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## **The Educational Use of Holocaust Novels**

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**Abstract** *This article will look at the use of Holocaust novels in higher education. Starting from an analysis of the appropriate educational use of literature (other than in literary studies, of course), it explores the value of novels in particular as many-voiced and as descriptive of large-scale social phenomena. Those specific qualities of novels make them particularly useful in teaching the Holocaust. The Holocaust is taught in a number of ways—across a number of disciplines—in higher education, with religious, historical, political and emotional aims, amongst others. One common approach to teaching the Holocaust uses the perspectives of victims, perpetrators and bystanders, and two novels are given as possible examples to be used to teach, respectively, about victims and perpetrators. There are opportunities and challenges in the use of Holocaust novels, including the danger of misrepresenting history and misrepresenting or misusing the novels, and the various educational, emotional, political and religious challenges. However, the article presents this work as, on balance, a good opportunity to learn and, as Kafka says, for a book to be “an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.” A good opportunity, but one that is inevitably incomplete and, to an extent, a failure: we should not tackle the Holocaust expecting some straightforward redemption.*

**Keywords** Holocaust, novel, aesthetics, empathy, sympathy, Kafka

*A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us*  
(Kafka, in Steiner, 1967, p. 67)

### **Introduction**

In this article we explore the issues arising from the educational use of Holocaust novels in teaching the Holocaust in higher education. (The term “Holocaust” is used rather than “Shoah,” as the former term is more familiar—but we recognise that the latter is the preferred term for some scholars and communities.) We write from the perspectives of lecturers in universities who have made use of Holocaust novels in

teaching programmes in theology and religious studies, and in initial teacher education. Starting with a consideration of whether it is appropriate to use literature for educational purposes other than purely aesthetic purposes, the article goes on to consider the nature of novels, and why they may have a particular educational value *as* novels. After a brief account of why, where, and how the Holocaust typically appears on the higher education curriculum (and the opportunities and challenges presented by this topic), a more detailed description is given of one common—and, we suggest, appropriate—approach to the use of Holocaust novels in teaching the Holocaust. That approach, based on developing an understanding of Holocaust victims, perpetrators, and “bystanders,” is not without its problems. Our conclusion is that Holocaust novels can indeed be used to teach the Holocaust in higher education, but that if this is to be done, particular care must be taken—not only because of the possibility of mis-education with respect to the Holocaust, but also because of the possibility of the misuse of novels. And teaching the Holocaust should not be expected to “succeed,” in the sense of achieving a straightforward redemption or complete explanation.

### **The Novel and Education**

Literature (which we take to include the arts more generally) has been taught and studied in schools and higher education around the world. Literature has been studied “aesthetically,” that is, for its artistic value, and it has been used in other studies—history, moral education, religious education, and no doubt a whole range of subjects (such as using literature to teach science). Questions are asked about how appropriate it is to use literature for anything other than aesthetic purposes. Is literature distorted or misused by such uses? And if this is a “misuse,” does it matter?

For Plato, literature is of very little use for anything, as poets merely hold up a mirror to nature, and do not know the truth of what they make, and do not even have the craft skills of a carpenter or other manufacturer (Plato, 1908, p. 338). Poets should not, therefore, be allowed in the ideal city (Plato, 1908, p. 336). Another promoter of the uselessness of literature—albeit one who also admired literature—was Wilde. For him, like Plato, “[a]ll art is quite useless” (Wilde, 1908, p. 6), but, unlike Plato, this uselessness is art’s most important quality. “They are the elect,” he says, “to whom beautiful things mean only Beauty” (Wilde, 1908, p. 5). “The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it immensely” (Wilde, 1908, p. 6). Wilde explicitly discounts any connection between artists and ethics: “[n]o artist has ethical sympathies,” as “[a]n ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (Wilde 1908, p 6). The clear and apparently simple positions of Plato and Wilde are attractive, but unconvincing. Literature is hard to dismiss as wholly useless, not least because there are so many literary figures who see themselves as doing “useful” work of various kinds. Steiner, for

example, admits that “a man [sic] can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening,...he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning,” and that “the universities, the arts, the book world...failed to offer adequate resistance to political bestiality; they often rose to welcome it and to give it ceremony and apologia” (Steiner, 1967, p. ix), and yet Steiner goes on to quote Kafka who gives one of the most powerful descriptions of the moral effect of literature.

