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# WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES  
VOLUME III, ISSUE 2

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Winter 2010  
Holocaust Around the World



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**WOW Review: Volume III, Issue 2**  
 Winter 2010  
 Holocaust Around the World

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## Introduction and Editor's Note

**WOW Review** is pleased to have Dr. Melissa Wilson as guest editor for this themed issue on the Holocaust. Melissa's extensive and focused research on this literature provides a framework for these powerful reviews and invites readers to consider unique perspectives on this many faceted topic.

### Holocaust around the World

This issue is devoted to international children's books about the Holocaust. "Children's books" signals that these are not Holocaust books that children may read, but rather, books specifically written and published for children about the Holocaust- a seemingly small, but important distinction. Because the intended audience is children, the protagonists are often children and the endings, if not fairy-tale happy, are, at the very least, hopeful. The reality of children in the Holocaust was not hopeful at all. In Poland, for example, only .5% of all the one million children aged fourteen and under survived. This means that 995,000 Polish-Jewish children were murdered directly or indirectly by adults. Anne Frank was the norm, not the exception. This issue deals with the stories about the exceptions.

The Holocaust is a strange genre of children's literature for the very reason that the subject is horrific in the truest sense. It is a story of senseless murder that must be told in ways in which children and adults can make sense (if that is even possible). It is also an international story belonging to many nations of murderers, collaborators, victims, survivors, and heroes. Our text set comes from Denmark, Poland, France, Sweden, Cuba, and Germany. Some authors are Jewish, some aren't. All are stories of hope and humanity.

Some of these stories are narratives of righteous Gentiles. *Number the Stars* and *The Yellow Star: The Legend Of King Christian X Of Denmark* highlight the incredible daring of the Danish people and its leaders to make a conscious decision not to collaborate in genocide despite being an occupied country. *Resistance: Book 1* concentrates its focus on the French resistance movement in which ordinary people showed unbelievable courage as France's government were Nazi collaborators at that time. This sub text set's focus is on the Gentile experience of WWII.

*Tropical Secrets* and *A Faraway Island* deal with the theme of identity. In these novels the Jewish characters escape the Nazis but find themselves unable to flee their own Jewishness and other's anti-Semitism. These are stories of growing up and making sense of the world, but not directly of the Holocaust.

Set in the ghettos and concentration camps of the actual Holocaust are stories of the Jews themselves. In order from least to most graphic and realistic, are *Milkweed*, *Emil and Karl*, and *Hidden Letters*. The reader experiences a part of the Holocaust, the danger, privations, and suffering, but also the humanity, hope, and being a kid during a tragic time in history.

*T4: A Novel in Verse* is the outlier in this text set as the novel features a Gentile (and German) protagonist who is being targeted by the Nazis for being deaf. One of the few children's Holocaust books that deal with non-Jewish victims, *T4: A Novel in Verse* is also unique in that it tells the rarely told story of Hitler's war against his own people.

I invite you to read this issue to experience new books and revisit old favorites. What these reviews reveal is that the need to survive, to rebel, to make difficult decisions, to be yourself, and to find meaning knows no borders. The exceptional stories included are a collective narrative of good and evil and fictional children filling in for those who can never speak again. Sachsenhausen, a Holocaust survivor, famously said, “I have told you this story (the Holocaust) not to weaken you, but to strengthen you. Now it is up to you.”

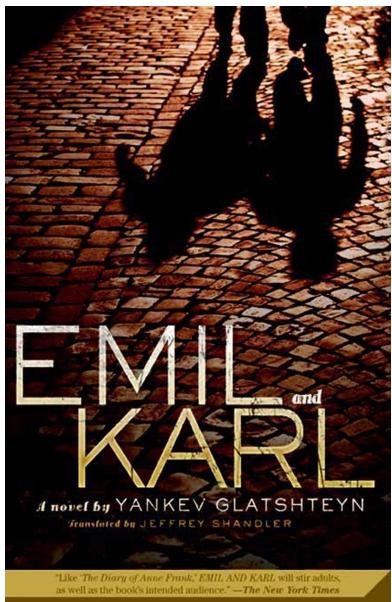
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### Emil and Karl

Written by Yankev Glatshteyn,  
 Translated by Jeffrey Shanler.  
 A Neal Porter Book, 2006, 208 pp.  
 ISBN: 1-59643-119-9

Yankev Glatshteyn (Jacob Glatstein) immigrated to the United States from Lublin, Poland where he was born in 1896. Upon his arrival in the U.S. in 1914, Glatshteyn lived with his uncle and worked in sweatshops until he learned English. He attended NYU's Law School before dropping out to teach, and then made a career change to journalism, writing columns about politics and culture. In 1920, he co-founded the In zikh, a literary school of thought where metered verse was rejected and non-Jewish themes were encouraged. The movement followed on the heels of the "Sweatshop Poets" and became known as the first true movement in

modern Yiddish literature. Glatshteyn wrote on "exotic" themes and his poetry focused on the words and their sounds.

Glatshteyn's 1934 visit to Poland radically changed his life and his work. After witnessing the advancement of anti-Semitism across Europe, he wrote *Emil and Karl* and two more novels. He became an activist with his works focused on Jewish themes, urging Jews across the world to take action against what was happening to European Jews. For the remainder of his life, Glatshteyn continued his writings in Yiddish, becoming known as one of the most important Jewish poets of the twentieth century. He died in 1971 in New York City.

Glatshteyn's compelling story takes place just prior to the start of World War II. In an afterword, Shandler notes that many books have been written about the Holocaust, but the timing of this book makes it "among the very first books written about the Holocaust for readers of any age and in any language" (p. 187). He also explains that one of Glatshteyn's purposes for writing this book was to help readers, "understand that what was happening to Jews in Europe had an impact on everyone living there, and that the future of Europe's Jews depended on their relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors" (p. 194).

The story opens with terrified nine-year-old Karl, alone in his apartment. He has just witnessed "three big, hulking men" (p.3) drag away his mother, a Socialist. Karl tries to defend his mother but is punched "in the stomach so hard that he fell down, taking the chair with him" (p.3). Not knowing what else to do, Karl decides to go to his Jewish friend, Emil. Two weeks earlier, Emil's mother had told Karl not to come over any more because Emil was harassed and beaten by other children for playing with Karl, a Gentile. Karl was also abused by other children because of his friendship with Emil. As Karl runs to Emil's he reasons, "they'd have to let him in now. He didn't have anyone else. Now he was a Jew, too. After all, he'd been punched in the stomach so hard that he could have died. They took his mother away from him. He was all alone in the world. How could Emil not let him in now?" (p.13).

