

Memory, Morality, and Misinformation: The Controversy (and Necessity) of Holocaust Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the ethical and cultural necessity of Holocaust fiction in the 21st century, particularly as the world enters a post-witness era marked by rising antisemitism, historical distortion, and the erosion of public trust in fact-based memory. Through a comparative analysis of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne and *Mischling* by Affinity Konar, this study argues that Holocaust fiction must be held to clear ethical standards that prioritize historical specificity, emotional truth, and narrative responsibility. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Menachem Kaiser, Lawrence L. Langer, and Sara Horowitz, the paper explores the tensions between imagination and testimony, narrative and memory, and freedom and morality. While *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* exemplifies the dangers of sentimental distortion and misinformation, *Mischling* serves as a model for ethical engagement, using survivor testimony and fragmented style to create a narrative that honors the gravity of its subject matter without reducing it to metaphor. This paper contends that Holocaust fiction, when responsibly crafted, can serve as both a vessel of remembrance and a form of resistance in an increasingly hostile sociopolitical climate. Ultimately, Holocaust fiction is not a replacement for testimony but is a vital continuation of it—one that must carry the weight of memory with care, accountability, and commitment to truth.

Introduction

In an era marked by rising antisemitism, increasing Holocaust denial, and the gradual loss of survivor testimony, the question of how we remember the Holocaust—and who gets to shape that memory—has never been more urgent. The responsibility of preserving memory increasingly falls more heavily on literature and education. Fiction has emerged as a powerful, albeit controversial, medium through which the Holocaust is represented and interpreted. Critics argue that fictionalizing the genocide risks distortion, trivialization, or exploitation. Yet others maintain that storytelling, when undertaken with research, empathy, and moral clarity, can preserve memory, deepen understanding, and reach audiences that traditional accounts often cannot. At the heart of this debate lies a fundamental tension: the creative liberties of art versus the moral weight of atrocity. Fictional portrayals of genocide inevitably walk a fine line between evocation and appropriation. And yet, to turn away from fiction entirely is to risk allowing the Holocaust to fade in memory, especially for younger generations that are further removed from the event. While Holocaust fiction carries undeniable risks, it also has the potential to foster

historical literacy, deepen empathy, and combat the growing issue of antisemitism and Holocaust denial. By examining both a problematic and a powerful example of Holocaust fiction, I will explore how literature can either distort or preserve memory—and what ethical and literary standards should guide these efforts. In an age of rising extremism and fading memory, responsible Holocaust fiction may not just be valid, it may be vital.

Background on the Holocaust

The Holocaust was an unprecedented, state-sponsored genocide orchestrated by Nazi Germany during World War II from 1939-1945. It involved the systematic persecution and extermination of those deemed ‘asocial’ or unworthy of being a part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or “people’s community.” These victims included Jews, Roma and Sinti people, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, individuals with mental and physical disabilities, political dissidents, and others. Throughout the 1930s, antisemitic laws gradually stripped Jewish citizens of their rights and humanity, culminating in acts of state-sanctioned violence. With the outbreak of WWII, Nazi policies escalated from persecution to extermination: Jews were forced into overcrowded ghettos where disease and starvation were rampant. By 1942, the so-called ‘Final Solution’ was implemented: a euphemism for the systematic murder of ‘asocials’ through gas chambers and mass killings at death camps. In these concentration camps, victims were subjected to harsh forced labor, starvation, torture, medical experimentation, sexual violence, and execution. By the end of the Holocaust, approximately 6 million Jews and 5 million other people had been murdered.

In response to the enormity of this atrocity, a distinct body of writing emerged. As Sara Horowitz, Holocaust literary scholar and professor of Comparative Literature and Humanities at York University, defines it, “Holocaust literature encompasses not only *belles-lettres* by and

about victims and survivors of the Nazi genocide, but also life-writing, including diaries, autobiography, letters, journals, journalism, and other self-referencing narratives written during or after the war.”¹ She states that “Holocaust literature encompasses many languages, genres, and perspectives that mediate life and death, survival and memory, during and after the Nazi genocide.”² Today, Holocaust education is more crucial than ever. Public awareness of the genocide continues to decline, while antisemitism and historical revisionism rise. With survivors aging and passing away, we are approaching the end of living memory. As author Carrie Anne Brownian warns, “we’re living in a time when more and more Holocaust survivors are leaving us every year. As of January 2024, there were only 245,000 left...Hence, we won’t have infinite firsthand testimonies and memoirs forever. Eventually, any new books will have to be historical fiction or nonfiction.”³ While Brownian’s tone may be casual, her point is profound: the burden of remembrance is shifting. In the absence of firsthand testimony, literature—particularly historical fiction—has the potential to become an essential medium for remembering, understanding, and transmitting Holocaust history across generations.

The Controversy of Holocaust Fiction

The fictionalization of the Holocaust remains one of the most ethically fraught and intensely debated issues in both literary and historical discourse. For many survivors, scholars, and readers, any attempt to transform the Holocaust into narrative raises serious ethical, historical, and philosophical concerns. At the heart of the controversy lies the perceived

¹ Sara R. Horowitz, “Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, Reprint Edition (OUP Oxford, 2012), 428, <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/40208/chapter-abstract/342948030?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

² Horowitz, 429.

³ Carrie-Anne Brownian, “Why Holocaust Historical Fiction Matters (And Is Necessary),” Wordpress, *Carrie Anne Brownian* (blog), May 6, 2024, <https://carrianebrownian.wordpress.com/2024/05/06/why-holocaust-historical-fiction-matters-and-is-necessary/#:~:text=As%20long%20as%20a%20fictional,first%2Dperson%20witness%20is%20gone>.

incompatibility between atrocity and imagination. Critics warn that fictionalizing genocide risks trivializing its horror, misrepresenting lived experiences, and exploiting trauma for entertainment and profit. The Holocaust continues to occupy a taboo space in public consciousness—ethically sacred yet narratively dangerous. As the genocide becomes increasingly mediated through art, literature, and film rather than survivor testimony, the debate over what is ethically and aesthetically permissible has only grown more urgent.

Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel exemplifies this restrictive view around fictionalization surrounding the genocide. He once declared that “‘a novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. A novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. *Is* blasphemy.’”⁴ For Wiesel, fiction lacks the moral authority to represent an event as singular and horrific as the Holocaust. He further argued that “‘to fictionalize [the Holocaust] insults the dead.’”⁵ His concern was not only with the act of writing but also the industry around it: “‘The Holocaust,’ he wrote, ‘has become a fashionable subject.’ As such, the entertainment industry has ‘set out to exploit it.’ ‘The truth of Auschwitz,’ he wrote, ‘remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so.’”⁶

Wiesel’s perspective exemplifies the argument that the Holocaust resists artistic translation—an argument that many survivors have echoed. Arnošt Lustig, himself a survivor, claimed that “‘to write of Auschwitz-Birkenau as it was—no one will do.’”⁷ This sense of futility

⁴ Yael Shahar, “Holocaust and Literature: A Writer’s Dilemma,” *The Times of Israel* (blog), April 17, 2023, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/holocaust-and-literature-a-writers-dilemma/>.

⁵ Ruth Franklin, “A New Novel Draws on the Dark History of Josef Mengele,” *The New York Times*, September 16, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/books/review/mischling-affinity-konar.html>.

⁶ Ellen Wexler, “‘The Tattooist of Auschwitz’ Demonstrates the Limits of Holocaust Fiction,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/tattooist-of-auschwitz-demonstrates-limits-holocaust-fiction-180984267/>.