If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? So that it shall make us happy? Good God, we would also be happy if we had no books, and such books as make us happy we could, if need be, write ourselves. But what we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide. A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us. (Steiner, 1967, p. 67, quoting a letter by Kafka, aged 20.)

Mejía and Montoya balance the aesthetic and moral uses of literature in education, concluding that “those two educative approaches to literature...can actually be mutually reinforcing in such a way that aesthetic appreciation will suffer if the moral is not deeply examined with both mind and heart, and vice versa” (Mejía & Montoya, 2017, p. 370). They quote writers such as Campbell who says “[p]oems were created for aesthetic pleasure...[so a]ny activity that deviates from this goal, obscures their beauty” (Mejía & Montoya, 2017, p. 18), but they go on to say that this is not necessarily true of all poets, all writers. And although, as Steiner says, reading great literature sensitively is no guarantee of moral behaviour, it would be absurd to argue that there could never be a contribution of literature to moral education. For Mejía and Montoya, “there are various different *layers* in a story, and morality appears in all of them in different manners” (Mejía & Montoya, 2017, p. 379), so an aesthetic approach to literature would include moral elements, and could therefore include moral education. (Whether or not there is a systematic, regular, moral effect of such education could be asked of all moral education, and of all education, with little chance of a clear, definitive, answer.)

The relationship between literature and its educational use—beyond its aesthetic use—is a complex matter. Mejía and Montoya provide a justification of such use on aesthetic grounds. But even if using literature in education did contradict its aesthetic purity (in Wilde’s sense) or exaggerated its truth value (in Plato’s sense), there would still be an argument for using literature for moral or other educational purposes. Novels in particular are literary forms with characteristics that lend them to various educational purposes. In a regularly quoted comment, novelist Sir Walter Scott suggested that a novel is “a fictitious narrative,

differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society” (Scott, 1834, p. 129). He acknowledges that this is not a precise definition, but the sense of a novel being related to “the modern state of society” is a helpful guide to the distinctiveness of the form. Poetry, visual arts, and music may all reflect modern society, of course, but novels are, in their scale and form, often descriptions of whole societies.

In teaching humanities and social science disciplines, then, a novel can often provide a whole-society description. As fiction, a novel cannot be treated in the same way as historiography. Yet the fictionalising of a novel will not take away all its relationship to the truth. Of Holocaust literature, a novel such as *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1991) is populated by mice and other non-human animals, but it is unlikely to deceive readers into thinking it a primarily an account of rodent life, or that it is anything but an account of life in and beyond the concentration camps. Some would say that the distancing of fiction (with extra distance provided by Spiegelman through his use of non-human animals) is itself the only way to approach an event so horrific that a direct account would be impossible to engage with appropriately. As the poet Dickinson said, we should tell the truth but tell it “slant”: the truth must “dazzle gradually” or “every man be blind” (Dickinson, 1970, pp. 506-507).

A second feature of novels, related to the “social” feature, is their many-voiced dialogic nature. Bakhtin described this as a form of “heteroglossia”:

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia [*raznorečie*] can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (all more or less dialogized). These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263, brackets in the original.)

