

**Navigating the Kingdom of Night:  
Writing the Holocaust**

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## **Abstract**

*End of the Night Girl* and ‘Navigating the Kingdom of Night’:

### ***End of the Night Girl***

Nothing seems to go right for Molly – she’s stuck in a dead-end waitressing job, she’s sleeping with a man she doesn’t even like, and she’s just been saddled with a swarm of goldfish and a pregnant stepsister. The chance discovery of an old photograph leads her into an act of creation, and brings her into contact with the ghost of a woman who has been dead for more than sixty years.

Sixty years earlier, in Poland, Gienia’s family arranges her marriage to a distant cousin. Not long after her marriage to this stranger, the Nazis invade and she has to face life in the ghetto and the horrors of Auschwitz.

*End of the Night Girl* is a complex fictional narrative in which the lives of these two women, ‘real’ and imagined, imagined and re-imagined, are inextricably combined.

### **‘Navigating the Kingdom of Night’**

Critics, historians and Holocaust survivors have argued for decades over whether the Holocaust should be accessible to fiction and, if so, who has the right to write those fictions. ‘Navigating the Kingdom of Night’ addresses such concerns and analyses various literary strategies adopted by authors of Holocaust fiction, including the non-realist narrative techniques used by authors such as Yaffa Eliach, Jonathan Safran Foer and John Boyne and the self-reflexivity of Art Spiegelman.

Through the course of the essay I contextualise *End of the Night Girl* by turning my attention to works that raise critical issues of authorial intent and the reader/writer contract; for example Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird* and Helen Darville’s *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. How did I resolve my own concerns? Which texts

helped me and why? Together *End of the Night Girl* and 'Navigating the Kingdom of Night', one creatively and one critically, explore these complex and controversial questions in a contemporary Australian context.

## **Statement of Originality**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge or belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. In the case of *End of the Night Girl* there will be a one year embargo.

Amy T Matthews

April 2007

A Brief Outline  
of the  
Debate over  
Fictionalising the Holocaust

## **Literary Risk and Moral Peril**

The critic Theodor Adorno once famously proclaimed that ‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ (Gubar 4). He made this proclamation in 1949, a time when high-ranking Nazis faced the Nuremberg trials, when the world was watching newsreels of bodies in pits and walking skeletons in striped pyjamas, when the Holocaust was a recent, raw and stunning event, when the victims faced a disbelieving world and the perpetrators a divided, beaten and shamed homeland. Adorno’s statement, made so soon after the horrors, still resonates today and can be applied critically to all imaginative literature about the Holocaust. Later critics have interpreted him in a number of ways: Susan Gubar believes it was ‘sometimes taken to be an admonition (beware of writing poetry), sometimes a directive (poetry ought not be written), sometimes simply a diagnosis (poetry cannot be written)’ (4). Each of these three interpretations have different implications for writers – ‘beware’ does not mean ‘do not write’, rather it is a warning, an admonition to be sensitive, to not ride roughshod over difficult and painful terrain; ‘ought not be written’ is a moral judgment, implying the writing is in bad taste, or disrespectful, or harmful; and ‘cannot’ refers to a literal impossibility, this material is so unspeakable and/or unknowable that it cannot be written about. All three of these interpretations have been adopted by critics and have become central to the debate.

Irving Howe thinks Adorno ‘probably meant to focus upon the sheer difficulty – the literary risk, the moral peril – of dealing with the Holocaust in literature’ (Schwarz 22). This interpretation fuses all three of the above into one. So what are these literary risks, these moral perils?

The Australian historian and literary critic Inga Clendinnen, who turned her attention to Holocaust literature in the wake of the Helen Darville/Demidenko scandal (which I will discuss at length in chapter five), defines fiction as a ‘kind of a game, a

circumscribed place of play. Once inside I have no responsibility, beyond my responsibility to respond to the text' but when it comes to the case of 'true' stories, such as stories of the Holocaust, 'I engage with them differently because I stand in a moral relationship with these people, because they are my fellow-humans, whose blood is real and whose deaths are final and cannot be cancelled by turning back a page' (191). Although the characters and plot may be invented in a Holocaust narrative, although it may be *fictionalised*, the fact remains that these events happened to real people who suffered and died in the millions and it is inevitable that in the reader's mind the invented characters come to stand for the real people. As such there is a moral implication because a fictional character is then representative of an actual human being and, in the words of Lawrence Langer, an historian whose career has been devoted to the Holocaust and the literature of the Holocaust: 'in the literature of atrocity, no fiction can ever be completely that – a fiction' (*Literary Imagination* 91). This confers moral responsibilities upon the author, one of which, Reinhard Baumgart claims, is that fiction 'imposes artificial meaning on mass suffering' (Rosenfeld *Double Dying* 2) and the choice of fiction, the choice of meanings, is a moral choice.

Survivors such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi have expressed their struggle with the meaninglessness of their experiences in their work. *Night* documents Wiesel's experiences in the camp, his relationship with his father and his relationship with God and his religion; *If This Is a Man* is a more darkly ironic account of Levi's time in the Lager and neither of these authors tries to ascribe meaning to their experiences in the traditional sense – the texts are tense with pain, literary but not artificial – there is not a sense of a plot constructed with an eye towards an inevitable denouement, or contrived thematic material. This is because they are memoir, autobiography and testament. Nicholas Patruno believes Levi 'dignifies himself and the reader by allowing the facts to speak for themselves, so that each person may therefore experience and interpret them within one's own emotional framework' (93).

Fiction, on the other hand, especially written by non-survivors, is perceived to be a more manipulative construct. Everything must be imagined, rather than relived; all meanings are ascribed rather than described. This, Elana Gomel claims, ‘courts the inevitable falsification of memory’ (xvi). There is a widely held belief that writers have a responsibility to history, to represent the events of the Holocaust factually. This arises from the sheer horror of the events, which strains the limits of understanding. The Holocaust is an event so extreme, so premeditated and mechanised, and a failure of humanity so astonishing that it beggars belief. From the earliest Holocaust literature, when the survivors and historians began to write, veracity was paramount. The world had to acknowledge the scale and extent of the Holocaust. The assumption has been that ‘only “facts” tell the truth and that fiction somehow lies’ (Ezrahi *Words Alone* 25) and the fear with fiction is that it has the potential to misrepresent the Holocaust. Berel Lang expresses a strong belief that ‘all literary representations of the Holocaust are violations of the facts of history, and that the violation of the facts of history is immoral in the same way that the violation of persons is’ (Hungerford 102).

Fiction writers often rearrange historical events to suit a narrative structure or thematic point and this can be morally problematic when it comes to the Holocaust. Ultimately art ‘shapes, edits, invents, lifts, abstracts, colours, remixes, twists or embroiders fact to create something that is no longer fact but a product of imagination’ (‘Unoriginal Sins’) and perhaps this is why even those survivors who have ventured into fiction, Wiesel, Levi and Imre Kertész among them, ‘have written memoirs or histories as well as fiction, as if to establish the historicity of the subject before admitting it to the imagination’ (Ezrahi *Words Alone* 22).

The ‘legitimate fears that fictional discourse might then usurp the “history of the Holocaust” altogether’ (Young 7) become even more relevant the further we move in time from the events themselves. We are now the generations who learn about the Holocaust through second- and third-hand accounts, for whom it is *history*, even though

many of the generation who lived through it are still alive. The liberation of the camps over sixty years ago will soon pass from living memory. Does this *reduce* our responsibility with regard to historical veracity, or *increase* it? Blake Eskin paraphrases one of Lawrence Langer's arguments quite neatly: 'When Auschwitz recedes from the collective memory as the battlefields of the Napoleonic wars and World War I did, a future Tolstoy or Hemingway can render the camp with his full imaginative powers . . . but not before' (71). This statement seems to suggest that the need to restrain from fiction in the case of the Holocaust is primarily out of respect for those still living, rather than a general belief that history should not be muddied by fiction. When no survivors, perpetrators or witnesses remain perhaps fiction then becomes a way to recover memory when lived memory is no more.

### **The Case of DM Thomas' *The White Hotel***

As well as raising concerns about misrepresenting history, a fiction writer's creation of meaning around *imagined* plots and characters can lead to charges of 'appropriation'. Such was the case when DM Thomas wrote *The White Hotel*, a novel with the 'ambition . . . to demythologise Freudian explanations by subjecting them to a brutal encounter with actual events' (Rosenfeld 'Perspectives'). Thomas' novel is in six parts, including a Prologue of Freud's correspondence, and takes the form of a pornographic poem outlining Lisa Erdman's sexual fantasies, a prose journal of the same surreal sexual fantasies, Freud's case study of Lisa Erdman, the narrative of the actual events in Lisa's life leading to her slaughter at Babi Yar and, finally, a narrative of Lisa in an afterlife that is a strange amalgam of Christian belief and the setting of an Israeli kibbutz.

The novel faced criticism for the appropriation of suffering to make a point about Freudian theory, thereby ascribing artificial meaning to real historical events. Historian Alvin Rosenfeld argues that ‘to invoke a hundred thousand dead at Babi Yar as the means to delegitimise Freudian theory is to burden this novel with an historical weight far in excess of what it can easily carry’ (‘Perspectives’). Rosenfeld further argues that Lisa’s end at Babi Yar, where her phantom reproductive pain becomes an actuality as she is bayoneted through the reproductive organs, is gratuitous (‘Perspectives’) and indeed there is no explicit reason why Thomas had to use the Holocaust as the reason for the physical manifestation of Lisa’s phantom pain; another kind of attack in another context could have made the point just as well. This also led to accusations of voyeurism, that Thomas was ‘narrating the Holocaust to give readers a sadomasochistic thrill’ (Vice 39), an accusation no doubt also arising from the pornographic content of the early sections of the novel. The critic Sylvia Kantaris stated that the ‘element of titillation is . . . strong – *and* wrapped up in an art package so that you can get it in the guise of culture and feel virtuous in the process’ (Vice 54).

There was also an accusation of plagiarism arising from Thomas’ reliance on A Anatolii’s (sometimes known as A Anatoli Kuznetsov) *Babi Yar* for his historical information (Vice 40). *Babi Yar* is itself an historical novel and while it does relate actual events the form of the novel means that it is fictionalised, which means that Thomas’ Babi Yar events are based on fiction, rather than historical fact. Most of Thomas’ account of the massacre at Babi Yar is drawn directly from this source, in often startlingly similar language. Sue Vice, in her book *Holocaust Fiction*, attempts to argue that Thomas’ reliance on Anatolii’s text is not simply a case of plagiarism but can instead be seen as ‘a recourse to documentary sources’ (40). This argument relies on accepting Anatolii’s text as historical record, which ignores the fact that it is a novel and uses devices of fiction, such as dialogue and characterisation. Thomas himself said he felt it would have been immoral if he, ‘a comfortable Briton, fictionalised the

holocaust’ and so instead he stayed close to his source material (Vice 39), which raises the question of whether he took into account that *Babi Yar* was a novel. Vice takes issue with Thomas’ defence, not because it is based on a fictionalised version of events but because she feels that ‘using Kuznetsov’s words verbatim is bad enough in the eyes of those who would accuse the author of plagiarism, but changing them to fit the rest of a novelistic scheme seems even worse’ (40). Vice’s concern is that he has taken the events of Anatolii’s text and used them in a changed form to suit the purposes of his own novel, thereby changing the meaning of the events and deforming the historical facts. Again, Vice’s criticism treats Anatolii’s version as ‘purer’ and more historical than Thomas’.

Thomas was also criticised widely for *The White Hotel*’s Christianisation of the Holocaust (his protagonist is a Christian who is drawn into the Holocaust because of her marriage to a Jew; after the shootings at Babi Yar Lisa and the slaughtered Jews enter a decidedly Christian afterlife). While the Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust there is an obvious sensitivity to this kind of appropriation of a predominately Jewish persecution by Christians and for Jewish characters to enter a Christian-styled afterlife is understandably offensive to many Jewish people. Thomas claims he wrote the afterlife section of the novel, ‘The Camp’, because ‘I couldn’t leave it with those bodies in Babi Yar. It had to go on’ (Vice 49). This leads us to another of the major literary and moral ‘perils’ of Holocaust literature: the endings.

## **Holocaust Endings and the Right to Write**

In Holocaust narratives, Clendinnen observes, ‘the closure is at once predictable, and utterly bereft of meaning and comfort’ (188). The camps, *Einsatzgruppen* killing squads, the dehumanisation inflicted by the Nazi system and, for the majority of the

victims, their ultimate deaths at the hands of that system, are the endings for most victims of the Holocaust. These fixed and grim endings leave little creative room for the writer of fiction and choices such as Thomas' receive wide criticism. The fact is, Vice points out, writing fiction about the Holocaust 'entails the loss of such novelistic staples as suspense, choosing one's ending, constructing characters with the power to alter their fate, allowing good to triumph over evil, or even the clear identification of such moral categories' (3). We can of course write from the point of view of the survivors, as their endings contain more possibilities for hope, suspense and positive closure but they are the minority of victims; most Holocaust victims were murdered and, according to Clendinnen, 'Only the dead know the full bitterness of their victimhood, and they are silent' (56). Which brings us to the issue of authority: who has the right to speak for the dead, to write about the Holocaust?

Whether or not Adorno meant it was impossible to write about the Holocaust, the fact is that people have done so and many seem compelled to do so. These works fall into three categories: the literature by survivors, the literature by the children and grandchildren of survivors and the literature of non-survivors. (I am not concerning myself here with literature by or about the perpetrators – I will address that when discussing Helen Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper*.)

The right to write is often referred to as 'moral authority'. Critics, Vice observes, 'have invariably considered the biography of the author highly relevant' (3) and the survivors, it is assumed, have a 'moral authority', the stories *belong* to them. Commenting on *Night*, Rosenfeld says that Elie Wiesel has 'a moral authority so pronounced and so rarely found in our day that, to grasp it, one has to bypass almost all of modern literature and seek for interpretative parallels in the Bible and its major commentators' (*Double Dying* 59). Clendinnen notes that 'Already precious by virtue of their rarity, the witness testimonies can seem imbued with an air of unchallengeable authority' (25) whereas, in contrast, in his writing on second-generation survivors

Andrew Furman declares that ‘Artists who attempt to represent the Holocaust when their knowledge of the event is second- or third-hand, or transmitted by other cultural artifacts, can expect their work to elicit a special kind of scrutiny’ (84). Presumably this is not only because of concerns about muddying the historical record but also because we are concerned about *intent* when it comes writers who are not writing from experience: *Why* are they writing about the Holocaust? *What* are they trying to say and do they have a right to say it?

