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Bonnie Kristin Mary Jendrek
bjendre1@utk.edu

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The Middle Ground Between Good and Evil:
The Role of Young Adult Literature in Modern Understandings of German History

Bonnie K. Jendrek

Senior Honors Thesis

Dr. Daniel H. Magilow, Thesis Advisor

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I. Explaining the Middle Ground

In 2005, Michael Sontheimer wrote an article for *Der Spiegel* entitled, "Germany's Nazi Past: Why Germans Can Never Escape Hitler's Shadow." He wrote that this shadow looms over his own child, who was born well after the fall of the Nazi Party. Sontheimer recounted that when his family lived in London, other children taunted his child with taunts of "Heil, Hitler." His child was not involved with the Nazis or even the Hitler Youth; he was born after German Reunification, and yet his peers still returned to an old stereotype to taunt him (Sontheimer). The Germans-as-Nazis can still be heard in common conversation, frequently through jokes told at the expense of the German people, thanks in large part to media representations of World War II and Germans in general.

In 1990, psychologists Kurt Stapf, Wolfgang Stroebe, and Klaus Jonas provided empirical evidence of this persistent stereotype. They asked 1,500 Americans to list their spontaneous association with the theme of "Germany." Respondents most commonly responded with the East-West German conflict, which reached a turning point that year. Close behind in second place followed "Hitler, Nazis, Third Reich, concentration camps" (Webber 135). The third most popular answer followed in a similar vein: "The first and second World Wars, soldiers" (Webber 135). At the time of the survey, the Second World War was almost fifty years in the past, yet it remained a key association in Americans' minds. When asked about tourist attractions in Germany, concentration camps were listed alongside beer halls and the Berlin Wall (Webber 135). This survey, done almost fifty years after the end of the war, shows just how lasting an impression the Second World War and the Holocaust have made on Americans.

Eighteen years after Stapf, Stroebe, and Jonas collected data about American images of Germans, educational theorist Simone Schweber wrote the article “What Happened to their Pets?”, which recounts the teaching of the Holocaust in a third-grade classroom. Throughout the unit, the teacher and a student, both of whom were Jewish, contributed their opinions. When it came down to the ultimate question of “Why did the Nazis take [away] the Jews?” the answers lacked substance. When asked to write questions in their journals about the topic, some students, like Emmeline, wondered, “I wonder if hitler [sic] was mean when he was little?” (Schweber 2104). Schweber argues that the teacher represented Nazis as “unidimensional ‘bad guys,’” while the Jews came across “in much more complicated hues” (Schweber 2104). While this characterization may have resulted from the presence of two Jewish people in the classroom, the teacher remains at fault for forgetting to explain the reasoning behind the Nazi actions. Though these reasons are nuanced and perhaps beyond the intellectual ability of third-grade students, the foundations of an explanation could still be discussed with children who are deemed old enough to discuss the Holocaust in general.

If the unnuanced image of Germans-as-Nazis persists, and if Holocaust education is taught at younger grade levels than ever, scholars must consider how materials on the subject represent Germans. Authors of young adult literature use this trope far too frequently. Young adult books dealing with Germany and the Holocaust, such as Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars* (1989) and Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (1988), have a tendency to focus solely on Nazis and Jews, as opposed to broader and more representative cross-sections of the general population. *Number the Stars* takes place in Denmark during the German occupation and features Danes hiding their

Jewish friends and securing their safe passage to neutral Norway. *The Devil's Arithmetic*, also a popular adolescent Holocaust novel, tells the story of a modern girl's discovery of the horrors of concentration camps and her family's Holocaust history. Conversely, some tales show the resistance or change of heart of one German and convey the impression that the one person is an exception to the rule, and that the rest of the German population is still part of the Nazi Party and thus evil.

Scholar Mark M. Anderson use the examples of both Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) and Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1955) to explain why contemporary representations link children and the Holocaust. Both texts are based on real experiences during the Second World War, and thus are at least nominally true. However, Anne Frank's diary was edited before publication, both by Anne herself and by her father, Otto Frank. Wiesel's account is a memoir, so it has been adjusted and is not entirely accurate (Anderson 4). Anne Frank's diary tells the tale of her time in hiding in Amsterdam before the Nazis captured her and her family. Regarding this text, Anderson argues that "Anne's identity as a child muted her Jewishness from the very beginning. . . . Anne could be a Jew to Jewish audiences or simply a courageous girl whose Judaism posed no real obstacle to those who wanted to identify with her 'existentially'" (Anderson 4).

