Popular Appeal

Popular Appeal:
Books and Films in Contemporary Youth Culture

By

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and Lesley Hawkes

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A cursory look at any best-seller list (the *New York Times*, for example, or the *Australian*), reveals that cultural texts aimed at young people between the ages of 12 and 18 years presently account for many of today's top books in terms of critical and commercial recognition. This phenomenon has occurred principally over the past ten years and more, beginning with the success of the Harry Potter novels (the first was published in 1997, and the final three, at least, are clearly positioned for a youth market), together with Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000), and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). It continues today with the extraordinary international popularity of the Stephenie Meyer *Twilight* franchise (2005–2008); Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2003); John Green's oeuvre including *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *The Fault in Our Stars* (2010); and, with David Levithan, *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (2010); as well as Neil Gaiman's novels and graphic novels (these include *Coraline*, (2002), and *The Graveyard Book*, (2008)) and more recently Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010). Moreover, most of these texts have been made into very popular films, signposting the fact that Hollywood studios now cater primarily and very successfully to a youth audience.

Scholars, authors and critics alike are agreed that Young Adult (YA) literature has become a global phenomenon, a fact accentuated by the fact that the *New York Times* was forced to inaugurate a children's best-seller list, as distinct from the adult one, because the previous list was being increasingly dominated by Young Adult texts (Cart 2010, 96). This robust market has significant buying power (Cart 2010, 91), including not only those adults (including of course parents, teachers and school librarians) who have traditionally bought materials for the under-18s, but the young people themselves. Curiously, though, this easily identifiable publishing trend has not been translated into book-length studies examining this phenomenon. This collection of essays pointedly addresses a current void

in the field. Most of the available material relating to youth studies is sociological in nature: for example, a number of studies examine the emergence of particular youth sub-cultures and youth styles of music or fashion (see Ross Haenfler's *Goths, Gamers, and Grrrls: Deviance and Youth Subcultures* 2009)). Other texts look at specific instances of youth culture – for example Thomas Doherty's *Teenagers and Teen Pics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (1988), or Valerie Wee's *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age* (2010). To date the definitive text in the area of youth studies remains Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce's edited collection of essays, *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images and Identities*, which was published by Praeger in 2003. *Youth Cultures* has been highly influential in its interrogations of the spaces that youth occupy and are represented in texts produced for them, about them, and occasionally by them. Writers in this collection concentrated upon a diverse range of cultural landscapes which included not only popular literature and film, but computer games, pop music and videos, fashion, journalism and arts education policy.

It is our aim in *Popular Appeal* to produce an update of some of the subject matter of *Youth Cultures* (this is especially pertinent as one of the three authors of this book was co-editor of the earlier text). This particular study focuses upon the specific areas of youth literature and film rather than the broader panoply of youth cultures. Since 2003 significant changes have occurred–such as the widespread popularity of graphic, vampire and more recently dystopian novels to cite just some obvious examples−so a study devoted to these specific and burgeoning areas of literature and film is certainly timely. There is a strong and evident need for a follow-up book that applies a new lens to contemporary concerns. Moreover, at the present moment, texts which specialise in Young Adult literature are all too often either based in the classroom (for example Alsup 2010; Wolf et al. 2011) or are approached from a historical perspective and are geared to librarian studies (Cart 2010; Campbell 2010; Jones 1992; Aronson 2001). Books on specific genres such as fantasy, Holocaust and dystopian fiction (which have occupied a key market space since the impact of the September 11 attacks in New York, the increased threat of global warming, and the global financial crises), have also appeared in some numbers in recent years. A significant number of book-length critical engagements with dystopian writing for children and young adults have marked the academic field since that time. These include Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry's *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults* (2003); Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum's *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature* (2008) and

more recently Carrie Hintz, Balakia Basu and Katherine Broad's *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults* (2013) which specifically focuses on the darker themes of YA fiction, suggesting that writers and young readers are genuinely concerned about the future of their planet and ways to manage it for the greater good. Other critical texts engage with specific issues or authors. Some, like William Gray's *Death and Fantasy* (2008) address a range of Young Adult fantasy texts, others such as the very recently published book by Alice Curry, entitled *Environmental Crisis in YA Fiction* (2013), deal with the pressing themes of ecological degradation and the relationship between young people and the environment as represented in a wide range of texts for young readers. There is a small pantheon of texts devoted to Harry Potter scholarship (see Nel, 2001; Hallett, 2005 as representative examples), and an even bigger and ballooning area dealing with Philip Pullman's more controversial work (for example, Lenz 2005; Colbert 2006; Tucker, 2007; and Vere et al. 2008). Meanwhile, Rachel Falconer has written extensively about the so-called "cross-over phenomenon" (2009; 2010), while Chris Richards' *Forever Young* (2008) is a loose collection of essays based on teaching Young Adult literature to Education students. The plethora of academic articles by established and emerging scholars in the field of YA fiction also attests to its legitimacy as a cultural site that provides important challenges to the ideologies and practices of many questionable hegemonic social and political structures.