Children and grandchildren of survivors, writers such as Yaffa Eliach, Jonathan Safran Foer and Art Spiegelman, are conferred a measure of authority by right of birth. Their families have suffered and, often, are still suffering; their childhoods have been imprinted with the events of the Holocaust and therefore it becomes an element of their story too. Often they write from the fringes of the victims’ experience, relating the stories of family members and their impressions of the impact the Holocaust has had on their own lives. Those who venture into the heart of the horrors, into the ghettos and concentration camps, qualify their accounts by giving us their sources: Eliach names her interviewees and Spiegelman attempts to make his interviews with his father and the way in which he uses the material transparent to the reader. They create a sense of trust between themselves and the reader by drawing attention to their source material and their personal connection to that source material.

The fact is, Vice says, ‘readers are suspicious of the motives of outsiders’ (4), suspecting them, as Thomas was accused, of voyeurism, appropriation, falsification and mystification. George Steiner, whose *Language and Silence* remains a pivotal text in Holocaust literary criticism, asks ‘Does any writer, does any human being other than an actual survivor have the right to put on this death-rig?’ (Young 130). His choice of terminology, ‘death-rig’, reveals a discomfort, a suspicion of voyeurism, a sense of fear and disgust. The question he poses, whether non-survivors have a right to don the death-rig, is not an easy question to answer.

Writers have always adopted voices different from their own, speaking across gender, race, culture, nationality and sexuality. They often tell stories that lie outside the bounds of their actual experience, based on research and imagination. To assign the Holocaust a sacred position, to put it beyond the grasp of writers and other artists, creates a barrier, separates Jews from non-Jews, victims from non-victims, those who lived through the events from those who came after. This barrier is constructed with the best of intentions; those who suffered though the Holocaust were stripped of their belongings, their citizenship, their dignity and their right to life and it is understandable that they are wary of their stories being appropriated too. Yet there is a danger in allowing the Holocaust to be cordoned off, with only certain writers allowed access (whether they are survivors or descendants of survivors): it denies our shared humanity and the power fiction has to break down barriers and to see from different perspectives. Fiction has the ability to confront our prejudices, to make us identify with the 'other', to make us *feel* what the 'other' feels. It is a unique way of addressing complex issues; it can frame the Holocaust in a way history and fact cannot and can address an audience that may not be interested in pure historical record.

To fictionalise the Holocaust, then, is to address complex moral issues and raise questions that cannot be easily answered, if they can be answered at all. But that can also be where the power of fiction lies. The Holocaust makes us face what it means to be human in the twentieth and post-twentieth centuries and to exclude fiction from these realities denies our shared humanity. If we can no longer write from the position of Holocaust victim or perpetrator what else can we no longer write about? Should straight writers be denied access to writing about gay characters because they haven't lived the experience? Should men be denied the right to write about women? Should we be limited to writing about our own experiences and selves? Denying writers access to the Holocaust denies our capacity to imagine other experiences and points of view.

Since the rise of identity politics we have become more sensitive to the adoption of other viewpoints. In Australia for example we have become sensitised to the appropriation of Aboriginal stories and of trespassing against their cultures and beliefs. This sensitivity is a necessary development given the appropriation of Aboriginal stories, land and culture by European colonisers; I don't believe we should thoughtlessly trample over others' beliefs and cultures but we need to recognise that sensitivity is not censorship. We can disapprove of the appropriation of stories but are we willing to endorse and impose complete denial of access? Moral questions are foregrounded when fictionalising the Holocaust but does that mean it cannot be written, or can only be written by certain accredited people? Or is it the sensitivity, responsibility and intelligence of the approach that matters? We can feel discomfort when reading Holocaust fiction but such discomfort makes us aware of the moral complexity of the issues involved and can be powerful in the hands of a responsible writer.

Ultimately our very humanity gives us the right to don the death-rig and yet, although censorship may be too extreme, there are limits to artistic freedom. Obviously we must be aware of 'hate speech' and racial vilification and creative freedom should perhaps be qualified as freedom with *responsibility*. It may not be a question of *who* has the right to write but *how* they write. There are occasions where creative artists enter sensitive territory and the responsible artist can display an awareness of that sensitivity by being more open and allowing more questions. It may be that the way in which we wear the death-rig is more important than whether we have 'ownership' of it.

When critics discuss the works of Sylvia Plath and her appropriation of Holocaust imagery as a metaphor for psychic pain, many argue that the Holocaust has filtered into the very fabric of Western culture and, as such, belongs to all of us. 'We might look to her poetry,' James Young suggests in his discussion of Holocaust narrative, 'for the ways the Holocaust has entered public consciousness as a trope' (132). The Holocaust

has become a cultural reference for ultimate pain and suffering, and for ultimate evil. Plath's experience of the Holocaust was as a 'universal point of reference for all kinds of evil, oppression, and suffering' (Young 131). Of course we must be aware that Plath was not writing Holocaust literature per se, she was using the Holocaust as a metaphor; her metaphorical use of the Holocaust caused controversy and raises questions that can be distinguished from those of fictionalising the Holocaust. Relevant here is that Plath's poetry and her adoption of the Holocaust as metaphor introduces us to the idea that the Holocaust is now central to Western culture's understanding of itself in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and is therefore relevant to all of us. Along with other poets of her generation, Anne Sexton among them, Plath learned about the Holocaust second-hand; they are the first generation of artists to approach the Holocaust from a distance and they reveal a metamorphosis in what the Holocaust *means*: it has become a cultural reference point, part of a linguistic landscape, an historical horror rather than a contemporary one. They show us a new way of writing about the Holocaust, a new perspective arising from their distance from the material.

In his discussion of modernity and the Holocaust Zygmunt Bauman stresses that it is a way of belittling the Jews to see the Holocaust 'as something that happened to the Jews; as an event in *Jewish* history' (1). Rather it was an event in human history, a pivotal moment in European and Western history and culture and has ramifications for everyone belonging to that culture. Schwarz believes that 'when Holocaust history is personalised and dramatised, when abstractions and numbers give way to human drama . . . . the distance between us and the victims closes' (33) and Berenbaum feels that in fiction 'death is restored to its human place as an event in the life of real people' (*Vision* 76). In other words, fiction allows us to remove the label of 'Victim' and see these people as human again, as people like us. 'History,' Langer declared, 'provides the details – then abruptly stops' (*Literary Imagination* 9); literature allows us to explore beyond factual information to psychological impact, philosophy and the human

response to atrocity. It gives us a window into the human condition that goes deeper than facts and figures.

Even George Steiner, who in 1958 famously wrote that ‘the best *now*, after so much has been set forth, is perhaps to be silent’ (188), also said when remarking on Sylvia Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery, ‘perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who *can* focus on them rationally and imaginatively’ (330).

Those who argue for the necessity of a literature of the Holocaust and the freedom for writers to write fiction about it believe that all writing is better than silence. Writing, Rosenfeld claims, is ‘an effective counterforce to nihilism’ and is an act of ‘preserving the human’ (‘Problematics’ 3). He feels that while writing fiction is fraught with dangers, ‘how much greater the injustice and more terrible the blasphemy to remain silent’ (‘Problematics’ 4) because to ‘submit to the finality of silence is to confirm, however unwillingly, the triumphant nihilism of Nazism’ (‘Problematics’ 185). Even Adorno himself said that ‘not even silence gets us out of the circle’ (367) because silence is a further death for the victims. Silence buries the events forever, which goes against the drive survivors have felt to testify, to ensure the world knows their stories and witnesses the crime. ‘Better abused memory in this case,’ Young has decided, ‘which might be critically qualified, than no memory at all’ (133).

The literary critic AI Alvarez takes these arguments a step further, believing that ‘from the fragile, tentative, individual discriminations of art emerge precisely those moral values which, if understood and accepted, would make totalitarian atrocities impossible’ (23). Alvarez wants to return art to the humanistic. The value of artistry was questioned in the wake of Nazism and the Holocaust; refusing to let the shadow of Nazism destroy the ideals of art is a continuing resistance. The contemporary critic Daniel Schwarz agrees, feeling that ‘in truth it is barbaric *not* to write poetry, in part because if we do not write imaginative literature, how can there be a post-Holocaust era?’ (22).

In the end, Langer claims, the ‘literature of the Holocaust is neither awesome nor holy, only painful’ (*Divided Voice* 45). If we choose to write we need to be aware of and respectful of this pain. Writing about the Holocaust involves a moral dimension; in the case of imaginative literature ‘moral’ writing can simply mean opening up questions about the construction and content of Holocaust narratives, not providing a ‘neat’ plot and simplified meanings but allowing there to be complexity without resolution. My following analyses of texts will illustrate my personal path to narrative choices as I navigated ‘the realm of “truthful lies” which is poetry and fiction’ (Steiner 147).

Fantastic Narrative Strategies:  
the Use of the Hasidic Tale,  
Magic Realist Folk Tale  
and the Fable  
in Holocaust Literature

The first texts I wish to discuss have adopted non-realist narrative strategies. Yaffa Eliach has written in the traditional form of the Hasidic tale, a religious form of parable; Jonathan Safran Foer's depiction of the now eradicated Eastern European *shtetl* takes the form of folk tale with magic realist elements; and John Boyne claims his children's book about the son of the commandant at Auschwitz is a fable. All three writers have taken different narrative positions for different reasons and I would like to explore the ramifications of each strategy within the context of the wider debate about the ethics of fictionalising the Holocaust.

### **Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust***

Hasidism is a branch of Judaism that emerged in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century and, Eliach claims, 'one of the movement's most important contributions was its literature, particularly the tales and anecdotes' (*Tales* xvi). Hasidism secularised religion: storytelling and prayer about daily life was considered as important as the study of the Torah, the Talmud and the Midrash (*Tales* xv). 'The main themes of Hasidic tales,' Eliach says in her Foreword, 'are love of humanity, optimism, and a boundless belief in God and the goodness of humankind' (*Tales* xvi). These themes are not ones we usually associate with Holocaust literature.

Yaffa Eliach is an Hasidic Jew and at the time of writing *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* in the late 1970s and early 1980s she was teaching courses on Hasidism and the Holocaust at Brooklyn College in New York. She and her students conducted oral interviews with friends and family who were survivors and also took note of stories that had circulated the Hasidic communities they interviewed (the survivors interviewed were not all from New York; some were from Israel, Europe and Australia). Eliach then turned these oral histories into 89 Hasidic tales, divided into four sections –

‘Ancestors and Faith’, ‘Friendship’, ‘The Spirit Alone’ and ‘At the Gates of Freedom’ – and these sections represent the victims’ progression through the experience of the Holocaust. Perhaps the most famous tale in Eliach’s book, quoted often, is the first one, ‘Hovering above the Pit’, in which Rabbi Israel Spira and a friend are ordered to jump across a pit at Janowska Road camp:

‘Each of you dogs who values his miserable lives and wants to cling to it must jump over one of the pits and land on the other side. Those who miss will get what they rightfully deserve – ra-ta-ta-ta-ta’  
(*Tales* 3).

The rabbi’s friend despairs but the rabbi counsels him that it is God’s will: ‘If it was decreed from heaven that we be commanded to jump, pits will be dug and jump we must’ (*Tales* 4); their turn comes to jump – ‘the rabbi closed his eyes and commanded in a powerful whisper, “We are jumping!”’ (*Tales* 4) – they jump, making it to the other side. The friend weeps and asks the rabbi how he got them across:

‘I was holding onto my ancestral merit. I was holding on to the coattails of my father, and my grandfather and my great-grandfather, of blessed memory,’ said the rabbi and his eyes searched the black skies above. ‘Tell me, my friend, how did *you* reach the other side of the pit?’

‘I was holding on to you,’ replied the rabbi’s friend. (*Tales* 4)

As Holocaust fiction this story can be seen as problematic: it ascribes a meaning to the jumping of the pit that is specifically religious; claims that God was able to control, indeed decreed, the actions of the Nazis and Ukrainians; it takes the text from an historical account to a more fantastic level of storytelling; and it is obviously fictionalised, as can be seen from the presence of dialogue. Yet the major defence of Eliach’s work rests on its status as an Hasidic tale. How does the fact of it being an Hasidic tale sidestep the criticisms another style of Holocaust fiction might face? The writing of Hasidic tales is an act of memorial, of resistance and an act of preservation.

The Holocaust almost succeeded in wiping out entire cultures in Eastern Europe – the Jewish *shtetl* and Jewish *shtetl* life no longer exist in countries such as Poland and the Ukraine. What remained of Jewish communities after the war were scattered to the corners of the globe and there was, and still is, the threat that beliefs, ways of life, and culture, would die. ‘If the tale fails,’ Eliach has stated, ‘the only imprint of their existence will be a patch of blackened sky and a handful of scattered ashes’ (*Tales* xxv). Her book, when it was published in 1982, was the first work of original Hasidic tales in more than 100 years and the first to feature women as main protagonists and tellers of the Hasidic tale (*Tales* xxi). The act of not only preserving but advancing a religious and cultural form of storytelling, writing them with a post-feminist twentieth century filter, is obviously a valuable one and Eliach acts ‘to commemorate the cultural universe that was destroyed along with the people’ (*Ezrahi Words Alone* 97). With regards to this sentiment, Elie Wiesel wrote that ‘words have been our weapon, our shield, the tale our lifeboat’ (*Ezrahi Words Alone* 98); the Hasidic tale is the lifeboat of a religious movement, a cultural artifact and the Hasidic way of framing the world through optimistic belief.

This idea is, of course, wider than the specific form of the Hasidic tale, encompassing the scope of Hebraic literature and storytelling. In traditional Hebraic literature ‘historical events are absorbed into an inherited valuational framework’ (*Ezrahi Words Alone* 97). For example the exodus of the Jews from Egypt is structured into an existing system of religious beliefs and becomes part of a wider Jewish (and now Judeo-Christian) story. In her work on Jewish literature of the Holocaust Sidra Ezrahi holds that ‘the Hebraic writer cannot regard the Nazi epoch as unrelated to, or isolated from, the issue of both social and metaphysical continuity’ (*Holocaust Writer* 135) and it is a strategy of resistance, Gomel believes, to ‘use a rigid narrative formula to combat the disintegrating pull of the cataclysm’ (182). The use of the Hasidic tale reaffirms and extends centuries of belief and culture and Eliach’s narrative formula is

an integral part of preserving her religious culture and defying the legacy of Nazism. Eliach herself admits to feeling her role as part of a long established religious tradition: ‘Whenever I wrote the tales, I felt a need to cleanse my hands, as does the scribe who is writing a sacred book’ (*Tales* xxv).

While it is admirable to preserve the form of the tale and its religious and cultural heritage, it places an enormous weight of responsibility on the text itself and is problematic in terms of a literature of the Holocaust, partly because Eliach has to fit the events to an existing structure, which implies manipulation, rearrangement and authorial interference. ‘Eliach can finally transmit them,’ Young argues, ‘only as they are legendarily reformulated to fit Hasidic principles of righteousness and justice’ (41).