Anderson's argument regarding the popularity of the child witness as an American stereotype of the Holocaust provides a useful lens through which several recent young adult novels about the Holocaust can be examined. Anne Frank's dualistic role—either she is a Jewish girl or a courageous girl, but rarely both—is crucial for understanding why so many authors set their tales of courage and morality in that era.

Authors can teach lessons in morality to their audiences with the clean-cut triumph-over-evil backdrop.

Using World War II and the Holocaust may provide writers with an easy-to-use background for a moral tale, but these stories tend to distort the historical realities of the German people of that era. They misinform young readers when they give the impression that, historically, Germans were all Nazis and all of them involved in the horrors of the Holocaust. Furthermore, this media trope creates a stereotype about the German population that has survived, despite seventy years to work through this history and the concurrent development of democratic institutions in Germany since the end of the Holocaust.

As evidence of the existence of this trope in young adult literature, it is useful to examine and compare two enormously popular young adult novels published in 2006. John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a frequently read young adult novel set during the Holocaust that plays into the stereotypes about Germans witnessing the Holocaust. It reached the top spot on *The New York Times* Best Seller list and was made into a film in 2008. By contrast, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* provides a less narrow-minded view of Germans during World War II. This book has been, and remains, on *The New York Times* Young Adult Best Seller list since its publication in 2006. They provide very different views of the Holocaust and the German people during that era. Young adult literature plays an important role as a vehicle that promotes this image to young people who are forming their own ideas and stereotypes. This comparison of Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* with Zusak's *The Book Thief* demonstrates both those stereotypes in play.

A clear definition of “young adult novels” does not exist; however, a recipe or slate of common characteristics does. A young adult novel typically consists of an adolescent or teenage protagonist, a distinctly teen narrative voice, and a journey toward identity or self-discovery (Stephens). Other scholars note the presence of a moral lesson as essential to adolescent literature. In his book on moral education, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong*, William Kilpatrick discusses the role of literature as a means to teach moral lessons to children and teenagers. Kilpatrick asserts that, along with family and upbringing, books can also help anchor children to moral values (Kilpatrick 88). Following similar logic and going much further back in time, Alasdair MacIntyre argues in *After Virtue* that the moral tradition from the heroic age through medieval times depended on literature and stories as the basis for moral education (MacIntyre 216).

Books and stories may no longer be the primary method of moral education—if they ever were. Visual media in particular would appear to be filling this void. Even so, these novels' commercial success suggests that literature remains an important means of education, and moreover, authors of adolescent literature continue to include moral lessons in their writing. World War II and the Holocaust provide a ready-made background for these moral tales, giving authors a clear opportunity to distinguish between “good” and “evil.” As such, these stories, like most young adult fiction, offer a useful platform to teach morality. Boyne and Zusak, in their recent works of young adult Holocaust fiction, contribute to this discussion with different approaches. They also provide very different presentations of the historical fiction aspect of World War II and the Holocaust.

II. Oversimplifying the Middle Ground

Boyne uses *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* to teach a moral lesson, focusing on the future rather than the past, despite the historical setting. The novel tells the story of Bruno, a nine-year-old boy who moves with his Nazi officer father and family to “Out-with,” which Boyne admits is Auschwitz with a gentler name as a young child might understand it (Boyne 9). Bruno is lonely in the countryside until he meets Shmuel, who lives on the opposite side of a barbed wire fence. Although the fence separates the boys, they can communicate through it and they quickly become friends. In the end, Bruno, not realizing the fence’s true purpose, goes to play on Shmuel’s side and ends up in a gas chamber. Boyne ends his story with the pacifying claim that, “Of course, all this happened a long time ago and nothing like that could ever happen again. Not in this day and age” (Boyne 216).