When Karl reaches Emil's door, he gives the special knock and waits. "Emil stood there, looking dazed.

He didn't say a word" (p. 23). Emil tells Karl his father has been taken away and killed; his ashes returned to them in a box. His mother has a complete break-down and is led away by the Rabbi and friends. The Rabbi tells Emil and Karl to wait, he will find homes for them both. They wait for a day, but hunger drives them back to Karl's building. When they arrive at a neighbor's, they find only her kitchen table left and decide to hide in the cellar for the night. The next morning, the janitor finds them. He and his wife feed them, telling them to stay there each night. On a bright and clear day, Karl talks Emil into going outside. As they walk through the streets, they are caught by a Nazi soldier, who takes them to an area where hundreds of people are on their knees and forced to clean the street with their hands. And thus begins Emil's and Karl's struggle to survive in this hostile environment.

While Emil and Karl are certainly victims of horrendous times and both boys struggle to understand why these events are happening, they also take action for themselves and encounter heroes with varying shades of kindness, including Jews, Gentiles, and Nazis. For example, on that first day scrubbing the streets, a Nazi overseer singles them out and escorts them away from the other Nazis. As Emil and Karl negotiate their days and nights, they must figure out who they can trust and where they can go for food and shelter, as one-by-one their helpers disappear, taken away by the storm troopers.

Eventually, Emil and Karl are taken in by "Uncle Hans" and "Aunt Matilda," two underground workers. As the story concludes, Emil and Karl are waiting at the train station to leave Vienna. Matilda risks her life to give them notes Hans has written to each, "I will die so that Emil and Karl might be able to live together in peace" (p. 180). The train pulls up, chaos breaks out, and Emil and Karl are separated. Emil is on the train when the doors are closed, while Karl is left behind—hoping to get on the next train.

*Emil and Karl* was written as a cautionary tale, and so can be connected to allegorical picture books, such as *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* by Eve Bunting (1989) and *The Little Boy Star: An Allegory of the Holocaust* by Rachel Hausfater (2006). These picture books could serve as introductions or be the impetus for whole class discussions during the reading of *Emil and Karl* to make connections across the three books.

Since *Emil and Karl* focus on the experiences of two young boys experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust, other companion titles might include the picture books *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti (1985) and *I Never Saw Another Butterfly* by Hana Volakov (1994). The first is about a young girl who discovers children in a concentration camp near her town; and the second, a collection of poems, stories, and illustrations written and drawn by children in a concentration camp. Two novels to include might be *Friedrich* by Hans Peter Richter (1987) and *Survivors: True Stories of Children in the Holocaust* by Allan Zullo (2005). The former is a similar account to *Emil and Karl* and the latter is a collection of biographical sketches.

In reading *Emil and Karl*, as well as these companion pieces, readers cannot help but make connections to current events in their own lives and the world today. How are children suffering from conflicts worldwide? Do we have an obligation to step in? Should we? How can we help? Like Glatshteyn's decision to take action upon seeing the unfolding events in Europe in 1934, reading

*Emil and Karl* and similar titles will help readers gain a global perspective in responsible citizenship and what can happen when one does not act against unjust events.

### Resources

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob\\_Glatstein](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Glatstein)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yiddish\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yiddish_literature)

<http://wordswithoutborders.org/contributor/yankev-glatshteyn/>

<http://www.jewishliteraryreview.com/2007/11/jadcob-glatsteins-summond-home/>

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### A Faraway Island

Written by Annika Thor

Translated by Linda Schenck

Delacorte Press, 2009, 256 pp.

ISBN: 10-038-573-6177

*The picture is two years old. In those days, the Steiners were still an ordinary family, taking the streetcar, going to movies and concerts, enjoying vacations. But less than a year after the picture was taken, the Nazis invaded Austria... Things the Steiner family had always taken for granted were suddenly prohibited. Forbidden to people like them, to Jews. (p. 21)*

For protagonist, Stephie Steiner, the picture of her family marks normality, a time before her entire world changed. It marks a time before she was separated from her parents and her homeland of Austria. A novelized account of two sisters who are part of the Kindertransport Program just prior to World War II, *A Faraway Island* is set on an island off Sweden in 1939 at the beginning of the Holocaust. The novel introduces twelve-year-old Stephie Steiner and her eight-year-old sister Nellie, whose parents send them through the Kindertransport Program, which was introduced in 1938 by Great Britain and other countries across Northern Europe after the Kristallnacht incident in Nazi Germany. It was a program used to sponsor Jewish children under age 17 until the crisis was over. As more and more Jews in Vienna are targeted by the Nazis and taken away from their homes, the Steiners place their daughters on the train to Sweden, believing they will follow shortly. The girls are to await their parents' release from Austria so they can travel together as a family to America where they will be safe. Shortly after the sisters arrive on the island, Austria is invaded by the Nazis and the sisters are caught between what they knew as Austrian Jewish children, what they are experiencing as Jewish refugees in a predominantly Christian country, and what possibilities might exist for them once—and if—they are reunited with their parents.

A quiet story with an atmosphere that reflects the cold and alienating setting of a windswept Swedish island, *A Faraway Island* aptly depicts outsider Stephie who is not only physically separated from her parents, but is culturally and emotionally separated from her adoptive community. She struggles to make friends and to find a place of safety between her Jewish heritage and the predominant Christian ethics of her adoptive community. She is bullied by classmates, reflecting the political climate of Europe toward Jews at the time, and is not allowed to continue in school, reflecting the cultural limitations she must accept as a young girl within her new community. The novel reveals how children from the Kindertransport had to make great changes to fit in their new countries and families, including—for many—their Jewish identity. Nellie, the eight year old who is placed with a young family, fits in easily. She readily gives up her German language and her culture as she adjusts to her new family and her new surroundings. She begins to embrace the Christian perspective of the community. Stephie, however, has more to lose, and has a difficult time living with Aunt Marta, whose sadness reflects her own. While her new Aunt does not require Stephie to accept Christian values, there is no acknowledgement of Stephie's Jewish heritage, and

she must partake in the Christian rituals of her adoptive community. Thus, Stephie is a young girl who also has the huge responsibility of keeping her parents, her Jewish heritage, and her old world alive in her own and her sister's imagination. The outward struggles she faces on the island reflect her inward turmoil, and throughout the story she struggles with who she is, where she belongs, and what she needs to do to remain faithful to the beliefs she has always known.

