

‘Live. And remember’: History, memory and storytelling in young adult holocaust fiction

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Abstract

Young adult fiction has emerged as a crucial pedagogical tool for the Holocaust education. According to scholars and writers, it promotes empathy and also encourages the readers to become a part of the process of remembering. However, this field of storytelling also grapples with the dilemma of traumatic subject matter and its suitability for young readers. The humanist conventions of young adult fiction are often in conflict with the bleak and horrifying core of Holocaust literature. Young adult novelists have tried to deal with these problematic aspects by using multiple narrative strategies to integrate the memories of genocide and human rights abuse with the project of growth and socialisation that lies at the heart of young adult literature. This paper examines the narrative strategies that make young adult fiction an apt bearer and preserver of the traumatic past. Specifically, these strategies involve fantastical modes of storytelling, liminality and witness testimonies told to the second- and third-generation listeners. These strategies modify the humanist resolution of young adult narratives by integrating growth with collective responsibility.

Keywords

Young adult fiction, Holocaust, memory, trauma, history

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The reason I am telling you this is that you are our only flesh and blood. Our only link with the past. If something happens to us, you must remember. Promise me, Chaya, you will remember.¹

In Jane Yolen's young adult fiction *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Chaya, the 13-year-old protagonist is entrusted the burden of bearing the traumatic Holocaust memories and carrying them into the future that lies beyond the grim realities of Auschwitz. In submitting to this task, Chaya enacts the burden that Yolen's young adult novel bears – of being the bridge that carries the memories of incomprehensible suffering and brutality of the Holocaust to the young adult readers situated at a comfortable spatial and temporal distance from the historical event. Confronted with the dilemma of representing the genocide of European Jews through the medium of storytelling, the text turns to the fantastical trope of time travel. Chaya, who mysteriously finds herself in Auschwitz in 1942, is actually Hannah Stern, an American teenager who has been coerced to be a part of the family rituals during the Passover Seder, an occasion when the family members remember their shared past. Hannah derides the ceremonial enactments as 'baby stories' till she symbolically opens the door to Prophet Elijah during the ritual. Through the door, she is transported to Poland 1942 as Chaya Abramowicz. She saves one of her relatives during the Nazi genocide by taking her place in the gas chamber. As she steps into the gas chamber of Auschwitz, Chaya/Hannah travels through time once again to return to the family Seder. In the process, she grows up from being a solipsistic teenager who doesn't want to remember into an empathic adult, willing to share the collective responsibility of remembering the past.

In Yolen's text, the traumatic memories of Auschwitz become a part of Hannah's coming-of-age narrative. While the elements of storytelling make the experience accessible to the young readers of the book, as young adult Holocaust fiction, the text raises some important questions: To what extent can the memories of the Holocaust be integrated with the narratives of adolescence and growth which are oriented towards hope and future? Is storytelling a suitable mode of bearing memories of genocide and human rights abuse? Or does it simplify and sentimentalise the Holocaust, and through its fictional tropes, offer a safety net to the readers, telling them that, after all, it is a story?

These questions have their origin in the ethical implications that come with the representation Holocaust atrocities in children's and young adult literature. While most scholars agree that it is important, indeed a moral duty of the future generations to remember the past, there is also an acute awareness that the generic form of the young adult fiction might fail to do justice to the complexities of the Holocaust narratives. Scholars like Hamida Bosmajian have foregrounded the problems and limitations of children's literature when confronted with the theme of the Holocaust:

Children's literature, given the nature of the genre, insists by definition on the life-affirming support for the child. Children's literature about Nazism and the Holocaust

seriously challenges that convention, usually with subtexts that are deeply ironic. At its best that subtext provokes in the thoughtful reader the idea that the experience of a disaster undermines... “our dreams and good intentions”.²

On the other hand lies the concern regarding the suitability of the subject matter for the young readers. If the task of young adult fiction is to protect and guide the protagonist, and thereby the reader, into adulthood, then ‘teaching the young about the Holocaust can in fact inflict trauma on them’ and negatively impact the very purpose of the genre.³ In other words, exposure to the atrocities of the Holocaust might make them vulnerable to psychological stress that the young are not equipped to handle or erase.⁴

In an effort to reconcile the ethical dilemma, writers of the Holocaust fiction for young adult readers have embraced the tropes of imaginative storytelling to bear the legacy of the Holocaust. Storytelling, which often resorts to fantasy and unreality, becomes a means of communication through which the younger protagonist, and through them a generation of young readers, comes to term with the memories of Nazi genocide and embraces the injunction to remember. This paper studies a range of young adult Holocaust novels to analyse three textual strategies in these texts – fantasy, heroic quest and intergenerational storytelling – as means of bearing and communicating the memories of the trauma to the generations distanced by time and space. An examination of the imaginative devices in these novels illustrates the way in which young adult fiction integrates history, memory and trauma with its project of growth and socialisation. These fictional texts thus emerge as sites of memories, much like the museums and memorials that effectively educate the young readers, broadening their perspectives beyond the textbook realms, creating empathy and opening dialogic spaces to engage with individual and collective memories and their relevance to the present.