Subtitled “A Fable,” *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* gives the impression that the author seeks to teach lessons about morality, not the Holocaust. The back cover blurb, the end of the final chapter, and the author’s note all promote the idea that this book does not solely apply to the Holocaust itself. However, because it is set during the Holocaust, it does misinform naïve adolescent readers about concentration camps and the horrors therein. In a sense, using a setting from history makes a work historical fiction, and to include historical inaccuracies teaches incorrect lessons to readers, regardless of the book’s purpose.

John Boyne’s story tells of a German who, because of his youthful innocence, does not accept the Nazi Party line—or any party line. However, Bruno’s age and

correspondingly naïve worldview mitigate the validity of his status as a “good German.” The novel’s overly innocent and childish tone detracts from any message it might try to convey. Bruno does not actively take a stance against the Nazis’ mistreatment of ethnic minorities; instead Boyne creates and employs a character who does not understand the concept of ethnic minorities at all. This characterization suggests that German youth are innocent and naïve, and as they grow up, they all become Nazis. Bruno’s father is an officer in the SS, and, presumably, Bruno would shed his innocence as he ages and follows in his father’s footsteps.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas fits perfectly into a broader theoretical discussion about the use of children in Holocaust discourse. As Anderson says, “[O]bjective’ history often gives way to gripping, visually enhanced ‘stories,’ while a careful contextualization of German antisemitism and European Jews is replaced by an ethics lesson on religious tolerance and respect for ‘otherness’” (Anderson 12). Boyne’s purpose in writing the novel—whether as a moral lesson or a history lesson—is irrelevant to what it teaches regarding the Germans. In reality, the text obscures historical lessons about the Holocaust. As Anderson postulates about other works of Holocaust literature, this fable is a gripping story but not necessarily historical fact. It presents an ethics lesson, not a history lesson. While Boyne’s purpose may have been to present a moral tale, his use of Auschwitz as a setting makes *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* a story about an historical event. As such, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* becomes historical fiction and is thus subjected to discussions of its treatment of facts.

In the author’s note and an interview printed in the back of the novel, Boyne discusses his purpose and style in *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Boyne claims that,

while writing and editing his novel, he concluded that “the only respectful way for me to deal with this subject was through the eyes of a child, and particularly through the eyes of a rather naïve child” (Boyne 217-8). Boyne decided to write through a child’s eyes because, in his words, “only victims and survivors can truly comprehend the awfulness of that time and place” (Boyne 218). Using a naïve child to tell the story aims to soften the harsh realities of a concentration camp. In another effort to soften realities, Boyne uses a vague writing style to maintain the story’s purpose as an allegory and lesson for the future. He uses childish euphemisms and malapropisms such as “Out-with” for Auschwitz and the “Fury” for the “Führer” to mask the reality of the setting—Auschwitz concentration camp.

Critical reception of Boyne’s novel addresses Boyne’s decision to make the Holocaust an allegory. Film critic A.O. Scott, reviewing the book for *The New York Times*, notes the vague, indirect way Boyne uses Auschwitz as his setting, saying, “Boyne’s reluctance to say as much can certainly be defended, not least on the grounds that the characters in a story about the Holocaust are themselves most likely unaware of the scale and historical importance of their experiences” (Scott). Scott does not claim that the characters do not know what is happening; he simply allows them to be unfamiliar with the magnitude of the death camps. Those who are truly naïve about the Holocaust, and remain so even after completing the book, are the readers, who receive little historical knowledge from the book. In the end, Scott decides that, “To mold the Holocaust into an allegory, as Boyne does here with perfectly benign intent, is to step away from its reality” (Scott). He also explains that the horrors of history cannot be

made equivalent to one another or turned into fables (Scott). Boyne minimizes the Holocaust by using it to teach a non-historical lesson set at Auschwitz.

Unlike Scott, literary critic Kathryn Hughes, reviewing the fable for *The Guardian*, appreciates Bruno's innocence. To her, Boyne portrays the young German boy as a typical nine-year-old, focused on his "three best friends for life" and the indignity of being called "little man." Hughes also sees his innocence as representative of "the willful refusal of all adult Germans to see what was going on under their noses in the first half of the 1940s" (Hughes). However, a novel with a target audience of young adult readers, ages 12-14, must take into account its readers' ability, or lack thereof, to comprehend nuance and subtlety. Adult readers may understand this complex interpretation, but a younger reader will interpret Bruno's innocence as fact—children had no knowledge of the Holocaust, even when it was right under their noses—when in fact, they did have an understanding of at least some of the injustices that were happening.

