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Literary Commentary: A Transactional Approach to Holocaust Literature*

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Abstract: Through active reading strategies including annotation, shared inquiry, and interpretive discussion, librarians can play a major role in the development of age-appropriate Holocaust literature programs suitable for library and classroom settings. Literary response theory becomes practice as librarians and students, in this updated adaptation of the *chavruta*, use writing journals to articulate and exchange questions, comments, and feelings about the books they have read and recommended, bridging the gap between the generations of readers who share, through literature, the Holocaust experience.

Teachers Versus Librarians

In the November 1992 issue of *Language Arts*, Sean A. Walmsley writes that many elementary school teachers see the librarian in much the same way as they see the owner of a bookstore: the librarian buys and checks the books. Librarians, of course, "see themselves as playing a major role in the development of a literature program"; many are "trying to shake off their 'bibliographer' image." Walmsley writes:

The librarians we interviewed were not pleased to have been excluded from the planning of school literature programs, and they were not reticent about comparing their extensive knowledge of children's literature with what they regarded as most classroom teachers' shallow literary understanding.

Walmsley points to this evident tension as proof of the need for articulation and cooperation among those of us who are responsible for "the provision of books and of instructional activities to promote children's use of them" (Walmsley, 1992, p. 508).

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Making Holocaust Literature Accessible

Although teachers and librarians have distinct areas of expertise and interest, we also share the goal of finding ways of making the literature of the Holocaust accessible to students. By accessible, I do not mean merely available: We all seek ways to help students make sense of what they read. We want them to analyze and reflect on the events of the Holocaust, and on the relationship between these events and the personal and societal values of today. We want to increase students' knowledge of the historicity of the Holocaust, but we also want them to ponder its significance, its implications for them as youngsters who live in its shadow.

The challenge in identifying appropriate literary experiences that help us meet those goals comes with the realization that, just as the Holocaust was unique, so should the reading experiences related to it be unique. British educator Jack Thomson (1987) notes that "the right book brought forward at the right time makes all the difference." But I am suggesting that with books about the Holocaust, it is what we do with them after they are brought forward that makes all the difference.

What should we do with them?

Current theories of Holocaust education suggest that we provide a caring community, where readers are encouraged to explore what they have read, through discussion groups, cooperative learning groups, and journal-keeping, all with the goal of making information personally meaningful and significant. Interestingly, these Holocaust education theories reflect theories of literary response. Educator Louise Rosenblatt (1976) and her followers recognize the importance of sharing reactions to what we read in a thoughtful, structured partnership. Furthermore, Rosenblatt maintains that it is the transaction between the text and the reader's response which makes the "poem." Without the reader's interactive participation in the reading process, she notes, the text is merely "squiggles on the page."

As powerful as the subject of the Holocaust is, so is our need to discuss what we read about it. Reader response theoretician W. Iser defines this demand by writing

when we have been particularly impressed by a book, we feel the need to talk about it; ... we simply want to understand more clearly what it is in which we have been entangled. We have undergone an experience, and now we want to know consciously *what* we have experienced.

(Iser, 1980, p. 64)

In the very act of responding to literature through conversation, our perceptions about it begin to change. B.F. Nelms explains that "the minute we begin to articulate our feelings, ideas, and judgments about a piece of literature, it begins to take another shape. We see things we had not seen before" (Nelms, 1988, p. 7).

Of course, the Jewish textual tradition reflects this same understanding. Jewish learning is both active and interactive. The Melton Center's Prof. Barry Holtz notes that "traditional Jews rarely speak about *reading* texts at all; rather, one talks about *studying* or *learning*." Jewish learning "is as much about talk as it is reading; in fact, the two activities of reading and discussing are virtually indistinguishable." He also reminds us that "most traditional Jewish 'reading' occurs in a social context—the class, or the study session." Thus, reading is both "an act of self-reflection ... [and] a way of communal identification and communication" (Holtz, 1984, p. 18–19).

Not surprisingly, current research in literary response supports the value of this method (without, of course, acknowledging its source!). A researcher named Lytle (1982) has coined the term "think-alouds" to describe "the complex thought processes involved in orally exploring meaning" (cited in Beach, 1990, p. 66). In think-alouds, students explore their personal responses to a text by "expressing their emotional reactions, sorting out and clarifying their conceptions, or coping with difficulties in understanding meanings" (Beach, 1990, p. 66).