The first of a series of books about Stephie and Nellie, *A Faraway Island* gives readers a new perspective on one of the outcomes of Hitler's policy on Jews. Something frequently overlooked about the Holocaust is how that policy directly impacted all Jews in the areas of Europe that were occupied by the Nazis, with some experiencing what might be considered a more gentle devastation. The text focuses on Stephie's struggle within a culture that is often quite hostile to her emotionally, socially, and religiously. This text makes a nice complement to *Number the Stars* (Lois Lowry, 1998) if readers wish to read a narrative about what happened to Jews once they escaped to Sweden for safety. A better pairing, however, would be *Black Radishes* (Meyer, 2010) as another fictionalized account of a Jewish family that flees Paris before the Nazi take over and division of France. This pairing would be especially beneficial for showing young readers the price many Jews paid as a direct result of Hitler's policy—the giving up or hiding their identities, losing their rights and privileges as members of a society, or loss of their materials goods, including houses, businesses, and yes, for some, the lives of family members. Both texts aptly portray the angst those in safe areas felt for those who were not so fortunate, and both are based on actual family accounts.

*A Faraway Island* could be used with any number of Holocaust texts that would allow middle school readers a wider range of understanding about what transpired in Europe during World War II, and the resulting situations—both horrific and less so—during that time period. This story addresses themes that question what it means to survive, what it takes to be faithful, what is family, and ultimately what it means to embrace life and love as it is given. There is a great sense of loss and sadness in this novel that could be overlooked by younger readers. Older and more sensitive readers, however, will ponder the loss of both national and religious identity, and will wonder what happens to the Steiner sisters, especially Stephie. The rest of the series has not been released in English, but readers should anticipate their arrival; if they are anything like this first text, they will be worth the wait.

Author Annika Thor based her novel on interviews of Jewish survivors who, as young children, were sent to Sweden during World War II. She grew up in a Jewish family in Sweden where some of her cousins experienced the Kindertransport as young children. In her author's note, she mentions how many young children were never reunited with their parents, and thus absorbed into Swedish families and a new culture. *A Faraway Island*, the 2010 Batchelder Award winner for translation, is only one of a number of novels Linda Schenck has translated from Swedish for an English-speaking audience.

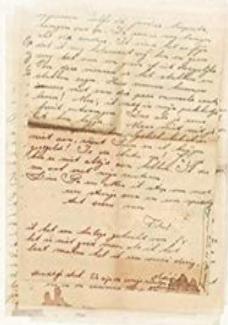
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## HIDDEN LETTERS



Edited and annotated by Deborah Slier and Ian Shine  
Translated by Marion van Binsbergen-Pritchard

### Hidden Letters

Annotated by Deborah Slier and Ian Shine  
Translated by Marion van Binsbergen-Pritchard.  
Star Bright Books, 2008, 200 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-88773-488-2

*Tuesday Evening 13 July '42 — Pa and Ma, I have a sense that something is going to happen soon. Will it last another winter? It seems almost impossible to me. Thousands and thousands are dying. But we have to keep our courage up. (p. 77) 3 Aug. 1942 — [Monday] Pa and Ma, it broke my heart to see these oldsters plodding along. Some of them have heart trouble and varicose veins. There is no light work on the moor, and they get no time to catch their breath. We have already decided that tomorrow we will dig a ditch for them. (p. 96)*

*Hidden Letters* is the real-life story of 18-year-old Philip "Flip" Slier who was imprisoned in a forced labor camp in Holland during World War II. Flip's experiences are told through the letters to his parents, letters which were discovered in 1997 in the ceiling of a building being demolished in Amsterdam. From April 25 until September 14, 1942, Flip Slier regularly wrote to his parents from Molengoot forced labor camp sixty miles from Amsterdam. Flip tells about camp procedures and his hard work. He shares how he manages to procure additional food from Gentiles whose farms bordered the camp and how he stays healthy in a very harsh environment. Flip acknowledges his blessings, including the support of many people, Jews and Gentiles, who help him meet his physical and emotional needs during his imprisonment.

The eighty-six letters, postcards, and a telegram around which this book is built offer an eyewitness account of a Jewish teen's life in Nazi-occupied Holland. The annotators support Flip's saga with extensive notes, annotations, and over 300 hundred photographs, maps, and documents that situate his experiences within the larger context of World War II. The letters were translated from Dutch by Marion van Binsbergen-Pritchard who lived in Holland during the war and received a Yad Vashem Medal for rescuing about 150 Jews, mostly children.

This book is filled with many little known facts, and gives a new perspective on Holland under Nazi occupation. Similar to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Hidden Letters* will resonate with teen readers because of Flip's age. Readers will identify closely with his experiences which can help them comprehend and connect to the specifics of Flip and his family's persecution with the enormity of genocide. *Hidden Letters* offers readers the opportunity to take multiple stances along the aesthetic and efferent continuum. They can focus on Flip's letters, which provide lived-through experiences of a Jewish teen's life in a Nazi work camp. They can also learn facts about this period in history by examining the primary source documents that support the information found in the letters. Unlike a textbook that pre-digests information and transmits it to readers secondhand, students can make their own interpretations and judgments regarding the information presented in primary sources. The letters and documents in this book provide thought-provoking perspectives for youth to consider.

Transacting with primary sources encourages teen readers to reflect and make inferences. Flip reports

hearing singer Harry Pos at Molengoot who often sang on the Dutch Labor Party radio station. A sidenote in *Hidden Letters* says: "A survivor who was in the Blechhammer Camp, a sub-camp of Auschwitz, watched three Jews being hanged for a minor misdemeanor: 'We all had to watch... Later in the evening we had to go to a concert as usual and listen as Harry Pos stood and sang, while outside the bodies dangled'" (p. 38). This entry reflects the irony of Flip and his fellow inmates being "entertained" with Jewish songs while incarcerated for being Jews.