Michael Berenbaum discusses the tension between Eliach’s attempts ‘to view the Holocaust as the domain of the miraculous and as a world in which the Torah still reigned’ and the cold fact that ‘Auschwitz was not a place of miracles; the victims far outnumbered the survivors, and many people with an ancestral lineage of magnificent distinction perished along with those of more common background’ (‘Yaffa Eliach’). What do Eliach’s tales mean for those who were not saved by miracles? Does ‘Hovering above the Pit’ suggest that the people who failed to jump the pit at Janowska Road believed in God less than Rabbi Spira? Were their ancestors less meritorious? Does the Hasidic tale then inherently pass judgment on those who were not saved?

The form of the Hasidic tale raises many complex and troubling questions and yet letting the form perish, or denying the Hasidic tale access to the Holocaust – a pivotal moment in Jewish history – because of its inherent optimism and faith is to deny a particular sect of Jews the right to their own stories and history. Kremer declares that ‘Throughout time, tale-tellers have made recourse to myth and fable to circumvent the strictures of fact while seeking a truth with even more human resonance than realism’ (Kremer 41); the tale of Rabbi Spira certainly resonates with the desperation of the moment, the horror of the impending violence and the hope inherent in faith. The rabbi

and his friend never for a moment lose their humanity or find themselves reduced to mere 'victims'.

Eliach has been criticised for the conflict between her choice of narrative form and the fact that she attempts to claim historical veracity. Her work uncomfortably straddles a line between constructed tale and survivor testimony. The tales are based on interviews conducted by Eliach and her students with survivors (although there are a couple of apocryphal tales that are included because they had been accepted by the community) and at the end of each tale Eliach has included a short italicised paragraph identifying the historical root of the story; for example at the end of 'Hovering above the Pit' she has written: *'Based on a conversation of the Grand Rabbi of Bluzhov, Rabbi Israel Spira, with Baruch Singer, January 3, 1975.'* (Tales 4). The paragraph identifies the characters as real, living people, the event as an event in historical reality, related in an interview on a specific date with a specific interviewer. The paragraph is meant to convince the reader of the tale's veracity, its 'truth'. Yet the fact that it is italicised is a visual cue to the difference between the interview and the tale. The tale and Eliach's brief italicised statement of 'actuality' are in contrasting styles and hint at contrasting aims. The tale, as I have discussed, is a form of religious and cultural preservation and resistance, while the statement tells of an historical document or testament. Are the two mutually exclusive? Eliach's tales rely on a belief in God, a belief in the Hasidic tradition and the possibility of miracles – none of which traditionally have a place in the more coldly analytical realm of history. Young believes this reflects the 'impulse in Holocaust writers to insist on a documentary link between their texts and the events inspiring them' (51), which is an understandable impulse given the ferocity of the debate over the fictionalisation of the Holocaust. There is a feeling that if fiction is rooted in 'truth', in actual happenings to actual people, it constitutes a defence against those who would criticise the fiction.

Young is a critic who questions Eliach's work with regard to her need to verify the historical sources of the tales. He claims that 'they are not documents of fact amenable to historical verification and analysis' (42). There are few specifics in the tales; they are broad brush-strokes of atrocity and camp life told in the tone of religious parable, with the intent of showing that 'there is a way out of the inferno, not just a way into it' (Eliach *Tales* xxi). In this sense, Young argues, 'they are necessarily allegorical and parabolic in both mode and intent, [and an] affirmation of spirit over fact, the triumph of vision over events' (42). Therefore there is an inherent conflict between the form of the tale and Eliach's attempted verification of the stories (I say 'attempted' because not all of them could be verified) and the way she presents them as historical fact. Young also notes that in the first printing of the book Eliach was credited as the 'editor' but in subsequent editions the 'Edited by' has been removed, 'leaving the relationship between Eliach and these tales ambiguously unstated' (40). There is a considerable difference between tales *collected* by Eliach and tales *written* by Eliach. 'Collection' tends to imply a collation of written record, and of many voices, while 'written' is an explicit admission of an act of creation, of manipulation and craft. The foreword to the 1988 Vintage edition seems to indicate that Eliach collected the interviews and *wrote* them up as Hasidic tales, thereby becoming the author of the stories.

A defence against concerns about the tension between historical veracity and a more fictional form of storytelling, Ezrahi claims, again rests with the tradition of the tale, in that 'unlike myth, the midrashic manner commands a certain authenticity, and communal experience must be transmitted with a measure of realism as well as miracle' (*Words Alone* 120). The Hasidic tale is a story rooted in secular life, in actual events. 'The role of the witness or transmitter of collective Jewish experience,' Ezrahi holds, 'is to establish at least a degree of verisimilitude and then to interpret and explore the event and to assign it a place in Jewish history' ('Holocaust Writer' 143). The tension here is between the history of a religion and religious group and the secular history of Europe,

World War II and the Holocaust. The Holocaust, the actual survivors' experiences and how they perceived them as Hasidic Jews, must be able to be represented in this traditional cultural form. Of course this right relies on *who* is doing the telling, which brings us again to the issue of authority.

The Hasidic tale is culture specific – it is not a form widespread in the Jewish community; it belongs to a specific movement from a specific region of Eastern Europe. Does a non-Hasid have the right to adopt this form? Eliach is an Hasid; she gathered the tales within the Hasidic community and related them in a uniquely Hasidic form. What would it mean for a non-Hasid to adopt the form of the tale? Obviously, critics have focused on intent. Why would you adopt the form? What are you hoping to achieve? Preservation of culture may be the province of members of the culture only, otherwise how authentic is it? Many of the readers of Eliach's work will of course be members of the Hasidic community but her work can also serve as an entrance into an unfamiliar world, culture and set of beliefs for those who are not Hasids. To say that the Hasidic tale is *only* the province of Hasidic Jews (as readers and writers) is exclusionary, in the same way that saying only those directly connected to the Holocaust have the right to write about it is exclusionary, when one of the purposes of art can be to move beyond the barriers between people and cultures, to express a shared humanity. The primary difference with the Hasidic tale is its roots in religion. We must be careful to respect other people's religions, as well as their culture, laws (and land rights) and if a non-Hasid is to write in a narrative form specific to a religion and culture there needs to be a deep understanding of that religion and culture.

'The optimistic power vested in the Hasidic tale,' Eliach writes in her Foreword, 'defies the burning furnaces and glowing chimneys of the concentration camp universe' (*Tales* xx). There is a wonderful sense of reclamation in Eliach's tales; a sense of history being conquered by faith, and while it may not be palatable to all survivors or readers it is a unique and important voice in Holocaust literature. Eliach has

demonstrated that a non-realist narrative form, while open to criticism for lack of historicity, can be an effective form for Holocaust literature.

### **Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated***

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* also adopts a non-realist style but does not rely on a strictly defined, culturally determined narrative structure the way Eliach's work does. Foer is of my generation, the generation whose grandparents lived through the war years; a generation that is distanced from the Holocaust by time, culture and experience. His writing adds to the existing literature of the Holocaust, a literature that includes work by those who lived through the events and those from subsequent generations, who write at varying distances from the material. In attempting to engage with his family's past Foer has adopted postmodern and magic realist techniques as a strategy for dealing with the difficulties inherent in writing about the Holocaust. The novel consists of three styles: 1. Fictional letters to Foer by Alexander Perchov, the young man who was his guide on a trip to the Ukraine; 2. Alexander's written accounts of the trip, which he posts with his letters to Foer in the US; and 3. Foer's magic realist folk tales of his ancestors' Jewish *shtetl* life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and in the 1940s. The novel explores the inherent manipulation involved in writing, as Alexander admits to changing events and descriptions of people and places and through the construction of a fictional Foer and a fictional Alexander. The reader is left not knowing what is real and what is imagined.

Apparently the author Jonathan Safran Foer, just like the character Jonathan, went to the Ukraine in search of the woman who rescued his grandfather from the Nazis. The actual Foer found very little information and returned to the US without the documentary material he needed to write a novel. The novel he wrote in the absence of

this documentary material is an exploration of the ‘unknowability’ of the past: Jonathan is unable to represent his ancestors except through the distancing and fairy-tale-like *shtetl* folk tales set, for the most part, centuries before the Holocaust itself (his ancestors inhabit a world that is a construction; a place he is unable to visit physically because it does not exist). Alexander’s struggles to understand his father and grandfather, the violence in his family and his own place in the world are filtered through his incomplete and often hilariously inaccurate English, which is another marker of distance, another way of rendering the past and other people unknowable. The Holocaust is merely glimpsed by the reader, through second-hand accounts given by Alexander’s grandfather and Augustine, which are further filtered through Alexander’s broken English and Jonathan’s manipulation.

The presence of Foer as a character in his own novel could be seen to give it documentary weight, were it not undercut by the reflexive and non-realist techniques he adopts. Authors are usually consigned to non-fiction and creative non-fiction as their presence in a text gives a sense of authenticity, a sense that the events actually happened and were witnessed. Foer’s editor at Houghton Mifflin, Eric Chinsky, claims that having Foer as a character in the book ‘adds an immediacy and a power to the book that would otherwise be lacking’ because the core of the book is about ‘the play [between] fact and fiction, which leaves the reader wondering what really happened’ (Dahlin). From the opening of the novel we are aware that we are at the mercy of untrustworthy narrators. The character Jonathan is not a first person narrator, he only appears as a character seen through the eyes of Alexander:

When we found each other, I was very flabbergasted by his appearance. This is an American? I thought. And also, This is a Jew? He was severely short . . . . He was wearing nor blue jeans nor the uniform. In truth, he did not look like anything special at all. I was underwhelmed to the maximum.’ (Foer 32).

We are alerted to fact that Jonathan is the author of the folk tale chapters by Alexander's letters, which make it clear that Jonathan is sending him chapters of the book to read and asking for Alexander to write his own version of their journey. This makes it obvious to the reader that the book has been crafted, reworked and manipulated. Jonathan himself remains a largely unknowable figure, revealed to us only through Alexander's portrayal, written in unstable English, which immediately undercuts the trust usually accorded to the author appearing in the text: this is not the real Jonathan Safran Foer; this is a depiction filtered through another character, a Jonathan held up to mockery from the first, severely short and underwhelming.

The novel begins with Alexander's father instructing him and his grandfather to guide the 'hero' and then, without explanation, moves on to two folk tale chapters: 'The Beginning of The World Often Comes' and 'The Lottery, 1791'; the chapter following these unexplained folk tales consists of a letter from Alexander to Jonathan, who doesn't make an appearance himself until chapter five, after all of the other narrative forms (account, folk tale, letter) have been established.

*Everything Is Illuminated* is essentially about the distortion inherent in writing. Alexander's English is a prime example; words are used in new ways, to discover new meanings, and are slippery and untrustworthy. The reader must be a translator of meaning, as Alexander's incorrect or inappropriate word choices produce bizarre and sometimes opaque images. For example:

'I know many people who dig rapid cars and famous discotheques. There are so many who perform the Sputnik Bosom Dalliance – which is always terminated with a slimy underface – that I cannot tally them on my hands' (2).

The manipulation involved in writing is constantly laid bare. In his first written account Alexander describes himself as 'unequivocally tall. I do not know any women who are taller than me. The women I know who are taller than me are lesbians' (3) and later in a 'private' letter he writes '*And thank you, I feel indebted to utter, for not*

*mentioning the not-truth about how I am tall. I thought it might appear superior if I was tall'* (24). Alexander is, by his own admission, an untrustworthy narrator.

Through his letters we are also made aware of Jonathan's influence on Alexander's writing:

*I did fashion all of the other corrections you commanded. I inserted what you ordered me to in the part when I first encountered you. (Do you in truth think that we are comparable?) As you commanded, I removed the sentence "He was severely short," and inserted in its place, "Like me, he was not tall." (53).*

We realise that the accounts are not only manipulated by Alexander but by the character of Jonathan (and, we of course make the leap, by the unseen and unknown actual author, Foer). Foer uses this technique to explore the dangers of fictionalising such a serious subject matter, for example when Alexander asks:

*'We are being very nomadic with the truth, yes? The both of us? Do you think this is acceptable when we are writing about things that occurred? If your answer is no, then why do you write about Trachimbrod and your grandfather in the manner that you do, and why do you command me to be untruthful? If your answer is yes, then this creates another question, which is if we are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? (179).*

Using Alexander's voice, Foer directly addresses his own ethical concerns, and, Behlman believes 'foregrounds, through a set of untrustworthy narrators, the impossibility of any unmediated, wholly accurate access to the past' (59).

The Holocaust is a shadow and an absence in Foer's novel. Until the climax of the novel the Jews we meet live in a magic realist construction. We are introduced to this world as Jonathan's great-great-great-grandmother is born from the river Brod after a carriage has crashed:

*In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like*

jelly-fish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside  
of a plum. (13).

The town is renamed after the crashed driver (Trachim) and the river (Brod), Trachimbrod and Jonathan's folk tales follow the lives of his ancestors until 1941: his great-great-great-grandmother Brod, whose adoption is decided by means of a lottery, whose marriage arises out of a rape, and his grandfather Safran, a man with a dead arm, who pleasures old ladies, drives a Gypsy girl to suicide and experiences his only orgasm during a German bombing. The tales are as much about a surreal and fairy-tale world as they are about Jonathan's imagined ancestors, a world peopled with the likes of The Wisps of Ardisht:

The Wisps of Ardisht – that clan of artisan smokers in Rovno who smoked so much they smoked even when they were not smoking, and were condemned by shtetl proclamation to a life of rooftops as shingle layers and chimney sweeps. (16).

The religious life of Jews in Trachimbrod is divided into two distinct groups – those of the Upright Synagogue (a synagogue on wheels that is moved whenever the line between the 'Human' section of town and the Jewish section of town moves) and the Slouchers. Those of the Upright Synagogue shout every word: 'since the Venerable Rabbi enlightened that we are always drowning, and our prayers are nothing less than pleas for rescue from deep under the spiritual waters' (17); hang from high ropes so that they are closer to God and walk with an affected limp, or refuse to walk at all, because of the time a fly bothered them during prayer and the Rabbi shouted: 'SHOULD WE NOT RISE TO ITS CHALLENGE? AND I URGE YOU: CRASH TO THE GROUND BEFORE YOU DROP THE GREAT BOOK!' (17). Those of the Upright Synagogue fell to the floor and held the book, while those who became the Slouchers dropped the book and held onto the rope – forever dividing the Jews of Trachimbrod.

Jonathan's chapters about his ancestors combine elements of folk tale, fairy-tale and magic realism and, just like the rest of the novel, are overtly humorous. Foer claims that

when he initially approached this project he thought: 'I can't be whimsical, and I certainly can't be funny about this' (Dahlin) and it is true that very little Holocaust literature is humorous. The events are so grave that humour seems in poor taste and it must be noted that when Foer eventually confronts the Holocaust face to face the humour disappears. Yet his use of humour in the folk tale chapters and through the character of Alexander, who is unwittingly hilarious, does not feel inappropriate or disrespectful. With regards to the character of Alexander, the humour is a gentle and non-didactic technique for addressing ideas of authorial manipulation, the inadequacies of language, illusion and distance. Alexander also gives Foer a means to address the concerns raised by a 'humorous' Holocaust novel, which he does early in the novel when Alexander asks Jonathan: '*Are you being a humorous writer here, or an uninformed one?*' (25).

