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## Young adult Holocaust literature: How is the Holocaust depicted and what is appropriate to teach?

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YOUNG ADULT HOLOCAUST LITERATURE:  
HOW IS THE HOLOCAUST DEPICTED AND WHAT IS APPROPRIATE TO TEACH?

A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

Madison Hilbert  
University of Northern Iowa  
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## **Purpose**

Historical fiction and narrative nonfiction that centers on the topic of the Holocaust is frequently used in the classroom. It is used most often in English and History classes. This thesis is an argument-driven pedagogy essay focusing on the Holocaust literature that is written and taught to middle school and high school students today. I wanted to compare and contrast several texts that are frequently taught in United States classrooms. There is not a whole lot of research currently on this subject, and I decided to use this opportunity to address some of the questions I had. Is historical fiction better to teach or is narrative nonfiction better to teach? Or should there be a combination of the two that is taught in the classroom? What should the age range cutoffs be for these texts and what themes are prevalent? Are there some texts that should not be taught? This thesis aims to answer each of these questions and show which texts should be used in American middle and high school classrooms.

## **Literature Taught**

In the United States, the Holocaust is frequently taught in English and History classrooms at the middle and high school levels. Typically, there is a blend of fictional and nonfictional texts, however, at least from my own experiences, I believe that fictional texts are used much more often. These texts are usually taught by having the entire class read it and do corresponding activities, assignments, writing, and tests. They are used to better inform students about the time period and the events that transpired. Since the texts are used to educate about the Holocaust, the texts should be historically accurate. They should also keep the attention of the students and be at the appropriate reading and appropriate content levels for the grade in which they are being taught.

## How to Compare

There are many ways to compare and contrast these texts. First, I organized both the historical fiction and the narrative nonfiction separately in order by the typical age range in which they are taught in the United States. From there, I described the general plot of each novel for background context. The texts are then compared by the themes in the text. I wanted to figure out what themes are most common and are most beneficial to teach in a classroom setting. Themes also play a part in readability. Certain themes may work better with older students. Some of the texts may contain more graphic or gruesome scenes than others and that is important to consider when selecting a text for the classroom. I also want to compare and contrast the historical fiction and narrative nonfiction by the language that is used. It is important to know how easy or difficult the text will be to read. Students need to be able to comprehend what they are reading in order to learn and apply knowledge. Also, the frequent use of vocabulary that is more difficult or the use of terms that are not meant for younger audiences can determine what age level something should be taught, or if it should not be taught at all. I also wanted to take into consideration students' interests. Some texts may better capture the attention of students than others. Lastly, I compared what aspects of the Holocaust were shown in the texts. Was it about hiding a Jewish person, escaping, or living in a concentration camp? Or was it about a combination of these? The storyline also helps to figure out what age is most appropriate for each text and I will be comparing the plots of each below.

### Literature Review of Historical Fiction

*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry is one of the most commonly taught books about the Holocaust (Dean-Ruzicka, 5). It is used most often with younger students, primarily in late elementary or early middle school (Dean-Ruzicka, 7). The novel handles the harsh topic in a way

that is more digestible for younger audiences. Lowry's novel centers on Annemarie, who is best friends with a Jewish girl named Ellen. Tensions have been rising in their hometown. Certain shops start to close and Annemarie is confused about what is happening. She manages to speak to Peter, her deceased sister Lise's ex-fiancé. He is a part of the resistance and tells Annemarie more about the war. This gives Annemarie a better understanding of what is going on. Shortly after, Ellen's family has to leave, but Ellen is left in the care of Annemarie's family. The five of them are nearly caught that night by a German officer, but manage to convince the man that Ellen is a part of the family by using old baby photos of Lise. Annemarie, Kirsti, her mom, and Ellen escape to some of Annemarie's family the following day. They plan to smuggle Helen's family on a boat to Sweden. Annemarie helps them escape by bringing them a scented handkerchief to disguise their boat from the trained German dogs. Helen's family get out safely and Annemarie's family returns home. The war ends and Annemarie thinks about how her friend's family as well as many others will return (Lowry). This novel had a relatively happy ending. Although it is open ended, it has a positive tone. In terms of themes, it has friendship as a main theme as well as bravery and hope. Since this novel is written for a younger audience, the students in this age range can identify with Annemarie's confusion and lack of understanding about the events that are transpiring. Students learn with Annemarie and it gives them a basic understanding of events that happened.