Our proposed critical study contributes to the burgeoning field of YA fiction studies by examining in chapter-by-chapter detail a select range of contemporary popular books and films targeting young audiences. We are defining the Young Adult audience in a broad, even porous, fashion here, as befits the fact that it is a term generally used in the industry (publishers, booksellers and school librarians) as a convenient, if often somewhat arbitrary way to classify texts. Once thought of as encompassing the ages of 12–18 (at a point when society formally relinquishes its duty of care), it is now mostly considered as also including those young people, eternal adolescents, "kiddults," or "adultescents" forced by economic forces to remain in the parental fold and studying until the age of 30, whose coming-of-age has become distinctly more attenuated, as they delay commitments to professions and partners alike (Cart 2010, 119-121). While many of the texts analysed in this book are marketed for, and designed to attract, a young adult audience of somewhere between 12 and 18, it is obvious that they are equally attractive to an older cohort. What is emerging as perhaps more significant is that young adults are being addressed in recent YA texts in ways that increasingly call on them to

respond seriously to many of the challenging issues of our times. In this focus there is an underpinning acknowledgment that "youth" are discerning consumers of media, actively engaged with the products of their culture.

Now indeed is an opportune moment to consider the shifts in youth and popular culture that are signalled by the texts that are being read and viewed by young people in our target demographic. In a world seemingly compromised by climate change, political and religious upheavals and economic irresponsibility, we ask: What do young people like and why? We are deeply intrigued by the fact that at a time of fundamental social change, young people in all parts of the world are devouring fictional texts that focus on the edges of identity, the points of transition and rupture, and the assumption of new and hybrid identities. Accordingly, this book draws on a range of texts, using English, American, Australian and other international examples to address these issues, examining the ways in which key popular genres in the contemporary market for young people are being re-defined and re-positioned in the light of urgent questions about the environment, identity, one's place in the world, and the fragile nature of the world itself. As Rachel Falconer has argued, "Young Adult fiction, having once been dismissed as an ephemeral and transient genre, has, by its very emphasis on transience, become a kind of cultural lightning rod, attracting to its conductive space questions and debates about what it means to be human in the twenty first century" (Falconer 2010, 88).

The key questions we are asking are:

- What are the shifts and changes in youth culture that are identified by the market and by what young people read and view?
- How do these texts negotiate the addressing of significant questions relating to the world today (for example, concerns about the natural environment, the political issues related to the first world and the developing world, the role of religion in the affairs of the state, the ongoing tensions around gender/racial/ethnic inequalities?)
- Why are these texts so popular with young people?
- What are the most popular genres in contemporary best-sellers and films?
- Do these texts have a global appeal, and if so, why?

These are the over-arching themes and ideas throughout this study, presented as a collection of inter-related essays exploring a rich variety of forms and styles from graphic novels to urban realism, from fantasy to dystopian writing, from epic narratives to television musicals.

In "Writing The Barbaric Recent Past: Holocaust Fiction for Young Adults," Sharyn Pearce examines the current popularity of Young Adult Holocaust novels, in particular looking at Marcus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006). While it was long thought by writers and scholars that the Holocaust was not an appropriate subject matter for young audiences, from *The Diary of Anne Frank* onwards it has in fact always been part of their reading matter. Never, however, has there been so much interest in the Holocaust, as the recent best-selling publications by Zusak and Boyne (both of which have been made into films) demonstrate. This chapter examines why this is the case, and explores the delicate and fraught politics of crafting stories for young people about the unspeakable events of history, including who (if anyone) has the right to "speak for" the victims, and whether some genres (for example, fairy stories, fabulism or magic realism) work best for a youthful audience, given the frequently horrific and graphic nature of the subject matter involved.

Dystopian and utopian writing has always been a space in which our worst fears and best hopes are concentrated and sometimes realised. Dystopian YA texts in particular have been increasing in number and popularity in recent times, due in part to the lingering legacy of 9/11 and in large measure to the various political, economic and cultural global disturbances and disasters that mark our present time. This engagement with the dark side has clearly generated significant appeal to a youthful audience not only weaned on 3D versions of fictional apocalyptic events and violent catastrophes, but also living in a world in which the dystopian is a customary and visible accompaniment to the everyday business of life. In an article focusing on the current spate of young adult dystopian texts tellingly entitled "Apocalypse Now", Karen Springen notes those narratives exploring "end-of the world scenarios are bigger than ever" amongst young adolescent/adult readers (Springen 2010, 21). She comments that young people especially express concern about their futures (including the effects of global warming, continuing wars and famines, terrorism, dwindling resources, the misuses of technology to name a few), seeing these as determined by an uncaring and often ruthless adult world. There is uncertainty about the future, and often dystopian narratives—as "scary" and unsettling as they are—give them some hope for a better

