Moving Forward in Remembering a Truthful Past

—Catherine Appleton

Arato, Rona. *The Ship to Nowhere: On Board the Exodus*, Second Story, 2016. 176 pp. $14.95 pb. ISBN 9781772600186.

Kacer, Kathy, and Jordana Lebowitz. *To Look a Nazi in the Eye: A Teen's Account of a War Criminal Trial*, Second Story, 2017. 256 pp. $13.95 pb. ISBN 9781772600407.

There is an understanding that the Holocaust must be remembered so that it will never happen again; consequently, a number of children's novels about the subject have been published over the past few decades (Kokkola 101). Mixing historical fact with the subjectivity of first-person narratives provides the emotional content to connect young readers to the past and may develop their insights and empathic understanding. The challenge of writing about the Holocaust for children and young adults has been to find appropriate representations of the "unrepresentable" (Kokkola 1). *The Ship to Nowhere* and *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* confront this history and make a significant contribution to Holocaust literature. Both focus on a vision of the future, gently building an understanding of what happened in the devastating past. Furthermore, the texts manage to balance the narrative devices necessary to engage the reader while retaining historical accuracy.

There is a "moral obligation" (Kokkola 3) for stories to reflect the truth when they describe this unique and catastrophic genocide, especially in response to Holocaust deniers. Some Holocaust YA texts, however, follow a conventional adventure format that focuses solely on the story of the survivor or rescuer with an assumption that YA readers are not interested in the details of historic fiction (Kertzer 326). As Adrienne Kertzer argues, readers are drawn in "with tantalizing reference to spies, thrilling adventures, and the possibility of fighting back. In effect, they promise the reader exciting narratives of choice" (326), thus avoiding the

horror and finality of the shocking history. Additionally, Eric L. Tribunella describes the Americanization of the Holocaust in children's literature where "lessons involving heroism, moralism, dignity, and prejudice" (106) reduce narratives to the simplistic ideas embodied in binary oppositions such as good/bad and heroes/villains. Authors are sometimes uncertain about what it is appropriate to reveal in children's literature, and this has resulted in texts that are historically inaccurate.

Alternative ways of discussing memory, loss, and other issues relating to the Holocaust have been to approach the subject with a focus on something other than individual moral agency. Andrea Hammel suggests, for example, that the separation of children from their family, home, and country in the Kindertransport evacuation story provides an access point into the "emotional and cultural issues relating to the Holocaust" (152) without requiring a discussion of the explicit horrors. However, Tony Kushner criticizes the lack of critical rigour in telling these stories of child and parent separation. Some narratives give the false impression that the evacuated children were so happy to be saved from the Nazis that they gladly left their family, home, and country (172). This representation of Kindertransport brushes over the significant trauma of forced migration. An important function of Holocaust literature is to give YA readers the opportunity to "rehearse trauma and to master it by reading about it and by experiencing it vicariously" (Tribunella 125). In order to do that, books that describe the trauma of genocide need to retain the complexity of history even if the content is challenging and the endings are not all happy. *The Ship to Nowhere* and *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* approach issues relating to the Holocaust with contemporary relevance for an audience that has little or no direct experience with this history. Despite their different storylines, they share similar narrative devices and both focus on events that took place after the war. *The Ship to Nowhere* centres on the direct postwar years, whereas *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* tells of a recent legal trial. Both books use passages of retrospection to describe the Holocaust horrors, a strategy that enables trauma to be addressed and attempts to make sense of the unfathomable past and the struggle to move forward. Holocaust survivors appear as characters in the stories to show that they regained a sense of agency in rebuilding their lives after the wartime trauma of being victims. The narratives are told from the perspective of strong, young female protagonists who describe the emotional experience of real historical events. In both books, the female protagonists are based on real people, with photographs to show their age and appearance. *The Ship to Nowhere* includes an image of Rachel Landesman outside her original home (Arato 28) and later with the friends she made at the displaced persons camp in Germany (143). *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* bases the story on Jordana Lebowitz's experience. The book includes a number of images, first showing her with another Holocaust survivor when she visited Auschwitz

(Kacer and Lebowitz 10). In another photograph she is shown in the town where the trial she is observing takes place (127). Finally, a portrait accompanies the biographical text at the back of the book. The stories demonstrate historical precision by presenting documentary evidence such as dates, quotes from interviews with survivors, and original photographs of people, places, and artifacts. An author's note at the end of each book explains the factual basis of the story and identifies the historical figures, supporting Lydia Kokkola's argument that it is important for young readers to be able to recognize the "historical faction" (3) of what they are reading. These stories are constructed from careful historical research and, wherever possible, employ pertinent illustrations from the period. As a result, they have been described in the publishing details as non-fiction even though they read like novels.

[*The Ship to Nowhere*] fuses real people with fictitious characters in a refugee story that, with the forced migration of people throughout the world, is currently of great relevance.