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, depending on which country it is published in, is written by John Boyne. When researching popular reading sites, Curthoys found that "children around the target age of 9–13 as well their educators are deeply attached to the book and strongly identify with Bruno's and Shmuel's tragically fated friendship" (Curthoys, 263). Boyne's story is about a boy named Bruno whose father is a Nazi officer. Bruno

grows up happy and unaware of all the things happening around him. He and his family end up moving to a new town which is seemingly surrounded by soldiers. While there, Bruno discovers that there are boys and men wearing striped pajamas beyond a fence. His family refuses to tell him who they are. One day, Bruno decides to walk along the fence and meets a boy named Shmuel. The two talk about their lives and quickly become friends. Eventually, Bruno was going to move with his family again and at the same period in time, Shmuel is unable to locate his father. They make a plan for Bruno to borrow a pair of striped pajamas to help look for Shmuel's father, but instead all of the people wearing the pajamas, including Bruno and Shmuel, were led into a building and killed (Boyne). This novel did not have a happy ending. It instead, is devastating. The themes in this novel are friendship and family, as well as innocence. There are many issues with this novel. First off, there are several inaccuracies with the storyline. Curthoys writes, "Bruno has outraged some readers as an impossible contradiction, the German son of a Nazi commandant who is unerringly obtuse and naive: he mishears Auschwitz as Outwith, thinks that Hitler is called 'The Fury', and doesn't seem to know what the term 'Jew' means" (Curthoys, 261). Bruno is blissfully unaware of everything happening around him, something that would not have been possible during this time, especially with a Nazi commandant as a father. Curthoys also mentions that at his age, Bruno would have been forced to have been a part of the Hitler Youth. This was not addressed during the book. Bruno's family lived next to a concentration camp as well, yet Bruno still did not know what was happening. This story seems to imply that not only Bruno, but other German children who lived during this time were unaware of the things going on around them. However, that is just not true. Curthoys describes this as, "dismissing the victimization of the Jews to advance the victimization of others" (262). Bruno is turned into the victim in the novel, which is viewed as offensive to many. It can skew

many young students' perceptions of the Holocaust. Also, the story implies that Shmuel is in Auschwitz-Birkenau. However, as Curthoys states, if Shmuel had been taken to Auschwitz, he would have been killed upon arrival since he was so young. It is the sad truth of that camp. Bruno and Shmuel also could not spend time around the fences because they were electrified as well as heavily guarded (Curthoys, 262). There are so many historical inaccuracies that *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* contains that it is crucial to question whether it is truly beneficial to continue teaching the book in the classroom.

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* has quickly become one of the most taught historical fiction novels on the topic of the Holocaust as well as on World War II (Dean-Ruzicka, 17). Zusak's story is narrated by Death and tells the story of a young girl named Liesel Meminger. She is placed in the care of the Hubermanns and spends years with a loving family and her new best friend, Rudy. Things get more tense as she grows up in the midst of the war and her family ends up hiding a Jewish man, named Max, in their home. Liesel and Max develop a close friendship, spending time bonding over books and words, but as things get more difficult, Max is forced to leave. At the end of the novel, Liesel's street is bombed and she loses almost everyone she had known and loved. Years later, Max finds her and they reconnect (Zusak). *The Book Thief* does not have a particularly happy ending. It has themes such as life versus death, bravery, family, and friendship. This novel is written for a slightly older audience. It was initially written as an adult novel, but grew into a popular book read by younger readers. Typically, when it is taught, it is taught to students who are in eighth grade or older (Dean-Ruzicka, 6). It also uses a different format as there are inserted thoughts from Death and drawings and written text by Max.