world even if this is contained within the pages of a book. Often the hope resides in the main character as he or she is confronted by, and involved in, dire situations that have far-reaching and world-affecting influences. Educators have been quick to mine the YA dystopian text for its important themes about how we live now and might live in the future. Vivienne Muller's chapter, "The Work of Dystopia: Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games Trilogy", considers the ambitious, instructive and serious nature of YA dystopian fiction, in its engagement with issues that affect young and old alike, its challenges to hegemonic structures of power and domination, and the forms these assume. Of specific focus in the chapter is Suzanne Collins's very successful "the Hunger Games" series which addresses these important issues in ways that have had wide appeal to young adult readers.

Lesley Hawkes's chapter "Staking and Restaking the Vampire: Generational Ownership of the Vampire Story" examines how the vampire is not only a contemporary cultural icon but also a site of contestation and struggle over cultural knowledge. Since Nina Auerbach's 1995 *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, there has been much research on how each generation appears to have its own vampire, but this chapter examines how certain changes are more accepted than others. The vampire story becomes the space where young people can reveal their ownership over cultural knowledge and the rules that make up this knowledge. What emerges from this examination is the manner in which some shifts in the vampire genre are far more accepted and even celebrated than others. But it is in the discussion of what groups in society are allowed to cause and direct these shifts where new areas within vampire fiction are discussed. Why, for instance, is it accepted by readers that vampires can morph into day-walking sword-carrying martial arts specialists (as happens in *Blade*), yet when a vampire begins to dazzle in the sunlight there are outcries of disbelief? The struggle for certain changes in the genre is as much to do with who is allowed to have cultural knowledge and agency and who is not. The shifts that occurred in *Twilight* caused unease because many perceived that cultural knowledge was in the hands of young girls and women. Associated with this concern was the fear that the vampire story was blending with other not-so-suitable genres. The genre that is mostly discussed as bringing the vampire story down in cultural value is romance, and again, this may have its roots in gender issues. Hawkes gives detailed background information on the evolution of the vampire story beginning with John William Polidori's 1819 *The Vampyre* and James Malcolm Rymer's sprawling 1847 *Varney the Vampire*. She also examines Bram

Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* but her analysis concentrates on contemporary vampire texts: *Blade, Blade 11, Blade Trinity,* (1998–2004); *Buffy* (1996–2003); *Twilight* (2005–2008); *Peeps* (2005); and *True Blood* (2008-). These texts represent a number of different engagements between the vampire tropes, readers, and fans, and the tensions that emerge between them. Who actually is "allowed" to own and change the vampire story and the popular cultural knowledge that surrounds it?

In "Graphically Political: Exploring Social Issues in the Graphic Novel", Vivienne Muller examines the capacity of the graphic narrative to deliver unpalatable truths about society and culture. The chapter argues that many graphic novels present themselves as very consciously directed interventions into traumatic times and/or social spaces in which issues of power, cultural differences and diversity are central drivers of the narrative and thematic action. Will Eisner's highly regarded *A Contract with God and Other Stories* (1978) and Art Spiegelman's popular Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus*: *A Survivor's Tale* (1986) are iconic forerunners of the socio-political graphic novel, dealing as they do with social problems and dark truths in a compelling form. For an increasingly visually literate youth culture, graphic texts are a popular and appealing medium of thematic and aesthetic exchange. Drawing on the interplay of verbal and visual registers, graphic narratives encourage stories to be read in new ways, often generating new perspectives and modes of engagement from their readers. Their multi-literate nature is highly valued by educators wishing to engage their students in meaningful dialogue with serious social and political issues within the classroom. Through its analysis of a variety of graphic texts—Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis 1 & 2* (2004), Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) and the Stanford student collective project *Shake Girl* (2008)—the chapter explores Hillary Chute's contention that the graphic novel can "perform the enabling political and aesthetic work of bearing witness powerfully because of its rich narrative texture; its flexible page architecture; its sometimes consonant, sometimes dissonant visual and verbal narrative; and its structural threading of absence and presence" (Chute 2008, 93-94).