Children very clearly did know of the Holocaust or, at least, of racial theory. Bruno's naïveté about Nazi ideas and concentration camps is not particularly believable, given the realities of Nazi control of education and Bruno's own family life. His father is the commander of Auschwitz and an avid supporter of the Nazi Party. The father proves his loyalty with his pride that the Führer sent a wreath to Bruno's grandmother's funeral, and in his lesson to Bruno that the people he sees through the window "are not people at all" (Boyne 53).

Bruno would most likely have been educated in the Nazi-controlled school system. Guido Knopp produced a five-part documentary based on his novel, *Hitler's*

Children, in which men and women discuss what they experienced growing up during Hitler's regime. Once the state took control of the school system, racial theory education began in Kindergarten with picture books such as Ernst Hiemer's infamous anti-Semitic children's book, *Der Giftpilz (The Poisonous Toadstool)*, which taught an allegorical lesson on race. One of the children explains, "There's a saying, 'Every little drop wears away a stone.' We were like stones that water dripped on slowly, until we believed it was true and everything was okay" (Hitler's Children: Seduction). The Nazi education system was developed to indoctrinate German children so that they believed completely in the "evil of Jews," and Bruno would have experienced this during his time in Berlin. Though students at that time were taught racial theory, it was their decision to believe it or not. However, given that Bruno's father is the Commandant of Auschwitz, that his sister is an ardent Nazi, and that, at nine years old, he had already been educated in this system for several years, it is hard to believe that he would still be utterly unfamiliar with the Nazi racial mindset.

Bruno's tale, which targets a young adult audience, teaches a misleading lesson about Germans and Germany during the Holocaust. Using this story as a history lesson, or even the jumping-off point for one, gives students and young adults inaccurate impressions about the history of Auschwitz and the Holocaust. In Deborah Dwork's book *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe*, Esther Geizhals-Zucker was deported with her family to Auschwitz. There, the men were separated from the women and children. The women and children were then further divided: women with children on the left, and women and teenagers who could work were sent to the right. Esther's mother, younger brother, aunt, and cousin were all lined up to the left and sent directly

to the gas chambers (Dwork 209-10). Bruno's friend Shmuel would not have survived the initial selection process at Auschwitz. He was not old enough to work, and thus would have most likely been selected for immediate extermination. Though *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* does portray a German who has not assimilated Nazi ideology, his naïveté and false characterization of the Holocaust take away from his credibility. The implausibility of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* prevents its categorization as historical fiction. If one considers it a fable, as Boyne does, one must be able to distinguish between historical fiction and historical fantasy. Boyne has trivialized the Holocaust with his oversimplification of, and inaccuracies about, the German people and concentration camps.

III. Acknowledging the Middle Ground

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* represents events during World War II with slightly more nuance than does *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Zusak's text was originally published in Australia, where it was, and still is, promoted and marketed as a book for adults. In the United States, however, publishers released it as a young adult novel (Maughan 16). Like many other young adult books, it features key components found in most adolescent fiction. Like Boyne, Zusak encourages readers to identify with a young protagonist who develops and acquires self-knowledge. The protagonist, Liesel, is discovering books, her own opinions, and a sense of individuality. Similar to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, *The Book Thief* addresses adult issues in adolescent lives, such as genocide and right versus wrong. Unlike many young adult books, however, *The Book Thief* lacks what Stephens calls a "distinctly teen voice" (Stephens);

it is not fast-paced and does not have observations applicable solely to teenagers. The novel has experienced a unique sales trend and appeal across age groups. It has transcended the normal sales curve for a young adult novel and seen steady sales through the first four years of its U.S. publication. Indeed, it still ranks seventh on *The New York Times* Young Adult Bestseller List (*The New York Times*). While *The Book Thief* does not fit the mold for young adult novels in its writing style and abstract nature, bookstores still shelve it in the “young adult” area because of its marketing team’s assiduous efforts.