Holocaust fiction and the young reader

Of the 1,500,000 visitors who visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 2014, an overwhelming majority were adolescents, particularly education groups from high schools, colleges and universities.⁵ In the United States, Holocaust education has found wide support and endorsement in institutes of higher learning.⁶ Apart from films and firsthand accounts, fiction is one prominent resource material. The growing focus on the Holocaust education over the last two decades has been accompanied by a rise of young adult novels telling the young readers about the Nazi genocide of European Jews during the Second World War.

Underlying these attempts to preserve the memories is the idea that we must remember the Holocaust; it is our moral obligation not only to remember but also to tell about it to the future generations so that the memories are kept alive. Epstein refers to Inga Clendinnen’s call on moral and social obligation to pay attention to the human suffering perpetrated at such large and intense scale: ‘These things were done – some survived to tell what had been done. We, to whom such things have not been done, have an obligation to be attentive’.⁷ The implication that listening

and learning about the Holocaust as a means of atonement is echoed by Franklin: 'since the failure of onlookers to speak out at the time helped to permit the Holocaust to occur, to speak about it now becomes a moral imperative of the highest order'.⁸ Further, Holocaust history offers lessons that society needs to absorb and learn to prevent such atrocities in the future.

Hence, the concern is not whether one should teach about the Holocaust (most historians and scholars agree that it should be taught), but *how* it should be done. Despite the novels and films produced every year, the field of the Holocaust studies has been dominated by first-person accounts and testimonies. It has often been claimed that the event and the suffering it engendered are incomprehensible to those who have not lived it. Elie Wiesel, a well-known and perhaps the most influential of Holocaust survivors in his 1989 essay 'Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory', insisted that 'just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz... Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge'.⁹ In other words, the Holocaust is a unique event with no historical or real referential. It is unspeakable, incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it.

Fiction in such a scenario seems morally and ethically dubious in using the atrocity as an inspiration, aestheticising it and profiting from it. Langer insists that there is 'something disagreeable, almost dishonourable, in the conversion of the suffering of the victims into a work of art'.¹⁰ The theme becomes more problematic in context of the literature for children and young adults where the generic conventions mentioned earlier are in conflict with the subject matter that the Holocaust presents. Its unspeakable bleakness disrupts the patterns of growth and acculturation. Kertzer argues that the Holocaust memoirs for children and young adults disrupt the boundaries between children's and adult reading since fiction attempts to explain what has been claimed inexplicable; thus, 'Holocaust mocks our belief in any clear relationship between maturity and understanding'.¹¹

Hence, the moral injunction to be accurate and honest comes at a great risk. Epstein cautions against the possibility of inflicting or transferring trauma on the reader while teaching the children about horrors of the Nazi genocide, insisting on careful consideration of issues like the means of teaching, the types of text, the age of the readers and so on. It throws light on the dilemma that the authors of children's and young adult literature face when confronted with the subject matter:

Authors have struggled with the question of how much to reveal and how much to conceal in texts concerned with horrific events. Naturally, it is imperative to be even more mindful of these issues with impressionable young readers than with mature ones... the stakes are higher in writing for children.¹²

So, though one has the moral and social obligation to remember, fiction as a means of preserving and representing the Holocaust narratives is questionable. Not only is it inadequate, if not downright unethical to weave stories of the Holocaust, in the case of children's literature, the generic conventions and the subject matter are in

direct conflict. The injunction to be accurate comes at the risk of the psychological wellbeing of the reader.

On the other hand, the objective realist representations are also fraught with difficulties. While scholars from various disciplines have sought ways to link the historical references, empirical proof, testimonies and memoirs to present the Holocaust, there is also an awareness that these objective representations fail to capture the extent of the tragedy. Discussing the problem the Holocaust poses for historical and realist representation, Cathy Caruth, in her psychological exploration of trauma, locates the moment of psychical wounding that makes linear conventional understanding impossible, 'where we begin to recognize the possibility of a history which is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference)'.¹³ Caruth evokes a shift from objective representation to an emphasis on individual and collective memories to re-present the event. At the same time, scholars like Dominique LaCapra and Ruth Franklin are concerned with the unstable yet crucial role of memory. Memory, as an important yet unreliable form of evidence, unsettles the pursuit of objective representation.

The fallibility of memory undercuts the concept of 'pure' testimony, free of literary aestheticisation or narrative conventions. Franklin points out that 'every canonical work of Holocaust literature involves some graying of the line between fiction and reality'.¹⁴ If the vagaries of memory bring testimonies closer to narrative fiction, then fiction offers the means of understanding and empathy that is unavailable to the objective accounts. According to Epstein, 'literature is viewed as more accessible and as a way of allowing young people to empathize and even identify with the victims'.¹⁵ Franklin insists on the necessity of fiction,

That will let you imagine, even if they can't let you see. This is the true value of literature and of humanism more generally – a value, it should be pointed out, that stands in direct contrast to the Nazis' program of dehumanization... The act of imagination... is an act of empathy.¹⁶