In the folk tales the humour is affectionate and is perhaps only successful because Jonathan and Foer are members of the community being mocked. It is an insider's joke, rather than a cruel parody. Foer cannot access the now-lost *shtetl*, it exists only in history and the memories of others and so his creation is a personal way of accessing it. Again, Foer foregrounds his choice, alerting the reader to the use of humour as a technique – in a letter to Jonathan Alexander says '*I wanted to be truthful and humorous, as you counseled*' (101). The humour adds humanity and is the opposite of the harsh and horrible reality to come. In portraying Trachimbrod as a fairy-tale world, idiosyncratic and vaguely ridiculous, Foer heightens the impact when Augustine (the sole survivor of Trachimbrod, the memory keeper who guards the towers of boxes filled with the possessions of the dead) tells Jonathan, Alexander and his grandfather about the arrival of the Nazis and the shooting of the entire town.

Foer maps his choices every step of the way, so by the time the reader reaches the climax, when we find out about the destruction of Trachimbrod from Augustine and about Alexander's grandfather's guilt from his grandfather, we are aware of the

complexity involved in fictionalising the subject. At this point the narrative tone changes, Augustine uses the spare language of survivor testimony: ‘And the General shot my sister. I could not look at her, but I remember the sound when things hit the ground still’ (186). The Trachimbrod that Alexander brings Jonathan to – a deserted field, a woman who is not really the woman they are looking for but whom they call Augustine anyway (a woman who ‘had a very unusual walk, which went from here to there with heaviness’) (146) – is a world away from the whimsical, humorous and charming fairy-tale Jonathan creates. Foer’s language shifts completely and the contrast has enormous impact. This is what lies at the end of the fairy-tale – the Holocaust. An entire world, a history, a culture and even the illusion and fairy-tale are reduced to a monument in an empty field and a woman who walks with heaviness. In his analysis of the text Lee Behlman remarks that

‘the reader’s sense of shock or surprise . . . derives from the apparent clash between the familiar characters, conventions, and storylines of Jewish folklore and the dreadful events that would destroy the culture that produced them’ (58).

Foer’s novel is a sophisticated narrative that addresses the very complex issues surrounding fictionalising the Holocaust. Like Art Spiegelman in *Maus* he has used self-reflexivity as a way to reconcile fictionalising the Holocaust with his ethical concerns. The use of texts within texts, of reader awareness of storytelling manipulation and technique, the use of humour and the acknowledgement of an unbridgeable distance are all techniques used to address the ethical dilemmas facing a non-survivor writing from a great distance: temporal, physical and emotional.

## **John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas***

John Boyne's recent novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a fable about the friendship between a Jewish prisoner and the son of Auschwitz's commandant. It is a work that sacrifices historical veracity for the sake of a dramatic denouement. The self-consciously child-like voice and the historical inaccuracies are chosen to serve the plot and they raise many concerns about the ethics of dealing with the Holocaust in fiction. Boyne is an Irish writer who is also from the same generation as Foer and who is similarly distanced from the material, although his choice of narrative strategies is completely different.

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is told from the point of view of Bruno, an extraordinarily naïve boy of nine, who relates the story of his father's promotion and the family's move to the camp in a way that reveals a complete lack of understanding and thus a complete absence of guilt or ownership of the situation. Throughout the novel the camp is referred to as 'Out-With', Hitler as 'The Fury' and Bruno imitates his father's salute supposedly without understanding it: "'Heil Hitler," he said, which, he presumed, was another way of saying, "Well, goodbye for now, have a pleasant afternoon." (54). Boyne establishes that Bruno has no concept of what a Jew is, for example when Lieutenant Kotler chastises one of the servants working in the house:

'And afterwards, when you return to the kitchen, make sure you wash your hands before touching any of the food, you filthy –'  
Lieutenant Kotler repeated the word he had used twice already and he spat a little as he spoke. (76).

Near the end of the novel Bruno's sister attempts to explain to him about the Jews.

'Jews, said Bruno, testing the word out. He quite liked the way it sounded. 'Jews,' he repeated. 'All the people over that side of the fence are Jews.'

'Yes, that's right,' said Gretel.

‘Are we Jews?’

Gretel opened her mouth wide, as if she had been slapped in the face. (182).

Bruno’s naiveté stretches the bounds of belief. Firstly, the fact that any German child living under the Nazi regime would not know the word ‘Führer’ (a very simple German word meaning ‘leader’) and would not know what a Jew was lacks credibility. The fact that the son of a high-ranking Nazi would not be a member of the Hitler Youth (and therefore be more completely aware of the climate of racial hatred) is ridiculous. Bruno has the tone and naiveté of a five-year old, not a nine-year old. In his review Ed Wright describes it as a ‘tonal clunkiness where you can almost hear the author thinking “how do I write a child”’? (‘The Boy’). Boyne needs Bruno to be naïve, to not comprehend the horror of the world around him in order for the denouement to have its impact.

Bored at ‘Out-With’ and secluded in the house with only his sister, who dislikes him, Bruno is lonely and restless. Eventually he starts ‘exploring’ and in the chapter ‘The Dot That Became a Speck That Became a Blob That Became a Figure That Became a Boy’ he meets Shmuel. Shmuel sits on the other side of the wire fence:

The boy was smaller than Bruno and was sitting on the ground with a forlorn expression. He wore the same striped pyjamas that all the other people on that side of the fence wore, and a striped cloth cap on his head. He wasn’t wearing any shoes or socks and his feet were rather dirty. On his arm he wore an armband with a star on it. (106).

The boys find that they share a birthday and are the same age. Bruno begins visiting Shmuel and when he remembers he brings food for the boy but often gets hungry and eats it himself on the walk to the fence. Their discussions do little to enlighten Bruno; for example when Shmuel reveals that he is Polish (Bruno has no idea that Out-With is in Poland), Bruno responds:

‘That’s not as good as Germany, is it?’

Shmuel frowned. ‘Why isn’t it?’ he asked.

‘Well, because Germany is the greatest of all countries,’ Bruno replied, remembering something that he had overheard Father discussing with Grandfather on any number of occasions. ‘We’re superior.’ (112).

When Bruno gets lice his head is shaved. ‘I look just like you now,’ Bruno tells Shmuel, to which his friend replies, ‘Only fatter’ (185). When Shmuel’s father goes missing he steals a pair of striped pyjamas for Bruno to wear and Bruno slips through the fence to help him search. Bruno doesn’t find the café and the village life he imagined was behind the wire and responds to his first glimpse of the camp by telling Shmuel, ‘I don’t like it here’ (208). Inevitably, the boys find themselves being rounded up with a group of others and herded into a long room.

And then the room went very dark and somehow, despite the chaos that followed, Bruno found that he was still holding Shmuel’s hand in his own and nothing in the world would have persuaded him to let it go. (213).

The only clue Bruno’s father has to his disappearance is the pile of clothes beside the fence. The book ends with a wry wrap-up:

And that’s the end of the story about Bruno and his family. Of course all this happened a long time ago and nothing like that could ever happen again.

Not in this day and age. (215).

Boyne’s plot can only work because of the deliberate historical inaccuracies. For example the fences at Auschwitz were electrified and there were manned watchtowers at regular intervals. Prisoners who came too close to the fences were shot. Shmuel would have been warned away from the wire and shot if he’d ignored the warning and there is no possible way a boy could have crawled under the wire, at least not without being electrocuted. What was to stop prisoners escaping the same way Bruno entered? There is also no possible way Bruno could have met Shmuel without anyone knowing, but without these inaccuracies Boyne would have no story. Without Bruno’s excessive

naiveté there would also be no story. If Bruno were a member of the Hitler Youth, aware of what Jews were and aware of his father's role, there is no way he would befriend Shmuel through the wire. The denouement, when the son of the commandant is gassed with his fellow human beings, is powerful and heartbreaking only because of these inaccuracies.

Boyne attempts to sidestep any responsibility to historical veracity by calling his work 'a fable'. The words appear on the inside cover, so the reader is adequately warned. Does the form of fable bear less of an historical or ethical burden than other fictional forms? Fables are tales with a moral. Boyne is certainly taking a position, albeit a very simplistic one. His portrayal of Hitler is an unsubtle portrayal of an uncharismatic, unlikable 'Fury', who is accompanied by a blonde woman. In actual fact, Hitler was usually very charming towards women and children and the children of his higher-ranked party officials often referred to him as 'Uncle'. Also, Eva Braun was never seen publicly with him and was usually confined to the chalet on the Obersalzberg. She was not widely known about until after their deaths. Boyne has chosen to ignore these ways of seeing Hitler in favour of a more black-and-white version. Hitler – the 'Fury' – is not a nice man. This is important in terms of the fable because the lesson is aimed at Bruno's father: the Nazi, the commandant of Auschwitz, a man directly responsible for millions of deaths. Bruno's father's boss is portrayed as an 'evil' man – 'evil' as it is understood in a children's story: he is unattractive and unappealing – which puts Bruno's father on the 'wrong' side. The moral of the fable seems to be that we are all human and when you kill another human, you kill yourself (or in the literal case of the story, when you kill another's child, you kill your own). Boyne also includes a warning ('beware this does not happen again') in his final lines.

The choice of the narrative form of 'fable' means that the story is inherently reductive. To simplify the Holocaust in such an extreme way is problematic. It is easy to adopt an 'us' and 'them' mentality, whether the 'them' is the victims or the

perpetrators. Bruno himself is neither – he is the innocent. Although in her review Kathryn Hughes argues that you can read Bruno’s innocence as representative of ‘the willful refusal of all adult Germans to see what was going on under their noses’ (‘Educating Bruno’), Gomel notes that in most fairy-tale narratives ‘the child is often the central figure: a personification of tough and stubborn innocence’ (182). Bruno is humanity before hatred has taken root and he stands in for the reader, a reader who views the Holocaust with incomprehension and at a distance.

The fact that the boys die together, holding hands for comfort, reinforces their shared humanity, but Bruno is not a Nazi. Even though he repeats the words of his father and grandfather he does not comprehend the meaning of those words. In the fable his death functions as a punishment for his father. Again, a critic could argue that Boyne’s appropriation of this material assigns false meaning. He has reconfigured Auschwitz, created a Hitler that fits our contemporary understanding of the man and positioned us with the innocent in order to tell a tale with a simplistic moral. However the fable only works if the reader has the knowledge to fill the gaps. It requires prior knowledge of the Holocaust.

The lacunae are many in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. For example, ‘Out-With’ is never referred to as Auschwitz, although Bruno’s sister constantly tells him he’s saying it wrong; ‘The Fury’ is not referred to directly as Hitler – it is our knowledge of Hitler and Eva Braun that enable us to recognise them; even the gassing of the boys is not explicit, there is mention of a long room and darkness but the fable only works if the reader has prior knowledge of the gas chambers. The lacunae are not a problem if we read the book as a work for adults but it is currently being marketed at children and young adults. Sixty years after the Holocaust, do children and young adults have the knowledge to fill the gaps? Many would argue that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is a way for new generations to learn about the Holocaust, about Auschwitz and racial hatred and our ultimate bond of shared humanity. But what about the historical

inaccuracies? The fact that this book may be the first introduction to the Holocaust for many of its readers places a heavy burden on it. Is it better for people to learn about it in any form, accepting the inaccuracies without knowing they exist, or is such simplification dangerous?

Boyne has gone out on an ethical limb with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, making deliberate choices to alter history to suit the point he wishes to make. After all, stories are not history. Fables especially are not history. And yet, unlike Foer, Boyne has set his fable in a concretely historical world, peopled with actual historical figures. Young believes that by 'mixing actual events with completely fictional characters, a writer simultaneously relieves himself of an obligation to historical accuracy (invoking poetic license), even as he imbues his fiction with the historical authority of real events' (52).

In both form and content *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* embodies fears about fictionalising the Holocaust. Boyne appropriates the suffering of the Jews to suit his own narrative ends, he ascribes a meaning to the events, he manipulates history to suit the story. Boyne's moral is a positive and necessary one; we do share an humanity and when we kill others we kill ourselves, but his methods are problematic.

Eliach, Foer and Boyne, by adopting non-realist narrative techniques, have acknowledged the divide between story and history. Foer acknowledges openly that he cannot access the past except through non-realist techniques. Eliach and Boyne have taken existing narrative forms and applied them to Holocaust stories, Eliach as an act of cultural preservation and resistance and Boyne for less concrete, less easily defensible reasons. Boyne and Foer demonstrate two radically different ways we can write at a distance from the material. They illustrate the story/history divide: fiction is not documentary and it is able to adopt non-realist strategies, without always losing a sense of 'truth'.

Contracts with the Reader:  
Writers Who Break  
the Reader/Writer Contract

The success of Eliach's, Foer's and Boyne's narratives relies on a clear contract with the reader. Young's concerns about whether Eliach is credited as 'editor' or 'author' are concerns about the clarity of this contract. If Eliach's contract specifies she is authoring a series of Hasidic tales the reader approaches the book differently than if her contract specifies she has collected a series of testimonies. Boyne has sought to make his contract explicit by labeling his work 'a fable', a label which appears on the inside cover. The contract is not always so explicit; for example Foer's contract is established through the unreliability of his narrative, which proclaims 'Do not trust me. This is invented'.

In this section I want to look at the complexity of this relationship between the writer and the reader and the importance of this invisible contract, especially with regards to Holocaust fiction. I want to do this by looking at the examples of two writers who have been seen to breach the reader/writer contract: Jerzy Kosinski and Helen Darville.

### **Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird***

Jerzy Kosinski was a Jew who survived the war in hiding and who claims in his Afterword to the second edition of *The Painted Bird*: 'that I survived was due solely to chance, and I had always been acutely aware that hundreds of thousands of other children had been condemned' (xi). Kosinski is deliberately vague in the Afterword about his nationality ('Eastern Europe' is as specific as he will get) and is at great pains to establish the book as fiction – 'Facts about my life,' he writes, 'and my origins should not be used to test the book's authenticity' (xiii). This Afterword was written after the book's first edition had weathered controversy and after the critics had turned their attention to *who* the author was and what his wartime experiences had been. *The*

*Painted Bird* was first published in 1965, seven years after Primo Levi published *If This is a Man* and five years after Elie Wiesel published *Night*. Holocaust literature (memoir, testimony and history) was still an emerging genre and Holocaust *fiction* was younger still.