### **Comparison and Analyzation of the Historical Fiction**



One thing I found interesting, is that out of the three of these historical fiction novels, not one is from the point of view of a Jewish person. They are all told from the view of either Danish or German children. The lack of that point of view is upsetting. It limits students' views of the Holocaust. If these novels were paired with a nonfictional narrative told by a Holocaust survivor it would be a better fit in the classroom. Otherwise, these historical fiction novels are not as all-encompassing as they need to be. Since not one of these novels is told from a Jewish person's viewpoint, students will not receive all the information they need to learn from reading one of these books as a standalone novel in a Holocaust unit.

These three novels are all for different age ranges. Students in different grades need varying amounts of knowledge and topics covered. *Number the Stars* is for younger readers in late elementary school and early middle school (Dean-Ruzicka, 7). It shows a broad overview of the Holocaust while not showing a copious amount of gruesome scenes. Also, by having it be told from the point of view of a young girl, it is more accessible to young readers. It is a good book to use as an introduction into the topic of the Holocaust. From a glance, one might think *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* would be aimed at the same age range as *Number the Stars*. However, it contains more topics and scenes that are not appropriate for younger readers. It is geared more towards middle schoolers who have previously been introduced to the topic of the Holocaust and are ready for reading more uncomfortable scenes (Curthoys, 263). This can be a drawback to the novel because students that age may be more impressionable and will believe what the story tells them. On their own, they will not pick up on some of the inaccuracies of the text. Even with the teacher highlighting many of the things wrong with the book, they will not gain much historical information. It may even end up confusing them more as they may forget what aspects of the novel are true and did happen versus parts of the book that are inaccurate.

Lastly, *The Book Thief* is used more often with eighth graders and older (Dean-Ruzicka, 6). It was intended to be for adults when it was first written, but was incorporated into many schools' curriculums as it gained popularity. While it covers many aspects of World War II and the Holocaust, it does not go as in depth when it comes to camp experiences. Rather, it focuses on Liesel's family stowing away a Jewish man. It does not shy away from showcasing heart wrenching scenes; there are deaths, bombings, and death marches to name a few. The vast array of topics and the format of the novel makes it a good fit for the classroom.

All three of these novels work to capture the attention of the reader. The general reader will likely not get bored. I think that partially because all of them are written from a young persons' perspective, students are able to identify more with the characters and their experiences. *Number the Stars* and *The Book Thief* also both touch upon the idea of growing up. They mention the struggles that accompany getting older and losing some of their childhood ignorance. As many of the students who read these books are going through puberty and are getting older, they get more attached to the characters and their stories.

### **Literature Review of Narrative Nonfiction**

The first nonfiction text I want to include is *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank. This is full of diary entries that detail two years of Anne's life that she spent hiding out in a secret annex. It starts off like a normal teenage diary, but then delves into deeper subjects as things grow worse. The end of the entries is abrupt, as the group was betrayed to Nazis (Frank). Anne and the others were sent off to camps and Anne eventually died there. It shows a real teenager's experience of the Holocaust. This can capture the attention of students. Many can identify with certain themes and situations in the narrative. Some themes within her entries include isolation, identity, love, and family. Students are still in the process of growing up and

figuring out who they are as a person and they feel connected to Anne when they read her entries dealing with some of the same things they are currently dealing with. These diary entries also can touch the hearts of those who feel trapped and isolated. For example, in *The Freedom Writers Diary*, Erin Gruwell has her students read *The Diary of a Young Girl* when she realizes none of them had even heard of the Holocaust. Her students grow attached to the diary and Anne quickly, as they are able to relate to Anne's experience being hidden away in the annex. Anne could not leave that room for fear of being killed, harassed, or taken away to a concentration camp. Erin Gruwell's students were afraid to leave their homes each day due to the prevalent gang and gun violence in their neighborhoods. Students with all different backgrounds are able to connect to Anne. However, Dean-Ruzicka warns that "[i]t is potentially dangerous to rely so heavily on a single young girl as the universal representative of persecution" (21). Anne Frank's diary entries and experiences are not intended to be the sole representation of a Jewish person's life during the Holocaust. There are so many distinctive narratives from that time. If a teacher opts to use this text in the classroom, they should make sure to expose their students to different real-life stories from other perspectives. It is important to have students understand that everyone's experiences, while they may undeniably have things in common, are not all the same. Some people were hidden and some escaped; some were sent to work camps and some were sent to killing centers. Each life and person was different and one teenage girl cannot represent all of them.