In the mainstream media, much is made about the lack of engagement between the youth of today with political issues. This, of course, is an exaggeration. However, one area where it is accepted that youth do have a major interest in and engagement with issues is the environment. Recently, there has been a growth in the number of publications that investigate the

connection between the environment and young people. Alice Curry's *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (2013) is an excellent example of one such work. Curry uses an Ecofeminist framework to explore young adult fiction and its potential for environmental engagement. In the chapter "The Popular Appeal of Environmental Epics: *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Avatar*", Lesley Hawkes explores how these works of epic fantasy open spaces for the youth of today to activate and make meaning of the world they find themselves in and world they want to be in. The fantasy epic as a genre form appears to resonate with audiences and readers and this chapter examines why and how this occurs. Hawkes discovers that one of the reasons why fantasy allows dialogue on environmental issues to occur is because it is one of the few genres that does not demonise technology. We live in a technological world and to separate or negate technology is to also separate and negate its users. Epic fantasies have the potential to push through boundaries of separation and to give people a sense of agency and possibilities for the future.

Finally, in "Television, Entertainment and Education: Issues of Sexuality in *Glee*," Sharyn Pearce looks at Fox Television's highly-rating U.S. television series, *Glee*, based on a fictional Glee club in a high school in Ohio. She argues that the program has been successful not only because of its fabulous musical numbers and engrossing teen romance plots, but also because it acts as a *de facto* source for sexual advice for young people, both straight and gay. *Glee* offers an up-to-the-minute analysis of present-day mores and in doing so it is uniquely positioned in mainstream television because of its part in providing lessons in sex and romance to young audiences who are actively seeking out information that is all too often unavailable in other educational spaces (such as the high school classroom, for example).

The subjects and themes discussed in these chapters reveal the quite remarkable diversity of issues that arise in youth fiction and the variety of fictional forms in which they are explored. Once seen as not as important as adult fiction, this book clearly demonstrates that youth fiction and the popular appeal of this fiction is complex, durable and far-reaching in its scope.

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CHAPTER TWO

WRITING THE BARBARIC RECENT PAST: HOLOCAUST FICTION FOR YOUNG ADULTS

SHARYN PEARCE AND ANTONIA STRAKOSCH

Speaking very generally, writing about the Holocaust has spawned a great deal of rigorous ethical debate, with much vehement positioning about the best way to approach this event. In the years immediately following World War Two and its horrific revelations of an overt attempt to completely annihilate a race of people, many scholars were convinced that there should be no literary representations of the Holocaust at all. A reverential moral silence was demanded by the intellectual gatekeepers of the day, who argued that the Holocaust simply defied artistic representation, a stance perhaps most famously exemplified by Theodore Adorno's statement: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (quoted in Kokkola 2003, 18). In acknowledgment of the unspeakable inadequacy of language to describe, confront and contain the barbarity of the Holocaust, this position replicated the position of victims at a loss for words to explain their ordeals, that so-called "thwarting of language" (Gubar 2004, 450) which is so markedly evident in the oral histories of Holocaust survivors. These stories show a clear demarcation of the incongruities between the language employed by them to describe their unprecedented ordeal and the ordinary meanings of the same words, thereby demonstrating the linguistic alienation and stigmatised status of Jewish persons in Nazi Germany, of their inability to speak or write "in a tongue that has denied the writer a personhood" (Gubar 2004, 449). Moreover, in endorsing the notion that the Holocaust lay beyond the pale of artistic representation, scholars saw language as so abused by the Nazis for anti-Semitic propaganda (as, for example, the relabelling to avoid using words like "murder" or "genocide," instead using euphemisms like the "Final Solution," "cleansing" and "removal") that it had either lost its power to communicate effectively (Kokkola 2003, 17) or, alternatively, it was feared that the events could become normalised via everyday language

(Kokkola 2003, 19). And so George Steiner could argue in *Language and Silence* that the Nazis used language so comprehensively that it was no longer a reliable, trustworthy tool for communication, and silence could be the only legitimate response: "How can a Jew speak of the Shoah in the language of his murderers? How can he speak of it in any other language? How can he speak of it at all?" (quoted in Baron 2001, 159. Steiner later recanted somewhat from this view, arguing instead that the Holocaust should be written about in German, for centuries the main language of anti-Semitism). According to Susan Gubar language itself had become an obscenity, "an instrument and casualty of the disaster" (Gubar 2004, 443), while Adorno (quoted in Kokkola 2003) identified the act of speaking as yet another form of abuse, because aesthetic appreciation of a text about such a horrific event could elicit voyeuristic pleasure which would add further to the victims' suffering, an emotional reaction which Irving Howe referred to elsewhere as "voyeuristic sadomasochism" (Howe 1991, 429). In Lawrence Langer's words, many felt speech to be impossible: "Language alone cannot give meaning to Auschwitz ... the depth and uncontained scope of Nazi ruthlessness poisoned both Jewish and Christian precedents and left millions of victims without potent metaphors to imagine, not to say justify, their fate" (Langer 1975, 27). From the mid-century onwards, then, language seemed utterly inadequate to the task of discussing the Holocaust: it was deemed "better to remain silent than to attempt to speak the unspeakable" (Kokkola 2003, 19). As Adrienne Kertzer argued "Auschwitz is what I cannot relate" (Kertzer 1999, 238).