*The Painted Bird* approaches the Holocaust through allegory, as a “translation” of the political, bureaucratic and sadistic layers of genocide into scenes of local horror’ (Vice 68). It is the story of a boy, possibly Gypsy, possibly Jew, wandering a nightmare landscape of violence and abuse, fleeing from one terrifying hiding place to the next. The opening paragraphs position the boy in an historical period:

In the first weeks of World War II, in the fall of 1939, a six-year-old boy from a large city in Eastern Europe was sent by his parents, like thousands of other children, to the shelter of a distant village’ (3)

The tone of this two-page introduction is again reminiscent of folk tales and fairy-tales and is succeeded by a first person narrative. The introduction sets the scene, establishing how the boy comes to be wandering alone, who is chasing him and why, and the fact that the villagers are also suffering under the Nazi regime. Kosinski obviously includes these introductory paragraphs because the boy, like Bruno in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, is a naïve narrator. The events are not explicitly linked to the Holocaust by the boy himself and he repeats the prejudices and superstitions of the villagers he encounters without displaying a clear understanding of what they mean.

For example when commenting on his time with Marta he says:

I was never allowed to pick up any of her lost hairs from the floor. It was well known that even a single lost hair, if spied by an evil eye, could be the cause of serious throat trouble. (10).

Antisemitism is implicit and not subject to analysis by the narrator, therefore the introductory paragraphs serve to guide us in filling the lacunae of the text. There is little else in the narrative to indicate such specificity (the photographs thrown from the

trainloads of deported Jews and the invasion by the Soviet forces are rare examples) and the novel reads like a folk tale, a tale of an ‘everyplace’.

In *The Painted Bird* the brutal world of the villagers comes to stand for the brutal world of the camps. The boy takes shelter with increasingly abusive and vile villagers, such as the miller who suspects a plowboy of coveting his wife and who gouges the plowboy’s eyes out with a spoon, or the farmer Garbos who hangs the boy from the ceiling and terrorises him with his dog, Judas, or Makar, who copulates with the farm animals and his own children and who has the billy goat rape his daughter. This is a world where the inhuman has become the norm, where the rules of civilisation have been swept aside and the bestial rules – a strong and horrific allegory for the dehumanisation of the Nazi system. Kosinski strips away the bureaucracy and the sterile language of Nazism to reveal the true horror beneath.

*The Painted Bird* features scenes of extreme pornographic violence, mapping the emotional experience of the Jew in hiding, rather than a literal truth. The boy has become, in Schwarz’s words, an ‘almost anaesthetised witness’ (187): the violence has ground him down to a base level where he is operating merely to survive. He has adapted to the world, becoming prey, naïve but not innocent, able to save himself by killing others, as we see when he tricks the carpenter into the rat pit and watches him being devoured by the rats:

Mad with greed, they tore from one another scraps of clothing, skin, and formless chunks of the trunk. They dived into the center of the man’s body only to jump out through another chewed hole. The corpse sank under renewed thrusts. When next it came to the surface of the bloody writhing sludge, it was a completely bare skeleton.  
(64).

The violence is confronting and seeks to make a point about the way the Holocaust overturned the familiar, the civilised and the humane. The Holocaust world, Kosinski is saying, has more in common with the brutality of early fairy-tale narratives (witches

eating children, stepsisters being made to dance themselves to death) than with later novelistic forms.

Kosinski's work has been criticised for the extremity of the violence and the graphic sexual content. There is a sense, Schwarz feels, that 'Kosinski enjoys describing sexual excess beyond the need of his text' (192). For example there is a scene where the village women attack Stupid Ludmilla:

Stupid Ludmilla lay bleeding. Blue bruises appeared on her tormented body. She groaned loudly, arched her back, trembled, vainly trying to free herself. One of the women now approached, holding a corked bottle of brownish-black manure. To the accompaniment of raucous laughter and loud encouragements from the others, she kneeled between Ludmilla's legs and rammed the entire bottle inside her abused, assaulted slit, while she began to moan and howl like a beast. (55).

Kosinski indulges in detailed description of such assaults; in fact they form the structure of the novel as the boy lurches from violence to violence. Many critics feel that

Kosinski's use of violence is exploitative, for example Ezrahi contends that the novel is

an orgy of scatology and cruelty and dwells on the grotesque details of sexual perversion and death largely in order to exploit the shocking, sensational effects which no other historical experience so easily affords. (161).

I would argue that the relentlessness of the repulsive violence and horror and its sheer extremity creates a version of the Holocaust experience that is unique and powerful, although certainly not easy to read. The experience of reading this book is grueling; it leaves the reader feeling soiled and degraded. It is an attempt to portray the concentrated horror of inhumanity, of prejudice and degradation, so that a reader with no personal experience of the Holocaust can begin to understand how it *felt*. Kosinski has chosen to shock his reader in an attempt to convey the emotional experience.

According to Langer he ‘seeks to transform [Auschwitz’s] legacy into primary truths more basic and universal’ (*Literary Imagination* 167).

Leslie Epstein has criticised Kosinski for this interpretation of the Holocaust experience. She objects to the extreme violence, feeling the Holocaust experience was largely defined by its banality; she believes that *The Painted Bird* ‘divert[s] us from what the actual atrocity – most unbearable in its monotony, its regularity, its unobtrusiveness – was like’ (Vice 70). Langer disagrees, feeling that ‘Kosinski has been one of the few who has not flinched before the ultimate cruelty of the age of the Holocaust – dying in a situation of literally unutterable horror’ (*Literary Imagination* 185).

Kosinski’s defence has often rested on his past. The way we read this text is determined by an unusually complex contract, due to Kosinski’s background and the scandals that have surrounded him. If a non-survivor were to write an Holocaust fiction as brutal and pornographic as Kosinski’s there would probably be an outcry over the exploitation of the material. Kosinski, while not a survivor of a camp, is a Jew who spent the war in hiding with his family in Eastern Europe. Stefan Maechler, who investigated the Binjamin Wilkomirski fraud – a case in which the author of an Holocaust memoir was revealed to be, not a survivor, as he claimed, but someone who had recovered ‘false’ memories through recovered memory therapy – is at pains to point out the difference between Wilkomirski’s situation and Kosinski’s. Commenting on *The Painted Bird*, Maechler says that the ‘plot was invented, but the pain was genuine and rooted in early childhood’ (214). The problems arise out of the fact that Kosinski often claimed that the book was autobiographical, for instance in an interview with historian Lawrence Langer, three years after the book was first published, he claimed that ‘what happened to him during the war was even worse than what happened to the boy in *The Painted Bird*. As it turned out, he was lying’ (Maechler 158).

In claiming his work was autobiographical Kosinski redefined his contract with the reader. Elie Wiesel claims that ‘when he told me it was autobiography I tore up my review and wrote one a thousand times better’ (Maechler 214). The label of autobiography grants *The Painted Bird* not only authenticity but heightened emotional impact. As fiction, the violence is repulsive and somewhat voyeuristic but as autobiography it carries an emotional weight that fiction does not and the charges of voyeurism and exploitation become empty because we read it as literal truth, as a form of testimony. Kosinski’s use of the first person voice heightens the autobiographical sense, although it is a voice completely contained to the perspective of a six year-old, without the hindsight of an older narrator.

The problem is that *The Painted Bird* is not autobiography and it became impossible for Kosinski to maintain the pretense. In the Afterword to the second edition in 1976 Kosinski claims:

‘I did not perceive myself as a vendor of personal guilt and private reminiscences, nor as a chronicler of the disaster that befell my people and my generation, but purely as a storyteller’ (xi).

This reveals a conflict with his earlier claims of autobiography. The fact is that Kosinski told multiple versions of the ‘truth’; for example ‘he told contradictory versions of leaving Poland to emigrate to the United States’ (Maechler 213) and as such he has rendered the ‘truth’ unknowable. His Afterword is an attempt to renegotiate a contract with his reader, presenting himself as ‘storyteller’ and the work as fiction rather than autobiography. The difference between fiction and autobiography, Kosinski maintains, is that fiction ‘forces the reader to contribute: he does not simply compare; he actually enters a fictional role, expanding it in terms of his own experience, his own creative and imaginative powers’ (xiv).

Even as fiction, however, *The Painted Bird* carries weight as it was written by a man who survived the war in hiding (even if it was a form of hiding more banal than his character’s). As Maechler suggests, it can be read as Kosinski’s *emotional* experience,

even if it wasn't his literal experience. Vice believes Kosinski was treated harshly, claiming that 'unable to accuse Kosinski of lacking a personal connection with the Holocaust, critics instead subjected the precise details of his connection to unforgiving scrutiny' (162).

The problem, Schwarz contends, is that the reader cannot help but 'read *The Painted Bird* with a double optics: on one hand, immersed in the world of his text, and on the other, aware that his life was often a performance, a text he created' (176). This is especially true in light of the later scandals over plagiarism and literary practice. In 1982 a *Village Voice* article accused Kosinski of plagiarism and of making 'extensive use of translators and collaborators' (Myers), and in her review of James Park Sloan's biography of Kosinski Julia Bloch Frey notes that rumours had been circulating for up to ten years prior to the publication of the accusations ('Lying'); for example in 1975, in an unpublished doctoral thesis Barbara Tapa argued that 'long passages of Kosinski books were more or less directly translated from Polish sources unknown to English speakers' (Frey). The scandals, Maechler claims, 'destroyed Kosinski's credibility' (213).

What effect does this have on the reader/writer contract? If we read *The Painted Bird* as autobiography, as it seems Kosinski initially wished us to, the contract is in tatters. If, however, we approach the text as fiction the contract would appear to hold. We read it as a 'story', contributing to the creation of meaning, as Kosinski suggested, rather than accepting it as 'truth'. We are willing to be more active as readers, less tentative, less fearful of misinterpreting what the writer is trying to tell us.

What impact does the author's status as survivor or non-survivor have on the contract if we read the novel as fiction? The fact that Kosinski survived the war in hiding allows us to read more authenticity into the emotional truth of the novel. But what if the novel was co-written by translators and collaborators? How do we read *The Painted Bird* if it is co-written by non-survivors? I would suggest then we would

approach it in the way we approach other imaginative fiction; as an invention. Being authored by non-survivors leaves it more open to charges of exploitation and criticism of the sexualisation and extremity of the violence. Yet I think the text is strong enough to withstand such criticism. It offers a visceral and powerful emotional experience, conveying the sense of being hunted and portraying dehumanisation in an extreme form, allowing the reader to feel the panic and horror and sheer relentlessness of experience that Jews in hiding (and Jews that were captured) might have felt. The prose is taut, elegant and able to convey the horror simply and effectively, for example in the section where the churchgoers throw the boy into the pit of excrement:

We halted at the edge of the pit. Its brown, wrinkled surface steamed with fetor like horrible skin on the surface of a cup of hot buckwheat soup. Over this surface swarmed a myriad of small white caterpillars, about as long as a fingernail. Above circled clouds of flies, buzzing monotonously, with beautiful blue and violet bodies glittering in the sun, colliding, falling toward the pit for a moment, and soaring into the air again. (139).

The passage is evocative – the reader can almost smell the effluent – and the flies mirror the boy’s position, his collision with others, his fall to the pit, his continuing escapes.

*The Painted Bird* presents the reader with a complicated contract. Some may initially read it as autobiography, some may read it as survivor fiction, some may read it as imaginative fiction. Some may have their faith in the text destroyed because their faith in the author has been destroyed. The case of Jerzy Kosinski is an effective example of how the contract between reader and writer is negotiated. It also shows us how the author remains visible in Holocaust literary criticism, how their history and intention are considered relevant and how that history and intent impacts on how we choose to read their fiction.

## **Helen Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper***

The case of Helen Darville and her Vogel- and Miles Franklin-winning novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper* further illustrates the complexity of the reader/writer contract.

In 1993, under the name of Helen Demidenko, Darville won the *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award with her novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper* (the Vogel is an award for an unpublished manuscript by an author under the age of thirty-five). The novel went on to be published by Allen & Unwin and to win both the ASL medal for literature and Australia's top literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award. It is an ambitious novel that connects contemporary Australia to European history, speaking about our multicultural heritage, and engages with complex issues surrounding writing from the point of view of the perpetrators. It was celebrated for its spare, unflinching style and for breaking away from the 'banality' of contemporary Australian stories. The Miles Franklin Judges Report stated that Darville's novel incorporated 'into the cultural memory first hand experience of the major historical events of the century' and that 'novels about the migrant experience seem to us to be seizing the high ground in contemporary Australian fiction, in contrast to fictions about the more vapid aspects of Australian life' (Manne 64).

Yet from the moment it was published *The Hand That Signed the Paper* was controversial. Initially there were charges of historical inaccuracy and antisemitism, followed by the largest scandal in the Australian literary world since the Ern Malley affair: the fact that Helen Demidenko wasn't the child of Ukrainians, as she claimed, but was in fact Helen Darville, of British origin.

*The Hand That Signed the Paper* is a novel written in a number of voices: we are initially introduced to Fiona Kovalenko, a young Australian woman whose Uncle Vitaly has been accused of war crimes; the novel then segues into first person accounts

from Vitaly, his sister Kateryna and Vitaly's first wife Magda; a brief letter from a Jewish Communist to her mother; and finally a third person narrative, relating the events of the war and the roles played by Vitaly, Magda, Kateryna, Kateryna's SS husband and Fiona's father, Evheny. The eclectic mix of voices is unusual and not entirely successful, partly because it is a broad range of voices for such a slender novel. The immediacy of the first person voices jar with the third person narrative, which skips from character to character, sometimes giving insights into behaviour, sometimes remaining coldly distanced, particularly during scenes of violence, leaving the intentions of the author opaque, as for example in the passage where Magda sees Vitaly shooting at Jews:

Drunken guards treated the Jews very badly, deliberately frightening them by shooting into the air above the trains, or by opening the doors and firing at random into the packed flesh. She learnt to tell the difference between the sound of shot wood and the sound of shot flesh. The soft 'rrrip' of flesh. There was always blood on the railway tracks. She once saw Vitaly do this. She confronted him the next morning. (113)

The style is numb; events are described but there is no sense of an emotional response, of horror or judgment, even though the narrator tells us that Magda confronts her husband over the shooting, implying some kind of disapproval. The vast understatement of guards treating Jews 'very badly' is disturbing and the use of terms such as 'flesh' dehumanises the Jews – we see them through the eyes of the perpetrators – and the blood and violence are divorced from the victims. Even when Magda confronts Vitaly there is a disturbing lack of judgment or sympathy: 'Look at the mess there now. See. You did that.' (113).

The flatness of the style could be read as a narrative strategy, a deliberate choice by the author to reveal the emotional and moral numbness of the perpetrators and bystanders. In fact, before the scandal about her heritage broke, many of those who

admired Darville's work argued that this was the case. The journalist and critic David Marr felt that Darville was showing rather than telling: 'There was no voice to tell me they were terrible; she made me feel the evil of those years' (218). Yet the flatness can also be read as authorial ineptitude or moral anesthesia, rather than a conscious rendering of insensitivity or denial. If the numb style is a narrative strategy Darville has employed it with perhaps too much subtlety, not giving guidance to her reader as to how to interpret its flatness.