So we have the theory. We know what we should be doing. But in practice? Unfortunately, these theories have little if any practical application to students' experiences with books about the Holocaust. If they are fortunate, youngsters have response-centered discussion groups in English classes. But too often, even English teachers feel a need to "cover the curriculum," as if the numbers of books read contribute more to the personal and intellectual growth of a child than the depth of the discussion about them. In addition, there are relatively few language-arts teachers, especially in the elementary and middle grades, who are comfortable enough with their own understanding of the Holocaust and related issues to choose to engage in ongoing discussions about any aspect of this subject with their students.

In the library, particularly in secondary public schools, such recommended experiences are even less likely to occur. Students may or may not have a discussion with the librarian about a particular book. But such sharing is often superficial, on the valuative level; casual, interrupted, or interruptible; and rarely ongoing or inclusive of other students who have read the same book, or a different book with the same theme.

An Interactive Reading Program: The Chavruta

And so we return to the idea that makes learning partners of us all.

Consider the English teacher who is looking for books on rescuers, because she knows that is an age-appropriate way to discuss the Holocaust with her sixth or seventh graders. She turns to a librarian for recommendations. The librarian suggests *Twenty and Ten*, by Claire Bishop; *Number the Stars*, by Lois Lowry; *Waiting for Anya*, by Michael Morpurgo; and *The Man from the Other Side*, by Uri Orlev (see section B of References). The library has, or can get, six copies of each. The librarian keeps one copy of each title to read or reread.

In class, at the librarian's suggestion, the teacher forms four reading groups, *chevrutot*, with her 20 students, five students per group, and sets two weeks as the period in which they have to complete the reading of the books during class as well as at home. As they read, students keep response journals. In the journals, they raise their own questions, comment on events as they unfold, or answer questions raised by the teacher: "What is the significance of this particular detail or

event? How does this event affect my understanding of what has gone before? What am I learning about this person? What am I learning about the world described in this book? What impression is the book giving me of the kind of person who wrote it? What puzzles me at this point? What problems am I having with this book at this time? What pleases me about it?"

In addition, students are asked to note, by page and paragraph number, passages which seem to them particularly significant, perhaps because they are moving, or startling, or beautiful, or because they help them to understand a person or setting or situation especially well.

The librarian, too, is noting these passages as she reads. And when she has, say, three passages from each book, she photocopies them, cuts them out, and pastes them in a blank book, to be used in a follow-up writing project.

Now the librarian is ready to send invitations to the participating classes! A sample text for the invitation:

"You are cordially invited to come to the library at 1:00 p.m., Wednesday, for our First Annual Book Month Roundtable! Bring your book and your journal. Refreshments will be served."

The librarian arranges with the administration that the period from 1:00 to 1:30 is *kadosh* (holy). There will be no interruptions, no phone calls, no visitors. And there will be cookies and juice.

Now 1:00 Wednesday afternoon is the time usually scheduled for English; the teacher sends the librarian one reading group, perhaps the group reading *Waiting for Anya*. The teacher is delighted, because now she has more time with fewer students.

And the librarian forms her own *chavruta* with five eager readers who are happy to have someone really listen to their ideas about this book, and very happy to know that their thoughts are valuable to each other and to adults, not for a grade, but just because they have something to say that is worth hearing.

The librarian and the students meet for half an hour, and discuss some very cogent issues, precipitated by the librarian's questions (see Appendix) as well as by the students' reactions, and now all of them realize that the conversation has raised new and more provocative issues to ponder, so they agree to meet again

the following week, after the other three groups have met. But for this second meeting, the librarian suggests mixing students, bringing together one or two from each of the four reading groups. Discussing four different books on the same topic, the librarian explains, will allow for much greater exploration of the differences in the Jewish experience, and in the backgrounds, motivations, and experiences of rescuers in different countries.

In the meantime, on Thursday, Monday, and Tuesday at 1:00 the librarian meets with each of the other *chevrutot* and shares thoughts and questions about their books. When this first series of meetings is complete, every student has had an opportunity to reflect on and discuss his or her Holocaust book with peers and with a caring, interested, knowledgeable adult.

On the following Wednesday at 1:00, the second series of talks begins. The teacher sends the librarian one or two children from each of the four reading groups, and a new and even livelier discussion starts, as students trace thematically similar events through four different texts. And these new groups meet each day as well (see Table 1).

By the third Wednesday, the cycle is complete. The librarian has led two series of discussion groups, meeting every student twice. Each student has now had the opportunity to compare and contrast four Holocaust novels within a smaller and larger *chavruta* and with a caring adult participant.

Whatever will the librarian do at 1:00 the next day that can compare? Luckily, there is a follow-up activity.