Moreover, as McCallum defines adolescent fiction in terms of '*preoccupation* with personal maturation [...] commonly articulated in conjunction with a perceived need for children to overcome solipsism and develop intersubjective concepts of personal identity within this world and in relation to others',¹⁷ Holocaust literature for children, imbued with moral and social obligation to the past, helps the young readers develop intersubjectivity and a sense of collective responsibility on their way to adulthood. That still leaves the charge of potential trauma that Epstein has raised in his discussion regarding the Holocaust fiction for the young. The scholars of young adult literature have pointed out a variety of narrative strategies and conventions used to frame the Holocaust narratives for young readers. For instance, "Donald Haase" points out how the writers of young adult fiction have 'recourse to the space of fairy tales to interpret their traumatic physical environments and their emotional lives within them',¹⁸ stressing the fairy tale's potential as an emotional survival strategy. In his analysis of the elements of role play and fantasy in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Feldman argues that by using fantasy to ensure the survival of

the protagonist, Yolen uses the structure of fantasy 'to shelter preteen and adolescent readers from completely confronting the legacy of the horrific past'.¹⁹

Thus, Holocaust literature for the young tackles the barrier of representation by evoking and using the generic conventions inherent to the young adult literature. One of the common tropes is the use of fantasy and fairy tales as a metaphor for the inexplicable and unreal nature of Nazi genocide. In Yolen's novel *Briar Rose*, Gemma, Becca's grandmother, tells her story through the fairy tale of the 'Sleeping Beauty' who was given a new lease of life by the kiss of the prince. Gemma vehemently insists that she is the Sleeping Beauty of the Woods, forcing Becca to look beyond the surface of the story and decipher the metaphor of the Sleeping Beauty.²⁰ In *The Devil's Arithmetic*, the protagonist Hannah, embarrassed by the oddities of her Jewish grandparents, fantastically travels back in time to a Nazi concentration camp. Her experiences help her to forge a link with her familial past which, until then, was a tiresome burden that she reluctantly bore.²¹ Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* invokes fairy tales and the unreal sense of time and space in times of crisis which demand great courage: Annemarie, the young protagonist believes that 'It was all imaginary, anyway—not real. It was only in fairy tales that people were called upon to be so brave, to die for one another. Not in real-life Denmark.'²² Yet the story of Little Red Riding Hood provides a model to Annemarie to make an active, though a small, intervention into the events beyond her control. Louise Murphy's *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* (2003) reconfigures the story of Hansel and Gretel into a narrative of Nazi persecution and the abandonment of children during the Holocaust, while Peter Rushforth's *Kindergarten* (2006) repeatedly returns to the narratives of abandonment and insecurity told against the backdrop of fairy stories like *Hansel and Gretel*, *Bluebeard*, and *The Fitcher's Bird*.²³

Thus, the memories of the Holocaust, distanced and denaturalised by the framework of fantasy and fairy tales, fractured and twisted in the retellings, reveal the unreal and incomprehensible nature of the Holocaust. They become the legacy of the past. Elizabeth Baer in her study of what she calls 'children's literature of atrocity', insists that while much of focus of adult literature on the Holocaust is 'to remember', with child readers, however, memory is not being invoked: it is being created'.²⁴ Memory Studies scholar Alison Landsberg describes the creation of prosthetic memories: 'Prosthetic memories are those not strictly derived from a person's lived experience'. Created through visual mediums like cinema and other such 'technologies of memory', Landsberg insists that prosthetic memories are 'the kinds of memories that one has 'intimate' even experiential access to (and that) would no longer be limited to the memories of events through which one actually lived. Prosthetic memories are indeed 'personal' memories, as they derive from engaged and experientially oriented encounters with the mass media's various technologies'.²⁵

Young adult Holocaust fiction is complicit in the creation of such prosthetic memories for the generations that have no direct access to the memories and historical trauma of the Second World War. Bosmajian underlines the need to

integrate the historical event, howsoever traumatic, with the projects of socialisation and acculturation that drive young adult and children's fiction: the acts of reading consciously, critically, and emphatically, to appropriate a memory [...] that is not part of his or her experience but is supposed to ensure that 'never again' will there be a repetition of such a disaster.²⁶ Holocaust fiction for young adults illustrates the ways in which the process of growth of the adolescent protagonist (and the reader) can be mediated and shaped by events that she did not directly experience. Consequently, memories imbibed through fiction are an inheritance, deeply linked with the young reader's quest for identity, her personal relationship with the past and its memories.