A testimony from Sobibor Extermination Camp survivor Esther Terner-Raab reported that an SS officer smuggled extra bread for Jewish workers in the camp and even provided her with pair of shoes before he requested a transfer (p. 150). This excerpt from the letter (below) from Edith Stein [a Jew who converted to Catholicism and became a nun and later a saint] was written to Pope Pius XI:

*...We all, who are faithful children of the Church and who see the conditions in Germany with open eyes, fear the worst for the prestige of the Church if the silence continues any longer. We are convinced that this silence will not be in the long run to purchase peace with the present German government. For the time being, the fight against Catholicism will be conducted quietly and less brutally than against Jewry, but no less systematically (p.95).*

What inferences can readers make about people's treatment of one another during the war? What are the devastating effects of persecution for both persecuted and persecutors? What is the interplay between politics, religion, and morality during war times?

Reading an informational text can build background knowledge that helps readers understand and question novels as well as informational texts. Flip's letters are fascinating reading; they are both ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. Youth will identify with Flip's youthful spirit, camaraderie with his fellow inmates, and his attraction to a farmer's daughter. They will find him to be a sympathetic character, and their hearts will be broken to learn that neither Flip nor his parents survived the Holocaust. In fact, nearly all of Flip's extended family was murdered by the Nazis. Flip's *Hidden Letters* provide a first-hand account of this tragic period in human history told from a young person's point of view.

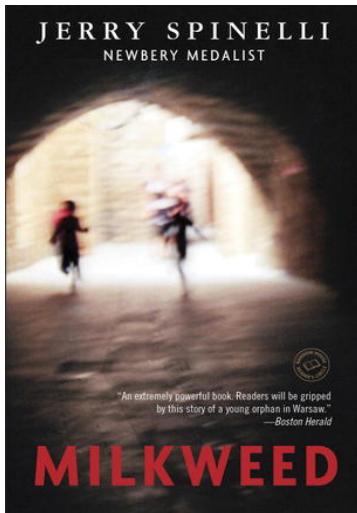
Pairing this book with Shoah novels can create an opportunity for readers' hearts and minds to be touched, awakened, and activated to work to end the unconscionable crime of genocide forever. *Hidden Letters* can also be paired with other informational books that share the Holocaust experience from the perspective of youth: *The Beautiful Days of My Youth: My Nine Months in Auschwitz and Plaszow* by Ana Novac (1997), *Ben's Story: Holocaust Letters with Selections from the Dutch Underground Press* by Benjamin Wessels (1998), *The Cage* by Ruth Minsky Sender (1997), *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* by Anne Frank, edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler, translated by Susan Massotty (1997), *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti (2005), *I Have Lived A Thousand Years* by Livia Bitton Jackson (1999), *Lonek's Journey: The True Story of a Boy's Escape to Freedom* by Dorit Bader Whiteman (2005), or *Surviving Hitler: A Boy in the Nazi Death Camps* by Andrea Warren (2002).

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### Milkweed

Written by Jerry Spinelli.  
 Scholastic, 2005, 208 pp.  
 ISBN: 978-0375861475

*The problem is no longer 'never to forget': it is how to remember*  
 -Bosmajian

*There was not a Holocaust of six million, but six million Holocausts of one*  
 -Spinelli

Thankfully, Theodor Adorno's famous quote that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" has not been taken to heart. Countless Holocaust memoirs and works of fiction have been written and put into the archives of a new collective memory of that historical event. Even considering the amount of literature written for and about children, the above quote by Jerry Spinelli, taken seriously, alters the landscape, allowing us to tell the small stories, making connection to the past easier for children (and adults) of many different backgrounds. Hamida Bosmajian recognizes the scope of the Holocaust genre which explores every aspect of the horrors and renders the stories either repetitive or desensitizes the reader to a dangerous extent. In Milkweed, Spinelli has used a child narrator/protagonist in order to look at a small but significant part of the Holocaust—the starvation, ghettoization, and eventual deportation of Warsaw's large Jewish population. Spinelli, who is not Jewish, chose to write about the Holocaust because of his interest in the historical time period. He met a Holocaust survivor, but did not consider him a source for the book.

Warsaw is seen through the eyes of an unnamed street urchin (Spinelli thought of him as eight or nine years old) who is assumed by other street kids to be a Gypsy. Abandoned by parents he does not remember, the character lives a hand-to-mouth existence on the streets of Warsaw, eventually taking up with a group of orphans, who happen to be Jewish. As the situation gets desperate in Warsaw (mostly by Nazi decree), the group's stealing becomes more systematized. The unnamed boy is given a history by Uri, an older teen who looks out for him, to be used in case he gets caught.

Misha, as he is now known, has a whole invented history that explains his present circumstances. Before long, he befriends a Jewish girl named Janina whose food he was going to pilfer, becoming a de facto member of their family when all the Jews are herded into the ghetto. The family depends on Misha and Janina to steal food because they are the only ones small enough to fit through openings in the wall to Warsaw city proper. In this story, the reader is exposed to many of the horrors of life in the Warsaw ghetto. We are sympathetic to Misha's plight as a street orphan before the ghetto, but there is always food for the taking. After developing the characters during this period, Spinelli does not spare us the descent into mass starvation taking place before the Warsaw Jews were deported to their deaths.

There has been much academic discussion over the last twenty years about how much of the horror of the Holocaust children should be exposed to. Many of us have seen photographs or films of the

death camps with their piles of bodies and shoes and glasses. These horrific visual records of the Holocaust beg questions about how much children should see and if there is any way to spare them from the goriest details. How the story is narrated, whose eyes we see the story through, will affect not only what we see, but how we see it.

Similar to Spinelli's most famous protagonist, Jeffrey Lionel Magee, Misha (through no fault of his own) looks upon the world through a detached lens. *Maniac Magee* (1990) tackled the hot topic of racism, but Magee always seemed to be above the fray. His world was not black vs. white and, maybe naively, he saw all people as essentially good. Misha has the same reaction to many of the horrors in *Milkweed*. Gunshots are a normal daily sound, and death does not seem to faze him. Used to an extremely difficult daily life from the start, he takes everything in stride, only worried about how he will find his next meal. It is only when he is given the fake story of his identity that he slowly begins to show emotion. When his newfound Jewish identity is confirmed by his acceptance into Janina's family, the boy finds a reason to keep himself and the others going. But there is still a level of detachment in his actions and observations of daily life in the ghetto.