The fact that Darville has chosen to write about, and from the perspective of, the perpetrators is unusual in Holocaust fiction. The perpetrators have not been the focus of much Holocaust fiction, perhaps because, as Clendinnen notes, 'Classified as non-human, as worse than the cruelest beasts, the perpetrators of the Final Solution are placed beyond human scrutiny' (96). Primo Levi believed that 'even to attempt to understand such men is to risk contamination' (Clendinnen 104). Recent writers, notably Bernhard Schlink and Rachel Seiffert, have positioned their novels from the point of view of those connected with the perpetrators but have not written from the thick of the atrocities or in the direct voices of those who committed murder, as Darville has done. Choosing to write from the perspective of the perpetrators is a difficult and daring endeavour and brings the concerns of Holocaust criticism to the fore.

I believe that this is an important question to address. If the perpetrators are regarded as 'unimaginable', if they are set aside, made 'other', we can comfort ourselves with the thought that they are 'not like us'. An analysis of the role of perpetrator could be valuable, yet it is a choice fraught with difficulty and there is a dangerous line between representing a position and endorsing it. When it comes to the Holocaust, Alfred Kazin states, 'literature served and serves the condemned' (Ezrahi *Words Alone* xi). We must be careful not to perpetrate the prejudices, or to

misrepresent or explain away the events when writing from the perspective of the perpetrators, rather than the victims.

Schlink in *The Reader*, and Seiffert in *The Dark Room*, write from the fringes of the Holocaust, analysing the moral impact of the Holocaust, considering *how* such choices could be made and what it means for the humanity of the perpetrators, and their descendants, however marginal their participation. Franca Signorini, in her writing on Primo Levi, shows a belief in the importance of representing other viewpoints, stating: ‘When people are able to understand and be understood, they become less alien to each other’ (178), yet Darville’s positioning, from the thick of the concentration camps and killing squads, is controversial because her choice to write from the perpetrator’s perspective can be seen to endorse misconceptions, rather than create understanding, and to justify the actions of the Ukrainian perpetrators.

Reading *The Hand That Signed the Paper* I was discomforted by the sense that the author herself wasn’t discomforted at all. The flatness of tone, the lack of commentary on her characters’ thoughts and actions (even the lack of a *hint* of commentary or of emotional nuance) fail to reveal any sense that Darville recognised she was handling sensitive material; for example in the passage where Vitaly and Magda take their baby son down to the river Bug for a swim:

Magda seated herself comfortably on her long skirt and began breastfeeding Ihor. Vitaly leaned against the trunk of the tree and watched in silence, smoking another cigarette. She looked into the distance over Vitaly’s shoulder and saw the head of a scoop-shovel dip and claw at the earth, then rise with its mouth full of something. Dirt, she supposed. (140).

When Magda remarks on the stink Vitaly tells her that they are burning Jews and she responds:

‘I thought so.’  
 ‘You don’t mind?’  
 ‘As if I didn’t know.’ (141).

They go on to bathe naked, flirt and play with their son. The contrast between their fun and the starkness of their conversation is jarring, partly because of the fact that it remains underdeveloped. We are horrified by their callousness but does Darville intend us to be? Part of my horror arises from the fact that I cannot tell if she means me to be horrified. It was not clear to me that she was employing a conscious strategy. If it was a deliberate creative choice it is a difficult strategy to master and it is a matter of interpretation as to how successful it is. We are positioned to identify with Vitaly and Magda. Darville gives no direction as to her personal opinion. The opacity of the author is discomfiting and renders the scene itself opaque. What exactly is Darville saying? Does she believe, as Vitaly does, that the Jews deserved Treblinka? Are we supposed to be as unfazed by the burning of bodies as Magda is?

There is no question that *The Hand That Signed the Paper* seeks to explain the Ukrainian hatred of the Jews and their participation in *Einsatzkommando* shootings and the Treblinka death camp by blaming it on a cycle of violence. Darville attempts to show that the Ukrainians were reacting against the persecution they themselves had suffered under the ‘Jewish’ communists. As Kateryna relates:

Millions of us died in the famine. Carefully, they starved away our desire for national independence. The communists had both the money and the guns; we had neither. But, people reasoned, if someone were to come and give us either or both, then we would take revenge. We would kill every communist and Jew in the Ukraine.

(9).

Darville’s explanation is horribly simplistic and, as the historian Geoffrey Jules stated, Darville ‘ignored almost altogether the pre-Bolshevik history of Russian and Ukrainian antisemitism’ (Manne *Culture* 41). Antisemitism stretches back hundreds of years in Eastern Europe and there was a long history of pogroms before the Nazis ever invaded. The impression given by *The Hand That Signed the Paper* is that the hatred of Jews by Ukrainians rose directly from their persecution by Jewish Bolsheviks. The

novel never questions its own crude simplifications. The major danger of this contention is that the ‘twinning of Bolshevism and the Jews is near the center of the Nazi world-view’ (Manne 156) and therefore Darville is perpetuating a Nazi belief, while ignoring the established history of antisemitism in the Ukraine.

The other dangers of Darville’s simplistic theory go beyond the text itself, because in the case of Darville it is difficult to divorce the text from the author. She cultivated a very high public profile and spoke often about her Ukrainian heritage. For example, in her article ‘Writing after Winning’, Helen ‘Demidenko’ tells of how her Baba (grandmother) was brokenhearted because her granddaughter did not attend an Ukrainian school. And, defending herself in both *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers, Darville stated that most of her father’s family ‘were killed by Jewish Communist Party officials in Vynnytsa’ (Manne 77). She contended that she had the right to voice the opinions aired in the novel because they were ‘fact’, legitimate beliefs held by the Ukrainian community she was a member of. She is quoted in Vic Alhadeff’s article in the *Australian Jewish News* as stating that the ‘extent of the Ukrainian collaboration depended on how many Jews were in the Communist Party in the area, how close to the frontline the people were and how severe famine had been in that particular area’ (6). Essentially Darville claimed she was merely representing the widely held beliefs of a community, without necessarily saying if they were right or wrong. This is a problematic position in Holocaust literature (made untenable when it was revealed that she was not a ‘Demidenko’ and the novel was pure invention that did not draw on her experience of family and community beliefs and prejudices) because there is always the concern, if history is not fully understood and acknowledged, of history repeating itself, of prejudices being propagated and reinforced, leading perhaps to another Holocaust.

In Holocaust literature authors are often expected to give their readers guidance as to where they stand in relation to the novel; critics seem to expect evidence of an

authorial position within the text, which Darville had not clearly provided. For example the Australian author and critic Brian Castro (himself a winner of the Vogel) noted that the jingoism evident in the novel was ‘sometimes indistinguishable from the author’s viewpoint’ (Manne 37). The absence of this authorial position, when joined with the perceived antisemitism and her claims of historical veracity, concerned her critics from the start.

Robert Manne, one of Darville’s harshest critics, always believed that *The Hand That Signed the Paper* had a dangerous absence of ‘a clearly identified and morally unambiguous voice’ (52). Sue Vice criticises this position for assuming that the ‘two voices – represented and representing – are one and the same’ (152). Vice draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony to defend some of Darville’s narrative choices, stating that within a polyphonic narrative the narrative ‘voice operates on the same level as the characters and their voices’ (151), as it often does in Darville’s text, although, Vice believes, imperfectly. In Bakhtin’s theory the narrator does not need to provide a detailed explanation of each character’s traits and beliefs – these are revealed through the characters themselves in a more organic manner. The problem is, Vice notes, that Darville has not chosen to create an entirely polyphonic text, instead the novel has ‘polyphonic patches’ (152): sometimes the narrator ‘is someone more sophisticated’ than her characters but other times she ‘simply *shows* ignorance on the part of her characters, without commenting on it’ (152). Vice’s criticisms address Darville’s text as a technically flawed novel, rather than a morally flawed one but I’m not sure that the two can be separated. The technical choices *are* moral choices in Holocaust fiction of this kind. Darville’s choice to remain an invisible author, to give no markers as to moral judgment, fails to open up questions (at least not questions we see as intended by the author). Even though Vice often defends Darville she also believes that ‘it is important to investigate precisely whose opinions these are’ (152). This is certainly relevant with regard to the charges of antisemitism, although Darville herself

maintained that ‘it’s not the writer’s task to do the reader’s thinking for him. I don’t provide a neat moral’ (Manne 127), an approach that may sound plausible but is not easily defensible when the charges of antisemitism are so severe.

In a report to his fellow Vogel judges, Roger McDonald stated: ‘there will have to be a lot more work on the roots of Ukrainian antisemitism otherwise this manuscript will be seen with justification as antisemitic’ (Manne 32). Darville’s simplistic linking of the Famine with the Ukrainian participation in the Holocaust endorses a position taken by Holocaust-deniers. Her novel can be seen to perpetrate antisemitic myths. As Alan Dershowitz argues in the *Australian Financial Review*, ‘all of the Jewish characters in the book are stereotypes’ (71). One example is Judit, the Jewish doctor, who is seen through a strange post-colonial filter (Armitage 2). She is represented as prejudiced and oppressive, a coloniser attempting to inflict a new order on the natives, without attempting to understand them. In a letter home to her mother she writes of the villagers:

They breed like true Catholics: the women are either nursing or in pup, without any variation. They are terrified of the evil eye, and constantly have visions of saints and spirits. I have tried to tell them that women are to be liberated from slavery in the Soviet Union, and that this is what Comrade Lenin and Comrade Stalin fought so hard for. But they spit on the earth as they pass me, presumably to propitiate their fecund God in my presence. (24).

This passage positions the Ukrainians as victims, hated and persecuted by the Jewish intellectual, as if to justify the fact that by the end of the novel it is the Jews who are murdered by the millions. The logic is that Ukrainian participation in the Holocaust is a result of the Famine, because prejudice and violence beget prejudice and violence. This is another way of saying that the Jews were ‘asking for it’. It is a distortion that ignores the Nazis and their other collaborators, who had not been subjected to Soviet-induced famines or persecution.

The events of the Holocaust are incredibly complex and people who lived through them (survivors and perpetrators), philosophers, sociologists and artists are still grappling to find a meaning or an understandable cause. Darville's 'cycle of violence' theory reduces the quest for a cause to a frighteningly simplistic level that is also deceptive and avoids the more banal and seemingly irrational side of prejudice and 'race' hatred.

Part of the problem is Darville's 'cold' authorial style. Helen Daniel believes it is possible to address antisemitism 'and to raise contrasting viewpoints so that the reader is at least considering other possibilities, other moral ways of looking at a central dilemma' ('Elaine Canty' 120). Darville has the chance to do this, not only through the construction of a more sympathetic Judit and other Jewish characters but also through the contemporary figure of Fiona. Fiona is an opportunity for Darville to unpack what it means to be guilty of such crimes and to provide a moral filter that differs from Vitaly, Magda and Kateryna's. She acknowledges the possibility of such a filter when she describes her reaction to having to read *The Diary of Anne Frank* at school – she vomits – but overall Fiona's account is sympathetic towards Uncle Vitaly and there is a lack of moral inquiry and horror on her part. Uncle Vitaly is seen through her eyes as a harmless old man, vaguely ridiculous and a victim of the system trying to punish war criminals. Fiona tells her sister:

When Uncle Vitaly first heard about the trials, he hid under the kitchen table. Staciya came home from the shops and found him hugging the table leg and yelling "the Israelis are coming to get me!"  
It was funny at the time. (2)

Her sister's response is to laugh. There is no sense that Vitaly deserves to be punished, despite serving at Treblinka and being directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Jews. When Fiona describes finding mementoes and photos in her father's bedside drawer she is not horrified so much as fascinated when surely the fact that he keeps such mementoes (and so close to where he sleeps, where he can access them easily)

would appall someone who thought about it. Fiona's description shows no sign of moral judgment:

An enamel badge showing a blue and yellow flag. A fancy, winged eagle clutching a swastika in its claws. A cloth patch with a silver skull and crossbones on it. The idea developed in my head that Daddy had been a pirate. Pirates were bad. They were also glamorous. (39)

Fiona's reaction trivialises the discovery, romanticising the SS and her father's past. Even worse, Fiona's sister begins to display signs of antisemitism, resenting the treatment of Uncle Vitaly, a pitiable old man who suffers a stroke as a result of the stress brought on by the impending trial. Fiona's sister remarks bitterly: 'This is all because of the silver budgie Zionist, bloody Hawkie. Bob Hawke. Shit.' (81). Fiona's response is not to be appalled but to lament: 'My sister is starting to hate. My sister. My sister who has never hated anything' (81). There is an implication that this hatred only arises because Vitaly is somehow being persecuted. When Fiona asks Vitaly if he still hates the Jews, he replies 'I stopped for a long while, but now it starts again. In here. In my soul.' (83). Starts again, presumably, because he is being called to account. All hatred in Darville's novel is part of a cycle, stemming from a definable cause. There is no sense that Vitaly is remorseful for his actions, or even that he should be.

Occasionally Darville flirts with ideas of guilt and remorse, such as when Magda finds the Ukrainian boy guard crying on her front step: 'I don't like what I . . . what happens . . . what we do – ' he tells her (114) but it is a rare moment in a novel that is, as Robert Manne claimed, 'as flat as the Nullabor' (118). There are not enough of these moments to balance or call into question the other characters' antisemitism and moral numbness, particularly in light of the author's invented justifications for actual historical figures. She creates a fictional version of Ivan the Terrible – an infamous Treblinka guard, renowned for his sadism – and gives his sadism a cause that supports

her 'cycle' theory: Vitaly says, 'He is mad because the Jews burnt his house down in front of him. With his parents and six brothers and sisters inside. In the famine.' (115). Ivan is described as being 'very tall, with a calm, mild face and sandy hair; he was plainly of great strength' (115). Darville has taken one of the most reviled perpetrators and portrayed him as a simple, unfeared man, who has been harmed by the 'Communist Jews' – a creative act that is highly questionable, particularly in light of historical testimony that reveals the real Ivan's enjoyment of violence and his extreme torture of Jews. In effect, Riemer claims, her construction of Ivan is a 'rationalisation of sadistic brutality' (77). This criticism of Darville shows how Holocaust literature, perhaps more than any other form of historical literature, is subject to high standards of historical accuracy. Manne is adamant that this is right and appropriate with regards to *The Hand That Signed the Paper*:

For a novel which deals so dogmatically with two of the most catastrophic events in human history, in so recent a past that some survivors are still with us, and which purports to demonstrate nothing less than a causal link between the grievous suffering of the Ukrainian nation in the Famine, and the attempted genocide of the Jews, rigorous historical criticism is more than appropriate. It is obligatory. (141).