It is worth noting that a novel is many-voiced even though it is, typically, composed by a single author. An author may generate one or more voices in other literary forms—a poem, a painting. But a novel is filled with many voices, such that “[t]he novel can be *defined* as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262, emphasis added). Boundaries between fiction and society are not always clear, and the many-voiced nature of social forms, the masks worn in educational settings (Geiger, 2016), suggest a “real” social organisation may itself

be described as imaginative (as in Buber's requirement of "imagining the real" in order to take part in dialogue, Buber 1998, p. 71) and "fictive" (Stern, 2015, pp. 78-80). Bakhtin himself wrote of carnival as fictive social event, and his reading of Rabelais (Bakhtin, 1984) is also a reading of "real" carnival. In educational settings, then, the novel provides many voices, and the educational advantage of such heteroglossia is that teachers and students can explore a variety of positions and understandings of the same social situation. Univocal literature can be disagreed with, but the advantage of systematically many-voiced literature is that the disagreements and divergences are already expressed. When added to the character of novels as descriptive of whole societies, a persuasive case can be made for the educational use of novels.

### **Teaching the Holocaust in HE**

The Holocaust is characterised by silence. During the events, there was silence:

The world is silent; the world *knows* (it is inconceivable that it should not) and stays silent. God's vicar in the Vatican is silent; there is silence in London and Washington; the American Jews are silent. This silence is astonishing and horrifying. (Steiner, 1967, p. 160, quoting one of the last messages to the outside world from the Warsaw ghetto in 1940.)

If there was silence during the Holocaust, the silence afterwards was just as deafening and just as shocking. Most survivors withdrew into silence, muted by Nazi violence. As Kaplan observes, "the victims could not speak, and even their screams were delayed" (Kaplan, 1994, p. 7). The world did not know how to respond: there was no language with which to respond. For Steiner, as a Jew after the Holocaust, silence offered space for the pathos and meaning of what had happened. It was the only appropriate response, because "the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech, as it lies outside reason" (quoted in Kaplan, 1994, p. 6). The first accounts to appear after the end of the war—such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1981), Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (1959), and Tad Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1976)—give up their narratives in ways which destabilise their readers, plunging them into a world in which language itself denies any expectation of resolution or redemption from the unfolding horror. The reader is left with a sense of disequilibrium which silences any response (Aarons, 2014, p. 29).

As time went by, other writers began to respond. Much has been written about the appropriateness of non-survivor responses to the Holocaust. Wiesel observed that to allow the reader to enter into "the other side," the writer must enact the conditions they evoke (Wiesel, 1985, pp. 13-14), something which only those who had experienced the Holocaust first-hand could do. Is this right? Are first-hand

experiences the only ones that allow an “enaction,” and is enaction the only way to enter the other side?

These issues of what we will refer to as empathy and sympathy are explored in wider educational debates. Buber, for example, describes dialogue (in and beyond educational settings) as an act of “imagining the real” (*Realphantasie* in the original German). Imagining the real involves “making the other present” by being able to “imagine quite concretely what another man [sic] is wishing, feeling, perceiving, and thinking” (Friedman in Buber, 1998, p. 19). This is not an “unqualified acceptance” of the other person (Friedman in Buber, 1998, p. 19), but may be exhibited in fights, even in duels (Buber, 2002, p. 241). Imagining the real “means that I imagine to myself what another man is at this very moment wishing, feeling, perceiving, thinking, and not as a detached content but in his very reality, that is, as a living process in this man” (Buber, 1998, p. 60). *Realphantasie* goes further than observation. It “is not a looking at the other, but a bold swinging—demanding the most intensive stirring of one’s being—into the life of the other” (Buber, 1998, p. 71). However, it also involves “remaining on one’s own side of the relationship” (Friedman in Buber, 2002, p. xiv) and not “wish[ing] to impose himself on the other” (Buber, 1998, p. 74). Buber’s dialogic “imagining the real” is a form of empathy, then, and it is distinct from sympathy—where, as Bill Clinton famously said, “I feel your pain.” Sympathy involves moving over to the “other” side, rather than connecting to a person whilst staying on one’s own side.