⁷ Horowitz, “Literature,” 430.

reflects both the scale of the genocide and the limits of artistic form. Theodor Adorno's infamous claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"⁸ has become shorthand for the crisis of representation that surrounds Holocaust art and literature. As scholar Sara Horowitz notes, Adorno's statement is not necessarily a categorical ban on Holocaust literature. Rather, it gestures to "a far-ranging crisis of representation, culture, ethics, philosophical systems, and knowledge after the Holocaust."⁹ Adorno's critique challenges not just literature, but the very structures of meaning that art relies on. If art traditionally seeks to create meaning, then representing an event that annihilated meaning—morally, linguistically, and philosophically—poses an existential challenge to the artist. A challenge that he ultimately believes cannot be met.

This anxiety over representation extends beyond literature. Film critic John Podhoretz, for instance, refuses to watch Holocaust films entirely, writing that "you are watching a story. And the act of converting the Shoah into a story is itself a violation of its meaning, its force, and its evil. The imposition of a plot makes the inexplicably and unimaginably awful falsely explicable."¹⁰ For Podhoretz, even when the intent is reverent, the form itself risks distortion. He believes that this art imposes logic on the illogical and humanizes what, he argues, should not be humanized. Podhoretz concedes that novels and poetry allow for more subjectivity, since they "spring from a single person's perspective and seek to engage the reader or the viewer in an act of imaginative recreation in which he must participate."¹¹ Still, the danger of misrepresentation lingers. Every act of storytelling involves selection, perspective, and emphasis, slightly altering historical record and influencing the reader or viewer.

⁸ Menachem Kaiser, "The Holocaust's Uneasy Relationship With Literature," *The Atlantic*, December 28, 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/12/the-holocausts-uneasy-relationship-with-literature/67998/>.

⁹ Horowitz, "Literature," 430.

¹⁰ Shahar, "Holocaust and Literature: A Writer's Dilemma."

¹¹ Shahar.

Holocaust historian Lawrence Langer articulates this same dilemma. He asks, “how can we expect the mind to adjust from the real horror to its portrayal in art, while simultaneously accepting the premise that nothing essential has been lost or changed in the process?”¹² For Langer, the very process of artistic creation and its reliance on structure and language inevitably reshapes the event it seeks to depict. He states that “art in its essence asks us to see life other than it literally was, since all art, even the most objective naturalism, requires selection and composition, and this alters the purity (or in this case the impurity) of the original historical moment.”¹³ The act of representation, however honest or restrained, changes what it seeks to preserve. In his mind, art cannot preserve the past without also transforming it.

Part of what makes fictional representations of the Holocaust so controversial is the way that the genocide has come to function as a cultural and ethical taboo. Wilhelm Wundt, an experimental psychologist, defines taboo as “the oldest unwritten code of law of humanity, a taboo stipulates that certain persons or things are to be avoided.”¹⁴ Dr. Matthew Boswell, a scholar and researcher that specializes in Holocaust literature, elaborates, “taboos influence the social and cultural codes that govern individual behavior...they are never enshrined in formal legislation, which marks the point at which a prohibition ceases to be taboo and instead becomes law.”¹⁵ The Holocaust, then, occupies a liminal space in cultural consciousness: not legally protected from representation, but socially and ethically regarded as sacred. Boswell argues that “the Holocaust has always been a taboo subject. During the war, civilians lived alongside a vast

¹² Lawrence L Langer, “Fictional Facts and Factual Fictions: History in Holocaust Literature,” in *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 77, <https://academic.oup.com/book/48590/chapter-abstract/422335233?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

¹³ Langer, 78.

¹⁴ Matthew Boswell, “Holocaust Literature and the Taboo” (Academia.edu, n.d.), 1, https://www.academia.edu/11090420/Holocaust_Literature_and_the_Taboo.

¹⁵ Boswell, 1–2.

infrastructure of camps, ghettos, deportation centers and train lines, yet rarely spoke out.”¹⁶ He goes on to highlight that “in the camps themselves, the basic humanity of the victims was also designated taboo, with the prisoners being treated as ‘units,’ tattooed with a number and never referred to by name. Even after liberation, the extreme dehumanization of the victims extended to the survivors’ sense of themselves and their condition as victims.”¹⁷

As survivor testimonies have become more public, some of these silences have been broken, but the taboo has not disappeared. Instead, Boswell argues, it has transformed. “The victims were no longer ostracized,” he writes, “but rather spoke with authority from the ‘inside’ of a genocide that came to be regarded as a taboo subject for those on the ‘outside’ who were not there.”¹⁸ In this sense, Holocaust fiction by non-survivors is not just controversial but is transgressive. And yet, Boswell ultimately defends such literature. He argues that:

texts which might appear, on the surface, to be crude, offensive, or factually misleading, are not always gratuitous or misdirected as they might seem. Rather, they are fundamental to what the Germans term ‘working through’ or ‘dealing with,’ (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) the knowledge and cultural legacy of the Holocaust.¹⁹

Literature, in this view, becomes a tool not for erasure, but for confrontation.

In literary circles, Holocaust fiction raises deeper questions about the purpose of literature itself. Langer writes that “literature generalizes human experience, while the events of atrocity we call the Holocaust insist on their singularity.”²⁰ This generalizing impulse, through metaphor or allegory, risks making the Holocaust interchangeable with other experiences of loss, when in fact its extremity demands exceptional reverence. But not all scholars agree that fiction is inherently a betrayal. For instance, Menachem Kaiser, writer and recipient of the Sami Rohr

¹⁶ Boswell, 4.

¹⁷ Boswell, 5.

¹⁸ Boswell, 6.

¹⁹ Boswell, 4.

²⁰ Langer, “Fictional Facts and Factual Fictions: History in Holocaust Literature,” 77.

Prize for Jewish Literature in 2022, writes that “literature is the pathos to history’s logos.”²¹ He notes that “If history teaches and (harshly) informs, then literature rouses and intimately disturbs.”²² Kaiser’s perspective illuminates the complimentary and complicated marriage of history and literature, implying that only having either fact or fiction would be a deficit and ultimately insufficient for a well-rounded education about the genocide. Fiction and literature have the capacity to enhance one’s understanding from a more human, empathetic perspective.

The controversy surrounding Holocaust fiction is not easily resolved, and nor should it be. The tension between ethics and imagination is precisely what makes the genre both powerful and dangerous. When engaging with such fiction, the stakes are high. But so too is the potential for literature to bear witness, to disturb, and to remember.

Purpose and Power of Fictionalizing the Holocaust

This tension between memory and representation becomes even more important in the post-witness era when fewer survivors remain to tell their stories firsthand. Despite longstanding criticism, fictional representations of the Holocaust serve a crucial cultural and emotional function. As professor of Sociology at Yale University, Jeffrey Alexander remarks, “‘in the beginning, in April 1945, the Holocaust was not the ‘Holocaust’...For an audience to be traumatized by an experience which they themselves do not directly share, symbolic extension and psychological identification are required.’”²³ Holocaust memory had to be constructed, sustained, and transmitted—and much of that labor has occurred not just through testimony, but through museums, theater, film, and fiction. These representations are not necessarily distortions

²¹ Kaiser, “The Holocaust’s Uneasy Relationship With Literature.”

²² Kaiser.

²³ Michael Gray, “The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?,” *Holocaust Studies* 20, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2014.11435377>.

of history; they are interpretations that seek to make emotional and ethical sense of something so incomprehensible. They do not merely recount what happened—they ask us to feel why it matters. This interpretive function becomes especially vital as time distances us from the event and new generations grow up without direct access to survivors or primary witnesses.

The power of fiction lies in its ability to invite empathy and imaginative connection. It does not aim to replace testimony, but to extend it. As author Daphne Kalotay explains, when schools and libraries ban books, “they acknowledge literature’s powerful role in the creation of social memory, whether offered by witnesses or provided secondhand by those who received that testimony.”²⁴ Fiction enables second- and third-generation authors to carry Holocaust memory forward—not by claiming the authority of lived experience, but by translating trauma into accessible and resonant forms for readers who might otherwise feel disconnected from it. This is not about appropriating suffering; it’s about ensuring that the emotional and moral gravity of the Holocaust doesn’t get lost beneath statistics or fade as survivors pass away.