After the initial charges of antisemitism but before the Demidenko hoax was uncovered, Darville defended herself by saying that her critics were 'the people who could not distinguish fiction from history' (Manne 76). This defence is imperfect when it comes to the reader/writer contract because the publicity surrounding the book and Darville herself did not sell the novel as pure fiction. From the beginning, when she accepted the Vogel wearing Ukrainian peasant dress, Darville represented the book as 'faction' and there was 'legitimacy given to the substance of her novel by the fact that she was believed to be relating her family's oral history and traditions' (Jost viii). This assumption meant that the reader was 'willing to forgive the author for sincerely

repeating mis-history on the grounds that it sprang from an oral, Ukrainian source' (Jost ix). Marion Halligan noted, after Demidenko was revealed to be Darville, that critics and the general media seemed 'to be saying that *The Hand That Signed the Paper* by Helen Darville is a quite different novel from the one written by Helen Demidenko' (170), an observation that reveals the importance of the reader/writer contract.

We are no longer so willing to forgive the 'mis-history' in *The Hand That Signed the Paper* when we discover that it is pure imaginative fiction and is not derived from familial experience. Partly this is because Darville no longer has the defence of relating a subjective point of view (that of the Ukrainians who suffered through the Famine). Instead, her material has been specifically researched and selected and is therefore held up to a different standard. The perceived antisemitism is also more of a concern, as it does not arise from a cultural history of antisemitism and was not part of Darville's upbringing and heritage. As with Kosinski, the way we read Darville is partially determined by who we perceive her to be. Again, as with Kosinski, this is because most readers are sensitive as to *why* writers choose to write about the Holocaust: intent is important, motives subject to analysis. Andrew Riemer, in his book *The Demidenko Debate*, expresses a belief that Darville, like other authors of Holocaust fiction, is bound to be subjected to such treatment because it is 'the most controversial of all literary undertakings: the representation of evil' (63).

It is impossible to know why Darville wrote *The Hand That Signed the Paper* and what her motivations were but it is undeniable that we read it more cautiously, more suspiciously, in the wake of her unmasking. Primo Levi felt that when non-survivors create art about the Holocaust there should be 'the need to interpret, but not falsify information and narratives about the event' (Feinstein 169), because each novel is written into an existing context, and this is a sentiment Darville has trespassed against. Neil Thomas declared that 'she'd put on hobnail boots and marched over sacred ground.' (Manne 44). What does it say about the Australian literary community that it

awarded this hobnail-booted author so many prizes? Was the sheer ambition of her work, her engagement with issues and locations beyond the Australian bush and suburbia, enough to cancel out the perceived antisemitism? Was celebrating Australia's multiculturalism important enough to let us ignore sensitivity about 'hate speech' and racial vilification?

The cases of Kosinski and Darville have led me to believe that transparency is an important part of the reader/writer contract when it comes to Holocaust fiction. Writing about the Holocaust is already so fraught with difficulty, addressing as it does such complex issues as ownership of sensitive stories, the nature of evil, the meaning of suffering and the role of God that muddying the waters by lying about your personal relationship to the story is not only fraudulent but grossly insensitive.

Addressing  
the Moral Minefield  
Self-Reflexively:  
the Case of  
Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

Art Spiegelman is the child of survivors and *Maus*, the first volume of which was published in 1973, is a daring postmodern attempt to address the position of second-generation survivors and the difficulties inherent in translating experiences (especially those not lived but heard from others) into words (and in this case, pictures).

Spiegelman has chosen to address the problems inherent in representing the Holocaust through self-reflexive means. He predates Jonathan Safran Foer by almost thirty years and pioneered a postmodern style that gained popularity in the following decades.

Spiegelman chose a controversial form to tell his father's story (and the story of his own struggle to tell the story): the form of comic book, or graphic novel. Schwarz notes that 'much of Holocaust narrative is quite conservative and traditional' (302), perhaps because, due to the extreme sensitivity of the material, writers are less inclined to experiment with form. In both volumes of *Maus*, published five years apart, Spiegelman draws the Jews as mice and the Germans as cats; on the surface a simplistic representation but one that plays with the Nazi construction of Jews as vermin, as well as the perceived shallowness of the comic book form. At the beginning of Volume II, *And Here My Troubles Began*, Spiegelman uses a quote from a 1930s German newspaper:

Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever revealed . . . .  
 Healthy emotions tell every independent young man and every  
 honorable youth that the dirty and filth-covered vermin, the greatest  
 bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom, cannot be the ideal type of  
 animal . . . . Away with Jewish brutalisation of the people! Down  
 with Mickey Mouse! Wear the Swastika Cross!

This quote, referencing as it does Nazi attitudes to Jews and American 'Jewish' pop culture and invoking the figure of Mickey Mouse, the ultimate cartoon character, shows how Spiegelman signposts his narrative choices for the reader, alerting them to the complexity involved in his chosen form. He is taking the cartoon mouse and twisting it, taking a version of Mickey into the Kingdom of Night and subverting our expectations

of what the form of the comic can do: instead of *Fantasia* and dancing broomsticks, Mickey faces Auschwitz and death, which can be read as a way of addressing the unbridgeable distance between the Holocaust and the struggle to comprehend for those who come after: our 'Mickey Mouse' perceptions jar with the horror of the history.

Form is a major focus of *Maus* and Spiegelman explores the problems inherent in storytelling: 'replacing' his father's story with a written (and drawn) version, the inherent manipulation of storytelling, the 'unknowability' of the past; according to Behlman, *Maus* acknowledges the 'impossibility of gaining any direct access to the past, or any way of representing it, except through a medium that announces its own contrived, provisional nature' (61). Throughout both volumes Spiegelman draws attention to his struggle to represent his father's story and shows an obvious concern with 'the ethics involved in converting oral testimony . . . . into a written and visual document' (Miller 55), a concern highlighted by the form itself. Deborah Geis notes that there was much criticism of Spiegelman's choice of form, with many feeling that the 'comic book form inevitably trivialises the events and reduces the characters to stereotypes' (5). The form of the novel is traditionally accepted as being more 'serious', a high-culture and respected form for non-fiction and fictionalised history, whereas the comic book is a form associated (rightly or wrongly) with popular culture: superheroes and children's entertainment. Spiegelman's utilisation of the comic book form immediately draws our attention to the 'constructedness' of the story and the ethical dilemma in representing the Holocaust in such a form and, by extension, I would suggest Spiegelman is saying, any form. Spiegelman crusaded to have *Maus* classified as non-fiction and protested when it was listed on *The New York Times* bestseller list for *fiction* (Hungerford 123), which illustrates his belief that all representations of the past are distortions and that his work, with its open admissions of distortion, was as 'true' and accurate as any other work of non-fiction.

In Volume I of *Maus* there is a comic within a comic, 'Prisoner on the Hell Planet: a Case History', a comic about Artie's mother's suicide. The use of photographic material seeks to foreground a sense of historicity.



(Spiegelman Volume I 100)

The first image of the comic is a picture of a hand (presumably Artie's) holding a black and white photo of a woman in a bathing suit with a boy squatting by her feet (presumably Artie and his mother). The photograph defines the following story as 'true', and shows us the photographic reality of the drawn characters (not mice in the comic within a comic, but human beings). It brings a greater seriousness to the material, which, due to the cartoon-like nature of the drawings, might otherwise be more easily dismissed. It attempts 'to make history and comic one seamless reality within narrative' (Hungerford 117).

Volume II is prefaced with a dedication, showing a photograph of a toddler in lederhosen – we later discover this is Artie's brother, who died during the Holocaust. *And Here My Troubles Began* is heavy with the absence of this brother he never met and is also heavy with the weight of history as Spiegelman takes us inside Auschwitz. There is a scene between Artie and Vladek, as Vladek looks through old photographs, telling Artie what happened to his family, when Vladek says: 'All what is left, it's the

photos.’ (Volume II 115) but here Spiegelman doesn’t use the real photographs, instead he draws them, with a ‘lack of nominalistic detail in facial expressions and shapes’ which ‘invite the experienced reader to fill in the details’ (Schwarz 290). For us, the readers, at this point not even the photographs remain; all we have is the representation, one Spiegelman has shown us to be a distortion, however sincerely attempted.

The final photograph appears near the end of Volume II, during the section of narrative which shows Artie’s parents finding each other after the war. It is a photograph of Vladek Spiegelman in striped Auschwitz pyjamas.



(Spiegelman Volume II 134)

Coming after the harrowing story of his survival of Auschwitz and the death marches it has enormous impact, again bringing home the fact that this story is non-fiction and that it happened not to comic book mice but to actual people. Even here, though, Spiegelman undercuts the authenticity of the photograph as Vladek tells Artie: ‘I passed once a photo place what had a **camp** uniform – a new and clean one – to make **souvenir** photos . . .’ (Volume II 134). With these words, which lead us to register how strong and healthy and unlike a camp survivor Vladek looks, Spiegelman shows that the photo is ‘like his own cartoons, an illuminating distortion, a performance’ (Schwarz 290).

Throughout *Maus* Spiegelman has chosen to illuminate the distortions inherent in representation, to foreground the ethical choices and transgressions of the writer, for example he reveals his broken promises:

Vladek: But this what I just told you – about Lucia and so – I don't want you should write this in your book.

Artie: **What?** Why not?

Vladek: It has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!

Artie: But *Pop* – it's great material. It makes everything more **real** – more human. I want to tell **your** story, the way it really happened.

Vladek: But this isn't so **proper**, so respectful . . . . I can tell you **other** stories, but such **private** things, I don't **want you** should mention.

Artie: Okay, Okay – I promise. (Volume I 23)

In this section Spiegelman shows his father's desire to keep certain things private, highlighting his father's wishes in bold text, but we know that he hasn't kept his promise to his father, as we have just read the story involving Lucia. Spiegelman has transgressed against his father but he has made the reader aware of his transgression, alerted us to his deception, to the fact that we are witnessing what was meant to be unwitnessed. As such, it could be argued that *Maus* is non-fiction in every sense, as it relates even the process of gathering the story and reveals the choices the writer makes whether to tell or not to tell.

This is a core component of Spiegelman's self-reflexive text: the naked portrayal of process. In *And Here My Troubles Began* we see Artie trying to decide which animal he should choose to represent his French wife. A moose? A poodle? A frog? A rabbit? He asks his wife Françoise what she should be:

Françoise: Huh? A **mouse**, of course!

Artie: But you're **French!**

Françoise: Well . . . how about the bunny rabbit?

Artie: Nah, too sweet and gentle.

Françoise: Hmmph.

Artie: I mean the French in general. Let's not forget centuries of anti-Semitism . . . I mean, how about the Dreyfus affair? The Nazi collaborators! The –

Françoise: **Okay!** But if you're a mouse, I ought to be a mouse too. I **converted** didn't I? (Volume II 11).

Here Spiegelman alerts his reader to the process of representation, to the meanings that surround his choices of animal and to the complex definition of 'Jew'.

Later in Volume II he explores the pressure he feels as a result of the weight of the material, his concerns about the ethics of making art out of the Holocaust, and the discomfort he feels about the critical and commercial success of his Holocaust narrative. The beginning of chapter two shows five panels of Artie, this time represented as a man with a mouse mask tied to his face, sitting at his drawing board, smoking and surrounded by flies.



(Spiegelman Volume II 41)

He is speaking aloud, in the fourth panel turned directly to face the reader, talking about Vladek's death and the success of Volume I. The fifth panel, which takes up the bottom third of the page shows Artie slumped across the drawing board, still surrounded by flies; sitting atop a pile of naked mouse corpses; through the window we can see the silhouette of a guard tower:

Artie: At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or movie. (I don't

wanna.) In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.)

Lately I've been feeling depressed.

(From off-page comes a disembodied speech-balloon): Alright Mr.

Spiegelman . . . We're ready to shoot! . . . (Volume II 41).

It is a dense and complex page, exploring the author's concerns over his popular success, the shadow cast over him by his personal connection to the material, the moral threat involved in representing such material (evident in the double meaning behind the word 'shoot') and the inherent aspect of 'performance'. In five panels Spiegelman manages to address some of the most difficult and challenging elements of Holocaust art and shows how 'Adorno's plea not to try to represent what happened shadows the narrative' (Wilner 117).

Spiegelman's subject is as much that of ethical representation as it is his father's Holocaust story and is an example of a more transparent form of authorship (although, as the text illustrates, all authorship is essentially a manipulation and as such its transparency is suspect). *Maus* is an inspiring Holocaust narrative because it embraces the difficulties inherent in representing such a sensitive topic. Spiegelman has the authority of a familial connection to the Holocaust and is telling the actual story of a survivor and yet I think his work can still serve as a positive example to a writer with no tangible connection to the Holocaust because what Spiegelman displays is a remarkable sensitivity to the material. Ultimately *Maus* is a testament to the fundamental difficulties of creating an ethical Holocaust narrative, which adds to its power as a work of art.

Navigating the Kingdom  
of Night:  
My Journey as a Writer

The first question anyone asked when I said I was writing a novel that engages with the Holocaust was: 'Why?' It's a question I have struggled to answer. There must be a reason I chose to write about the Holocaust, there must be a reason why I continued, despite my early paralysis when reading critical objections to fictionalising the Holocaust, there must be a reason for each narrative choice that I made. My answer to the 'Why?' is not simple: I have no familial connection to the Holocaust; I am not Jewish; my mother's family is of German origins but they immigrated to Australia in the 1830s, a century before the rise of Nazism, when Germany was still Prussia (and I don't feel an inherited sense of guilt or responsibility). I am an Australian woman, born in the late twentieth century, distanced from the Holocaust by time, nationality, culture, language and experience. Like many people my first exposure to the Holocaust was reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* at school, seeing documentaries on TV and having the Nazis assume the role of villains in the myths of my childhood (such as in the *Indiana Jones* films).

My initial exposure to the Holocaust was often filtered through mass culture and turned into a form of entertainment but I do have one strong memory from my childhood: it was the mid 1980s, I must have been about ten and I was watching Sunday afternoon television with my grandmother – it was a documentary about a woman returning to what I now realise was Auschwitz. She was short and stocky, with dyed black hair and bright lipstick and she wore a tan trench coat, belted at the waist. I clearly remember watching her walk through the neat ruins of the camp, pausing to describe what had happened to her: the latrines where she had clung to the slimy boards, terrified of falling in, of drowning; the barracks where they had slept crowded together, crawling with lice, dying of heat stroke in summer, freezing to death in winter. There was horror in her face, and an absence – part of her was still back there, living it as she relayed it to the camera. The sky was heavy and grey and sometimes drizzle fell, coating her dyed hair with a net of rain. The memory of watching that woman is crystal

clear and the bleakness of the place has never left me. The horror I felt I had never felt before: this was *real*. The woman looked like women I saw at the supermarket; the camp didn't look like a movie set, the grass looked like grass, the bricks looked like bricks. This place was a very real threat.

The following year I wrote a story in class about children escaping from a concentration camp (I didn't know that children didn't really exist there, I had obviously missed the part about the gas chambers). The story was essentially a fairy-tale: the children ran into the forest and were taken in by a good witch who took them on a flying carpet to sabotage the Nazis. Obviously I used narrative structures that I was familiar with; I suppose the adoption of the fairy-tale style and content was comforting, a shield against the horror of the material as well as being a way I could fit my new knowledge into an existing way of understanding the world.