The Ship to Nowhere is categorised as a text suitable for a young audience (middle school students, nine- to thirteen-year-olds). It tells the story of eleven-year-old Rachel, who travels with her surviving family of mother and sister on the arduous voyage of the *Exodus* that attempted to relocate 4,500 European refugees to their Jewish (spiritual) homeland in 1947. The book fuses real people with fictitious characters in a refugee story that, with the forced migration of people throughout the world, is currently of great relevance. Sharyn Pearce suggests that historical novels are more about establishing a position in the present that is attained through a reflection on the past (21). In the preface to *The Ship to Nowhere*, the reader is alerted to the fact that although this is a historical story, it is also a modern tale. A link is made between the events that took place just after the war and the current crisis of the "[m]illions of refugees around the world" (Arato 1) fleeing wars, persecution, and

poverty. "Whether they travel on foot, in boats, rubber rafts, or other vehicles, their journeys are fraught with fear, danger, and uncertainty" (1). Like asylum seekers today, the characters attempt desperately to flee hostility and persecution, only to be shut out of countries and suffer the experience of being stateless. The preface is explicit about the need to know this history: "By looking to the past, we can better understand the need to help people of all religions, races, and cultures who seek a new home where they can live in peace and freedom" (2).

Rachel, like so many other thousands of stateless Jewish refugees after the war, represents what was seen as an international problem. Having survived the persecution of being treated as a "dirty Jew" and lived in a displaced persons camp since 1945, the refugees were desperate to find freedom in a safe new home. Eretz Yisrael, the Jewish biblical homeland, was the destination that held hope for so many refugees like Rachel and her family. However, after 1923, Palestine—the modern-day Eretz Yisrael—was administered by the British, and they had a policy that blocked Jews from entering the country. In an attempt to trick the British and smuggle the refugees into Palestine, the ship on which Rachel was travelling was camouflaged as a Honduran ship bound for Turkey. Carrying a vast number of Jewish refugees, the ship began the journey flanked with hostile British war ships and a British plane. Not surprisingly, the British were not fooled by the disguise.

On the journey, Rachel is introduced to crew members who were organizing safe passage for the refugees. A portrait photograph is juxtaposed with a boxed text giving the biography of Captain Ike and then, overleaf, another captioned photograph of a volunteer American second officer. The separation of the boxed text and the images highlights historical existence of these characters. The other fictional characters are identified as representing the types of people who would have travelled on the *Exodus*, as described in the author's note. One is a young female volunteer, Aviva, who represents "the many Haganah men and women who organized and ran the movement of illegal ships that tried to break through the British blockade" (157). Aviva embodies what Rachel hopes to become: an emancipated, powerful free spirit, in contrast to the vulnerable, wounded refugees. In the book Rachel is quoted as saying, "'I wish I were a Sabra. They are so . . . ' Rachel searched for a word, '*free*'" (34). Aviva is a member of the Haganah, so she defends and protects her people. As a Sabra, she is like a cactus born in Palestine: "We must be strong and tough to survive, but inside we are soft" (32).

Rachel also makes friends with other Jewish Holocaust child survivors, including two boys, Saul and David, and a refugee orphan whose parents were killed in a concentration camp while she lived as a Catholic in a home of her father's employee. These survivors, all of whom have lost family members, band together and

survive the war, living a harsh life in the woods. Such side narratives function as a gentle reminder of the horrors of the war and help to build the reader's connection to the plight of the characters.

As the ship moves out of international waters into the twenty-two kilometres of sea that belong to Palestine, the crew and passengers prepare for a fight with the British to get to land. It is a brutal tear gas attack, with no regard for the trauma the refugees have already endured: "How can they use gas on Jews!" (57). With the second officer dead and injuries inflicted, the refugees surrender and are forced to board three transport ships to take them away from Palestine. Having sailed to Palestine and through the European seas, the ship returns the refugees to Germany after six weeks in difficult conditions. They essentially have travelled nowhere.

Ruth Gruber is identified as the journalist who played an essential role by publishing reports in the international media to fuel public support for the Holocaust refugees. This support led to the United Nations voting in favour of the partition of Palestine, which in turn led to the creation of the State of Israel. The story ends with Rachel and her family sailing into Haifa: "Whatever hardships we face in Israel will be worth it. We're going to have a home at last where we will feel safe and free" (151–52). Unfortunately, the story does not make any attempt to develop beyond Rachel's simple desire for a homeland or make any mention of the displacement of the Palestinian inhabitants.

Rachel is the main focaliser throughout the narrative, and it is through her experience of the action that the reader understands the story (Stephens 57). The 11-year-old's point of view limits the development of political complexity or the plight of the displaced non-Jewish Palestinians. Little explanation is given as to why the Sabra needs to be "strong and tough to survive" (32), what the Haganah defend and protect, or why the British initially stopped the Jewish refugees moving to Palestine, effectively reneging on their promise to create the Jewish homeland. The implied reader (the middle school student) is positioned to understand this history as a simple fight for freedom for the subjugated refugees against the powerful force of the British aggressors. However, the creation of the State of Israel turned the region into a political hotbed, with Palestinian refugees losing much in the process. Although the worldwide refugee crisis is mentioned at the beginning of the story, the suffering endured by the Palestinians is, alarmingly, ignored as the narrative develops. The text offers a simple narrative structure of the two opposing forces. *The Ship to Nowhere* does, however, introduce young readers to the atrocities suffered by the victims of the Holocaust. These atrocities form a background to explain their need for self-determination. The book also helps young readers understand the possibilities of community support and international pressure, and how the use of power to make change does not always have to be violent.