The Book Thief has received serious critical acclaim for both its material and style. With twenty-one best book awards and fifteen honors to its credit so far, Zusak’s war novel is well-respected by critics around the world. Death narrates the story of a girl, Liesel Meminger, her foster parents, Hans and Rosa, and the residents of the fictional Munich suburb of Molching during the years of the Third Reich. Liesel is forced into foster care because her mother is accused of being a communist. After she arrives on Himmel Street, Liesel eventually grows accustomed to life there. She befriends several key characters: Rudy Steiner, a young boy who loves Jesse Owens, the hero of the 1936 Olympics; her foster father Hans, who teaches her to read; and Max, a Jewish fist-fighter who hides in their basement. Liesel begins stealing books to regain some sense of control. Eventually, she saves books from book burnings and abandonment.

In her review of the book in *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin considers *The Book Thief* on the same level as Harry Potter. It is “perched on the cusp between grown-up and young-adult fiction, and it is loaded with librarian appeal” (Maslin). This assessment fits with its ambiguous shelving across country lines. Maslin appreciates

Zusak's use of the child protagonist. Indeed, with the lack of distinct teenage voice, Zusak does vary from the standard of using an adolescent protagonist by combining the childish lead with the figurative language used by the narrator, Death; he uses a very ornate style of storytelling, including poetic language and short poetic interjections throughout the text, and readers are kept on Liesel's level of awareness, creating a very figurative tale.

In comparison, Boyne's Bruno is overly naïve, using what A.O. Scott calls "translinguistic malapropisms" like "Out-with" instead of Auschwitz, and the "Fury" instead of "Führer." The two child protagonists are portrayed very differently, which leads to contrasting depictions of Nazi-era German children. Whereas Liesel seems merely focused on childish things, Bruno seems willfully ignorant of the realities of his surroundings at "Out-with." In both novels, however, this overused trope diminishes some of the harsh realities citizens faced during the war.

Like many contemporary novels set during the Holocaust, *The Book Thief* is not meant to be a history lesson. Whereas Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* aims to teach a moral lesson using fences as a metaphor for boundaries, *The Book Thief*, according to its author, concerns the importance of words (Zusak 9). Nazi Germany was an appropriate setting for a novel about words because of its legacy of propaganda and Joseph Goebbels's effectiveness as Minister of Propaganda. Like the author of any book set in a specific historical period, however, Zusak needed to take care while writing *The Book Thief* to avoid distorting history. Whereas Boyne sets his novel in the real extermination camp Auschwitz, Zusak uses the fictional town of Molching, and the setting becomes even more abstract with the tight focus on Himmel Street.

Zusak's choice of Death as a narrator highlights the death toll of the war. In an interview about the book, Zusak described why he chose the metaphysical figure as his narrator. He cited as his inspiration the adage that "war and death are best friends" (Zusak 10). However, when he first tried, "Death was too mean. He was extremely supercilious, and enjoying his work too much" (Zusak 10). The personification of Death as an unpleasant character is a relatively common concept. Death appears in Greek mythology and Celtic folklore, and is represented in modern popular culture as the Grim Reaper with a hood and scythe. Zusak grew to dislike this narrator and experimented with different narrative styles until he came back to Death—who was by then weary and defeated by his job. This characterization reinforces the horrors of what had been happening in concentration camps and, as the novel goes on, what would happen on Himmel Street.

Unlike many other books about Germany in World War II marketed to young adults, including *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, *The Book Thief* focuses on Germans on the home front and their experiences. Though Max does hide in the Hubermanns' basement, the story focuses mainly on Liesel, the Hubermanns, and the other citizens of Molching. As Zusak's story progresses, it incorporates many aspects of the war, including the Holocaust, represented by the presence of Max and the Dachau prisoners' march through town; conscription, portrayed when Rudy's father is forced to go to the front; and the bombing of German cities.

Discussing the catastrophic effects of these bombings remained until recently a taboo topic, but *The Book Thief* also partakes in this contemporary discussion.

Germany was the guilty party and had instigated the war, and thus, outside of radical right-wing circles, discussion of Germany's victimhood was considered inappropriate. However, some authors did address the issue, including Hans Erich Nossack, author of *The End*, which describes the bombing of Hamburg in 1943. In his 2004 foreword to the work, Joel Agee notes several "surprises" in Nossack's narrative, including "the most estranging, perhaps, for a contemporary reader, being the absence of any mention of the Nazis or Germany's guilt in provoking the retribution it was now receiving" (Agee 16). The lack of discussion about Nazis in Nossack's interpretation of the bombing forces a reader to understand that German people could be victims, because the book describes the event as an average German citizen might have experienced it.