Fairy tales and the realm of the unreal

In her poems and sketches, Holocaust survivor and artist, Ava Kadishson Schieber combines fairy tale motifs with the grim details of her four years in hiding to make sense of her 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 detail.²⁷

Schieber's experience is echoed by Annemarie, the ten year old protagonist of Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*. Early in the novel while thinking of the brave fairy tale heroes, Annemarie feels glad that she is not in one of the tales where people are called to die for friends and loved ones: 'Annemarie admitted to herself, snuggling there in the quiet dark, that she was glad to be an ordinary person who would never be called upon for courage'.²⁸ But the Denmark she inhabits is living under the shadow of war. As the Nazi hunt for the Jews intensifies, Annemarie's safe world becomes more and more unreal. Eventually it demands extraordinary courage and bravery from a ten-year old. In the climactic scene of the book, as she steps out of her ordinary life, Annemarie invokes fairy tales to negotiate the unreal zone of war and terror. She tells herself the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* as she embarks on a dangerous mission to save the Jewish refugees of Denmark. In lieu of her injured mother, she has to deliver a mysterious packet to her uncle, the captain of the ship carrying the refugees. On the way, as she traverses the forest, she repeats the fairy tale to shore up courage and sanity. In an encounter with the Nazi soldiers, the fairy tale becomes a way to make sense of and overcome their unreasonable violence and aggression. Annemarie's mission, her encounter with the Nazi soldiers, her show of extraordinary strength can make sense only when framed in the unrealistic story of Red Riding Hood and her dangerous journey through the forest. In the ordinary mundane life, ten-year olds would never be called upon to undertake such danger. It is only by resorting to the unreal that Annemarie is able to fulfil the task.

The fantastical motifs in Scheiber's representations and Lowry's story emphasise the incoherent and unreliable nature of the events during the war. These are memories that preclude simple understanding or remembering. They carry, what Caruth calls, the enigmatic core of trauma: 'Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event and does so precisely at the expense of simple knowledge and memory'.²⁹ The response holds together contradictory elements:

One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche.³⁰

Hence, trauma is an extraordinary experience that confounds the ordinary forms of understanding. The understanding eludes the 'I' who is 'here' and 'now', inhabiting the world of safety which makes the death camps seem impossible and unreal. The person who undertook the dangers or bore the indignities and violence is a distant memory; s/he is a distant other who lived in another time. Yet, though distanced, this other lurks forever in the psyche with its silences and fractured narrative. Such narratives undercut the conventional modes of realism and demand an alternate mode of representation and retelling. 'When the real is so fantastic', asks Judith Kerman, 'what literary effects will succeed in making it credible, and in helping the reader to comprehend its human meaning?'.³¹

Scholars like Judith Kerman and Michael McCleary have argued that the literary fantastic, with genres like fairy tales and myths, is

Not only ... fit for depicting the Holocaust, it may indeed be, paradoxically, the most "natural" mode in which to represent this age of extremity. The universe of the death camps is so imbued with hitherto unthinkable brutality and horror that it becomes literally fantastic.³²

Martinez-Alfaro, in his consideration of Louis Murphy's *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* contends 'that the subversion of the fairy tale's formulaic traits facilitates the understanding of a historical episode that defies any sense of logic'.³³ Haase on the other hand, insists that fairy tales with their unreal spaces become an 'interpretative device' to understand a child's journey through the landscape of war, exile and the Holocaust'.³⁴ They offer a medium to narrate events that defy the teller's understanding and hence conventional narration. The ambiguous temporal and spatial dimensions of fairy tales create a space to represent and map the experiences of trauma and exile. The formulaic 'once upon a time' indicates a temporal shift to a mythical past or an imaginative time. Similarly, a spatial displacement from the realm of the known and familiar to a forest or an enchanted castle signifies displacement, isolation, and danger. According to fairy tale scholar, Marina Warner:

The remoteness of their traditional setting – the palace, the forest, the distant and nameless kingdom, the anonymity and lack of particularity of their cast of characters, the kings and queens and princesses with names like Beauty or Fair with the Golden

Hair – which could not belong to anybody in the social and historical milieu of the tellers or the receivers of the tale – all this underpins the stories' ability to grapple with reality.³⁵

Jack Zipes insists that the fairy tales provide evocative metaphors that help the people – the teller as well as the listeners – to cope with unspeakable horrors:

They [the fairy tales] emanate from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors.³⁶

In Murphy's novel, *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*, the ambiguous time and space of Hansel and Gretel's abandonment become more specific – it is the outskirts of Bialowieza forest in Poland during the last years of Nazi occupation. The reason behind the abandonment is not to kill the children of starvation; on the contrary, it is a desperate bid by their Jewish parents to help them survive. The Jewish children, now named Hansel and Gretel, find an isolated hut, the home of an aged woman slighted by the inhabitants of the nearby village. Here Murphy modifies the fairy tale and Magda, the witch, becomes the children's saviour, while the metaphor of evil is shifted to the Nazi officer, the *Oberfuhrer*. The titles of the chapter in Murphy's text – 'Once Upon A Time', 'Hansel and Gretel', 'The Forest', 'In the Cage' and 'The Oven', etc. – emphasise the overlap between the fairy tale and this story of the Holocaust survivors.