*Night* by Elie Wiesel is another narrative I would like to touch on. It is Elie Wiesel's personal experience told through the eyes of a young, Jewish teenager named Eliezer. Eliezer, along with his family, are forced into a ghetto and then onto a train to Auschwitz. He and his father are immediately separated from the rest of their family. The camp conditions are horrific

and he and his father are worked, starved, and stripped of their humanity. One day, they are forced to evacuate to another camp on foot during a snowstorm. They trek a long way and many of their fellow inmates die. Once they reach their destination, they are thrown back onto a train to another camp and most of the group do not make it there alive. Eliezer's father is one of the many who perished on the journey. The camp he was taken to was soon liberated, yet after all he endured, Eliezer was just a shell of the man he once was (Wiesel). Although the camp is liberated at the end of the narrative, it is not a very happy ending. Eliezer is confronted with the fact that he does not know who he is and does not feel human anymore. The themes present include survival, dehumanization, family, and loss of hope. This narrative does not shy away from confronting difficult topics. Elie Wiesel experienced true horror and he is able to capture the fear, hunger, and numbness that he was made to feel when he was in the camps. While it encapsulates these feelings, emotions, and events well, it also can be harrowing to read. Dean-Ruzica states, "[s]ome students seem haunted by *Night* and claim it is "too much" for a high school student" (5). It is not an easy read by any means, but I do think it shows a real and honest perspective of a Holocaust survivor. It is definitely meant to be read by an older student, usually in high school. I think that a teacher could talk about what content is in the narrative and then let students and their guardians decide if it is okay with them to read it. I would want to encourage them to read *Night*, because it is true and authentic, but I would not want students to be plagued with nightmares afterwards. There could be an alternative narrative, such as *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, for those who may think *Night* might be too much for them.

*Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, is the text that Art writes about his father's experience of the Holocaust. It is written in conjunction with illustrations. Spiegelman's narrative jumps back and forth between his father's memories and of conversations between Artie and his father, Vladek,

in the present. Vladek marries Anja and has a son. He runs a factory, but then is forced to leave his position when he is drafted into the Polish army. Vladek is then imprisoned but soon after is released back to his family. Then, all the Jews in their area are rounded up to be sent away on trains, but Vladek and Anja manage to get released with the help of Vladek's cousin. They are sent to a ghetto which is eventually evacuated. The two hide and try to escape, but are betrayed and sent to Auschwitz. There, they are separated. Vladek tells his son Artie stories of how he used his resourcefulness to survive in the camp. He was relocated to a different camp and eventually was reunited with his wife, Anja. Vladek gets increasingly unwell as he tells his story in pieces to Artie, ending with him referring to Artie by the name of his firstborn son who had passed long ago (Spiegelman). This narrative also did not have a very happy ending. Happy endings, although common in historical fiction, are not nearly as prevalent in real life Holocaust survivor accounts. Artie got to write his father's story down, but his father slowly grew unwell during the process. Some themes in the text were grief, family, love, and memory. Due to recent events, it would be remiss of me to not bring up the Tennessee school board ban on *Maus*. Just days prior to Holocaust Remembrance Day in January of 2022, a Tennessee school district decided unanimously to remove *Maus* from its curriculum due to the "book's use of swear words, nudity and suicide, saying it was "simply too adult-oriented" for pupils" (BBC News). However, the narrative only contains a few swear words and the nudity shown is of drawings of naked mice. This ban has sparked a lot of controversy and conversation over the narrative. Similarly to *Night*, if students and their families do not think they can handle the content in *Maus*, then they should be allowed to read an alternate narrative. I do not believe that any books should be banned; it just restricts knowledge and limits world view. *Maus*, like *The Book Thief*, was originally intended for adult readers, but was adopted into the middle and high school classrooms

(Dean-Ruzicka, 76). It was meant to show how the Holocaust impacted the later generations. I think that it has an interesting viewpoint and structure that works great in a classroom setting.