What are we to make of a Holocaust fictional narrative that shows us life up close, but doesn't ask us to feel? An initial reaction may be to recoil from the thought of a neutral Warsaw ghetto. After all, it was one of the most visible manifestations of Nazi atrocity and a testament to the fight of those resisters who stayed past the deportations. Roberto Innocenti, famous illustrator and author of the Holocaust story *Rose Blanche* (2003), discusses the artistic choices that are made when creating disturbing narrative (Myers, 2009). Innocenti purposefully maintains distance in his illustrations. He doesn't show the raw emotion on the face of the characters during moments of crisis in order to shield children (and adults) from having to deal with it. This is both a strength and a weakness of Spinelli's writing. From the Jewish perspective of this reviewer, the horrors of what happened to Jews usually take precedence over more general historical questions of people's inhumanity to each other. However, when I step back, I see the value in allowing kids to get the facts while not being overwhelmed by the horrors. If Misha can be above the fray, so can the reader.

Another way that Spinelli keeps the reader a bit detached is by showing a character that never seems to grasp his own identity. We sympathize and maybe empathize with Jeffrey Magee and Misha because they are without the stability of home or parents. But their identity is rarely named by themselves. Misha's potential loss of identity through his own mortality is not shown up close. The world would be losing someone unnamed. He declares himself a Jew, but the reader guesses this is a bit of whimsy to satisfy his own present desire for belonging because his Jewish identity is affirmed only by Janina and her father and the scope of Nazi racial policies. He is not disturbed by the specific persecution of Jews or, as his initial protectors assume he is, Gypsies. We can also see his lack of identity by his reaction to the Nazi soldiers, the "Jackboots," when they occupy Warsaw before the ghetto. Misha dreams of being a Jackboot and is amazed by the shine and majesty of their uniforms. This is in stark contrast to the Jews who were "volunteered" to be policemen in Warsaw, looked upon as traitors by their fellow Jews. Their uniforms have no shine. One can imagine a naïve child taken in by the pomp and circumstance of the Nazi machine with their shiny boots and measured parades. Misha, as a targeted individual, is taken in to the same extent as German youth who became the members of the Hitler Youth. By restricting Misha's identification with the Jews initially, Spinelli attains a measure of truth not seen in most Holocaust narratives. Misha is just a starry-eyed kid like any other.

The continuous tension between the unnamed detached protagonist living through the Warsaw Ghetto and the knowledge that we have today about the actual time and place provides us with a safer means to look at the Holocaust historically. We are reminded of the destruction and can critically examine larger issues of identity, discrimination, and even genocide while, at the same time, be comforted with a story that provides facts, yet doesn't expose us so much that we get Holocaust exhaustion.

Although marketed to older readers than those of *Milkweed*, Israeli author Uri Orlev, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, has written two novel that can be paired with Spinelli's book. *The Island on Bird Street* (1984) captures the desperation of the ghetto from a eleven year-old Jewish boy's perspective while *The Man from the Other Side* (1988) looks at the situation from a Catholic boy's point-of-view. While these are different cultural points of reference, they also offer comparative views of childhood and innocence. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (John Boyne, 2006) is useful to look at with *Milkweed*, as it shows a more extreme form of naivete by the main character.

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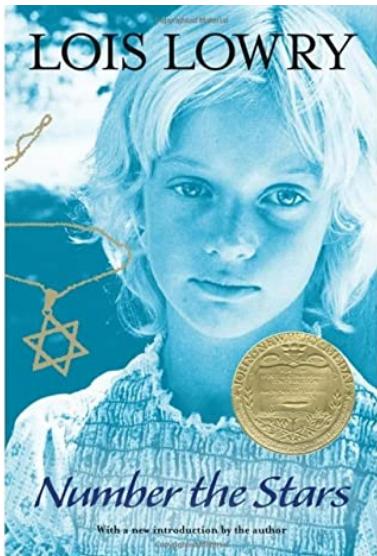
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### Number the Stars

Written by Lois Lowry  
 Houghton Mifflin, 1989, 144 pp.  
 ISBN: 978-0395510605

This Newbery Award winner has been well-known and well-read for over twenty years. The novel tells the story of how Annemarie Johansen, a ten-year-old Danish girl, bravely helps her family save Danish Jews during the Holocaust. Annemarie's heroism can be attributed, in part, to the fact that her best friend Ellen is a Jew who must escape Nazi-occupied Denmark to flee to free Sweden, as well as to the Danish resistance to the Nazis and their policy of exterminating Jews. While a piece of fiction, Lois Lowry writes in her afterward that, "Annemarie is a child of my imagination, though she grew there from the stories told to

me by my friend, Annelise Platt, to whom this book is dedicated." Lowry goes on to tell her readers that most of the plot is based on history, and ends her afterward with this line, "I hope this story of Denmark, and its people, will remind us all that such a world [of human decency] is possible."

The book succeeds in helping readers appreciate the generosity of the Danish people toward the Danish Jews, but *Number the Stars* fails as a piece of historical fiction in the Holocaust genre because it only focuses on the goodness of the Gentiles, leaving the Jews as hapless victims, others, who must be rescued by their Christian saviors. Unfortunately, the novel is considered a "Holocaust book" by many sources. According to Amazon.com, it is number three on the list of "Bestsellers in Holocaust fiction for children." Wikipedia's entry for *Number the Stars* says the novel "is a work of historical fiction about the Holocaust of the Second World War by award-winning author Lois Lowry." A Jewish source, the Holocaust Teacher Resource Center, lists the novel as an appropriate book for young children, while, it is interesting to note, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum does not include *Number the Stars* on its reading list.

*Number the Stars* is a book about an exceptionally brave and kind girl and her family and her entire country—it just so happens that the plot was set during the Holocaust. The Holocaust continues to be used as the setting for books that glorify the righteous Gentiles at the expense of the victimized Jews (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *A Faraway Island* are two recent examples). While the Gentiles of Denmark did save their Jews, and are examples of humanity in the midst of inhumanity, the story of the Danish resistance to the Nazi occupation of their country is a story about the Danish people, not a story of the Jewish Holocaust. In fact, *Number the Stars* devotes almost no space to describing the Rosen family. Only the daughter, Ellen, is sketched lightly as a "stocky ten-year-old, unlike lanky Annemarie" (p. 1), a great student (p. 4), and used to nice things (p. 29). These scant details can be seen as stereotyping, further evident in the only other description of a Jew as a boy who is, "a tall teenager with thick glasses, stooped shoulders, and unruly hair" (p. 20).