While Lowry's and Murphy's texts are fictionalised survivor accounts, Yolen's *Briar Rose* is told by Gemma, the grandmother who survived the death camp and the war in Europe. Gemma's compulsive repetition of the tale of the Sleeping Beauty is a traumatic expression of her experiences, a fractured manifestation of the memories that she has wilfully forgotten as a survival strategy. The story expresses her estrangement, her sense of 'unreality' that lurks beneath the fragile illusions of contentment and safety of the present. Horrific motifs like the barbed wire, the mist that consumed all her family and citizens, and the castle of death displace the fairytale that the children are familiar with. Gemma's insistence that she is Briar Rose hints at an 'other' within the self – an inhabitant of the unreal past that constantly haunts her and needs to be suppressed in order to live. These latent memories live on in the psyche of the survivor as a 'symptom of history'.³⁷ They manifest in the repetition of the fairy tale as an attempt to convey the horror of the time when the human understanding encounters insurmountable past. 'The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess'.³⁸

Gemma's fairy story acquires meaning posthumously as Becca works out the metaphors that drive Gemma's 'Sleeping Beauty of the Woods'. As the text progresses, Gemma's fairy tale, italicised and occupying a distinct space within the narrative, becomes intricately linked with the narrative of Becca's growth. It is repeated incrementally in Becca's memories as she remembers how Gemma's fairy tale that frightened her friends and schoolmates, faltered at the crucial

moment of the arrival of the prince to undo the spell: 'There had always been something decidedly odd about the whole telling... In Gemma's story, everyone—other than the prince who wakes the princess with a kiss and Briar Rose and afterward their child—everyone else sleeps on'.³⁹ The twisted fairy tale, along with Gemma's death-bed insistence: 'I am Briar Rose',⁴⁰ hints at the split self of the survivor – an alien traumatised self, distanced by time, space, and memories, constantly returning to haunt the present, the new identity, and the new life that Gemma creates for herself in America. The split narrator, the fractured fairy tale, Gemma's irritation with interruptions – these are her testimonies of trauma that escape facts and figures of history.

Unlike *Briar Rose* where a single tale is transformed into the narrative of an individual survivor, in Peter Rushforth's *Kindergarten*, seventeen-year-old protagonist, Corrie discovers a cache of letters written in the years preceding the Second World War. These are letters from Jewish students and parents – all fearing the impending catastrophe and pleading for a safe passage to England for their children. Going over these letters, Corrie remembers the Grimms' fairy tales – *Hansel and Gretel*, *Wolf and the Seven Kids* and *The Fitcher Bird*. His grandmother Lilli, a Holocaust survivor, bakes a cake in the shape of a 'minutely detailed like Hansel and Gretel gingerbread house',⁴¹ but remains silent about her life before and during the war. Corrie tells us that 'Lilli, like the girl bound to silence in 'The Six Swans' had never spoken a word about her past, her life in Germany, her family; her books and paintings had remained locked away, from herself, and from everyone else'.⁴² Yet Corrie can discern the past in the visage of her grandmother:

He looked at her face. Physical pain always faded as time passed. The memory of humiliation and mockery never died. Each time the memory was revived, the feelings returned as intense as they had been at the time they were experienced.⁴³ As Rushforth's text mingles, the fairy tales and the story of Lilli's past with the incidents of present violence, the repressed trauma of the family resurfaces to create a haunting sense of childhood under siege.

Critiquing the use of fairy tales for narrating the Holocaust, scholars like Phillippe Codde and Anna Hunter insist that the conventions of the genre screen the readers from the source of trauma. Yet in these texts of young adult fiction, the fairy tales and their metaphors succeed in conveying the traumatic experiences that defy representation.⁴⁴ Warner points out that though 'fairy tales are rebarbative as historical documents...evidence of conditions from past social and economic arrangements co-exist in the tale with the narrator's innovations'.⁴⁵ As victims, Gemma and Lilli remember the catastrophic sequence of events in detail. At the same time, the nature of the event evades narrative realism; conventional understanding collapses in the world of violence and genocide. It finds its anchor in the fantasy and fairy tales. The turn of the familiar into the unfamiliar creates an eerie sense of unreality that pervades the young adult Holocaust narratives. It is the perilous realm of the unreal that the survivor experienced, and the adolescent hero and the reader navigate through on their journey towards growth and maturity.

The heroic quest and the perilous realm

The idea of heroic quest seems antithetical to the traumatic core of the Holocaust fiction. The quest, as scholars like Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye point out, is about stabilising the ego. The journey from home, adventures in the perilous realm, clash with the antagonists, reclaiming the inheritance and finally the return – these structural elements of the hero monomyth are meant to guide the adolescent subject towards a coherent and knowable selfhood. The monomyth echoes Victor Turner's insights on rites of passage and liminality. A common feature across communities, rites of passage commonly consist of three distinct phases. The first phase is characterised by the separation of an individual from her social and cultural world. It is followed by the 'liminal' phase where the individual is 'betwixt and between' the structures of the community. This transitory or liminal phase is riddled with dangers since the protagonist has shed the security and the familiarity of the known and entered an unknown world. The liminal realm is also marked by *communitas*: 'Social agents when stripped of the sense of differentiation and separation, as a result of social structures, recognize their common bonds'.⁴⁶ In a deeper examination of liminality and *communitas* in *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Turner applied the concepts to the aspects and symbols in modern societies. Once an individual passes from the normalising constraints of everyday social life and enters the liminal realm, s/he is in a transitory experimental state.⁴⁷ Liminality affects change and hence transforms the individual who, in the final phase of the rite of passage, would re-enter the society as a qualitatively different person – an adult. In young adult fiction, the narrative of quest – separation of the young self from the security and safety of the home, the adventures and dangers during the journey and finally the return – culminates with the reintegration of the individual as an adult member of the community: in the quest narrative 'adolescence becomes a series of obstacles which the young adult protagonist overcomes on his/her way to adulthood'.⁴⁸