The teacher has given the librarian this half hour to speak with the class as a whole group. The librarian shows them her blank book, with the passages pasted in. She explains why she chose the passages. She explains that since such literary discussions are never really finished, she wants all students to have an opportunity to write whatever it was that they did not have a chance to say. And she wants them also to have an opportunity to read what everyone thinks—including their teacher, by the way—and not just those who happened to be in their groups.

The librarian asks who would like to be the first to write a response. Perhaps some students are interested in illustrating the passages, making a cover that embodies the theme of all four books, writing reviews on the back cover, or even making their own book with their own pas-

sages, the ones they had noted during their reading. Can they work in pairs or groups on this as well, someone asks? Of course!

Now the project becomes a cooperative class project, with students taking turns "owning" each book and being responsible for bringing it to class after they have taken it home. When it is at home, the parents see it, and the children suggest that the parents read the books that they have read, and write their responses as well! And when all the parents have responded, perhaps the librarian will sponsor a tea for them ... and the special guests at the tea will be the authors of the very books that all have been reading!

This is, of course, just one possibility for interactive reading with the librarian, teacher, students, and authors in partnership. Any librarian will find a dozen variations appropriate for her school.

But do not take on this project lightly—and prepare the administration—because once such a program begins, 1:00 on Wednesday at the library will never be the same.

Conclusion

This transactional approach offers the necessary support as students venture through the literature of the Holocaust. It provides as well the opportunity to forge a partnership between the teachers and librarians who act as the students' guides on this difficult journey.

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Table 1
Schedule of Reading Groups for Holocaust Literature

First Series: 4 groups, 5 students in each; 4 days

Wednesday	Thursday	Monday	Tuesday
Group 1- A	Group 2- B	Group 3- C	Group 4- D
A	B	C	D
A	B	C	D
A	B	C	D
A	B	C	D

Second Series: 4 groups, 5 students in each; 4 days

Wednesday	Thursday	Monday	Tuesday
Group 1- A	Group 2- A	Group 3- A	Group 4- A
A	B	B	B
B	B	C	C
C	C	C	D
D	D	D	D

Key: A = students reading *Waiting for Anya (Morpurgo)*
 B = students reading *Twenty and Ten (Bishop)*
 C = students reading *Number the Stars (Lowry)*
 D = students reading *The Man from the Other Side (Orlev)*

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Appendix:

Sample Questions to Use in Discussing Holocaust Rescue Literature with Children

1. What was your first reaction to this book? How did your reaction change as you read? After you finished?
2. What was the most important fact about the Holocaust that you learned from this book? What did you learn about yourself from this book?
3. What questions do you have as a result of reading this book?

(Continued on next page)

4. What age should students be when they read this book? Should it be their introduction to the study of the Holocaust?
5. What did you admire most about the main character? About those he/she rescued?
6. What surprised you most about what you read? Were you surprised by any of your reactions to what you read?
7. In what ways did this book remind you of other books, poems, or stories that you have read, or TV shows or films that you have seen?
8. In what ways were the Jews and their rescuers alike? In what ways were they different?
9. Why do you think the author wrote this book?
10. Have your parents ever spoken to you about the actions of the rescuers? Should students know more about the rescuers? Why?

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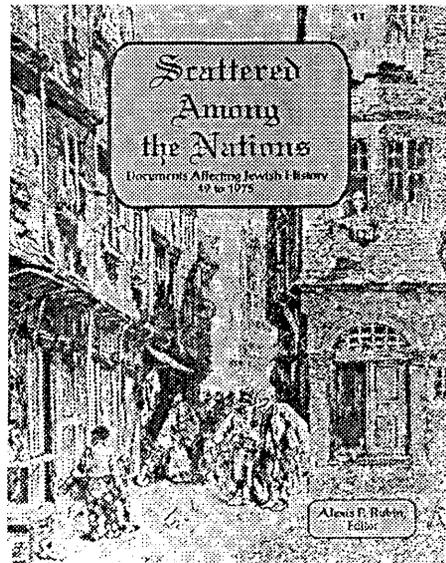
Scattered Among the Nations

Documents Affecting Jewish History 49 to 1975

Alexis P. Rubin, Editor

Scattered Among the Nations is a collection of important historical documents, gathered together for the first time in one volume, that have had a major impact on Jewish life over the last two millennia. Made up of laws, commentaries, letters, reports, and observations written by Christian religious and secular leaders, these documents and the forces they put into motion deal with the principal events and turning points in post-biblical Jewish history. The book also contains Alexis Rubin's extensive introductions and explanatory notes, which provide historical context and illuminate content.

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