Fiction also offers something that traditional historical accounts cannot: a deep and sustained engagement with the inner life of individuals. Survivor and author Aharon Appelfeld writes:

The historical, by its nature, tends to accent the unfolding of events while indicating social and political trends. Art, on the other hand, has always sought out the individual, his inner [world], and from that, it tries to understand the [outside] world. Art, perhaps only art, is the last defense against the banal, the commonplace and the irrelevant, and, to take it even further, the last defense against simplicity.²⁵

Where history must record what happened, fiction can ask what it meant; it can capture contradiction, ambivalence, and moral complexity in a way that conventional historical narrative often cannot.

²⁴ Shahar, “Holocaust and Literature: A Writer’s Dilemma.”

²⁵ Shahar.

Furthermore, fiction can create a kind of moral awakening in readers. As writer Yael Shahar writes, “art, literature, and film play the same role for civilizations as dreams do for individuals; they allow us to integrate our experiences and learn from them. They allow us not just to remember what happened, but to be changed by it.”²⁶ She goes on to discuss that one of the crucial lessons of the Holocaust is that both victims and perpetrators were ordinary people. Literature collapses the emotional distance between “us” and “them” and allows one to fully immerse themselves into the lived experience of another person, forcing the reader to question their own capacity for action or inaction in the face of justice.

This is why many scholars and artists now argue that fiction is not indulgent, but necessary. As Horowitz acknowledges, the challenge was not whether we could represent the Holocaust through fiction, but how. Early scholars “questioned whether classical literary forms and conventional language were adequate to representing the Holocaust and whether such massive suffering was appropriate material for the playfulness and pleasure associated with aesthetic production.”²⁷ But rather than abandon fiction, contemporary writers have reinvented it—experimenting with form, genre, and voice to reflect the fragmented and often inexpressible nature of Holocaust memory.

The horrors of the Holocaust demand new forms of expression. To fictionalize the Holocaust is not to erase or diminish it, but to reactivate its urgency in new contexts for new readers. As Joseph Stalin famously said, “one death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.”²⁸ Fictional narratives have the capacity to restore tragedy to the number, putting faces and names

²⁶ Shahar.

²⁷ Horowitz, “Literature,” 429.

²⁸ John Tirman, “316Counting: A Single Death Is a Tragedy, a Million Deaths Are a Statistic,” in *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America’s Wars*, ed. John Tirman (Oxford University Press, 2011), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195381214.003.0010>.

back into history that too often overwhelms with its scale. While history catalogs eleven million deaths, fiction can illuminate one story at a time, offering intimacy where numbers offer abstraction. In this sense, fiction is not a betrayal of memory, it is its preservation.

Having established the purpose and power of fictionalizing the Holocaust, it is now essential to examine how these ideas manifest in specific texts. The following case studies will explore how individual works engage with Holocaust memory, navigate moral complexities, and confront both criticism and praise. I will first turn to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne to assess how the novel's approach illustrates the problematic nature of Holocaust fiction. I will then examine *Mischling* by Affinity Konar, a novel that pushes the boundaries of Holocaust fiction in different and complex ways. These case studies reveal the range of possibilities and pitfalls that accompany fictionalizing genocide, and ultimately inform my own view of what makes Holocaust fiction ethical.

Case Study of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a widely read novel set during the Holocaust, told from the perspective of a young German boy named Bruno. Bruno, 9-years-old when the novel begins, moves from his home in Berlin to a fictional Auschwitz because of his father's promotion to commandant of the camp. Bruno eventually meets a young Jewish boy named Shmuel, an inmate of an Auschwitz. The two boys meet daily at a barbed-wire fence, forming an unlikely friendship. Eventually, Shmuel asks Bruno to help him search for his father, and upon entering the camp, they are both rounded up by the Nazis and put into a gas chamber where both children were murdered. Bruno and Shmuel are intended to mirror one another—they share the same birthday, look remarkably similar, and are portrayed as innocent children on opposite sides of a barbed-wire fence. Although Boyne classifies the novel as a fable, it takes

place in a real historical setting and is marketed and consumed as a Holocaust novel, which gives it an assumed level of historical authenticity. As the novel progresses, the lines between fiction and fact blur in problematic ways, culminating in the very tragic twist: the son of a Nazi commandant is killed in the very gas chambers designed to exterminate Jews. This conclusion, though deeply emotional, unfolds within a framework that is historically implausible and ethically troubling.

The historical inaccuracies and inconsistencies throughout Boyne's novel are staggering. First and foremost, the existence of Shmuel is entirely implausible within the context of the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Both Bruno and Shmuel are described as being born on April 15, 1934,²⁹ meaning they were nine years old at the time of the story's events. However, Michael Gray, head of Government and Politics at Harrow School in London, emphasizes that it is "highly unlikely that such a young boy would have been kept alive at Auschwitz. If by some rare chance he were, then it is much more plausible that he would have been sent to the labor camp at Plaszów rather than Auschwitz, the latter of which, by June 1943, had all four of its 'new crematoria' operational."³⁰ This historical context directly contradicts the novel's premise. While there were few camps that kept children alive, such as Theresienstadt, in the context of Auschwitz, this makes no sense. Even more absurd is Shmuel's assertion that "there are a lot of us—boys our age, I mean—on this side of the fence."³¹ As Gray clarifies, "while exceptional cases existed, Jewish children were gassed on arrival at extermination centers like Auschwitz."³² The idea that a young Jewish boy could have survived long enough in Auschwitz to maintain a regular friendship with a child on the outside—meeting daily at the fence, no less—is not only

²⁹ John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, Reprint Edition (David Fickling Books, 2007), 109.

³⁰ Gray, "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?," 122.

³¹ Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, 110.

³² Gray, "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?," 121–22.

historically impossible, but also misleading. Gray observes that Shmuel likely “would not have had the opportunity afforded to him to leisurely come each day to the perimeter of the fence, which in the film is void of any guards and appears not to be electrified.”³³ The casualness of this connection risks suggesting that such friendships—or even childhood survival—were common, rather than recognizing that nearly all children that were sent to Auschwitz were murdered upon arrival.

The novel also presents a deeply unrealistic characterization of Bruno, particularly in his understanding (or lack thereof) of Nazi ideology and antisemitism. Despite being the son of a high-ranking Nazi official, Bruno is depicted as having no animosity toward Jews and even asks his sister if he is Jewish, to which she is horrified.³⁴ Gretel states “‘No, Bruno,’ she said. ‘No, we most certainly are not. And you shouldn’t even say something like that.’”³⁵ Throughout the book, he expresses confusion over the term “Jew” and is unfamiliar with antisemitic rhetoric. Gray critiques this naivety, arguing that a child in Bruno’s position would “surely not have such an accommodating and open-minded attitude towards a Jew. His exposure to constant state antisemitism in his schooling would undoubtedly have shaped his world view and prevented the innocence and naivety [in Bruno].”³⁶ This erasure of the pervasive influence of Nazi propaganda undermines the reality of indoctrination and the complicity of ordinary Germans, including children, in the regime’s ideology.

In addition to the factual inaccuracies, the novel’s narrative focus leads to misplaced emotional emphasis and the troubling redirection of sympathy. The protagonist is Bruno, not Shmuel, and readers are given significantly more time to connect with him. Shmuel does not

³³ Gray, 122.

³⁴ Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, 182.

³⁵ Boyne, 182.

³⁶ Gray, “The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?,” 122.

even appear until chapter ten on page 106,³⁷ whereas Bruno's inner life and emotional journey are central throughout. This imbalance leads the reader to feel sadness at the end of the story principally for Bruno, especially with extensive descriptions of the grief and distress of Bruno's family:

Gretel returned to Berlin with Mother and spent a lot of time alone in her room crying, not because she had thrown her dolls away and not because she had left all her maps behind at Out-With, but because she missed Bruno so much...[Father] went to sleep every night thinking about Bruno and he woke up every morning thinking about him too.³⁸

In a way, there is a longing for the audience to share in the family's sorrow. As Gray points out, "the narrative dwells on the grief and distress of Bruno's family,"³⁹ implicitly inviting readers to empathize with the Nazi perpetrators rather than the victims. In doing so, the novel centers the tragedy of a German child's accidental death over the genocide of millions of people—an ethical failure given the context and historical weight of the Holocaust.