These views have, however, been revised as the Holocaust has become no longer a relatively recent memory, and the eyewitnesses, victims, perpetrators and bystanders have all but died out. Indeed, for the past twenty years or more, theorists have challenged these postwar responses and now the dominant view is that the dangers of misrepresenting the Holocaust are outweighed by those of failing to represent it at all, thereby risking a repetition of similar events (Lang 1999, Epstein 1988, Young 1988). This view became more pronounced following the foundation of the state of Israel but in particular after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when writers renewed their fears that Jews were destined to be an embattled people always struggling to survive against an omnipresent anti-Semitism that could easily be ignited into another Holocaust by cultural, diplomatic, economic or political crises (Baron 2001, 166). James Young argued that "a society's knowledge of the past is crucially informed by how that history was recorded" (Young 1998, 1), and moreover "as long as we name the events of this period, remember them, or figure them in any form, we also know them—however poorly, inappropriately, or dangerously" (Young

1998, 98). More recently Kenneth Kidd reflected this changed perspective when he announced that Adorno's declaration could and should be received more as a "call to narrative arms rather than a moratorium" (Kidd 2008, 162); for him Adorno was certainly not speaking literally, but using poetic licence, and what he was really saying was that poetry *must* be written after Auschwitz. This sea-change, beginning in the 1970s and generating massive momentum by the end of the century, meant that there was now a certain urgency about generating stories which would otherwise disappear when the remaining survivors were gone, and when the Holocaust could be forgotten or denied altogether (Baron 2001, 163). Indeed, the subsequent and burgeoning popularising of the Holocaust through products of popular culture such as Steven Spielberg's commercial melodrama *Schindler's Ark* even led to new accusations of an exploitative and mawkish "Holocaust Industry," given that money and kudos came from portraying people who had died horribly in the Holocaust (Baron 2001, 125), while scholars like Norman Finkelstein (2000) went further in arguing that images of the Holocaust were manufactured to reap moral and economic benefits for members of the Jewish elite, particularly to heighten public sympathy for Israel and justify American interests there. Furthermore, Peter Novick suggested that in the United States it had become a sort of a "civic religion" for American Jews who had lost touch with their own ethnic and religious identity to experience the Holocaust vicariously, using it "explicitly for the purpose of self-congratulation" (Novick 1999, 13).

Clearly Holocaust fiction has been and still remains a fraught and hotly contested space for debate. It follows then that as increasing numbers of writers and critics came to embrace the stance that speech should be privileged over silence, grappling with the most appropriate mode of representation has become especially significant (Kokkola 2003, 16), and literary artists have found themselves confronted with a "compounding complexity about their own medium" (Gubar 2004, 443). Many writers felt a moral obligation to approach the Holocaust as a sanctified piece of history; a solemn, even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its catastrophic enormity or dishonour its dead (Kokkola 2003, 10). Some felt that only those people who were directly affected had the right to respond (Kokkola 2004, 6), and that the genre of witnessing and being an insider to this nadir of evil was the most important element of Holocaust fiction, especially given the fact that "bearing witness" might act as therapy for those involved (Kokkola 2003, 85). For example, Claude Lanzmann declared that "a certain absolute degree of horror is intransmissible: to pretend it can be done is to make

oneself guilty of the most serious sort of transgression" (quoted in Hansen 2000, 133); and in his documentary, *Shoah*, he limited himself to "talking heads" interviews, the only type of Holocaust reportage that he believed was not falsified at its moment of transmission. Moreover, according to Berel Lang, there should be no place for figurative or imaginative discourse: given the moral enormity of the subject matter, the Holocaust would be most ethically and appropriately addressed in non-fiction, as historical facts were the best way to convey the essence or "truth" of the events, and to fictionalise history was virtually blasphemous (Lang 2003, 81-144). Shoshana Felman agreed: "For the purpose of transmission of the Holocaust, literature and art do not suffice" (Felman 2002, 165). Still others argued otherwise, however; for instance some have claimed poetry to be the best genre for the Holocaust, because techniques such as "broken emissions, stuttering repetitions, eccentric personifications, untranslatable foreignisms, recycled quotations and inane rhythms" best reflect the Jewish experiences of the time (Gubar 2004, 457). And so, directly contradicting Adorno's dictum, Edmund Jabes opted for a fractured kind of poetry: "after Auschwitz we must write poetry, but with wounded words" (quoted in Gubar 2004, 456), while Jerome Rothenberg asserted "after Auschwitz/ there is only poetry no hope/ no other language left to heal" (quoted in Gubar 2004, 461). Meanwhile Amir Eshel claimed that poetic literature had a transformative, liberatory effect, arguing that the "rhetoric of poetic presence" managed to release "the traumatic past from the bounds of historical reference and thus from the realm of the past" (Eshel 2000, 143). Yet other critics decided that realistic fiction was the best mode for conveying the death camps, with Aharon Appelfeld, for example, arguing for the importance of recreating the human figure lying behind the number of the dead, and insisting that the victims' status and dignity could be returned via literary approaches which held the reader's attention without titillating the audience (Kokkola 2003, 23). Meanwhile Lawrence Langer advocated a simple and understated narrative tone that did not detract from the historical material (Langer 1975, 83), and later argued that creative language was the best way to convey the atrocities of the past, declaring that while it is important to know the facts of the Holocaust in order to understand their causes and consequences, people's inability to comprehend or indeed *imagine* the atrocities points to "the *in*sufficiency of 'mere' historical narrative in Holocaust discourse" (Langer 2006, 131-132). Given the "semantic panic" (Gubar 2004, 445) inflicted by the Holocaust, many scholars felt that there was a valid argument for new forms of creative language, adopting Young's statement that "to leave Auschwitz outside of metaphor would be to leave it outside

