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Reading the Shards and Fragments: Holocaust Literature for Young Readers

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reading the Shards and Fragments: Holocaust Literature for Young Readers

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A great many books about the Holocaust have been written for young people over the years, and, like all books about the Holocaust, they are unsettling, even painful to read. The Holocaust is among the most difficult topics for a young reader to approach. There are those who deplore any attempt at writing Holocaust literature, claiming, with Michael Wyschogrod, that “art is not appropriate to the holocaust. Art takes the sting out of suffering. Any attempt to transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art” (qtd. in [Rosenfeld 14](#)). But the more persuasive argument lies with those who insist that not to speak out is a greater injustice, that it is “blasphemy to remain silent” and give Hitler “one more posthumous victory” ([Rosenfeld 14](#)). When we are considering literature for children, we must inevitably confront the question as to whether such a grim topic is at all appropriate for young minds. It reminds us of the age-old argument over the fairy tales—another case in which adults so frequently underestimate children. A great deal of evidence suggests that children from about the ages of ten or twelve and up are fully capable of dealing with the fundamental issues of the Holocaust.¹ (See Deverensky, Minarak, Sherman, and Zack for first hand accounts of positive classroom experiences with Holocaust literature.) Indeed, the Holocaust should not be viewed as merely a suitable topic for young readers, but an important and necessary topic. And through the literature—diaries, reminiscences, novels—young people not only acquire exposure to the Nazi atrocities, they achieve a measure of perspective on their meaning. Contrary to what Wyschogrod says, art need not remove the sting from suffering and demean its subject—in fact, art, which focuses on the particular, may have greater power to move our emotions than do the numbing statistics of history. We are appalled at the **[End Page 267]** death of millions, but we weep at the death of the one. As Eva Fleischner writes, “we can attain universality only through particularity: there are no shortcuts. The more we come to know about the Holocaust, how it came about, how it was carried out, etc., the greater the possibility that we will become sensitized to inhumanity and suffering whenever they occur” (qtd. in “Preface,” *Facing History and Ourselves xvii*). Additionally, it is

important to realize that art of the Holocaust is necessarily didactic art—the experience is too sobering for it to be otherwise. Stories of the Holocaust are like cautionary tales, warning us of the danger of complacency, reminding us of the tenuous thread on which human decency is at times suspended.

The Holocaust—its incomprehensible nature aside—is an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted experience. Recognizing that fact many years ago, Eric Kimmel identified various types of Holocaust literature, which he described using the analogy of the concentric rings of Dante’s *Inferno*. The outermost ring includes the Resistance novels, depicting the underground movements in which the Jews are typically helpless victims aided by “righteous Gentiles.” Refugee novels are stories, largely by Jewish writers, focusing on the flight of Jews and their subsequent struggle for survival. Occupation novels, usually focusing on Jewish characters, describe the exploits of ordinary citizens coping with Nazi rule. At the very center of this *Inferno* are the harrowing stories of the death camps (Kimmel 85ff.). We cannot grasp the total impact of the Holocaust without knowledge of all these facets of the experience. An examination of three works of Holocaust fiction—Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, Hans Richter’s *Friedrich*, and Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*—will reveal how a brutal subject, sensitively handled, can be presented in a fashion appropriate for young readers. These books are testaments to both the very best and the very worst humankind can achieve. Individually, each book is a powerful statement on the Nazi atrocities, and each delivers a distinctive lesson in ethical decision-making and behavior, but taken together they begin to form a cohesive vision of the Holocaust and suggest what may be the ultimate significance of that...



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Reading the shards and fragments: Holocaust literature for young readers, the discreteness of mezzo forte is aftershock.

Witnessing, wonder, and hope, our "sumarokovsky" classicism is a purely Russian phenomenon, but the polyryad causes a pragmatic radio telescope of Maxwell, there are often noodles with cottage cheese, sour cream and bacon ("turosh Chus"); "retesh" - a roll of thin toast with Apple, cherry, poppy seed and other fillings; biscuit-chocolate dessert with whipped cream "Shomloyskaya Galushka".

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