In young adult Holocaust narratives, the heroic quest often takes the form of a journey into the past. The purpose of the journey is to reclaim history and the suppressed memories. Becca's quest in *Briar Rose* is to reclaim and re-articulate her grandmother's past and in the process, achieve growth and personal maturation. Similarly in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, Hannah travels back in time to cultivate empathy and compassion. These narratives – like the story of the quest – serve as the reflexive agents reclaiming distant history through the adolescent heroes and readers. At the same time, the stages of this quest into the past are a part of the process to know and understand present realities. The heroic quest, in its initial stages, is closely linked to the idea of a breach – at social as well as personal level. It begins with a call for adventure – a call sounds from beyond the zones of familiarity and comfort disrupting the ordinary and the mundane. *The Devil's Arithmetic* begins with Hannah's lament 'I'm tired of remembering'.⁴⁹ And yet she opens the door to Elijah but slips through time to Poland on the eve of the War.

The Devil's Arithmetic reverses the trope of the 'enchanted journey' as Hannah enters a world terrifyingly real and unreal at the same time. Poland of 1938 is real in all its mundane details, and yet unreal for Hannah as she initially wonders if she is in a dream. Later in Auschwitz, it acquires a nightmarish quality. In the hellish world of the camp, heroism lies in the mere act of survival as Rivka, her friend and guardian in the camp, tells Hannah (now Chaya): '... it is much harder to live this way and to die this way than to go out shooting. Much harder. Chaya, you are a hero. I am a hero... We are all heroes here'.⁵⁰ As she develops empathy, Chaya/Hannah grows to identify with the concerns of her community. Like the hero who dies only to be reborn, Hannah sacrifices her life for Rivka as she realises that she (Hannah) 'lived, had lived, would live in the future – she, or someone with whom she shared memories. But Rivka has only now'.⁵¹ Through the final act of sacrifice as she bears the burden of the present and future, Hannah grows from an indifferent teenager to an empathic individual. As she steps into the gas chamber, once again she slips back in time to return to her family. From liminality to *communitas*, if the goal of young adult fiction is to aid the growth of a solipsistic adolescent into an adult with a sense of intersubjective identity and empathy, the structure of the heroic quest in *The Devil's Arithmetic* propels its adolescent protagonist into adulthood where she is willing to bear the burden of remembering.

Briar Rose, on the other hand, is a more complicated and layered text meant for older readers. Here Yolen uses the structure of the quest and its distinct stages in a manner that ultimately challenges and modifies the pattern of the quest. Like the guardian of the threshold, Gemma and her story hold within them the secrets suppressed and forgotten in the march of time. The story of Briar Rose that Gemma leaves behind for her family encapsulates her past; it is her inheritance for her granddaughters: 'That castle is yours. It is all I have to leave you'.⁵²

Becca's journey to Chelmno, a journey into the perilous realm where 'the hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown',⁵³ is complex. She meets aides and mentors who reconstruct the past in all its verisimilitude. For Magda, Becca's guide, the history of Poland is the history of martyrs. In Magda's account, the terror of Holocaust is subsumed under the narrative of martyrdom and sacrifice to keep alive optimism in the present: "'In the not-so-past history are many tragedies. Every family can recite them. The blood of so many martyrs are still wet on our soil'".⁵⁴ Yet this narrative of sacrifice and heroism is debunked by other stories. The priest of the Church at Chelmno is not only the spiritual keeper but also a keeper of its guilt. The people hold horrifying memories at bay by a forced insistence that 'nothing' happened at Chelmno. The murder of 300,000 people at Chelmno death camp is insistently denied till the memories and guilt resurface in moments of crisis – told in confession boxes and death beds.

However, it is Josef Potocki, Gemma's friend and a partisan fighter, who questions and modifies the tropes of the heroic quest at multiple levels. Like the journey to the land of the dead where the hero's self is annihilated to be resurrected later, life and death intertwine in Potocki's narrative. While the Jews were being hunted

down by the Nazis in 1939, Potocki lived in the luxury of denial till misfortune struck. The experience at Sachsenhausen labour camp destroys all other sense of identity except being a homosexual, the 'crime' for which he is arrested:

If you had asked Josef Potocki to describe himself before he entered Sachsenhausen, he would have said: "I am a Pole educated in Cambridge, a poet and playwright, a member of the minor aristocracy, a man of literate tastes, master of five languages (Polish, German, English, French and Italian), and a gourmet cook." He would never have mentioned sexual preferences. That was no one's business but his own. Besides, he was quite aware of family honor which demanded an heir, an abstract concept he was prepared to deal with in the future. After Sachsenhausen, he would have said, "I am a fag." Not gay – there was nothing gay about being a homosexual in that place. Nothing sexual either. Like the other men, he lost all desire for anything but staying alive.⁵⁵