This analysis can be applied both to teaching and to research, in schools and higher education (Stern, 2013). Empathy can be expected of higher education students; sympathy may be elicited but it cannot be *required*. Literature, read as dialogue, can therefore develop or practise empathy, but not necessarily sympathy. Where teaching the Holocaust attempts to force sympathy, this is disrespecting those involved in the events. Where Holocaust novels are used to force sympathy, this is also dishonouring works of art that are “thrown as fodder to the world” (Langer, 1975, p. 1, referring to Adorno).

Teaching the Holocaust in an empathetic but—as empathetic—slightly distanced way became, in the 1980s and 1990s, more common. Public awareness of the issues grew, and there was an increasing production of both factual and fictional Holocaust material in popular media during this period, and critical voices began to be heard in higher education. The effect of this has been the development of an academic “industry” in schools, colleges and higher education, one which attempts both to re-convey and to analyse the intentions of authors and creators of Holocaust media. Currently, there is a multi-disciplinary approach to the Holocaust in higher education though this was not always the case. Historians began substantial Holocaust research perhaps ten years after the end of the war, but Holocaust modules only became part of the standard history curricula on UK undergraduate courses thirty years later. Today the Holocaust is taught in both single-subject and

inter-disciplinary contexts in higher education, in history, religious studies, and literature departments amongst others (Hawkins, 2014, p. 3).

Whatever the pedagogical approach, challenges for higher education tutors will inevitably include how to give access to the Holocaust in ways that allow students to engage—to engage critically—with its full horror and complexity. Developing an awareness of what Arendt termed “the banality of evil” (Arendt, 2000, p. 311), the obscene ordinariness of the lives of perpetrators and bystanders, as well as the persecuted victims, can perhaps only be achieved by producing what Schama (2013) calls an “artificial simulacrum” of the events. This may be all that teaching the Holocaust can be (Hawkins, 2014, p. 3). While debate continues over the appropriateness of the use of fiction in this situation, the tutor’s challenge is to engage both the intellect and the emotions of the students in ways which allow exposure to the atrocities while guarding against the effects of secondary traumatisation.

Holocaust studies in higher education are often focused on social more than narrowly academic outcomes, attempting to develop awareness of the Holocaust in order to reduce prejudice and injustice and to promote tolerance (Davies, in Davies, 2000, p. 1). But should Holocaust education only be a “tool to combat current prejudice and discrimination” (Davies, in Davies, 2000, p. 4, quoting Kinloch)? The Holocaust is a unique event which has far-reaching consequences and significance and the pedagogical task is immense. The very structures which previously held together traditional academic constructs in theological, historical, philosophical and literary discourse are challenged. There is as yet no defined methodology for studying the Holocaust as an academic subject in its own right, and students and tutors alike are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of available material. Even within the confines of a single discipline there is a vast array of possible approaches. To take one example, Jewish studies can for example approach the Holocaust via historical discourse, the nature of belief in God after the persecution and suffering, Jewish artistic and literary approaches, or the problematic nature of survivor identity, amongst many others. But if we were to leave aside these complexities, at its heart is the paradox of appropriate representation and sensitive remembrance, without recourse to non-critical acceptance and emotional over-exposure—balancing both emotional and intellectual development (Tinberg & Weisberger, 2014, p. 2).

Traditional approaches to Holocaust studies, undertaken initially by historians and the political sciences, were inadequate to deal with its full complexity. The very constructs on which modernism was based had been shattered by the depravity that the “civilised” world had unleashed. The silence which had first marked the world’s reaction gave way to attempts to find voices—especially survivor voices—to articulate a response. Most significantly, Jewish scholars tried to re-appropriate the previously unassailable theology of the covenant (Cohn-Sherbok, 1996). Literature



scholars attempted to establish what Banner calls a “hierarchy of remembrance” in relation to authentic Holocaust representation (Banner, 2000, p. 1), and in philosophical discourse there was an acceptance of the failure of reason and language in conveying the truth of the Holocaust, which inevitably turned it into what Lyotard described as an “ordinary repression” (Lyotard, 1990, p. 26). The problem still remained however that the Holocaust remained outside established intellectual parameters, challenging every academic discipline with its sheer size and scope. There was no language to deal with what the world witnessed.