### **Comparison and Analyzation of the Narrative Nonfiction**

All three of these narratives are from the point of view of a Jewish person experiencing the Holocaust. However, each of the perspectives vary slightly. *The Diary of a Young Girl* is written by a teenager who was hiding away for much of the Holocaust. Her story is more accessible and relatable to younger readers. *Night* is Elie Wiesel's account of his experience during the Holocaust written a few years after the fact. It shows all the disturbing details of living in the concentration camps. It is much more difficult for readers to digest. *Maus* is written by the son of a Holocaust survivor. He is telling his father's story while also showing what it was like for him growing up in the generation after the Holocaust occurred. All three of these views are unique and important in their own ways.

These narratives vary on what age is appropriate to read them. *The Diary of a Young Girl* is frequently taught in middle school (Dean-Ruzicka, 22). It is a diary written by a young teenager, and so other teenagers are able to make connections with Anne and her thoughts. *Maus* is most often used for middle school and high school aged students (Dean-Ruzicka, 76). It garners the attention of students with its drawings and unconventional writing style. Lastly, *Night* is for a high school classroom (Dean-Ruzicka, 5). It is much more graphic in topic and shows what life in the camps was really like.

Each of these texts also has a history with banning and censorship. It is unfortunate as they are all great narratives that should be used in the classroom. They each are banned due to content reasons; *Maus*, for example, was banned because of perceived sexual content, language, nudity, and violence (BBC).

### Central Themes

One theme I would like to dig into is happy endings. Many fictional Holocaust novels contain happy endings. However, do happy endings truly encapsulate the experience of the Holocaust? So many people died, and even after it was over, the emotional pain was still present. Real life accounts from Holocaust survivors do not end happily. It is very rare to find one that does. Survivors dealt with so much pain and suffering that by the time they were liberated or escaped they were numb. It also took years before the camps were liberated, and many of the soldiers who freed them did not care much about them. Ruth Kluger states in her memoir, *Still Alive*, that when she and her mother told an American liberator that they were in the camps “he put his hands over his ears and turned away” and then he said, he “had his fill of people who claimed they had been in the camps. They were all over the place. Please, leave [me] alone” (149). Ruth as well as many others had to come to the harsh realization that their supposed heroes had not fought the war and liberated the camps entirely for their sake. So, in turn, even those who were freed from these camps did not feel joy over being liberated. There is a fine line between including novels with happy endings and risking desensitization or lack of true understanding in comparison to using a novel or narrative that ends unhappily and may be possibly overwhelming for students. Novels with happy endings are good to use for young students who may be introduced to the Holocaust for the first time, but for older students, they do not show the harsh reality of those experiences.

Another theme is the idea of coming of age and growing up. The majority of the most widely taught texts on the Holocaust are from the point of view of a child or teenager. They grow up during the difficult times. This can make it easier for students to identify with a person or character, but can also make it harder to read about what they went through. However, the

difficulty reading a text can also help students to better understand what happened rather than have information sugar coated or looked over.

### **Psychological Effects**

It is important to think about how a text may impact your students. Certain texts, such as *Night* by Elie Wiesel, are emotionally grueling to read. Students should be informed about these events, but should not be haunted by it. That is why it is paramount to consider students' ages and past knowledge of the Holocaust. If a student is particularly sensitive about the subject, they should be given an alternate text on the Holocaust that is still able to show what life was like without showing as many horrific scenes.

### **Conclusion**

Each of these texts has a good reason to be used in the classroom, aside from *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. The best way to utilize these texts is to not use them on their own. Students need to be given multiple perspectives of the Holocaust. It was a horrific, widespread tragedy, and only using one point of view and telling one story will not give students an all-encompassing understanding of the Holocaust as a whole. This is especially true when using a fictional text. Teachers should use a combination of texts, either all narratives, or a mix of narratives and fiction. I do not believe that only fictional texts should be used simply because they do not give a view of a persons' real experience. Students need to read and hear about true stories of people who were in one of the concentration camps or were hidden. If a teacher only wants to use one piece of writing, they could try incorporating short videos or documentaries that allow students to hear about different experiences. Students should always have access to other views as they are all valid and important.



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