In their actions, the Jews in this book reflect the idea of Jew-as-Victim. The Rosens hide and are saved thanks to Annemarie's family. The Jewish family is given no subjectivity; all action is given to

the Gentiles. The climax of the story has Annemarie, a ten-year-old, saving a boatload of Jews after one of them, an adult, forgets to bring the item that will foil the Nazi's attempt to stop them at the border. This particular group of Jews is portrayed as not only victims, but inept.

There are excellent children's books in print that tell the story of the Jewish Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's web site offers annotated bibliographies as well as philosophical and methodological guidelines. An excellent source for primary source materials that could be used to create a jackdaw to accompany a text set, [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org) has experts on the Jewish Holocaust available to help teach Ha Shoah ethically, thoughtfully, and accurately.

*Number the Stars* will continue to be read and enjoyed by countless children in classrooms. My plea is that we become aware that while it may be a well-written and finely plotted book, it is not a novel of the Jewish Holocaust, but a historical fiction novel about World War II and the Danish people's resistance to the Nazis.

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### Resistance: Book 1

Written by Carla Jablonski,  
 Illustrated by Leland Purvis, Color by Hillary Sycamore.  
 First Second, 2010, 128 pp.  
 ISBN: 978-1-59643-291-8

*Resistance: Book 1* is a graphic novel about the resistance movement in Vichy France. Paul Tessier and his little sister Marie find life in the free zone confusing—life appears normal but hostility can erupt suddenly even among friends. They worry about their POW father and their Jewish friends, especially Henri Levy. As a coping mechanism, Paul sketches to remember and think. After Henri's parents mysteriously disappear, Paul and Marie hide Henri at their family's winery. When they stumble upon local resistance fighters nearby, the friends discover

that it is not just soldiers who are fighting the Germans.

American novelist/playwright Carla Jablonski's story about "the impact of living in an occupied country" explores the feelings of anxiety, loss, and confusion associated with war and how even small choices can be empowering (Manning, 2010). Her background as a playwright can be seen in the periodic terse, verbal exchanges between characters that set a tone of anxious tension. The muted color palette of the story panels contributes to the tension by creating a somber ominous mood reminiscent of the darker DC comics.

Jablonski's characterizations and pacing entice readers to sit "at the edge of your seat" and to sympathize with the characters, such as when Henri is distraught over the disappearance of his parents after Germans take over the hotel or when the Tessiers and Henri reach the Paris checkpoint only to discover that the picture on Henri's ID card does not match his disguise. Illustrator Leland Purvis uses Paul's sketchpad as a visual device for characterization. Images from Paul's sketchpad are incorporated into the story panels, allowing readers a glimpse into Paul's thoughts or into events the friends have witnessed.

While the story alludes to atrocities such as the Velodrome roundup and deportation of the Jews, Jewish people are not solely depicted as victims nor are all townspeople heroes. While he could be categorized as a victim, Henri's actions and attitude suggest he is not. Henri mourns the loss of his parents and expresses frustration over being hidden; however, he decides his family is more important than his safety so risks everything to find them. Realizing Henri's determination to get to Paris could put him in danger, the Tessier children work with the local resistance movement to help reunite the family.

Overall, representations of culture are subtle. The most overt symbols of Jewish culture are the Star of David armbands seen at the train station and a menorah that Marie rescues from the Levy family's hotel. Another reference, a makeshift bar mitzvah for Henri, serves less as a cultural marker and more as a foreshadowing of the children's loss of innocence. *Resistance: Book 1* portrays the culture of fear that pervaded the German-occupied territories rather than focuses on

particular events and iconic representations of French culture, which could have contributed to a setting so vague that it could have been set anywhere. However, the iconic nature of the French Resistance movement makes it difficult to envision the story taking place anywhere else. Interestingly, evidence of the work's historical accuracy is not found in a "References" list but rather in its lengthy preface, the author's notes, and in interviews with the author, such as Manning, 2010.

The dark comic book-like tone and format make this book appealing to middle school and high school readers. The book provides a counterpoint to the Jewish internment stories by demonstrating the extent to which people, both Jewish and non-Jews, actively resisted Nazi forces. It could be paired with *Rose Blanche* (Roberto Innocenti, 1985) to highlight small acts of resistance as well as how personal values play into making difficult decisions. Other works that touch on Jablonski's idea of living life as a small act of resistance include *Flowers on the Wall* (Mirian Nerlove, 1996), *My Secret Camera* (Frank Dabba Smith, 2000), and *Sami and the Time of Troubles* (Florence Parry Heide & Judith Heide Gilillund, 1995). A text set of this work, *Gifts* (Ursula LeGuin, 2006), *Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2010), and historical accounts from the Civil Rights movement could challenge older readers to consider how small acts of resistance can inspire change.

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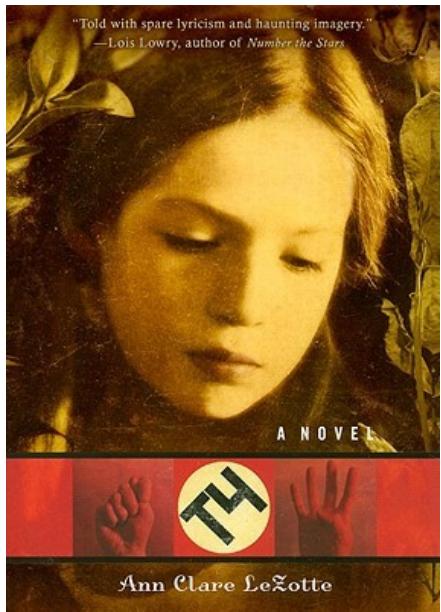
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Monique Storie, University of Guam, Guam

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**T4: A Novel in Verse**

Written by Ann Clare LeZotte

Houghton-Mifflin Company, 2008, 108pp.

ISBN -13; 978-0-547-04684-6

In selecting a book related to the theme of the Holocaust, I was intrigued to encounter *T4: A Novel in Verse* by Ann Clare LeZotte. My interest was heightened when I discovered that the author, the main character of the story, and I share the experience of being deaf from early childhood.