Gradually, interdisciplinary methods spread Holocaust teaching across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Although reaction to the Holocaust remained tentative and largely uncritical, German-born Jewish literary theorist Geoffrey Hartmann (2002, p. 1) believes that the after-effects *can* be measured and that the academic world is in the process of devising new means of appraisal and expression, born out of the trauma of the Holocaust. One way he posits is through fiction which can defamiliarise words and events, and shatter normality to produce a new form of Holocaust representation. The use of fiction highlights two themes in Holocaust study: balancing emotional and intellectual response to traumatic material, and the issue of appropriation and adaptation of Holocaust material for aesthetic purposes. For Hartmann the problem for academic scholarship comes in the form of adequately representing the task faced by survivors in overcoming the “internal injuries” to achieve some form of reconciliation and integration of memory. The immediacy and horror of the material renders traditional disinterested, critical, scholarship impossible. As he states:

Are we not attracted, like writers of fiction, to the heart of darkness; do we not consume the trauma of others? Or is facing a greater pain than ours the way we manage our own, often desperate awareness of an encompassing social suffering? (Hartmann, 2004, p. 23)

Notwithstanding the pull to enter the “heart of darkness,” Hartmann suggests that scholars “should be intellectual witnesses” (Hartmann, 2004, p. 24): their task is to remain objective and critical, to witness to the truth. He acknowledges there are voices that call us to closure and to refrain from brooding on the events to the point of obsession and melancholia (Hartmann, 1996, p. 1), but he questions whether the world has learned anything and advocates continued attempts to find a remedy to the despair of the Holocaust (Hartmann, 1996, p. 4). Perhaps it can only be through imaginative representation and defamiliarisation of traditional norms, rather than the gathering and critique of further evidence, that we can begin to approach the questions of prejudice, injustice and what went wrong with the world in Auschwitz.

The Holocaust is often taught in terms of data and evidence: six million Jews, the Nazi machinery, the extermination camps, survivor testimonies. There is a

macabre “excitement” and unreality which eschews critical engagement. One student described the effect of an encounter. The number six million started like pebbles on a beach, but an encounter with one survivor was like picking up and thinking about one pebble: the student now “owned” the single pebble and also therefore the massive number—but what to do with it now? That chance remark summarised the problem of teaching the Holocaust.

For the tutor working from within a particular discipline it can be difficult to integrate the theoretical conventions of their subject with the lived experience of survivors. As Tinberg and Weisberger observe, the limitations of academic discipline are overturned by the complex, traumatising subject matter. The tutor is required to step beyond the confines of their discipline and respond to questions that have no clear answers (Tinberg & Weisberger, 2014, p. 30). The Holocaust disrupts the possibility of critical engagement, with students often threatened by the overwhelming nature of the material. They retreat either into uncritical emotional acceptance of traumatic material, or refusal to acknowledge any emotional involvement, with a resultant over-developed critical response. Neither of these extremes is healthy or appropriate. The issue of the chronological proximity of the Holocaust also leads to academic challenges. Students and tutors alike struggle to evaluate material that has been produced by survivors who are still alive, leading to a weakening of academic rigour. So-called “Holocaust piety” (discussed in Rose, 1996, p. 43), the mystification of something we dare not understand, is acknowledged as a pedagogical challenge for both tutors and students, leading to self-censorship in dealing with traumatic material.