In addition to misplaced sympathy, the book creates a multitude of misconceptions among young readers, ultimately leading to real-world consequences for Holocaust education. The London Jewish Cultural Centre (LJCC) commissioned a nationwide study of 1,200 UK students between the ages of 11-16 to examine these potential consequences. While many students encounter Holocaust history for the first time through this book, this initial exposure frequently leads to a blurring of the lines between fiction and reality. The study by the LJCC powerfully illustrates this confusion with the anecdote of a young student deeply upset by the film. He exclaimed, "I literally ran out. I actually thought it was true!"⁴⁰ He is then met by

³⁷ Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, 106.

³⁸ Boyne, 215.

³⁹ Gray, "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A Blessing or Curse for Holocaust Education?," 125.

⁴⁰ Gray, 116.

another student's firm "It is true!"⁴¹ This immediate contradiction highlights the difficulty that students face in discerning historical fact from fictional narrative without a solid foundation of historical understanding. This struggle to differentiate truth from fiction manifests in significant misunderstandings. This is complicated because aspects of the book are true and that rightfully and understandably could be distressing to a child. But it is difficult to ascertain what is true and what isn't if they don't have a proper understanding of the history it is based on—which is why it's important to be transparent. As the study by the LJCC notes, one student, when asked about when the Nazis stopped killing Jews, incorrectly stated, "I think it ended when one of the Nazi children died in the poisonous gas in the Jew camp," a direct and inaccurate reflection of the novel's climax.⁴² This response underscores the danger of students assuming that because a story is set in the past, it is inherently accurate. This is natural to assume, especially at a younger age, but this is also problematic if they are basing this knowledge off something that is misinformed and misleading.

Furthermore, the impact of specific scenes within the narrative on student understanding of concentration camps is notable. The LJCC's research points to the fact that 14 children "remarked that the Nazis presented the camps as 'holiday camps.'"⁴³ Consequently, students expressed beliefs such as, "these camps were advertised on TV as very happy and comfortable but in reality, they were rough and the Jews were sent there to get tired and die," and "I know that the camps were perceived to be good...that is why so many Jews volunteered to go there, but in fact they were horrible."⁴⁴ These comments reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of the

⁴¹ Gray, 116.

⁴² Gray, 117.

⁴³ Gray, 118.

⁴⁴ Gray, 119.

coercive and violent nature of the Holocaust, with the false notion that Jews “volunteered to go there,” obscuring the reality of deportations and selections.

Even when students acknowledged the fictional nature of the story, a study by University College London’s Center for Holocaust Education revealed a concerning trend. According to them, “while most young people who took part in the study recognized the narrative as a work of fiction and many were able to identify and critique its most glaringly implausible plot-points or historical inaccuracies, they nonetheless overwhelmingly characterized it as ‘realistic’ and/or ‘truthful.’”⁴⁵ This perception contributed significantly to the “most powerful and problematic misconceptions of this history, that ‘ordinary Germans’ held little responsibility and were by and large ‘brainwashed’ or otherwise entirely ignorant of the unfolding atrocities.”⁴⁶ This narrative also shifted the focus of victimhood for many students. As a year 9 student noted, “‘Well we always think of the Nazis as the bad guys and this [*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*] shows that the Holocaust didn’t just affect the Jews.’”⁴⁷ Another year 11 student stated that “‘I feel sorry for practically everybody who was under Hitler’s control. And it doesn’t matter who was the bigger victim, they were all still victims of Hitler’s control in some shape or form.’”⁴⁸ While there is certainly value in honoring every victim of the Holocaust and how German people and culture were effected, it is also necessary to acknowledge not only the specific Jewish suffering present in the Holocaust, but also how *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* dilutes the specific suffering of Jewish people, arguably and potentially contributing to Nazi sympathy.

⁴⁵ Center for Holocaust Education, “Research Briefing: The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas” (UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, 2023), 1, <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfHE-Research-Data-Release-3-The-Boy-in-the-Striped-Pyjamas-.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Center for Holocaust Education, 1.

⁴⁷ Center for Holocaust Education, 2.

⁴⁸ Center for Holocaust Education, 2–3.

To complicate matters further, John Boyne explicitly states that his intention for *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is for it to serve as an introduction to the Holocaust. He notes that, for a generation of young readers around the world, the novel has become their first point of contact with Holocaust history.⁴⁹ Boyne himself acknowledges that the book “holds a responsibility in itself”⁵⁰ because of this role. Although he insists that he has “always made sure to impress on young readers the fact that this is a work of fiction – a fable,”⁵¹ many young people nonetheless continue to draw heavily on *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* as a reference point for understanding what the Holocaust was “really like” and how it could have come about.

The program director of the UCL Center for Holocaust Education, Ruth-Anne Lenga, puts forth a statement reflecting on the complicated nature of the book:

As a work of fiction and drama this book and associated film may have some worth, but as a resource for teaching this important history it is flawed. Even if used solely to identify the errors and mistruth inherent within it, students would need to already have established sound historical, evidence-based knowledge to be able to do that. With time for teaching this subject being a major challenge in schools across the country, this would, in many cases, simply not work. The potential for giving young people the impression that ordinary Germans were in some way ‘victims’ of the Holocaust is insensitive and dangerous. With the rise in antisemitism, such as it is in this country, and that so often manifests through trivialization, distortion and denial of the Holocaust, this book could potentially do more harm than good.⁵²

Indeed, “35 percent of teachers in England use *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* in lessons covering the Holocaust.”⁵³ Stuart Foster, the executive director for the Center of Holocaust Education, emphasizes that the issue lies not with the fictional work itself, but with its use in an

⁴⁹ Center for Holocaust Education, 5.

⁵⁰ Center for Holocaust Education, 5.

⁵¹ Center for Holocaust Education, 6.

⁵² Center for Holocaust Education, 6.

⁵³ Louis Chilton, “Holocaust Memorial Day: The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas ‘May Fuel Dangerous Holocaust Fallacies,’ Says New Study,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/27/the-boy-in-the-striped-pyjamas-fuels-dangerous-holocaust-fallacies>.

educational context, particularly ““in an era of fake news and conspiracy theories, it’s very worrying that young people harbor myths and misconceptions about the Holocaust.””⁵⁴

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas is not just a poorly constructed historical novel—it is a harmful one. It misrepresents the reality of the Holocaust, recenters the narrative around the perpetrators, and introduces historical inaccuracies that confuse rather than educate. It is widely consumed by young audiences who lack the proper context to differentiate the truth from fiction, and it ultimately fails both as a work of fiction and as a vehicle for Holocaust remembrance. While Boyne maintains that fiction can play a valuable role in introducing difficult subjects and fostering empathy, the overwhelming evidence suggests that without careful contextualization and thoughtful research, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* can inadvertently hinder, rather than help, meaningful Holocaust education. If the book continues to be taught in schools, it must be accompanied by critical analysis, historical contextualization and correction, and candid conversations about the responsibilities of Holocaust fiction. To do otherwise is to risk turning this genocide into a sentimental, inaccurate fable—and forgetting the real victims in the process.

Case Study of *Mischling*

Affinity Konar’s novel *Mischling* offers a fictionalized but deeply researched and emotionally rich portrayal of life as a twin subjected to Josef Mengele’s experiments in Auschwitz. The book follows the experiences of Pearl and Stasha Zagorski, identical twin sisters who arrive at the concentration camp in 1944. Their blonde hair initially leads to their mistaken identification as *mischling*, defined in the book as “hybrid; half-breed. Used by the Third Reich to denote a person of mixed blood.”⁵⁵ But ultimately it is their twinhood that draws the attention

⁵⁴ Chilton.