of language altogether" (Young 1988, 91). Clearly the two main modes of Holocaust fiction which have emerged very strongly over the past twenty years or so are realistic historical fiction, which incorporates the events into the continuum of history and human experience, and, more recently still, versions of the "transhistoric" mode, "a mythical reality where madness reigns and all historical loci are relinquished" (Hannah Yoaz, quoted in Howe 1991, 189). The field of imaginative or transhistorical Holocaust fiction in particular has flourished over the past decade, as scholars, writers and critics alike have come to see the validity and usefulness of creative Holocaust fiction. While representing the Holocaust remains and will most likely always be a fractious and disputed territory, this chapter later discusses two well-known and critically acclaimed texts for young people which use varying transhistoric genre approaches: Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005) and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006). It examines reasons for their success (or otherwise) in conveying the horror of the barbaric recent past to a young audience.

Who has the right to speak?

Given that the "speak or be silent" debate has for some time now been largely resolved in favour of speech, the question which arises next is that of ownership. While Jewish writers were the first to tackle the Holocaust, in recent years more and more non-Jews have also claimed a right to speak about it, thereby prompting discussion about the tricky and sensitive question of voice appropriation. For example, in an interview in the *Guardian* newspaper following the publication of his critically-panned Holocaust novel *Beatrice and Virgil*, Canadian author Yann Martel rejected outright the idea that the Holocaust is "indescribable, that it should be sacred," and that most fictional treatments of the Holocaust are inevitably doomed. According to him, "It's the specialism (sic) of the artist to go where other people don't go... I don't think the Holocaust gains by having artists staying on the edges. It's always represented in the same way, in a non-fictional way, so the archetypal figures are people like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, or the historians. They've all done essential work, but I can't think of any other historical event that is only represented by historians and survivors. Most other historical events will be taken on by artists." After all, he argues, "It was the non-Jews who did it. It was an act of two groups, so it's not just for Jews to be an expert on the Holocaust. In any case, we're in dialogue with history, and you no more own an historical event than people own their language. The English don't

own the English language; the Jews don't own the Holocaust; the French don't own Verdun" (Moss 2010). While Martel's words are scarcely diplomatically expressed, they nonetheless reflect very clearly recent developments in writing about the Holocaust. Writers who are non-Jewish, and even belong to another generation, are no longer seen to be automatically guilty of aesthetic or moral offences when they tackle this subject matter; Zusak and Boyne, for example, are differentiated from many Holocaust authors by virtue of their age and their nationality (Zusak is Australian, Boyne Irish) as well as their religion and race. Both, it is assumed, acquired their knowledge of the event almost entirely through reading, and neither had any direct association with it, although Zusak has acknowledged the role of his parents' childhood stories of life in wartime Munich, particularly his mother's memories of witnessing a forced march of Jewish prisoners to the nearby concentration camp in Dachau, which was later refigured into two key scenes in his novel (The Blurb n.d.). It is, however, notable that while non-Jews like Zusak and Boyle have taken to treating the Holocaust as an appropriate topic for their artistic endeavours, for the most part they do not attempt to speak "for" Jewish victims, preferring instead to use non-Jewish protagonists, with Jews as more marginal characters with whom their lives are entwined. This is certainly the case with the two novels examined later in this chapter.