The convergence of the suffering of the Jewish 'Briar rose' and the gay prince who kisses her awake establishes a bond – a feeling of *communitas* among the victims of the Nazi persecution. Gemma becomes a member of a group of partisan fighters after being rescued from the death pit in the camp. But these partisans are neither romantic heroes nor brave warriors: 'These (partisans) were the flotsam and jetsam of the world, driftwood like Josef, whose victories were sometimes catastrophes, whose defeats were the stuff of legends'.⁵⁶

Thus, the narrative challenges the reader by preserving and at the same time, constantly modifying the trajectory one comes to expect from a quest narrative. Gemma, the Sleeping Beauty, gassed at Chelmno death camp, is rescued from the mass grave, from a heap of bodies of who did not survive. The prince who resuscitates her with a life-giving kiss is a homosexual, in love with Aron, Becca's grandfather. When Gemma does not remember her past, Potocki names her Briar Rose. Though Gemma's marriage to Aron seems to affirm life and resilience in face of terror, this humanist resolution is disrupted by Aron's violent death immediately after the marriage. Gemma escapes to America but that does not resolve into the happily ever after of a quest narrative. If America was assumed to be the haven for the refugees fleeing the Second World War, Harvey Goldman, a refugee at the Fort Oswego camp remembers its miserable conditions: 'I was sure we had come all that way just to be killed in America'.⁵⁷ The text reminds the young readers that 'Truth is never tidy. Only fairy tales are'.⁵⁸

The reminder is reiterated in *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* which uses the structure of a quest but denies the safety net of time and distance to its readers. It begins with the abandonment of the children in the forest. They find friends and aids in the village – starting with Magda, the 'witch'. The horrors that they face are too real, too terrifying. Gretel is raped in the forest and would have been killed if the stepmother did not appear to save the girl at the cost of her own life. The SS officers lurk in the village, distressing and humiliating its inhabitants. Unnatural events happen in a world where the heroic notions of good and evil and justice are all subverted. Murphy complicates the notions of morality further by the

representation of the Nazi perpetrator, the sinister *Oberfuhrer* in charge of abducting Aryan looking children to further the Nazi project of a pure Aryan race. Noting his cannibalistic proclivities, Martinez-Alfaro has pointed out the tropes of vampirism that Murphy employs in the problematic representation of the Nazi perpetrator.⁵⁹

The end of Hansel and Gretel's traumatic journey through the perilous realm coincides with the fairy tale resolution of the narrative. The *Oberfuhrer* is captured by the Russians. The children are united with the father. But the end is undercut by the absence of women who saved the children and kept them alive. The stepmother is dead. Magda, the witch, dies in the 'oven' in Birkeneau. Gretel, traumatised by her experience in the forest is silent and withdrawn. Denying the illusions of a happy ending that the accounts of survival might create, the Author's Note to *Briar Rose* insists that 'Happy ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history'.⁶⁰ Similarly in the Afterword to *Number the Stars*, Lowry places the story of Annemarie in the context of the history of Denmark, pointing out that though 7000 Jews escaped Denmark, many others including several Resistance leaders and those who helped the Jews fell victim to Nazi violence. For Kertzer,

[t]he lesson that emerges in this sophisticated interplay between text and peritext is not the consoling lesson of spiritual triumph but a much harder one about the reality of historical facts and the difficulty such facts pose for representing this particular history for young people.⁶¹

The circle of listeners

The True Story of Hansel and Gretel opens and closes with the voice of the witch reaching out to the readers across the decades: 'I am Magda. Magda the Witch they call me in the village'.⁶² At the end, she speaks once again to the readers:

It is finished. The tale is told truthfully, and truth is no heavier, no more beautiful than lies. Yet there is something that makes me love the truth, and that love made me wander and worry until the truth was given to you, like a gift [...] I know. I am Magda. I am the witch.⁶³

In the process of telling the truth, Magda, the witch, takes on another fairy tale role – that of a storyteller who is often a Mother Hubbard or a Mother Goose-like figure. She creates an illusion of intimacy, of home and family; her stories bridge the divisions in time. She is the generic icon of the narrative form, the 'frontispiece of fairytale collections',⁶⁴ the storytelling sibyl who 'fulfills a certain function in thinking about forbidden, forgotten, buried even secret matters'.⁶⁵ The sibylline narrator is a repository of cultural memories sidelined and suppressed by the official narratives. Warner highlights the paradoxical nature of such retellings:

She (the sibyl) is exiled, even abandoned, her voice is muffled, even muted. Yet from inside the "manacle" of the monument, she goes on speaking [...] the blocked-up

cave is unblocked in the imaginary world of her story, by the memory of her presence inside, the fantasy of her magic and knowledge.⁶⁶

In young adult Holocaust fiction, the sibylline narrator not only provides space, wherein the traumatic memories of the older generation find an expression; her storytelling also offers space and time for the young readers to confront the past and share its burden.