The opening chapter, “Hear the Voice of the Poet,” set forth the author’s intent and purpose:

*Hear the Voice of the poet!  
I see the past, future and present,  
I am Deaf, but I have heard  
The beauty of song.  
And I wish to share it with  
Young readers.  
A poem can be simple,  
About a cat or a red  
Wheelbarrow.  
Or it can illuminate the lives  
Of people who lived, loved,  
And died. You can make  
People think or feel  
For other people, if you  
Write poetry. In T4 the facts  
About history are true, and  
My characters tell the story.*

*T4* is named for the location of Nazi headquarters, Tiergartenstrasse 4, in Berlin, where an “Action Plan” to kill mentally-ill and handicapped people was devised. The main character is Paula Blecker whose parents send her into hiding after they learn of the T4 Action Plan from a local priest. The priest takes Paula to the safety of a retired teacher’s farm. She lives there until the secret police arrive with questions about the presence of a Jewish child in the home. The teacher convinces them that a former student dropped by to visit and Paula is taken to another refuge. There she meets and befriends an older boy known as “Poor Kurt.” In 1941, after the dissolution of the T4 Action Plan, Paula and Kurt return to her home where she learns about his family and his true identity.

While I appreciate and commend the efforts of the author to create this book, I find the novel to be problematic for several reasons. As a whole, the story is essentially a melding of fiction and historical

fact onto the backdrop of the Holocaust. The frequent juxtaposition of story and facts results in two distinct voices in the narrative. The first being the voice of the young character and the second being the voice of a more mature “instructor” conveying information to the reader.

In some instances, verses were robbed of their impact by the inclusion of unnecessary explications. For example:

*I watched the lips  
 Of my relatives  
 When they told stories.  
 I could see words  
 Being formed on their mouths.  
 It's called lipreading. [p. 6]*  
 \*\*\*\*

*She made certain movements with her fingers  
 And took my hand to do the same thing.  
 She was trying to teach me  
 The official sign language alphabet of the  
 Deaf.  
 I learned to make the letters on one hand;  
 It's called fingerspelling. [p. 38]*

In other instances, concepts and words that are used in this day and time are incongruous within a text written for a different era. For example:

*[The Nazis] wanted perfect people  
 To give birth to more perfect people.  
 They imagined Germany as a master race  
 Who would rule the world.  
 They attacked Jews, people of color,  
 Homosexuals, and Gypsies, among others. [p. 21]*  
 \*\*\*\*

*We drove two hours  
 To a church with a homeless shelter. [p.46]*  
 \*\*\*\*

*Germany's Deaf  
 Community  
 Never completely recovered. [p. 93]*

The terms, “people of color,” “homeless shelters,” “Deaf Community,” and others used in this book do not fit the historical context of this story. Indeed, their inclusion negates the authenticity of the story and the character’s first-person voice in this time period and setting. Without authenticity, we are left with a simplistic, coming-of-age romance that is superimposed upon the notion of the Holocaust.

Author Ann Clare LeZotte is a 1991 graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, and became deaf as a young child. She has published several poems in various journals and this is her first novel. She credits the book, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People* in Nazi Germany, by Horst Biesold (Gallaudet University Press) as the catalyst for this work.

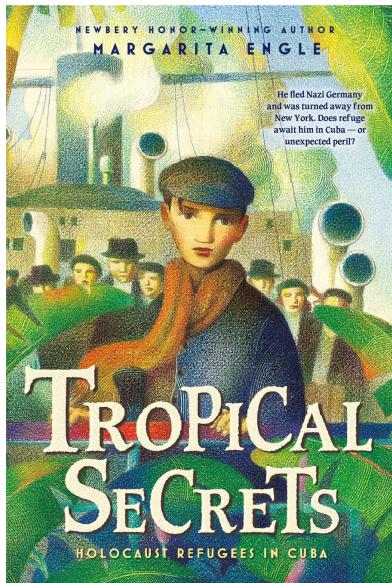
Possible companion books for this novel might include: *A Knock at the Door* by Eric Sonderling (1997), *A Picture Book of Anne Frank* by David A. Adler (1993), *Anne Frank* by Richard Tames (1989), *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti (1990), and *We Remember the Holocaust* by David Adler (1990).

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### Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba

Written By Margarita Engle

Henry Holt, 2009, 208 pp.

ISBN 9780805089363

This is one of the few books about Jewish refugees who, when denied entry to the U.S. and Canada, ended up seeking asylum in Cuba. Told by four different voices, two Jewish refugees and two Cubans, this story takes place from 1939 to 1942 during WW II. Paloma is a generous Cuban girl who has inner conflicts with the way her father, El Gordo, makes money. El Gordo has a wounded heart because his wife ran away with another man; a trauma that drove him to be cold-hearted, taking advantage of the desperate refugees through demands for large amounts of money for permission to find refuge in Cuba. Paloma becomes friends with Jewish refugees. David is an old man who came to

Cuba from the Ukraine where he experienced anti-Semitism while Daniel, a German Jew, was put on a ship bound for America by his parents and ends up in Cuba after he is turned away from the U.S. and Canada.

The four characters have their own stories, perspectives, politics, and cultures. Language, music, and celebrations metaphorically signal cultural adjustments and a range of acceptance among the four characters. Although this book is ostensibly about Holocaust refugees in Cuba, this is not a story of life or death decision making prevalent in the Holocaust genre but rather a story about embracing your own and other people's cultures and language.

The author, Margarita Engle, tells this story of refugees in Cuba through her well-known free verse writing style. Engle's historical fiction narrative style, powerfully delivered in *The Poet Slave of Cuba* (2006) and *The Surrender Tree* (2008), continues in this novel. Engle notes the major events and situations in Tropical Secrets are all factual. The story is based on German propaganda claiming, "Even a small, impoverished, racially mixed tropical island wanted nothing to do with Jews" (p.195). Joseph Goebbels, master propagandist of the Nazi regime, used these words to stir up anti-Semitism in Cuba. According to the author's note, passengers rejected by Cuba were returned to Europe since the U.S. and Canada had already rejected them. As a result, many Jews were transported to concentration camps in Europe.

Engle doesn't limit her story to Jewish refugees but also includes non-Jewish Germans who were accused of being Nazi spies and held at the prison in Sla de Pinos, on the southern coast of Cuba. Fear about identifying who should and should not be jailed indicates the vulnerability of political identity and situations in 1939-1942.

