

UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING
HOLOCAUST
EDUCATION

PAULA COWAN | HENRY MAITLES



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an interpretation of the past based on facts. That is not to say that we do not recognise the benefits of using different forms of fiction in the classroom. We understand that a novel can appeal to students who are not instantly, or especially, interested in History, or indeed in this specific area of history; help students identify and use the language of discrimination and racism; personalise and humanise the Holocaust experience; provide a rich shared experience for learners; and that it has the potential to be informative and contribute effectively to interdisciplinary learning. Additionally, the illustrations in picture books (e.g. Innocenti and McEwan, 1985) provide young readers with age-appropriate visual images that can support their learning.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

One recommendation that is commonly agreed in using fiction in school-based Holocaust Education is that teachers need to be judicious in their text selections. Such judgement relies upon their views as to what constitutes the 'best' novels. For some, the criteria will be texts that achieve the greatest participation and/or enjoyment of students; for others, the extent to which a text informs students of this historical event will be more important. Either way, teachers require to support students in their understanding of the Holocaust. If a fictional text contains incorrect information, then the teacher's role is crucial in ensuring that students are not misinformed and that they understand key facts of the Holocaust. Some authors (e.g. Gleitzman, 2006; Morpurgo, 2008) assist in this by inserting a note or letter at the end of their novel that clarifies the elements of truth in their story.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is a bestselling novel and DVD (2009) and these are popular resources in primary and secondary classrooms. The popularity of this novel amongst secondary students in England is supported firstly by Gray's findings (2014a: 114) that 75.8% of 298 secondary students had either read this book or watched its subsequent film (this percentage was considerably higher than those who had engaged with *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* (2007) or *Schindler's List* (1993)), and the Centre for Holocaust Education's findings that from its nearly 8,000 student participants, this was the 'most-read book and the most watched film about the Holocaust' (2014: 71). In a piece of unpublished research involving 44 primary teachers in Scotland's largest local authority in 2013, we found that more of them were using *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and that *The Diary of Anne Frank* was less widely used. This offers some explanation as to why when one primary 7 class were told by their teacher that they were going to be learning about the Holocaust and

would be reading *Hana's Suitcase* (see Chapter 8), one pupil asked the teacher, 'Why are we not reading *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*?'. Furthermore, conversations with teachers of secondary students, whose needs are better met in specialist settings rather than in mainstream schools, report their use of this novel to teach the Holocaust.

We consider that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* can be categorised according to Trease above as *period fiction*, and struggle with Lathey's categories, as Boyne's character development and setting do indeed bring this period of history alive for readers, *and* it can be argued that Boyne uses history to stimulate readers' imagination. We consider this book to be an original, well-crafted book that can be an effective resource to teach English. However, because of its historical inaccuracies, we do not consider that it is a novel that primary teachers should be using in their students' study of the Holocaust, as it involves too much work on the part of the teacher to – as Davies writes above – 'get right'. Further, we consider that secondary teachers need to exercise caution when using this novel with their students, and consult or work with History colleagues to seriously facilitate students' engagement with a range of informational texts and historical enquiry alongside their fictional reading.

This book has received a great deal of criticism from academics in the literary and historical worlds. Indeed Gray (2014b: 133) concludes that it is a 'curse' for Holocaust Education. Ruth Gilbert describes the book's climactic sequence of events as 'contrived' and 'implausible', and reports that Boyne 'admitted that he changed many facts [of the Holocaust] to suit the story' (2010: 361). Eaglestone claims that this novel conveys 'Auschwitz as "real" as a fantasy context such as Harry Potter's Hogwarts School' (2007: 52). Cesarani (2008: 4) accuses Boyne of a lack of knowledge of the Holocaust and of Auschwitz-Birkenau in particular, of distorting history, and writes that it is 'fiction in the worst sense of the word'. In addition to this, there are concerns over the theme and messages of this book.

Rather than inform the reader of something new about the Holocaust, Boyne uses the Holocaust as a setting to explore the friendship between two 9-year-old boys, one the son of the Camp Commandant and the other a Jewish prisoner in the camp. As Auschwitz-Birkenau had guarded electric fences and 9-year-old Jewish children were usually murdered on arrival at this camp, the novel misinforms readers about the Holocaust. One of the messages of this book is that Camp Commandants were respectable individuals and loving fathers who had to do their job. The actual Commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Rudolf Hoess (1900–1947), was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years in prison in 1924 for his part in the killing of Walter Kadow, a Party member who was

suspected of betraying another member. Kadow had been beaten with clubs before his throat had been cut (Harding, 2013). Hoess (voluntarily) joined the SS in 1933, trained as a supervisor in Dachau concentration camp in 1934, and was appointed adjutant of Saschenhausen concentration camp in 1938 where he was responsible for camp discipline and executions; he was not in any sense, a model citizen. Hence this too is misleading.