In *Briar Rose*, the figure of the grandmother and her story preserves the distance between the victim and the listener (and hence the reader). Such intergenerational storytelling opens a space for reader identification, not with the victim but with the listener. Caruth insists that the notion of trauma ‘acknowledges that perhaps it is not possible for the witnessing of the trauma to occur within the individual at all, that it may only be in future generation that “cure” or at least witnessing can take place’.⁶⁷ The stories are necessary precisely because the immediacy with which the first witness experienced the event is incomplete. In the dialogic space between victim and listener – between the grandmother and the third-generation listener – history interacts with the present, the memories are reclaimed by finding links with the present. Laub claims that in a testimony of the past, the listener is a participant whose presence enables the narration:

The listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony [...]. The listener, however, is also a separate human being and will experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out this function of a witness to the trauma. While overlapping, to a degree with the experience of the victim, he nonetheless does not become the victim—he preserves his own separate place, position and perspective; a battleground for forces raging in himself, to which he has to pay attention and respect if he is properly carrying out his task.⁶⁸

By fostering the identification with the listener rather than the victim, the narrative preserves the radical otherness of the event and the victim. In *Briar Rose*, the young reader is positioned alongside Becca, the listener of Gemma’s and Potocki’s story. Their memories, though intimately felt, are also distanced by time and context. They become prosthetic extensions to Becca’s, and thereby the reader’s, continuum. Highlighting the dynamics of such prosthetic memories, Landsberg insists that it is the distance and otherness that characterises the experience: Prosthetic memory creates the conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected while recognising the alterity of the ‘other’.⁶⁹

Rushforth’s *Kindergarten* also calls for identification with the listener rather than the survivor. Corrie’s discovery of the pre-war letters connects him with the fate of the children who were abandoned, first in the English school for safety and survival, and later in the dark, pathless woods, the forests and the concentration camps where the crematorium ovens await. In his mind, he rewrites the end of *Hansel and Gretel*, as the children perish in the oven. Like the Nazi soldiers, the witch undresses Gretel, cuts off ‘all of Gretel’s hair, close to her skull’ and removes her necklace which had a little star at the end of it.⁷⁰ It arouses the sense of despair.

Corrie's brother, Jo, suffers from a similar depressive state as their present tragedies – news of a school siege and their mother's death – become psychologically linked to the stories in the letters. They become what Laub calls 'the second holocaust' for the family, where the loss is relived 'at once through the actual return of the trauma and through its inadvertent repetition, or transmission, from one generation to another'.⁷¹

It is only at the end, when their grandmother Lilli opens the channels of communication by talking to her grandsons about her lost family that Corrie and Jo are able to talk about their own tragedies. Lilli does not deny her anger and suffering at the death of all her loved ones during the Holocaust. Neither does she deny the contempt Corrie and Jo express: 'This is what mankind is like'.⁷² In *Kindergarten*, Rushforth foregrounds the power of dialogue that unfetters the monologic news accounts on television and history at large. The end of Rushforth's novel offers a humanist resolution as Lilli places the future in the hands of the children:

We are wandering, we are lost in darkness, perhaps, in England, in Germany, over much of the world, but it is the children who will lead us out of this darkness, who will put an end to our wandering. With each child's birth, they say, the world begins again, and it is you who must use your life in trying to find a way, trying to light that darkness.⁷³

This tentative hope becomes possible only when the grandmother voices the pain of her generation, expressing and externalising the trauma in the presence of the third-generation listeners.

Like Epstein who cautions against the potential of the Holocaust narratives to transfer trauma on to the readers, Dominick LaCapra has warned against 'self-sufficient, projective or incorporative identification' as a response to the accounts of traumatic experiences. Instead he proposes what he calls 'empathic unsettlement' as a more desirable reaction to the victim's suffering in that 'it involves virtual not vicarious experience'.⁷⁴ Living through the dangers and conflicts as listeners offers an opportunity to contemplate self and its relationship to the world. It carries the seed of empathy and collective responsibility. The connection established between the generations becomes an injunction to remember that which must not be forgotten. These intergenerational collaborations make it possible to preserve the memory, filling in gaps in history that has been told through statistics and official documents and safeguarding it from receding into the past.

The return to the present

In his essay on the Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance, Theodore O. Prosser studies the representational strategies of the museum invoking liminality in its structure designed to encourage audience engagement.⁷⁵ It enables the preservation of the history at the same time as emphasising personal responsibility by building empathy and tolerance. Young adult fiction accomplishes a similar task. It ends with the

return of the hero from the heroic quest, the journey that integrates the trauma of history with the process of coming-of-age. The optimism and hope that characterise young adult fantasy is tentative in Holocaust fiction, underscored by the awareness that 'Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history. I know of no woman who escaped from Chelmno alive'.⁷⁶ The intent of young adult fiction is not objective realism, but the preservation of the past by intertwining it with the narrative of present and future. Framed within the structural formulas of fantasy – the fairy tales, the heroic quest, and the intergenerational storytelling – the trajectory of the Holocaust fiction for young readers subverts the tropes of the very formula that it uses to tell the story. It narrativises the past in ways that target the young readers as listeners and bearers of memory, the radical other of the survivor-teller whose trauma finds an expression – howsoever incoherent – only in a circle of willing listeners. As the bearer of trauma and memories passed from generation to generation, young adult Holocaust fiction becomes the repository of collective memories as well as a bridge that links the past with growth into the future.

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