Holocaust literature for young people

Those ongoing debates about the best way to depict the Holocaust also pervade writing specifically geared for young people. Although there was a widespread "invisibility" of Jewish characters in mainstream English-language children's literature prior to the Holocaust (Rahn 2003, 304), and most certainly a dearth of appealing or heroic ones, after the Holocaust came a distinct and permanent change in status. In keeping with the adult trends, children's and young adult novels about the Holocaust have flourished particularly in recent years. While the reasons for this are naturally very similar, it should be noted that there is a significant difference between Holocaust works intended for an adult and a young adult/children's audience. According to Adrienne Kertzer there is "a commonly recognised boundary between children's and adult reading about the Holocaust, in that children's books about the Holocaust seem to function primarily to explain what adult texts often claim is ultimately inexplicable" (Kertzer 1999, 2). Writing for young people has a history of didacticism, a prevailing notion that children can be moulded through literature to produce morally and socially acceptable behaviour: in essence

this means that the explication of history was and is regularly used to build desirable models for present-day conduct. For example, Holocaust stories are often taught in classrooms in the United States, Canada, England and Australia, as a means of instruction and of enhancing historical understanding rather than encouraging close textual analysis. Such texts may all too often be earnest, well-meaning attempts at educating young people not to repeat past mistakes, and they may be in effect sermons demonstrating the devastating consequences of following Nazi ideals. Moreover, an upsurge of writing about the Holocaust for children and young people has been prompted by an increasingly acute scholarly and public awareness of young people's hazy notions about it. For example, Elena Ivanova's study of Ukrainian high school students' understanding of the Holocaust revealed a knowledge that was superficial, murky, and harboured anti-Jewish stereotypes, with many students' anti-Semitism either openly expressed or lightly camouflaged (Ivanova 2004). This seems especially alarming as the Ukraine was one of the territories where the Holocaust actually took place, so it is indisputably part of the fabric of recent history, and to see a potential resurgence of racial bigotry there was sobering for educators and authors alike. By the turn of the century, then, Young Adult literature, always ready to draw a moral from history's mistakes and disasters in order to influence the moral good of the young, was ready to deal with the Holocaust in a very big way indeed. A text which would not reduce the Holocaust to trite or facile lessons, and which was able to render the horror without turning it into "pap for the masses" (Baron 2001, 170) would be especially welcome.

Yet this upsurge in Young Adult Holocaust writing is further complicated by another factor specific to its designated audience. When considering texts for young people, one question always arises: namely, how much can children and young people take? There is a long tradition of protecting children and young people from the harsher aspects of reality, which is against socialising them into adulthood too early, and giving them adult pressures and cares at a vulnerable and impressionable age. Writers in this area are usually only too well-aware of the need to avoid traumatising children and adolescents with overly graphic depictions of violence or instilling in them a pervading sense of despair about human nature. Any literature about the Holocaust, however, is likely to break the otherwise strict taboo that children (especially young ones) are not to be frightened, presenting instead a world where parents are not in control, evil is omnipresent and survival usually depends more on luck than wits: a world, indeed, where adults killed children systematically, methodically, and highly effectively. Holocaust literature for young people might, in

fact, be distinguished from the rest by its combustible combination of challenging subject matter, ethical responsibility, and its position outside the protective boundaries of much children's literature, that authorial accountability traditionally owed to young readers. Lydia Kokkola, for example, actually insists that one of the distinctive features of Holocaust fiction for young people as it currently exists is its renegotiation of those certain well-established standards of acceptability, its tendency to break the usual rules and conventions (Kokkola 2003, 8), citing Berel Lang's argument that it is "as if acceptance of traditional conventions would deny the unusual nature of the Holocaust as a literary subject," and claiming that breaking taboos causes the reader to think again and more deeply (Kokkola 2003, 10). It is indisputable, too, that attitudes have changed greatly in recent years. Whereas in 1977 Eric Kimmel could ask somewhat rhetorically "Is mass murder a subject for a children's novel?" (Kimmel 1977, 91), and answer firmly in the negative, more recently authors in the Young Adult field are increasingly averse to "whitewashing" historical events and treating them with extreme delicacy in order to protect the young. The Young Adult audience is now viewed by authors and critics alike as less vulnerable than in the past, as exposed to far more confronting situations in literature as well as in the media, where, for example, topics such as incest and paedophilia, previously held to be contentious, are now almost omnipresent. Moreover, judging by the extraordinary popularity of, for example, the *Lemony Snicket* books which gleefully feature serial slaughter, or Neil Gaiman's Newbery Award-winning *The Graveyard Book*, which begins with a triple homicide, violence is almost *de rigeur*, especially when the young reader knows full-well right from the start that the empowered child protagonist will eventually triumph and all will end safely. As well as the routine treatment of violence, horror and trauma which occurs in fantasy novels and speculative fiction (and *Harry Potter* should of course be included here), subjects previously thought by many as too upsetting for children are now deemed by critics to be appropriate and even necessary in other genres such as realism. And so Karen Shawn can argue that Holocaust stories for children should present "the truth without unduly traumatising young readers" and "personalise the statistics, fostering empathy, compassion, involvement, and identification with victims and survivors" (Shawn 2009, 141), while Elizabeth R. Baer in "A New Algorithm of Evil: Children's Literature in a Post-Holocaust World," goes even further by emphasising the urgency of "a children's literature of atrocity," recommending confrontational texts in the classroom, and proposing criteria by which to measure the "usefulness and effectiveness of children's texts in confronting

