaust” distinguishes Jewish from non-Jewish victims. The Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center classifies the Holocaust as “a Jewish story.” Israel’s Yad Vashem and The Imperial War Museum in London omit non-Jewish victims from their definitions.
 26. See for example, the play and film *Bent*, depicting persecution of homosexuals, and Ava Kadishson Schieber’s story “Tzigane,” featuring the murder of gypsies in Auschwitz (*Soundless Roar* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002], 97–104).
 27. The Nazis’ sterilization and killing of Africans, Jews, and Roma stemmed from their belief that ethnicity could not be cured. The belief that homosexuality was curable led to horrific experiments, castrations, and torturous “re-education” programs that killed thousands of homosexual men. These policies and actions provide mutually informative contexts that highlight Nazi intentions of purifying their Master Race by mutilating or eliminating any person threatening its goals. The Nazis also categorized individuals into multiple groups, as when a man who was imprisoned for being gay and Jewish had to wear a pink triangle over a yellow triangle, creating a yellow and pink star.
 28. See Henry Friedlander.
 29. See Danny M. Cohen for a discussion on the meaningful and necessary integration of non-Jewish victim narratives within the central Jewish Holocaust narrative.
 30. USHMM, “Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust.”
 31. See Eric Jensen.
 32. USHMM (2007), 50.

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