For some students Holocaust fiction can be the medium which can precipitate more effective emotional and critical engagement—as Kafka described of all books. As Sicher reminds us, the good Holocaust novel will reconcile the inhuman, unbearable and unbelievable with the reader’s belief in humanity, and provide a way forward out of our own frozen incredulity (Sicher, 2005, p. xviii). The use of Holocaust fiction in teaching can provide a platform for a subject that is defined by loss, disruption and fragmentation. Holocaust fiction, when it affects us like a disaster has the capacity to engage in ways which free empathic imagination whilst also offering a relatively safe platform for academic criticism of the material.

This leads to the question of the value of appropriating and adapting historical data for the purpose of story-telling—the case of “historical fiction.” Sanders refers to Miller’s *The Crucible* which empathetically depicts the events of the Salem witch trials while simultaneously bringing to mind the McCarthy era in 1950s America (Sanders, 2006, p. 141). She highlights the motif of lost or repressed voices within historical fiction which can represent the unheard, their motives and reasons in ways historical data is unable to do. Fiction, Sanders asserts, can give a voice to the silenced (Sanders, 2006, p. 146). Although it is argued that the Holocaust is ultimately un-representable due to the irreconcilable rupture it has caused of known

aesthetic and moral values and norms, Sicher and Sanders both support a selective affirmation of fictional representation.

Adorno's comment that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (quoted for example in Fine & Turner, 2000, p. 1) seems to assume that other forms of expression—including academic texts in sociology or religious studies—might be other than barbaric. Perhaps Adorno's critique was precisely that poetry can only describe "small" or intimate events, and not the larger-scale social events such as the Holocaust. However, "poetry" often refers to all literature (and that is Plato's use of the term), and so the implication of Adorno's remark seems, rather, to be that authentic literary expression is itself extinguished by the Holocaust. There was certainly opposition to fictional representations of the Holocaust from some of the early literary scholars in the field—notably Steiner and Rosenfield—who argued that gaps in understanding of survivors' accounts must remain as narrative gaps and silences (Gelbin, 2011, p. 28). Authenticity and accuracy of accounts, they argue, must supersede artistic representation.

There is also the problem of aesthetic pleasure gained from other people's suffering—an important sub-theme of the broader aesthetic "problem" of the art of "ugliness" (Eco, 2011). Later scholars, while acknowledging Adorno, accept the potential of fiction. Vice (2000, p. 8) proposes "approaching the subject in its own way, rather than aiming to 'add' or 'go beyond' the survivor record." This offers a new typology for Holocaust fiction in which intertextuality helps to validate rather than diminish the "disruption and unease" brought about by accounts of the events (Vice, 2000, p. 161). Use of historical data to underpin fictional lives can give authenticity and creative tension to the narrative, while allowing exposure to the minds of the protagonists without fear of misrepresentation. Similarly, Sicher defends the genre as a very particular retelling of the past to help the Western world understand through reappraisal of its assumptions and beliefs (Sicher, 2005, p. xix). This, he cautions, must be done with the utmost "caution and moral responsibility" (Sicher, 2005, p. xvi).

### **Teaching the Holocaust through novels**

Notwithstanding problems in the development of the genre of Holocaust literature, Sicher maintains there is value in some "good" Holocaust fiction, good in describing the Holocaust and good as literature (Sicher, 2005, p. xxiii). This strengthens Kafka's assertion that books can be the "axe" we need to shatter our fear of response, and help us to reconcile and understand that which is ultimately beyond representation. Two recent novels which attempt to respond to the challenge are Affinity Konar's *Mischling* (2016), which deals with the interaction of victimhood and identity, and Robert Lautner's *The Draughtsman* (2017), which demonstrates the complex and subtle borders that lie between the roles of bystander

and perpetrator. Both of these have been used in higher education theology and religious studies courses teaching the Holocaust.

