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In Our Hands: Responsibility, Gender, and the Holocaust in Young Adult Fiction

In My Hands is the memoir of Irene Opdyke, a young Polish woman who witnesses and experiences great cruelty during World War II yet develops compassion and strength. Woven throughout the story of her extraordinary life are issues with which many young adults grapple, like agency, purpose, and responsibility. *In My Hands* is an excellent addition to a syllabus for a young adult literature course for several reasons. In simple but beautiful language, it combines history and personal memory to create a unique yet familiar perspective. Additionally, it consciously and appropriately engages the topic of the Holocaust in four primary ways to explore its historical implications and provoke vital questions about the nature of evil and personal responsibility.

In “A New Algorithm of Evil,” Elizabeth Baer discusses how to select books about the Holocaust. Though Baer’s article primarily addresses how to identify the “usefulness and effectiveness” of Holocaust literature for children, the principles are the same for readers of all ages (384). She proposes four criteria for addressing broader and more philosophical issues in Holocaust narratives. The first condition is that these books “must grapple directly with the evil of the Holocaust” (383). People often state, correctly, that the Holocaust and its evil must be remembered in order to prevent it from recurring. However, Baer points out that most young readers are learning about the Holocaust for the first time, “and indeed, as more time elapses between the Holocaust and the present, this will be true of all readers” (380). *In My Hands* is not

gratuitous in its depiction of the horrors of World War II, but it also does not omit or sidestep it. Opdyke describes how she and her family endured occupation by the Nazis, who despised Polish people. They were dislocated from their homes, separated from their families, and forced to work for the Nazis. Their food was rationed severely, and they were under constant threat of physical harm or even death. Irene discovers that the Jews are experiencing persecution on an even larger scale and to a more extreme extent. While she is visiting friends in a Jewish ghetto, Nazis raid the houses and take many of the residents to labor camps. Irene herself grapples with the evil she witnesses. As she hides in an abandoned home, she watches an officer throw into the air and shoot what at first appears to be a bird, until she realizes “it was not a bird,” but a child (Opdyke and Armstrong 117). Several times throughout the book, Opdyke alludes to this tragic scene and the “bird,” at first unable to admit what she really saw. However, she eventually allows herself to confront reality. Irene’s innocence and gradual exposure to the horrors of the Nazi regime parallels the journeys of young adult readers who learn about the Holocaust for the first time.

The second criterion that Baer suggests is that a Holocaust narrative should not be oversimplified; instead it should ask “difficult questions for which there are no formulaic answers” (384). Opdyke’s narrative captures this complexity, particularly as she forms relationships. After she is beaten and assaulted by Russian soldiers, she is taken under the wing of a kindly Russian doctor, Dr. Olga Pavlovskaya. Later, she works under Herr Schulz, a German cook who feeds and cares for Irene and her sister. Eventually, when Irene begins undermining the Nazis and sheltering Jews, he looks the other way. However, she struggles to resolve his kindness with the cruelty of every other German she has encountered: “he made hating the Germans a complex matter, when it should have been such a straight-forward one” (134). Opdyke’s recollections of

cruelty and kindness from people who should have been her enemies are thought-provoking for readers because they don't allow simple and stark categorization.

Baer's third criterion is broad and probably one of the most obvious things that is to be expected in this genre of literature, but nonetheless important: Holocaust narratives must strongly caution against "racism," "anti-Semitism," and "complacency" (385). Baer does not elaborate any further on this point, but it is the baseline requirement that an educator, parent, or publisher should consider when evaluating a book about the Holocaust. Opdyke recounts her confusion as to why the Nazis specifically targeted the Jews: "It had never occurred to me to distinguish between people based on their religion" (18). Her statements apply to the senseless nature not just of anti-Semitism but also prejudice in general. Poland, with its own rich culture and history, was reduced by the Nazis to "a land of Slavic brutes, fit only for labor" (18). Irene's narrative demonstrates the ripple effect of prejudice, racism, and genocide. It raises questions for young readers about where the stopping point is if cruelty is allowable based only on what makes one person different from another.

In My Hands is also uniquely suited to Baer's fourth consideration for Holocaust literature because it encourages "a sense of personal responsibility" (385). Opdyke's first-person narrative draws the reader into her perspective as she develops her own sense of responsibility for the Jews' suffering. At first, she feels helpless and swept along by forces greater than herself. However, after witnessing the cruelty of the Nazis, she quickly develops a feeling of personal responsibility for what is happening. When she witnesses Nazis shoot an elderly Jewish man, she "felt a scream rising . . . as though I had been shot myself" (102). This moment is a turning point for Irene; immediately afterwards, she steals food from the hotel kitchen where she works and leaves it outside a Jewish ghetto. Irene's story proves that even a young female in a seemingly

helpless position can exert agency and subvert corrupt powers. Her perspective is valuable since, as Louise O. Vasvári writes, this area of literature “still tends to privilege the Holocaust experience of men as universal” (1). As a young female, Irene is vulnerable both in her own eyes and the eyes of society: “I was only a girl, alone among the enemy. What could I do?” (121). However, as her resistance efforts continue, she takes ownership of her femininity, and her “weakness” becomes her “advantage” (124). She spies on German officers and passes along information to the ghetto, supports a group of Jewish workers, and eventually hides them in the basement of a Nazi major’s villa. Later, she joins a Polish partisan group that sabotages and undermines the Nazis, all the while escaping detection by using gender stereotypes to her advantage. Her reputation as a resistance fighter spreads until she is suspected by the enemy to be the rebels’ leader. The phrase “only a girl” echoes throughout her narrative, becoming an ironic mantra as she flouts what her enemies expect of a young female. Opdyke’s unique perspective is vital for both male and female young adult readers because she takes action instead of complying with cultural and societal expectations.

In My Hands addresses issues facing young adults—like identity, responsibility, and agency—while providing a compelling and thought-provoking depiction of the Holocaust. Opdyke’s willingness to recount her experiences allows others to grapple with the complexity of evil and personal responsibility. Her personal growth as an adolescent woman and her unique perspective as a female during the occupation of Poland is inspiring to men and women alike. The novel’s simple and expressive language makes it an ideal literary, historical, and philosophical addition not just to Holocaust literature but also literature in general.

Works Cited

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