⁵⁵ Affinity Konar, *Mischling*, First Edition (Lee Boudreaux Books, 2016), 1.

of the infamous Dr. Mengele. As Stasha chillingly describes in their first encounter with him, “he drew us out, made us turn for him, and had us stand back-to-back so he could appreciate the exactitudes of us.”⁵⁶

Mengele, obsessed with genetic experimentation—particularly on twins—conscripted Pearl and Stasha into his grotesque human “zoo.”⁵⁷ There, they endure a living nightmare of invasive procedures, emotional trauma, and calculated separation and dehumanization. Despite these horrors, Pearl and Stasha cling to their identity as twins and the private world they create together. They even divide the emotional labor of survival: “Stasha would take the funny, the future, the bad. [Pearl] would take the sad, the past, the good.”⁵⁸ This division reveals not only their desperate will to survive but also the deep emotional intelligence with which they protect one another; they understand each other’s strengths and vulnerabilities. Their bond remains the only source of comfort in an environment designed to sever all human connection. This leaves them constantly vulnerably to what, in their minds, is the ultimate terror: separation.

Konar’s portrayal captures the specific, haunting reality of Mengele’s so-called medical experiments. Children like Pearl and Stasha were subjected to torturous procedures without anesthesia, including chemical injection, deliberate infection, and surgical mutilation, all in a pseudoscientific quest to engineer the perfect Aryan race. The novel alternates between the sisters’ perspectives, with Stasha’s voice gradually taking precedence as Pearl becomes increasingly withdrawn. While Pearl seeks to become invisible, Stasha actively engages with their terrifying new reality, learning its rules and actively seeking answers.

⁵⁶ Konar, 9.

⁵⁷ Konar, 13.

⁵⁸ Konar, 21.

The novel takes a poignant turn when Pearl disappears during a winter concert orchestrated by Mengele, fracturing the already fragile world of the twins. After the Red Army liberates Auschwitz, Stasha embarks on a postwar journey to find her twin. *Mischling* thus becomes not only a devastating portrayal of the atrocities committed against children in the Holocaust, but also a profoundly human story of love, grief, survival, and the persistent search for hope in the face of unthinkable trauma. The novel culminates in a reunion of the two girls, a moment that underscores the enduring bond between them despite all that they have gone through.

In its final pages, Konar offers readers a rare and strikingly optimistic vision within the landscape of Holocaust fiction, exploring ideas of repair and reconstruction. The novel's final line, "We had to learn to love the world once more,"⁵⁹ is a quiet, aching hope. Pearl and Stasha won't be able to erase their suffering, but they are determined to carve a path toward healing. This moment of optimism defies the genre's typical focus on despair and devastation and further highlights the characters' emotional and psychological resilience and their desire to rebuild their lives.

This emotional depth is reinforced by Konar's extensive and thoughtful research. She draws from survivor testimonies and historical documentation to ground the novel's fictional elements in reality. While *Mischling* is a work of fiction, Konar herself emphasizes the significant role that real-life accounts played in shaping her story. In an interview, she reflects:

When I first began, I worried about how I might give power to characters who had been stripped of it. But remarkably, granting agency to the characters was one of the easier tasks, if only because you cannot read the accounts of survivors without being inspired by how they sustained themselves, whether it was through stealing potatoes or tricking nurses or sabotaging paperwork. The book owes its animation to so many, but I must always

⁵⁹ Konar, 339.

mention Eva Mozes Kor, Miriam Mozes Zeiger, Alex Dekel, Gisella Perl, and Zvi Spiegel. I was blessed to live in awe of them as I wrote.⁶⁰

This direct acknowledgement of her reliance on survivor narratives immediately grounds the fictional experiences of Pearl and Stasha in the historical reality of Dr. Mengele's experiments.

Within the text, Konar very directly incorporates specific survivor accounts. Vera Kriegel Grossman, a real twin experimented on by Mengele, once described that during her time imprisoned in Auschwitz she had the following experience: "I entered his lab, there were eyes hanging on a board in every color. At one point I could not bear it anymore and fainted."⁶¹ Konar transforms this brief but harrowing memory into an extended and haunting scene through the eyes of Stasha. From pages 49-53, it is described that Stasha is met with "rows of eyes," "fastened through the iris, pierced with pins, all assembled as neatly as children at roll call."⁶² In this moment, the wall of eyes comes to symbolize the children themselves. The children, too, are ripped from their homes, lined up, made to be uniform, and poked and prodded with needles for the sake of entertainment and curiosity.

Konar's depiction is less clinical than Kriegel Grossman's. This is not because the original testimony was bland or ineffective, but because Konar's literary rendering amplifies the emotional resonance. If one were to only interact with Kriegel Grossman's concise twenty-five-word account, it might be easy to skim past and detach oneself. But in Konar's description, it is impossible to miss. Through her intense descriptions and imagery of the eyes that had "been torn from bodies that belonged to people who deserved such better sights than what they'd last

⁶⁰ Affinity Konar, "The Stories That Never Leave You," *Jewish Book Council* (blog), September 9, 2016, <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/the-stories-that-never-leave-you#:~:text=Earlier%20this%20week%2C%20Affinity%20Konar,had%20already%20written%20the%20book.>

⁶¹ Vera Kriegel Grossman, "I Defeated Mengele and I Defeated Hitler and I Defeated All the Nazis in the World. I Am Here, Alive," *The Jerusalem Post* (blog), March 24, 2021, [https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/i-defeated-mengele-and-i-defeated-hitler-and-i-defeated-all-the-nazis-in-the-world-i-am-here-alive-662307.](https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/i-defeated-mengele-and-i-defeated-hitler-and-i-defeated-all-the-nazis-in-the-world-i-am-here-alive-662307)

⁶² Konar, *Mischling*, 49.

seen,”⁶³ the reader is forced to confront the horror. Without Kriegel Grossman’s testimony, Konar would not have constructed this vivid scene—and without Konar’s elaboration, many might never have emotionally connected to that particular horror. Ultimately, the accounts are not in conflict but in conversation. In this way, Konar’s work exemplifies Menachem Kaiser’s observation that “literature is the pathos to history’s logos,”⁶⁴ reminding us that while historical testimony provides the essential facts, it can be through literature that one comes to truly feel their weight.

Konar also relied on the stories of Miriam Mozes Zeiger and Eva Mozes Kor, a pair of twins who survived the Mengele twin experiments. In the acknowledgements of *Mischling*, Konar explicitly thanks “Eva Mozes [Kor] and Miriam Mozes Zeiger for the inspiration of their sisterhood and their girlish spirits.”⁶⁵ These survivors clearly influenced Konar’s depiction of twinhood and resilience. More broadly, Konar’s research process reflects not only a deep engagement with survivor memory and Holocaust literature, but also a profound internal struggle. She has spoken about the emotional and mental toll that this work took on her, nothing that she was “uncomfortable speaking about this for some time, because [she] felt that the personal effects of this research had no place in the conversation.”⁶⁶ Her discomfort in sharing her work’s impact on her emotional and mental health reflects the environment that Holocaust literature inhabits, in that there is a struggle between how her work is truly impacting her and the perceived objectivity of the academic space she is entering. Her acknowledgement of the

⁶³ Konar, 50.

⁶⁴ Kaiser, “The Holocaust’s Uneasy Relationship With Literature.”

⁶⁵ Konar, *Mischling*, 342.

⁶⁶ Cheryl M-M, “A Fantastic Q&A With Affinity Konar, Author of *Mischling*,” Wordpress, *Cheryl M-M’s Book Blog* (blog), July 22, 2017, <https://mmcheryl.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/a-fantastic-qa-with-affinity-konar-author-of-mischling/>.

personal impact that her research had on her reflects the complexity of her work and the work of those immersed in trauma work.