Engle's unique cultural background as a Cuban-American poet and journalist contributes to her authentic descriptions of Cuba. Her Ukrainian Jewish grandparents' history of fleeing anti-Semitic violence provides cultural richness to this nuanced story of cultures. In history, ships like the St. Louis and the Orduna actually sought refuge in Cuba in 1939 and Daniel's story is the dominant

echo in history. In addition to the truthful descriptions of the refugee event, 13-year-old Daniel's voice longing for a reunion with his parents takes readers to universal characteristics of childhood and children's love for their parents and family.

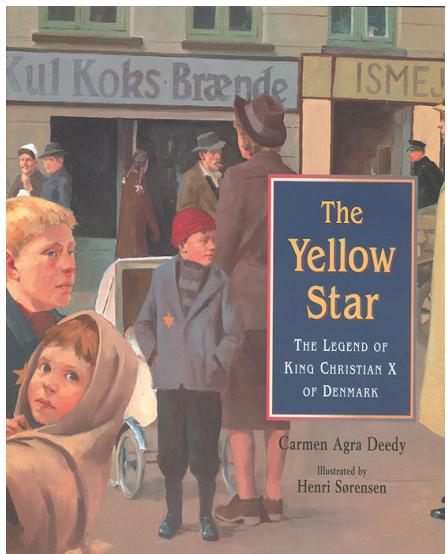
The alternative young voices exploring cultural identities as defined through interactions with others can be experienced in other books like *When My Name Was Keoko* by Linda Sue Park (2004), *Morning Girl* by Michael Dorris (1989), *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman (2004), and *Witness* by Karen Hesse (2003). The descriptions of cultural identity differ, depending on the contexts of culture, gender, ethnicity and identity in each book, but these books resemble *Tropical Secrets* insofar that readers can join character's shared experiences in the search for identity and connect or disconnect with these voices.

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### The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark

Written by Carmen Agra Deedy

Illustrated by Henri Sorensen

Peachtree Publishers, 2000

ISBN: 978-1561452088

Icons represent ideas. When adults see the iconic “yellow star” sewn onto a piece of cloth, they often automatically think of a dark period in history called Ha Shoah, or the Holocaust. As the Nazis gained power during World War II and Hitler attempted to fulfill his dream of an Aryan world by eliminating those he felt were unworthy (Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, and the mentally ill to name a few), yellow stars were used as a way to mark people of Jewish descent.

The award-winning book, *The Yellow Star: The Legend of King Christian X of Denmark*, is an example of a story about World War II that may very likely provide needed information about the time period for young students who are just learning about the Holocaust. I was a teenager when I heard the story of Anne Frank, my first story about the Holocaust. I remember asking my mother why people who were not Jewish did not stop the Nazis from doing horrible things to people. My Christian mother explained that they did try to prevent the atrocities. “Christians were hiding the Frank family in the attic.” Today I wonder if the guilt of Christians has produced the influx of mythical stories of how Christians saved Jews during World War II by hiding them. I question this representation of the Holocaust.

Written by Cuban-American storyteller, Carmen Agra Deedy, *The Yellow Star* is based on a legend about King Christian of Denmark who invited every Dane to wear the yellow star so it would be impossible to discriminate between Jews and non-Jews in Copenhagen when the Nazis begin their occupation in 1940. While the story of the yellow star and how it was used to represent Jews during WWII may provide needed background knowledge for children who do not know what the yellow Jewish star signified, this story is legend often (mis)represented as historical truth – especially by Christians. As a teacher educator, it raises all sorts of questions about how teachers make decisions about quality literature in their classrooms.

*The Yellow Star* has won at least 22 different awards. For many parents and teachers purchasing books for children, awards mean a book is worth buying and reading. In my research, I read a number of books about World War II and the Holocaust with a group of elementary teachers and Jewish mothers. I wanted to see how they made decisions about choosing literature for elementary children about such a sensitive time in history. While the teachers felt this book was “soft” enough for young children, the Jewish mothers who read *The Yellow Star* were disappointed in the too often told “glorification of ‘Christians as Saviors’ story,” the representation of myth as truth, and the relative silence of Jewish voices in the text. In one mother’s words, “Too often, Jews are seen as victims, the poor Jews being saved by the Christians again. The Jews don’t even speak in this book.”

This critique is an apt representation of *The Yellow Star*. The story begins with a unifying view of Danes living in Nazi-occupied Denmark. Deedy uses short sentences to describe Danes as “different from each other” and yet “all loyal subjects of their beloved King Christian” (p. 2). This king was so loved that he was able to ride alone in the streets of Copenhagen every morning, and everyone knew that “Danes would all stand together in defense” (p. 4) of the wise king. Deedy uses celestial metaphors throughout the story. War spread across Europe “like a fierce storm” and Nazi soldiers “gathered like dark clouds” at the border. According to Deedy, “The Danes watched and waited to see what their king would do.” After King Christian resisted the threatening Nazi who demanded that the swastika be flown over the palace, Jews were ordered to sew a yellow star onto their clothing so it would be visible at all times. Retrospective images of King Christian in deep thought finally show him looking into the sky at the stars for answers. “If you wished to hide a star...you would hide it among its sisters.”

The author’s note at the end of this book speaks to the disappointment Deedy felt when she learned this story was a legend or myth. As Deedy points out, Denmark was the only Nazi-occupied country that rescued a majority of its Jews, but “no Jews within Denmark were actually forced to wear the yellow star.” She also asks “what if?” In this question, Deedy urges readers to think about what would have happened if the people of the world had stood up the injustices of the Holocaust rather than simply hiding them. That is the story that must be told, not another myth that ranks a religious denomination as saviors.

Jews resisted the Nazis during World War II but finding heroic novels of Jewish resistance can be a difficult task. Allegorical picture books like *Terrible Things: An Allegory about the Holocaust* (1989) by Eve Bunting and *The Little Boy Star: An Allegory of the Holocaust* (2006) by Rachel Hausfater allow children to think not only about how people treated one another during the Holocaust but about how people treat one another in the present day. And, Karen Hesse’s *The Cats in Krasinski Square* (2004) is an example of a picture book that describes the bravery and resourcefulness of Jews resisting the Nazis. Based on the experience of Adina Blady Szwalger, this book tells of a young Jewish girl living in Warsaw who helps Jewish resistance fighters confuse the Gestapo in order to get food to Jews living inside the ghetto. Jews have made many contributions to society and these stories deserve to be told.

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