The Book Thief follows in *The End's* footsteps regarding this discussion. The novel's climax does not involve concentration camps or the Holocaust, but rather air raids and bombings of German cities. As Allied bombers drop their ordinance on Munich and its fictional suburb Molching, the German citizens of Himmel Street become the victims. The air raids are a crucial plot device in the story. They make for a believable resolution to the tale and advance Zusak's symbolic message about basements as safe havens. Zusak uses the basement as the safe haven for Liesel as she learns to read, Max as he hides from the Nazis, and the citizens as they seek shelter from the air raids. In reality, basements were used as shelter, but they were not always safe havens. Many people became trapped inside collapsed buildings or asphyxiated from a lack of oxygen after air raids (Logan 864).

Another aspect of German citizens during the war that Zusak addresses in *The Book Thief* is the common misconception about Germans' responses to the Holocaust:

that they, like Bruno, simply did not know what was happening. In *The Book Thief*, Dachau prisoners are marched through Molching, and the citizens in town witness the event. This scene was inspired by a story from Zusak's parents, who lived in Germany during the war. Only six years old at the time, Zusak's mother heard a noise and ran out onto the street. She expected to see cattle coming through town, but instead saw people. An old man among the marchers could not keep up with everyone else, and a teenage boy brought him a piece of bread. The old man fell to his knees in gratitude before a soldier took the bread and whipped the prisoner. He then chased the boy and beat him as well (Zusak). This story features the stereotypical resistance found in young adult novels, but more importantly, it demonstrates that average Germans knew what crimes were being perpetrated in their name.

Publications from the time and research printed after the war proves even more tangibly Germans knew of the camps than the evidence given in Zusak's verbal account. The *Münchner Illustrierte Presse*, a leading illustrated magazine printed a cover story about the early days of the concentration camp at Dachau, when it housed political prisoners. In an article in 1933 and again in another issue in 1936, this illustrated magazine showed pictures of guards, guard towers, and prisoners (*Münchner Illustrierte Presse*). Additionally, Robert Gellately explains in *Backing Hitler* that citizens knew about the camps, but "were invited to see the camps as educative institutions and as 'correction and a warning' to those described as 'social rabble'" (Gellately 263). Furthermore, Gellately addresses the issue of needing further investigation of "the public sides of the terror, and tak[ing] seriously what the regime publicized about the camps and their prisoners" (Gellately 263). Though citizens may have been unaware of

the details or scale of the issue, they still knew camps existed. Zusak presents this more nuanced view of Germans as neither universally victims nor perpetrators.

The Book Thief may provide more subtle depiction of German attitudes during the Second World War, yet it still falls into similar traps as other novels about the Holocaust. Though its narration by Death sets it apart, it still features a young girl as its protagonist. Although Liesel Meminger is more mature than Boyne's Bruno, her innocence is highly exaggerated. Although Death may have a better understanding of the world, he does not elaborate on subjects Liesel does not understand. For example, Liesel's foster parents have a son who strongly supports the Nazis and joins the party. When the son comes home for Christmas, he discusses politics with his father., but the narrative avoids details by saying, "[Liesel] read the first twenty pages [of her book] at the kitchen table while Papa and Hans Junior argued about a thing she did not understand. Something called politics" (Zusak 88). This narrative strategy is a simple way to keep politics from becoming the novel's explicit focus. Zusak mentions politics because it is timely in the context, but he also avoids fully expanding upon the subject by using Liesel as a shield and using her awareness to create the reader's awareness.