The effectiveness of *Mischling* is significantly enhanced by Konar's distinct narrative voice, which blends elements of fable and stark realism to explore the psychological impact of trauma in young people. While the subject matter is undeniably rooted in the brutal historical realities of Auschwitz, Konar often employs a lyrical, almost dream-like prose. This is evident in descriptions that, despite their unsettling content, possess a certain poetic quality. One reviewer notes the following:

Konar's novel takes an unorthodox, though not unprecedented, approach to these horrors: she describes them beautifully, lyrically, in the language of a fable. *Mischling* is not for everyone, not least because it is excruciating to read about such pain. I do not remember the last time I shed so many tears over a work of fiction. And it will surely offend those who still chafe at the idea of fictionalizing the Holocaust. But readers who allow themselves to fall under the spell of Konar's exceptionally sensitive writing may well find the book unforgettable.⁶⁷

Konar's deliberate stylistic choice of writing is not to diminish the horror, but rather to offer a glimpse into how children, particularly those facing such terror, might process and filter these experiences. Konar herself explains her intention, clarifying that "I dearly hoped that poetic language might serve as a filter. I did not want to obscure torment; I wanted to show how someone might obscure torment in order to survive it."⁶⁸

Her use of language, therefore, becomes a narrative strategy that mirrors the psychological defense mechanisms that the young twins might employ to navigate their surreal and terrifying reality. Consider the way that Stasha and Pearl create their own internal world, with shared languages and assigned roles— "Stasha would take the funny, the future, the bad.

⁶⁷ Franklin, "A New Novel Draws on the Dark History of Josef Mengele."

⁶⁸ Konar, "The Stories That Never Leave You."

[Pearl] would take the sad, the past, the good.”⁶⁹ This almost whimsical division of responsibility, while born of necessity in their minds, has the quality of a child-like game, a way to impose order and control on utter chaos. Yet, Konar juxtaposes these moments with stark and unflinching depictions of the camp’s brutality, ensuring that the underlying horror is never truly obscured. The “excruciating pain” that the reviewer above describes is palpable. This blending of the fantastical and the brutal allows Konar to delve into the psychological landscape of children, revealing how they may cling to fragments of imagination and shared fantasy as a means of survival. The narrative voice, therefore, becomes a crucial tool in conveying not just the events themselves, but the internal and emotional repercussions of such profound trauma on young people. This unique approach allows *Mischling* to explore the Holocaust from a new and deeply affecting perspective, prompting readers to consider the ways in which language and storytelling can both reveal and mediate the impact of historical atrocity.

Still, *Mischling* is not without controversy. The act of fictionalizing the Holocaust raises ethical concerns. A reviewer poses the question: “Who has the right to speak for Miriam and Eva, for their grandparents, parents, two older sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and the six million other Jews who died in the Holocaust? Should a writer feel free to exercise her imagination outside the boundaries of her own experience, even though her artistry will transform the survivors’ story?”⁷⁰ This question speaks to a central tension inherent in the genre of historical fiction: how to balance artistic imagination with responsibility to truth and memory.

And this concern is not without basis. Konar did not visit Auschwitz until after the novel was written. The Jewish Book Council notes that Konar’s first visit to Auschwitz occurred only

⁶⁹ Konar, *Mischling*, 21.

⁷⁰ Sally Lee, “Book Review: ‘Mischling,’” *Columbia Magazine*, Winter 2016.

post-publication—something many consider problematic, given the book’s setting.⁷¹ While authors frequently write about places they have never visited or points of view they don’t personally share, because this is about the Holocaust, it may be expected to be dealt with more sensitivity. Regardless, Konar manages to describe Auschwitz in detail, stating that Pearl and Stasha were led

away from the ramp and into the dust, onto a little road that led past the sauna and toward the crematoria, and as [they] marched into this new distance with death rising on either side of [them], [they] saw bodies on a cart...[they] saw the pinkness of a tongue as it flapped and struggled. Words had abandoned it.⁷²

Konar vividly illustrates the harsh reality of the camp, with descriptions and word choice that provides a haunting and all-consuming undertone. The imagery of the death rising on either side of them is ominous and overwhelming, underscoring Konar’s knowledge of the layout of the camps and also her understanding of how suffocating it felt for the inhabitants. The detail of her stating that death was “rising” implies an all-encompassing and relentless grip, emphasizing the contrast of the new chapter of their lives. Additionally, the details of the words abandoning the tongue denotes the indescribable nature of their reality; words fail them, language is no longer capable of articulating what they are experiencing.

While Konar diligently conducted research and drew upon survivor testimonies, the final product is still a conducted narrative, shaped by her artistic choices and perspectives. Furthermore, the very stylistic elements that contribute to the book’s unique impact, such as the fable-like language, could also be seen as a point of contention. While Konar intended this to reflect the children’s coping mechanisms and to filter the unbearable horror, some readers might find it distancing or feel that it softens the brutal reality of the concentration camp. Additionally,

⁷¹ Konar, “The Stories That Never Leave You.”

⁷² Konar, *Mischling*, 12.

focus on the twins' intense emotional bond, while moving, might inadvertently overshadow the broader context of systemic dehumanization and the experiences of other prisoners. While Konar explicitly states that her aim was “not to be an attempt to capture the vastness of the unspeakable, but a small stage for two Jewish girls, imperiled by the ultimate evil, to articulate an extreme love they have for each other,”⁷³ this deliberate narrowing of focus could be perceived as limiting the scope of the narrative. Ultimately, while *Mischling* offers a compelling and emotionally resonant portrayal of a specific aspect of the Holocaust, it is important to recognize that it represents just one interpretation among many, and its fictional nature inevitably entails a degree of artistic license.

Despite the inherent challenges and potential imperfections of fictionalizing the Holocaust, *Mischling* ultimately stands as a powerful and important work, offering a valuable contribution to Holocaust literature. While acknowledging the complexities and debates surrounding such narratives, the novel's strengths in grounding its fiction in research and survivor experiences, coupled with its unique exploration of trauma through the eyes of children, make it a compelling and ultimately beneficial example of Holocaust fiction done well. Konar's commitment to drawing from testimonies, as seen in her incorporation of Vera Kriegel Grossman's account and her acknowledgement of the influence of figures like Eva Mozes Kor and Miriam Mozes Zeiger, lends a crucial layer of authenticity and ethical consideration to her storytelling. By focusing on the often-overlooked experiences of twins in Mengele's zoo, *Mischling* sheds light on a specific and particularly heinous aspect of the Nazi regime, ensuring that these victims and their suffering are not forgotten. As Konar herself reflects,

I think fiction's great gift to us is its ability to collapse distance. The testimonies of survivors and witnesses, the art that came from the camps, all the nonfictional accounts—these will always be the most vital warnings. But I like to think that fiction can serve a

⁷³ Konar, “The Stories That Never Leave You.”

purpose in this attempt, that it can effectively trail behind history as a kind of shadow, because it can provoke empathy on a level that can force one to imagine this suffering differently, and with a nod to the fact that genocide is not limited to a certain time, people, or place.⁷⁴

In this sense, *Mischling* serves as a vital tool for remembrance, ensuring that the lessons of the Holocaust remain relevant and emotionally resonant for contemporary audiences, encouraging vigilance against future atrocities. While not claiming to offer a definitive (and certainly not perfect) representation, Konar's novel, through its careful research, distinctive voice, and focus on the human spirit in extreme conditions, ultimately succeeds in making a significant and meaningful contribution to our understanding of the Holocaust.