the Holocaust sufficiently" (Baer 2000, 384). Finally, in a forceful article entitled "A is for Auschwitz," Kenneth Kidd argues that a more direct confrontation with events such as the Holocaust is happening and *should* be happening: "we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child's confrontation with evil" (Kidd 2008, 120-121).

The Book Thief as a Holocaust novel

Writers of historical fiction–that is, when the primary focus of the story is upon life in a different past, time or place-face difficulties that are not present in writing about the contemporary world. In many ways historical novels for young people disclose more about the present and the way the present conceptualises the past, than the past itself, because the reader is always predisposed to reflect on the present and history's relationship to that present. Holocaust novels clearly reflect this contemporary focus and the urgent desire to ensure that the past never returns (albeit in different guises). Given that the events of the Holocaust are relatively well-known, the danger exists of overwriting the historical details and making the text a history lesson: consequently in the Young Adult market it is a "given" that precise chronological detail needs to be forfeited in favour of the recreation of a "sense" of the past, forged together with a concentrated focus on the central character's identity development, in order to engage a contemporary reader who might otherwise be disinclined to take up a historical novel. Using key historical signifiers such as the Nazi book-burning, the Hitler Youth phenomenon and the German retreat from Stalingrad, in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, history is consequently presented not as a sterile collection of chronological events and facts, but as an integral part of the rich fabric of the life of his characters, convincing the reader of the authentic nature of the protagonist's journey amid a judicious and light dusting of historical happenings.

Interestingly, in some ways *The Book Thief* fits perfectly Adrienne Kertzer's notions of what Holocaust literature should be/is usually like for young people. According to Kertzer, a representative Holocaust novel has a double narrative, is realistic, and yet is also ultimately hopeful, uplifting and life-affirming, illustrating the will to survive and the resiliency of the human spirit: "If we persist in thinking children need hope and happy endings...then the stories we give them about the Holocaust will be shaped by those expectations, and we will need to consider narrative strategies...that give readers a double narrative, one that simultaneously respects our need for hope and happy endings even as it teaches us a

lesson about history" (Kertzer 2002, 74-5). Michael Martin also talks about the trend for a dialogic Holocaust novel that solves the dual purpose of the traditional need for "hope and happy endings" as well as the need for new lessons. Such a novel raises the disturbing notion of mass murder and genocide, traditionally avoided in Young Adult literature, but also emphasises life-affirming morality rather than just relating a meaningless disaster (Martin 2004, 315). Certainly this potentially difficult balancing act appears to be an over-riding concern for many authors, given that the usual plot lines in Holocaust novels have Jews as secondary characters, with their deaths occurring offstage, their fates thereby replicating the historical reality for most European Jews. The tension between this profoundly unsettling subtext and the primarily happy ending where the non-Jewish main character survives, and even grows as a person, allows for the disturbing realities of the horrific events without necessarily overwhelming or depressing the audience. As a consequence, then, much Holocaust literature tends to focus on good and helpful Gentiles choosing to protect powerless Jews by using secret hiding places, thus celebrating human solidarity and demonstrating the potential for human goodness in the most trying and catastrophic of times (and incidentally most surely representing the historical exception rather than the rule). For the most part Holocaust novels individualise, heroise, moralise, idealise and universalise, and in so doing retain the traditional Young Adult emphasis upon a young person's resourcefulness and eventual triumph, despite the undeniable historical inaccuracies of this position. This standard format also uses the central character's vicarious encounters with the Holocaust to enable the reader's empathising with the victims. The developing relationship between non-Jews and Jews is therefore absolutely crucial to the plot, and is an important indicator of the novel's moral and ethical concerns, seen through the growing understanding and self-awareness of the protagonist, which is facilitated by their direct experiences of witnessing Jewish suffering.

Zusak's novel is seen somewhat unusually through German eyes, although he declares that he is no apologist for them: "I'm not trying to get people to re-examine their views on Nazi Germany. All I'm trying to do, like every writer does, is to tell a story that hasn't been told in this way before. It's the hope to examine one small story in the big story we already know" (The Blurb n.d.). In his multilayered novel, a young German girl, Liesel Meminger, goes to live with foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann of Himmel Street, in Molching, near Munich, after her own family unit is destroyed by the Nazis (her parents are both Communists, her father and younger brother dead, her mother vanished forever by the