*End of the Night Girl* was written two decades later but shares some similarities with that story. In writing it I struggled to combine the material with my understanding of the world. Why was I still writing about it so many years later? Was the black-haired woman really that powerful? In a way, yes. Because of her I was sensitised to the Holocaust, I read about it, watched documentaries, saw every 'Holocaust' film and continued to feel a drive to respond creatively. I attempted historical fiction but writing it was always a struggle – it was forced, stilted, derivative of the testimonies I had read; writing it made me feel like a trespasser, a voyeur. But I still felt the urge to write. The Holocaust didn't happen to me but it felt relevant to me. The footage of Europe, particularly Germany, in the 1930s and 40s looked familiar: they had electric light, trams, radios – sure they all wore hats but the women's makeup was familiar, their clothes weren't that different and the old photographs looked like photographs of my grandparents. I could imagine myself there, on either side, as victim or perpetrator. Not the kind of perpetrator who actually hurt or killed people but the kind of perpetrator who sat home and went along with everything – passive but just as culpable.

As a postgraduate I thought it would be interesting to explore the ethical dilemmas involved in writing about the Holocaust (the fears and concerns that plagued me as I struggled to engage with the material creatively), in trying to find the connection between it and a contemporary Australian. I had an idea about a waitress and a young Jewish woman, about telling their stories, separated by sixty years. Initially I thought the waitress would be helping to care for an invalid grandfather, a man who would turn out to have been a Nazi – mostly because I felt there should be a tangible connection between the women, because I felt uneasy about my own lack of connection to the material. As I researched I kept writing the historical fiction but I couldn't shake my unease and I became paralysed when I began reading literary criticism of Holocaust literature. I took to heart Elie Wiesel's admonishment: 'Even if you read all the books ever written, even if you listen to all the testimonies ever given, you will remain on this side of the wall, you will view the agony and death of a people from afar, through a screen of memory not your own' ('Why' 203). Who was I to be addressing these events, to be writing from the point of view of the victim? What did I know except what I had read, what I could imagine?

If I hadn't been doing a PhD perhaps I would have given up at that point – but I was doing a PhD, I had deadlines and felt the pressure of not wanting to fail. It's revealing that it never crossed my mind to change projects. Deep down this was something I felt compelled to do and the paralysis was a result of an ethical unease. It was the works of the authors discussed in this essay, among others, that helped free me from paralysis and come to terms with the fact that my unease may never fade and, in fact, may even be the most appropriate response.

Part of my problem was the form of historical narrative. I had rigidly adhered to the idea of historical veracity, feeling that anything else would be disrespectful, something that the ten year-old me certainly hadn't felt, populating her narrative with witches and flying carpets. Eliach, Foer and Boyne were examples of authors who reopened my

mind to the possibility of non-realist narrative strategies. Foer in particular I found inspiring – coming as he did from the same generation as me, facing similar problems of distance from the material. His work is contemporary; he is aware of the context of his art and adopts a postmodern self-reflexivity to address his distance from the material. He doesn't shy away from the use of humour or magic realism but he also doesn't ride roughshod over the material – he treats it with respect.

I broke my temporary paralysis by turning to Molly's narrative. There was no question I had the right to write her: we were both female, white, Australian, of the same generation and had spent far too many years waitressing. Of course this raised its own problems – finding her voice and her character was difficult because I had to put myself aside. I had tried to write Molly's story earlier but was always hamstrung by the presence of her grandfather and an inability to find out who she was. She kept turning into me and becoming wooden, and when her grandfather was present, even in her thoughts, the narrative became sludgy, slow, boring. I considered removing him; I had the suspicion that he made the connection between Molly and Gienia too neat. I didn't have a tangible connection to Gienia, why should Molly? As soon as I jettisoned the grandfather Molly emerged, almost fully-formed, nothing like me, strong, sassy and careening out of control through her own life. In the first draft her connection to the Holocaust was simply her obsession with it.

The first draft of *End of the Night Girl* was a messy one. The novel has a complex structure and a tone that was difficult to maintain – a tone that is tragi-comic in Molly's sections and serious and plain in Gienia's sections. The structure emerged organically but took many drafts to refine; Molly's story unfolds more or less chronologically, over a short space of time and is broken up by Gienia's story, which is told out of order, with the segments covering a time span of years. The structure is a poetic one; Gienia's sections emerge from Molly's emotional states, rather than running alongside Molly's story completely separately, or sutured with obvious thematic material. One of the

most challenging aspects of redrafting has always been balancing Molly and Gienia. Molly's first person sections are immediate, expressionistic and colloquial. Gienia's story, told in third person, is obviously researched, at a remove and more sober and spare. The two sections were always written with different vocabularies, as though written by two separate authors (although in the first draft it wasn't clear to me why). In the initial draft Gienia's story was much longer; there was a subplot of Gienia's thwarted romance with Karol in the *shtetl* (Karol who marries another and moves into her dead father's house) and the subplot of Gienia's affair with Schlomo was a greater part of the novel. That first draft revealed a problem I have struggled with ever since: the disparity of suffering between Molly and Gienia.

The contrast between Molly's suffering (in the first draft, her loss of Peter and Dan and her tender but abusive relationship with Chef) and Gienia's (enduring the Holocaust) are obviously out of proportion to one another. It was discomfiting to respond to Molly's suffering as well as Gienia's (and oddly, Molly's section was still strong in comparison – her voice was so developed and powerful that she stood alongside the Holocaust material and demanded to be heard). What right did Molly have to suffer after the Holocaust? How on earth could waitressing seem miserable after Auschwitz? How did Molly earn her right to suffer? Was the novel lessened by the immediacy of Molly's 'suffering'? Should Gienia's suffering cancel out Molly's? Was it dangerous that Molly's story was as strong (or stronger) than Gienia's? These questions plagued me as I worked on the redrafts and eventually became something I felt should be addressed within the text.

The strategy for addressing my concerns was, strangely, already present in that messy first draft. There was one line about three quarters of the way through the novel, which broke up one of Gienia's sections: '*Miriam? Who the fuck is Miriam?*' I didn't know where it had come from, it just splurged onto the page as I wrote the initial draft and, although it made no sense, I kept it because, for some reason, it gave me a frisson

of excitement. I realised that the question was being asked by *Molly*, not me. Molly had broken through the boundaries of the two narratives. From there, I came to the realisation that Gienia's story wasn't an historical narrative, at least not in the way I had intended. Rather, she was created by Molly, *written* by Molly. It opened up new possibilities and was a technique by which I could address my unease within the text. The narrative freedoms I had discovered in Foer and Spiegelman had obviously seeped into my subconscious, which spat back out a way to raise the questions that had earlier paralysed me. In the next few drafts Molly's authorship of Gienia's story emerged gradually – I didn't want the reader to be aware of the fact that Molly was writing Gienia until near the end. Unfortunately this hamstrung me in terms of addressing many of the questions I needed to ask. By the sixth draft I was aware that if I didn't make it obvious that Molly was writing about Gienia and the Holocaust I was shortchanging the reader and myself by leaving many questions implicit but unasked, which I was afraid left my authorial intent too opaque, possibly as opaque as Helen Darville's.

Helen Darville was one reason I had been so sensitive to transgressing against the victims and the historical record. The Demidenko scandal happened when I was just twenty, an undergraduate scribbling story ideas in the margins of lecture notes, and it had an enormous impact on me. Darville was vilified in the press and it impressed upon me a sense of 'sacredness' when it came to the Holocaust and introduced a vague idea about the importance of the author in such texts. I thought it was necessary for me to return to her actual text and to analyse what she had actually done in the work itself. Along with Kosinski, Darville allowed me to explore ideas of the reader/writer contract and of authorial presence or absence.

My subsequent drafts of *End of the Night Girl* have been concerned with drawing out the questions raised by attempting to fictionalise the Holocaust. At pivotal points in the text, for example when Chef asks Molly if she wants special treatment, or when

Molly is watching the video of *Shoah*, I inserted blunt commentary (*'There is no equivalence, a little voice hisses' / 'What am I doing watching other people's agony?'*) in an attempt to highlight the discomfort the reader should feel at the discrepancy between Molly's suffering and Gienia's, and at the voyeuristic elements of Molly's endeavour. These blunt comments and questions are also a way to separate me from Molly, to get the reader to question Molly and to not take everything she says (or writes) as gospel. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was a great help during the redrafting process, precisely because his work was all about his positioning, including the struggle to position himself at all.

A major challenge lies in raising these questions, concerns and concepts without weighing down the narrative and without being self-indulgent. It is a fine line to walk, between making sure the questions are raised for the reader and keeping the narrative flowing. It is an interesting exercise to look at the evolution of the library scene (where Molly rips a page from the encyclopedia) because it emerged as a pivotal scene in terms of ethical questions about writing the Holocaust. It is the scene where we want to know Molly's motivation for writing, we want to know what her attraction to the material is; after all, this is the beginning of a major obsession that leads her into a creative act. It was also a scene that I struggled with for a long time because, by the last few drafts, subtle changes made a huge difference to the meanings of the scene. The core of my struggle came back to the question that I myself found so difficult to answer: *Why?* Why was Molly writing this thing? Why was this the moment that began her journey?

In the first draft there wasn't a library scene. Molly described the encyclopedia page very early in the novel (page one, in fact – it was a very intense beginning in that first draft). How she obtained it is only given passing reference: 'it is a page torn out of a library book (I've been too ashamed to go back to the library since).' When working on the second draft I wrote the scene where she rips the page out and inserted it in its current location in the novel, after the flashback of Peter's desertion. It was much

briefed than it is now, beginning with the line: ‘I was miserable over Peter, dragging along after Hero one day when she went to the library’. Peter became part of Molly’s motivation. Her sense of loss and abandonment was played out as she traced the line between Adelaide and Sydney in an atlas. As motivations went, it was pretty weak and stayed underdeveloped for quite a few more drafts. The second draft kept Molly’s attraction to the nameless girl very unconscious and it was all very vague and unexplored. But I didn’t know how to fix it without sledge-hammering the reader with questions.

By draft four I was trying to deepen the misery over Peter. I added the short paragraph about her looking at the spines of books – *The Great Gatsby*, *An Equal Music* – and pining, before she went to the atlas and pined some more. I also added the Australia/New Zealand encyclopedia, in an attempt to address the question of why the suffering of Jews during the Holocaust drew her, despite her distance from it, when there were similarly enormous stories of suffering that force a writer to address similarly complex ethical issues, in her own back yard. I was still struggling to find a subtle way of addressing these questions and draft four also introduces the moment where Molly blots the girl’s face out with her thumb: ‘My greasy fingerprint was visible on the shiny paper, my personal whorls imprinted on her young, incomplete, unnamed face.’

The library scene stayed unchanged for another draft, even though it felt irritatingly incomplete; it was a microcosm of all the problems I struggled to solve. After five drafts I had a mentorship with Judith Lukin-Admunsen, who terrified me by raising all the concerns I was afraid of. ‘This is a dangerous book,’ she said and I felt sick. She found the disparity of suffering between Molly and Gienia disturbing. She found the novel too unconscious and thought the questioning needed to be more overt, although she warned, ‘don’t weigh it down or be too self-indulgent.’ I spent months grappling with how to solve the problems, the problems I had faced since draft one. In the end

two narrative solutions presented themselves – solutions which led me to a major revelation.

Firstly, Molly wasn't finished. Why was she so out of control? Why was her record with men so appalling? The answer lay with her absent father. As soon as I turned my attention to their relationship new scenes emerged that gave the narrative more power and more coherence. The entire subplot involving Molly's father is new to the sixth draft and gives the library scene more punch. Now it begins: 'Not long after Peter left, when I was dragging through a depression so deep I thought it would never end, my father called'. Molly goes to the library to escape her father, which gives strength to her attraction to an unnamed girl, whose face she can imprint with her thumbprint, whose life she can imagine and control from beginning to end.

In the sixth draft Molly's authorship of Gienia's story is revealed early, within the first twenty pages she is writing down the words '*little house, shtetl square*' and placing the page on top of a pile of similarly scrawled on pages. The questioning is more obvious throughout, although my natural desire for subtlety is difficult to overcome. The library scene in the sixth draft reveals a more conscious engagement with the picture of the girl, as Molly thinks: 'Here in my hand was a fixed and sure thing, a solid horror I could try to understand'.

The second technical solution was present in the novel already, although underdeveloped. Until draft six Gienia appeared to Molly twice as a ghost-like apparition: once in the reflection of the bar fridge and once by the scrap bin by the kitchen. These two appearances were unexplained and confusing but, again like the '*Who the fuck is Miriam?*' line, they felt important and I hadn't discarded them. Draft six became more artificial and, inspired by Eliach and Foer, I realised that I didn't have to stick to 'reality'. Why couldn't Gienia appear to Molly? They could even meet face to face. They could have a conversation. She could be a figment of Molly's imagination, or a manifestation of her conscience, a spirit calling her to account for her

trespass, a time-traveler, or the ghost of history. Gienia's apparition could be any or all of these things and her appearances, especially the one in the kitchen as Molly makes popcorn, allow me to raise more questions without losing the narrative momentum.

This heightened artificiality – the haunting and having Molly author Gienia's story – led me to a revelation that forever changed the novel and the way I perceive it. *End of the Night Girl* is not the Holocaust narrative I thought I was writing. It is the story of Molly. The Holocaust appears as her expression of pain, her feeling of helplessness, her exploration of suffering. The text is the story of a contemporary Australian woman who has chosen to write an Holocaust narrative. She is not me. Her experiences are not mine. But the ideas she and *End of the Night Girl* engage with are ideas I have been exploring for the past few years. All of those times I struggled to answer the question 'Why are you writing a 'Holocaust' novel?' I had no idea that my answer was 'I'm not.' I engage with the ethical complexity surrounding the writing of Holocaust narratives but I'm writing a narrative about *Molly*. There's a big difference. Gienia's story is part of Molly's story. Her story is not historical fiction; it is a construct within a construct.

Writing *End of the Night Girl* has been an arduous journey, one that has tested my technique and my beliefs. For most of that journey I thought I was writing a novel about the Holocaust. I believe we should allow artists to explore the Holocaust through their art but it is an exploration that is necessarily fraught with difficulty. There are arguments for and against fictionalising the Holocaust and each writer (and reader) has the freedom to form their opinion. I like Lawrence Langer's comment that 'The most we can wish from one writer is a partial point of view, an attitude, an access to that elusive experience that almost annihilated a people' (*Divided Voice* 32). I have written my partial point of view, stated my attitude and found my access, enabling the reader an access too, and while at times I am still discomforted by the idea of fictionalising the Holocaust I have come to terms with my discomfort, believing it a natural part of the process and wholly appropriate considering the sensitivity of the topic. Even Elie

Wiesel, who believed a wall divided us, still felt that 'What matters is to struggle against silence with words' ('Why' 206).

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