Another overused trope found in *The Book Thief* is portrayed by Liesel's subtly heroic foster father, Hans Hubermann. He is a charming character; Zusak created the ideal ally for Liesel. He is kind enough to help her learn to read, and patient while she practices. Hans is also the ideal German citizen for a non-German audience in a modern book about the era. Hans is not a Party member and does not agree with Party ideas. He paints over graffiti on a Jewish-owned shop in town, and argues with his Nazi son about politics. However, he is also wise enough to know to apply for Party

membership because it will help keep his family safer. Hans is willing to sacrifice his cigarettes—one of the few luxuries in the Hubermann household—for Liesel's sake. He is an endearing character for readers who creates moments for emotional identification in the text. However, Hans could be considered the idealized, stereotypical German activist. He accepts Max, a Jewish acquaintance, into his family's home to help keep him safe. Like the teenager in Zusak's mother's story, Hans steps forward to give an old Jewish man, who is forced to march through town to Dachau, a piece of bread. Hans, a charming character in many aspects of his life, is Zusak's representation of a Holocaust resister.

The Book Thief paints a complex portrait of life in Germany during World War II. Readers experience the poverty that pervaded German cities, the suffering with which they dealt as a result of Allied attacks, and most importantly, the activities of everyday life that, though affected by the war, continued unabated. Though in some ways *The Book Thief* appropriates common tropes often found in Holocaust literature, it gives readers a more nuanced picture of the average German's experience during the war. *The Book Thief* portrays some of the issues faced by German citizens during the war, including foster care, air raids, book burnings, concentration camps, and poverty. In reading *The Book Thief*, one may get an imperfect, fictionalized account of the Second World War, but the account that it presents is more complete than that presented in most young adult novels about the era.

IV. Understanding the Middle Ground

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas and *The Book Thief* are just two novels in a huge sub-genre. They do not represent the entire body of young adult Holocaust novels, but they do paint a picture of tropes and stereotypes overused within that sub-genre. Many books young adult Holocaust novels equate Germans with Nazis and leave no space for Germans who simply lived through wartime. No young adult author has written a World War II or Holocaust story that does justice to both the atrocities and realities of the time. Indeed, these tragic events left such an immense legacy that no single text could sufficiently sum up the era's nuances and complexities. Books set in this period often offer readers lessons in history and culture, even if the author intends the novel to be an allegory, not historical fiction. It is an oversimplification that these books do not address the average German citizen and focus instead on Nazis and the malicious acts they committed. Because young readers are impressionable, a young person's literary experiences and education can have a lifelong effect. If readers' first, and perhaps only, exposure to the Holocaust is through black-and-white stories featuring only Germans who are Nazis, then cannot even begin to understand the diversity of experiences in Germany during the Second World War.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas uses the Germans-as-Nazis trope, creating oversimplification and historical inaccuracies. While Boyne's tale of friendship across boundaries is heartwarming, it conveys an inaccurate impression of both Germans and the Holocaust. *The Book Thief* is not flawless and does not cover every aspect of German life during World War II, but it does depict Germans and German life under the Nazi regime in a way that does more justice to the German people. Its broad range of

topics, from Nazi-run youth groups to air raids and Jewish refugees, paints a clear picture of everyday life in Germany and avoids claiming, “Germans did not know what was happening.” There was middle ground at the time, and Zusak portrays that room for personal agency effectively while still conveying his allegorical point about the power of words. The two works convey very different overall impressions of the German people, leaving the young reader with a vastly different concept of Germans as a group.

Young adult Holocaust books that portray Germans as either resistance members or Nazis shortchange readers who are learning about the era by not exposing them to the diversity of German opinions. In a time of globalization and increasing transnationality, modern perspectives of other countries and their citizens is crucial to maintaining good relations around the world. American authors use the Holocaust as the backdrop for stories not necessarily about World War II itself, but instead as the setting for tales of grander morality; such focus has a deleterious effect on impressionable young minds.

Further research on the representations of Germans in young adult Holocaust literature should include primary research on classroom use of these books. Research could include teaching each book and studying how students perceive Germans in the war based on each novel’s portrayal. Primary research regarding adults’ memories of reading young adult Holocaust literature could explore the lasting effect of these impressions. Further research could delve into adjusting wrong or skewed impressions.

Future applications for research about the Holocaust and young adult literature include a shift in focus of the literature regarding the representation of Germans in literature, and changes in the use of young adult novels set during World War II in

curricula across America. Authors should be held accountable for the accuracy in historical fiction, regardless of the novel's purpose. To foster an understanding of the German people, it is important to strip away the stereotypes and biases about them. Proper understanding of the historical era can help readers learn even more from the event and decrease misunderstandings about modern German culture.

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