What We Can Learn from These Texts: Defining Responsible Holocaust Fiction

Drawing a line between responsible and irresponsible Holocaust fiction requires navigating complex ethical and literary boundaries. The case studies of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *Mischling* illuminate both the dangers and the possibilities of imaginative engagement with genocide. While both novels fictionalize the Holocaust for different audiences and purposes, only one of them, *Mischling*, demonstrates ethical care, emotional gravity, and deep-rooted connection necessary for responsible representation. The contrast between the two speaks directly to broader questions about who can write Holocaust fiction, how they should approach it, and what literary functions it might serve in an increasingly post-witness era.

One of the central tenets of responsible Holocaust fiction is personal memory or personal connection. This does not require the author to be a survivor or a direct descendent themselves, but it does require a kind of moral intimacy with the material—a sense of profound responsibility toward the people whose lives are being represented. As Shahar notes, “The paradox of

⁷⁴ M-M, “A Fantastic Q&A With Affinity Konar, Author of *Mischling*.”

Holocaust storytelling is that as powerful as the familiar images may be—the heaped shoes, the indistinguishable starved bodies—these collective symbols dehumanize...A single person's or family's story rehumanizes and reinvigorates generalized history."⁷⁵ This sense of re-humanization is essential to literature's ability to preserve memory. In *Mischling*, Affinity Konar accomplishes this through her hyper-focused narrative of Pearl and Stasha. The novel draws on survivor testimony and reconstructs a historical horror through the subjective lens of children. By contrast, John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* constructs a parable-like world in which characters are not individualized but reduced to allegorical functions: Bruno for ignorance, Shmuel for innocence, and their deaths as a generalized tragedy. While this may seem symbolically potent, it risks doing what Shahar is warning us against: replacing lived reality with mythic abstraction.

This abstraction is not merely a literary failing—it is also an ethical one. As Boswell argues, “This notion of understanding being ‘obscene’—indecent, improper, almost pornographic—leads us to the heart of the intellectual conflict that continues to be inspired by the literary obsession with evil, suffering and mass death.”⁷⁶ Fictional representations of genocide risk becoming exploitative when they attempt to aestheticize or sentimentalize atrocity. Boyne's novel frequently crosses this line. Bruno's childish misinterpretations, like calling Auschwitz “Out-With” the entire book, are used not to highlight the cognitive dissonance of living near a death camp, but to generate a sense of innocence. This stylized innocence effectively sanitizes the Holocaust for young readers, simplifying historical evil into something morally digestible. By contrast, *Mischling* does not attempt to render trauma palatable. It

⁷⁵ Shahar, “Holocaust and Literature: A Writer's Dilemma.”

⁷⁶ Boswell, “Holocaust Literature and the Taboo,” 22.

embraces what Boswell calls the “existential types of truth”⁷⁷ that literature can offer, refusing the safety of closure. Her story doesn’t lead to catharsis but invites readers to sit with uncertainty. It isn’t a didactic moment wrapped in innocence and sentiment.

In this way, *Mischling* reflects one of literature’s deeper ethical functions. Boswell identifies this when he states that “if breaking taboos around Holocaust representation is part of a process of ‘working through’ cultural memories of the Holocaust – a process that requires us to consider who we are, what our place in the world is, and also how we are implicated in the violence that our society inflicts on others – then, following Bernstein, this process must always be wary of its own endpoint.”⁷⁸ Fiction, when done responsibly, does not answer questions so much as complicate them; fiction encourages readers to empathize, to inhabit difficult emotional spaces, to reckon with trauma. It resists the impulse to treat the Holocaust as a distant historical event, and instead insists that we confront its ongoing emotional and ethical consequences and its relevance today.

Boyne’s novel implicitly encourages such closure. Its final scene, in which Bruno and Shmuel die together in the gas chamber, is framed as a tragic accident—one that invites mourning primarily for Bruno. The reader is encouraged to mourn only Bruno, while Shmuel fades into the background. This narrative imbalance not only distorts historical reality, but also reflects the issue of the ‘final resting place’ that Boswell warns us against—he believes that

By continuing to raise such questions and probing these more ‘existential’ types of truth in light of the Holocaust, transgressive works of fiction can at least help to ensure that we do not arrive at the kind of dangerous ‘final resting place’ where the objective truths of mass killing no longer matter.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Boswell, 25.

⁷⁸ Boswell, 25.

⁷⁹ Boswell, 25.

Part of what makes *Mischling* successful is its acknowledgement of both emotional truth and historical specificity. Konar herself is not a survivor, but she enters the space of Holocaust memory with great care, grounding her fiction in testimony, demonstrating a clear knowledge of history. She uses her literary form to enhance, not obscure, the trauma she describes. Her prose, which is lyrical, jarring, and fragmented, mirrors the psychic disintegration of her characters. This is consistent with Horowitz's assertion that "Holocaust poetry meditates on the nature of memory and testimony, and its special use of language gives expression to what falls outside the boundaries of ordinary speech."⁸⁰ Konar's fiction, like poetry, acknowledges that certain horrors resist straightforward representation.

Moreover, *Mischling* fits within a growing body of second-generation Holocaust literature. Horowitz notes that this work often grapples with "inherited or transmitted memory and secondary trauma."⁸¹ The novel's portrayal of memory, especially in the latter half when the girls are separated, highlights how trauma reshapes identity and recollection. Unlike *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, which treats history as a static backdrop, *Mischling* reveals history as an open wound: a source of continued grief, confusion, and emotional dislocation. Konar's speculative and stylistic flourishes are not deviations from truth, but methods of conveying how survivors and their descendants feel the truth—through loss, longing, and lingering pain.

This is not to suggest that only survivors or historians can write about the Holocaust. Fiction, by nature, relies on imaginative projection. But it must be well researched and held to a high standard. Brownian points out that "one of the hallmarks of hist-fic is putting fictional characters in real-life events and showing how they live through it. There's no rule that hist-fic should only be about shiny, happy moments in history or that there are certain events that can

⁸⁰ Horowitz, "Literature," 437.

⁸¹ Horowitz, 440.

only be in the realm of nonfiction.”⁸² This argument is important; it resists gatekeeping and insists of literature’s freedom to explore dark and painful subjects. She further makes a statement that:

If you’re so genuinely triggered or traumatized by books and films about the Shoah, 9/11, the Second Intifada, or other very tragic events you lived through, have generational trauma from, or just find generally upsetting, you can choose not to read or watch them. No one is forcing you to do that. But you don’t get to dictate what other people choose to write about.⁸³

While her point about creative freedom is valid, ethical freedom in fiction must be paired with responsibility. Authors must be conscious of the symbolic weight of the Holocaust and aware of how their narrative choices shape readers’ historical understanding. Brownian’s belief that “you don’t get to dictate what other people choose to write about” is valid, but it doesn’t mean that we should suspend critical judgement about it is written.

Mischling rises to this challenge. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, while perhaps well-intentioned, does not. The difference between them is not simply one of aesthetic preference or audience. It is a question of historical justice. Fictional representations shape cultural memory. Responsible Holocaust fiction is defined by its depth of engagement, respect for historical reality, willingness to rehumanize the dehumanized, and its refusal to simplify or sentimentalize atrocity. *Mischling* models these traits through its rootedness in research, its lyrical evocation of trauma, and its insistence on emotional and moral complexity. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* fails to meet these ethical and literary standards.

The trouble also lies in which story is more revered, known, and upheld in the cultural zeitgeist. The fact that *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* has become a staple of school curricula and pop culture discourse is deeply troubling, not only because of its factual inaccuracies, but

⁸² Brownian, “Why Holocaust Historical Fiction Matters (And Is Necessary).”

⁸³ Brownian.

because of how it subtly recenters non-Jewish suffering and flattens genocide into a cautionary tale about friendship. That *Mischling* is lesser known speaks to a discomfort with its rawness, its refusal to provide closure, and its challenge to narrative expectations.

The Necessity of Holocaust Fiction in Today's Changing World

In the context of today's rising antisemitism, political polarization, and the erosion of public trust in historical fact, Holocaust fiction takes on a new kind of necessity. It is no longer about remembrance; it is about resistance. As survivor testimony becomes less directly accessible with each passing year, fiction will increasingly bear the burden of memory. And that burden is growing heavier in a world where Holocaust denial is not disappearing, but resurging.