Perhaps the most controversial point about this novel, however, is the emotional journey on which the author takes the reader. At the end of the book, the reader feels sympathy for the son of the Camp Commandant who is mistakenly murdered in the camp, and his grieving family, and *not* for the primary victims of the Holocaust. This empathy for the perpetrators does not sit easily with Holocaust survivors or ourselves. One's first lessons of the Holocaust should focus on an understanding of what the Holocaust was, and this cannot be achieved unless students have a clear understanding of who the victims and perpetrators were. This is another reason why we recommend that this novel is not used in the primary classroom, and treated with caution in the secondary.

Our worry is that this book is currently leading to distorted perceptions of the Holocaust which present serious challenges to History teachers. This is supported by evidence from interviews with secondary students in England that the book reinforced an 'inaccurate perception of German ignorance of the Holocaust' (Centre for Holocaust Education, 2014: 71), and feedback from History teachers that students' inaccurate perceptions of the camps after studying or reading this book, are 'difficult to dispel' (HET, n.d.). Such perceptions are no doubt welcomed by those who would deny or trivialise the Holocaust. Boyne's assertion that this book is 'a fable' is also concerning, as setting such a genre in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the iconic symbol of the Holocaust, arguably diminishes the reality of this terrible place. We agree with the advice of US educators who comprise the Holocaust Educators' Consortium in urging teachers to 'Avoid this book' (Holocaust Educators' Consortium, 2014: 127).

We suggest that teachers choose informational texts such as true-life stories that are written by real children (e.g. Holliday, 1996; Leapman, 2000; Zaprunder, 2002), and non-fiction books that are written in a narrative, 'fictional' style (e.g. Levine, 2003) for the experiences of child victims of the Holocaust. With the inevitability that more novels will be published that teachers and students will enjoy and adore, that contest the reality of the experiences and events of the Holocaust, and the lessening of living evidence of the Holocaust, there is an urgent need for teachers and educators to give this greater consideration. One approach is to use (non-fictional) informational texts in conjunction with fictional texts. This is demonstrated in the following case study.

Bracey et al. (2006) investigated the use of historical fiction with 11- to 12-year-old students in teaching the Second World War and controversial issues such as the treatment of refugees and displaced children. This study unit approach focused on two novels: *Safe Harbour* (Conlon-McKenna, 1995), which tells of the experiences of the London Blitz; and *Faraway Home* (Taylor, 1999), which focuses on the experiences of two *kinder* who fled Vienna for Northern Ireland, and a range of informational texts. This approach is based on the rationale that students should read historical fiction alongside researching its context, thereby relating informational context from fiction to actual evidence and contributing to historical enquiry. This responds to the concern that students who do not have a firm grounding of the historical context of the Holocaust will be unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Brabham, 1997).

Informational sources included newspaper reports, personal testimonies and court records. These enabled students to make comparisons and engage in historical enquiry. For example, students compared the treatment of one character in *Faraway Home* with the actual treatment of Austrian and German refugees during the Holocaust, and discussed how the fictional author could have selected sources for their text. This study concluded that this use of historical fiction motivated students not only in their learning of the Holocaust, evacuation and refugees, but also in their reading of fiction and in their writing historical fiction (Bracey et al., 2006: 107).

Testimony

Survivor and eye-witness testimonies can, therefore, also make a significant contribution to addressing the difficulties arising from fictional texts. Whether in the form of a diary, a memoir, audiovisual or live (in-person) testimony, the version of events as told by witnesses adds a new dimension to the learning process. Survivor and eye-witness testimonies can dispel popular understandings, such as Holocaust survivors 'living' in one camp during their incarceration; the reality was that survivors were moved to and from a number of camps. It can also provide insight into incidents that students have read about or studied in their lessons, such as that of Gena Turgel (b. 1923) that verifies Anne Frank's illness at Bergen-Belsen.

The following extracts are from two audiovisual testimonies that were made available to schools in Scotland to accompany the introduction of Holocaust Memorial Day in the UK. Each of these demonstrates the insight that testimony can provide in commonly studied aspects of the