Affinity Konar's *Mischling* narrates the story of twin sisters, Stasha and Pearl, in Auschwitz who become part of "Mengele's zoo"—as he (like many scientists before and since) was particularly interested in experiments on twins. It is a story of slaughtered innocence, of unspeakable horror and of damaged hope. The aesthetics of the writing render the narrative even more poignant, unbearable and threatening; innocent trust is interwoven with menace in such a way as to produce an experience so intimate and revealing that readers begin to feel at times that they are colluding in the torture. As Stasha is waiting for an injection we are reminded of the clinical barbarity of the Nazi experimentation as we become the eyes of the dead children pinned on to a display on the wall:

I sensed the gaze of the eyes looking down on me, even as I knew that not a single one had stirred from its pin. I knew those eyes saw what I saw. With them, I watched Uncle perform the magic of loading a needle with some luminous liquid. It was as amber as the amber stones Pearl and I had once collected from the Baltic Sea. (Konar, 2016, p. 64.)

Drawing on extensive documented evidence the story immerses the reader in the world of experimentation and torture, not through graphic images but through the minds of the twins whose imagination is key to survival. And despite the increasing levels of toxins that are administered by Mengele, the imagination or hallucinations of Stasha allow both her and the reader to hold on to a hope of redemption for her and her sister.

Vice's assertion that Holocaust fiction must not go beyond the survivor record is stretched by the improbable and—for the authors of this article—disappointingly redemptive end to the story. While the language of the text is at times aesthetically exquisite, this does not make reading the novel into a more pleasurable experience: rather, it highlights the horrors described. (Adorno, who warned against aesthetic pleasure in Holocaust literature, would not, we think, feel this inappropriate.) At times *Mischling* is almost too hard to read. If the novel is used to teach the Holocaust, students should be allowed not to read it, indeed. But the fictional lives of Stasha and Pearl offer a reconciliation of the inhuman with the innocent in a way which both shocks and disturbs us, while leading us to an insight into victimhood and survival which would be difficult to achieve using only survivor testimonies.

Many scholars have tried to find a language to speak the unspeakable. *Mischling* attempts to do that with sensitivity and respect, illuminating a feisty and tragic victim mentality with brilliant aesthetic clarity. For the student, *Mischling* can present an imaginative account of survival which engages both emotions and critical awareness of the systems needed to allow these events to happen. Such an

imaginative approach to the novel allows for a critical exploration of survivor mentality through engagement with the thought processes of the twins. The value of *Mischling* for the student of the Holocaust lies in its intertextual approach to the events which are then made “real” by the imaginative storyline.

The question of perpetrators is perhaps even more difficult to engage in fictional form, and yet whilst Wiesel, for example, said that Jewish survivors and theologians might attempt to write of the victims of the Holocaust (and might fail in the attempt), Christians who lived through the Holocaust and Christian theologians might instead attempt to write of the perpetrators. (Wiesel and the Christian theologian Metz give their views in interviews, in Schuster & Boschert-Kimmig, 1999.) Jews and Christians might all fail. Accounts of perpetrators provide an important counterpart to the accounts of survivors, but there is a question of the ethical relationship between perpetrator and reader when the reader is called upon to imagine the mind-set and moral perspective of the perpetrator (McGlothlin, 2014, p. 159). The representation of perpetrators has largely been regarded as taboo in fictional writing, although distance from the events of the Holocaust have made thinkable the imaginative engagement with those who made it possible. McGlothlin gives a thorough account of the potential pitfalls of fictional representations of perpetrators, including the appropriateness of empathy—even sympathy—developing between narrator and reader (McGlothlin, 2014, pp. 160-162). She concludes however that as time passes writers are looking to find new points of entry into the Holocaust—such as the inner life of perpetrators—and thereby to “puncture the sanctified aura that often characterises public discourse about the Holocaust” (McGlothlin, 2014, p. 175). For the student there is a value in developing an overview that engages with many approaches to the Holocaust and that allows for in-depth exploration of the contexts and causes of the events. Heavy reliance on victim identification alone can lead to a polarised view of history and a lack of critical engagement, so there should be some engagement with the perspectives of perpetrators or bystanders.