The United States, in particular, is experiencing a worrying rise in antisemitic rhetoric and violence. According to the Anti-Defamation League, antisemitic incidents in the U.S. have reached record highs in 2023 and 2024, including an alarming normalization of Holocaust distortion on social media and in political discourse.⁸⁴ Education systems have begun to limit what can be taught in schools, creating fertile ground for denialism and historical revisionism. In this context, Holocaust fiction becomes more than an artistic endeavor, it becomes a vital tool for cultural and moral literacy.

This does not mean that all fiction is equally suited for this task. As previously discussed, ethical Holocaust fiction must be grounded in historical specificity, emotional gravity, and a profound sense of moral responsibility. But its fictional nature also offers unique strengths. As Langer explains in his essay, "Fictional Facts and Factual Fictions,"

I call this essay fictional facts and factual fictions in order to suggest a symbiotic kinship between actual and imaginative truth in the literature of the Holocaust. One of the many

⁸⁴ ADL, "Anti-Defamation League," n.d., <https://www.adl.org/>.

tasks of Holocaust criticism is to clarify the complex bond, in the minds of both author and audience, linking the oppressions of history to the impressions of art.⁸⁵

Fiction can make space for empathy and emotional engagement in ways that historical texts cannot. It can serve as an emotional memory bridge, helping new generations connect with a past that they did not witness.

Still, this fiction must tread carefully. Langer cautions that “when the Holocaust is the theme, history imposes limitations on the supposed flexibility of artistic license...instead of Holocaust fictions liberating the facts and expanding the range of their implications, Holocaust facts enclose the fictions.”⁸⁶ In an age where even facts are politicized and mistrusted, this reversal is more than theoretical. Fiction must not distort genocide into metaphor or aestheticize it into palatability for entertainment. The facts—the numbers, the logistics, the human toll—must act as constraints. That constraint is not a limitation of imagination, but a foundation for legitimacy.

Over time, this tension between fact and fiction may become increasingly blurred. As Langer suggests, “it will no longer matter so much whether fictional facts, tied to the actual deeds of history, have become factual fictions, monuments to artistic vision that require no defense or justification, but stand or fall on the strength of their aesthetic mastery of material.”⁸⁷ This vision is both hopeful and dangerous. On one hand, it suggests a future where powerful Holocaust fiction might stand independently as both art and memory, without the support of living testimony. On the other, it warns of a world where the line between Holocaust truth and narrative could become so indistinct from one another that fiction could overwrite fact. This is especially concerning as we consider the proliferation of Holocaust denial and conspiracy

⁸⁵ Langer, “Fictional Facts and Factual Fictions: History in Holocaust Literature,” 75.

⁸⁶ Langer, 75–76.

⁸⁷ Langer, 76.

theories online. Fiction, when handled irresponsibly, can unintentionally provide material for people who deny the genocide. As Carrie Anne Brownian candidly notes, “it’s also important to combat Holocaust denial. If it’s this bad while we still have living survivors, just imagine how much more insidious it might be when the last first-person witness is gone.”⁸⁸ This is not simply a forecast; this is a warning. Fiction may one day be the primary source through which many readers encounter the Holocaust. This gives writers enormous power and a burden through which they must be aware and responsible.

This is where literature’s dual role becomes most evident: it must reflect history, but also protect it. *Mischling* exemplifies this duality. It grounds its poetic style and imaginative scope in survivor testimony and historical research. It tells a story that feels more like memory, even though Pearl and Stasha never existed. This kind of fiction does not blur truth, more so embodying it. And that embodiment will become more necessary as direct memory fades.

Holocaust fiction is therefore not simply permissible—it is essential. It offers a form of remembrance that does not rely on photographs, archives, or eyewitnesses, but on the enduring emotional and ethical force of storytelling. In a world increasingly hostile to historical truth and increasingly vulnerable to distortion, ethical Holocaust fiction can help keep memory alive, not by simplifying, but by making it more viscerally human.

Conclusion

Holocaust fiction is a literary form uniquely situated at the crossroads of history, memory, and imagination. Throughout this paper, I have argued that such fiction is not only permissible, but in many cases necessary, particularly as we transition into a post-witness era where direct testimony becomes increasingly scarce. The central challenge, however, is not

⁸⁸ Brownian, “Why Holocaust Historical Fiction Matters (And Is Necessary).”

simply whether fiction about the Holocaust should be written, but how it must be written. Fictionalizing atrocity demands a rare ethical precision and a commitment not only to historical specificity, but to emotional truth, moral gravity, and narrative restraint. As demonstrated throughout the contrast of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *Mischling*, the line between responsible and irresponsible Holocaust fiction is not subjective, it is fundamentally ethical. And in a world increasingly vulnerable to distortion, denial, and narrative manipulation, the stakes of that ethical boundary are higher than ever.

What separates *Mischling* from *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is not simply a matter of age demographic, literary skill, or style, but the seriousness with which each text and author engages with the moral implications of writing about genocide. *Mischling* offers a deeply considered, emotionally complex, and historically grounded portrayal of such trauma. It does not attempt to simplify the Holocaust for ease of understanding; rather, it mirrors the disorientation of its victims, embracing ambiguity and fragmentation to tell a more human, honest truth. In doing so, it models what ethical Holocaust fiction can look like. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, in contrast, reduces the Holocaust to allegory and fable, misrepresents key historical realities, and minimizes Jewish suffering. Its popularity, particularly among youth and schools, is not just concerning. It is symptomatic of a broader cultural desire to process atrocity without confronting the consequences.

This desire reflects a larger trend in American society. It is the impulse to sanitize or depoliticize historical violence in favor of emotionally satisfying narratives. But true remembrance is not comfortable. It demands that we confront atrocity in all its complexity. We must be uncomfortable, there is no way to avoid it. In today's cultural climate, where there is increasing anxiety about causing offense or discomfort, Holocaust fiction becomes a test not only

for literary ethics, but for cultural memory. What we choose to remember, and how we choose to present that memory, reveals the values and anxieties of our world today.

As antisemitism rises and Holocaust distortion becomes more normalized, literature must counter the erosion of historical facts with emotional weight, narrative depth, and ethical consideration. Fiction, when responsibly written, can do what statistics cannot: it can humanize the dehumanized, refuse abstraction, and insist on individual experience. But the responsibility for ethical remembrance does not rest entirely on authors or scholars alone; it extends to readers, educators, and consumers. In a literary landscape full of stories claiming to be “based on a true story,” passive consumption is insufficient. We must ask: Does this narrative respect historical realities, or does it distort them for emotional payoff? Does it challenge us to think critically and empathetically, or does it merely comfort? Does it deepen understanding, or flatten it for entertainment? The preservation of Holocaust memory requires collective moral discernment, a shared commitment to amplifying voices and stories that approach this history with care and ethical integrity.

This paper has sought to sketch what an ethical standard for Holocaust fiction might look like. As we move forward into an era where the boundaries between truth and narrative become increasingly blurred, it is more urgent than ever to advocate for fiction that remembers—not just with fact, but with feeling; not just with knowledge, but with care. *Mischling* demonstrates that such fiction is possible. It reminds us that literature can mourn, resist, and illuminate all at once. In a world that continues to struggle with the legacies of atrocity, this kind of storytelling is not only important, it is indispensable.

The future of Holocaust memory will depend on our collective ability to tell stories that do not betray the truths they aim to preserve. There is no way to write about the Holocaust

without risk. Every literary attempt risks failure, misrepresentation, and harm. But to then abstain entirely is its own risk: the risk of forgetting. Holocaust fiction, then, must be held to a high standard not to stifle it, but to safeguard it. If literature is to carry the burden of memory in the absence of survivors, which it must, then it must do so with humility, rigor, and research.

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