Early research into Holocaust perpetrators found that many were neither psychologically extraordinary nor avid followers of Nazi ideology, but ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (Hiebert, 2008, pp. 367-368). One novel which takes up the challenge of the Holocaust perpetrator is Robert Lautner’s *The Draughtsman*. The story is, like *Mischling*, extensively researched, making use of real characters which lend authenticity to the text. It is a powerful reminder of the banality of evil and the complexity of human choices which surround the central character, Ernst Beck, a young German graduate journeying into the heart of evil through a seemingly ordinary series of events. Ernst finds himself complicit in the mass murder through his work at Topf and Sons, furnace makers. The gradual dawning realization of the extent of his involvement serves as a salutary reminder to the reader that this could have been any ordinary person. In describing his design

for a new crematorium to help deal with the number of prisoners “dying of typhus,” Ernst is brought face-to-face with his own complicity:

“They delouse,” I indicated the showers in the ceiling, “and then they shower them. This is for the new prisoners. Straight off the train. The track is close by so they do not mingle with the rest of the camp.”

“And what are these lines here, to the morgue?”

“Gas pipes.”

“Gas for what?” “I do not know. Exactly. Heating?”

He sat back. “You do not heat a morgue, Ernst. You do the opposite.” (Lautner, 2017, pp. 90-91.)

With Ernst we are brought to the realization that many are complicit, and in ignorance through a lack of engagement, people have the potential to be instigators of oppression and suffering. Lautner makes his characters human, forcing readers to confront the other side of the Holocaust narrative and the complex moral choices that all have to make in the act of being human. Identification with the perpetrator has the potential to open up a new dialogue of understanding and research in Holocaust studies.

### **Conclusion**

This article started with an account of the educational value of novels in general—as they are typically descriptive of whole societies, and they are typically many-voiced—whilst recognising that as *fiction*, novels are in some ways necessarily disconnected from (some) truth, and are able to be treated as beautiful and/yet “useless.” As aesthetic and moral education may be mutually implicated, it was suggested that novels may in some circumstances be legitimately used for moral education. This may include the development of forms of empathy, but may stop short of a requirement to develop sympathy amongst students.

Teaching the Holocaust is a particularly challenging task in higher education, as a common response to the events of the Holocaust is a respectful silence, leaving the indescribable or unimaginable events undescribed or unimagined. The gradual opening up of wide-ranging and interdisciplinary scholarship and debate on the Holocaust, in recent decades, has generated opportunities to go beyond silence—especially through the use of the arts. Aldous Huxley said that “[a]fter silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music” (Huxley, 1950, p. 19), and we would suggest his sentiment be extended to other art forms. Novels, in particular, are suited to the understanding of whole societies, which has the advantage of helping students understand the Holocaust in a wider context and not simply as a (very big) set of individual crimes and abuses. Novels also have the advantage of exhibiting heteroglossia, thereby allowing students to engage with a

wide range of perspectives within a single narrative. The two novels described in this article are given as examples, but not as ideal examples. Both have been used by one of the authors of this article, and students have described how they have found them helpful in engaging with the educational purposes of the modules in which they were used.

There are opportunities and challenges in the use of Holocaust novels, including the danger of misrepresenting history and misrepresenting or misusing the novels, and the various educational, emotional, political and religious challenges. However, the article presents this work as, on balance, a good opportunity to learn and, as Kafka says, for a book to break through what is frozen inside us. What should be remembered is the advice of Wiesel, that any attempt to understand the Holocaust will inevitably lead to a kind of failure, for what would success mean? The Holocaust rightly escapes any “complete” understanding. The use of novels may—just may—help create some personal, social and political empathy, and to that extent may help break some ice. Where the novels are used to elicit sympathy (and this may be the intention of some of the novelists, of course), this may limit the achievement of critical empathetic understanding, and may give a false hope for redemption.

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