[*To Look a Nazi in the Eye*] attempts to show that to fully grasp how the Holocaust happened requires an understanding of both the victims and the perpetrators.

Unlike *The Ship to Nowhere*, which tells a story around a character, Rachel, who has had a direct experience of the Holocaust, *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* follows Jordana, who is trying to make sense of a shocking history from her position as a third-generation survivor. In this story, a young woman witnesses a Holocaust trial in order to understand her family background. Survivors with experience of this history are coming to the end of their lives, making this a significant moment in which recent history is moving into a more distant past with the loss of the direct witnesses. This book attempts to show that to fully grasp how the Holocaust happened requires an understanding of both the victims and the perpetrators.

At the time the book was written Jordana Lebowitz was a university student with a passionate interest in the Holocaust. She is the grandchild of survivors, a connection that motivated her to participate in the March of the Living in 2012, a memorial march to Auschwitz in remembrance of all those who perished. She felt that attending a trial of a Nazi perpetrator would help her to really understand the past and continue her quest "for fairness and justice in the world that she [eventually] would turn into action" (Kacer and Lebowitz12).

The story begins with Jordana contemplating how important it was to be part of such a significant moment in history. She had drawn on every bit of her fierce determination to get there, and her efforts had paid off. Convincing her parents to let her go had been a struggle, and approaching the prosecuting attorney, Thomas Walter, to get her a pass into the courtroom had required all her confidence. She had convinced an organization (the Canadian Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center) to sponsor her flight in exchange for writing blog entries and presenting a talk about the trial.

Thomas Walter, a former attorney, had devoted his retirement to prosecuting Nazi war criminals. In 2011 he convicted John Demjanjuk, known as “Ivan the Terrible” for his role in the death machine. Demjanjuk worked as a guard in Sobibor extermination camp, where 200,000 Jews were killed. This trial “establish[ed] a new principle or rule that could be applied to other cases with similar circumstances” (Kacer and Lebowitz 27). The Oskar Groening case was to develop this legal argument further. The trial, which took place as recently as 2015, was significant, as it was the first case in the German court system to bring a Nazi to trial for “aiding and abetting” in the murder of three thousand Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp. During the war, Groening was a camp administrator known as the “bookkeeper of Auschwitz” and was not directly involved in the murder of Jews. However, the trial was to argue that he played an essential role in the process of the final solution and so was guilty of the deaths.

The author, Kathy Kacer, acknowledges that basing the story on Jordana’s experience of the trial gave her the perfect channel to tell Groening’s story (227). Jordana’s focalisation allows for a working-through of important issues and highlights the role that emotion plays in this process. For instance, Jordana expresses shock in the courtroom that the old man who looks like her grandfather is the monster responsible for so many terrible crimes. His resemblance to her grandfather encourages her to feel compassion toward him as the trial progresses, complicating what might otherwise be a simple story. Jordana struggles to stay calm when faced with a Holocaust denier who wants to “expose the lies of the so-called Holocaust” (84), and the upheaval in the courtroom after the testimony of Holocaust survivor Eva Kor “was all too confusing for her” (143). Following Eva’s description of the terrible experiments carried out on her and her twin sister, Eva proceeds to kiss Oskar Groening and tell him that he is forgiven. Jordana’s emotional reactions highlight the complexity of understanding this history. She searches for answers to the philosophical questions posed about punishment, justice, and forgiveness, recognising that the legal process exists as a way to move forward in recovery from the trauma.

The chapters that focus on Jordana’s experience are broken up with excerpts from Oskar Groening’s testimony. He explains that the German people were in desperate poverty caused by the reparations after the First World War, and in reaction to this there was an accepted belief that Jews were the enemy of the country. Groening joined the Waffen SS and was placed in a job he was told to keep secret, “perform[ing] tasks that would be difficult” (39). After he arrived in Auschwitz, it took a while to understand the process of the camp. Groening’s job involved clearing away personal belongings after the Jews arrived by train, to “create the impression that people had nothing to fear” (57). After witnessing the gas chamber and then seeing a baby being shot on the ramp, he was shaken by the brutality and puts in a request for a

transfer. He insists that he "never personally killed anyone in Auschwitz in the time that [he] was stationed there" (89), and admits that the ghosts of the dead are still with him: "This guilt will never leave me. I can only plead forgiveness and pray for atonement" (90). The remorse of Oskar Groening's testimony positions the reader to feel compassion toward this ninety-four-year-old man.

Jordana's experience of the trial and the testimonies of Oskar Groening and the Holocaust survivors are woven together and cleverly build up the evidence that shows the complexity of the judicial process. Walter's line of questioning indicates that Groening's testimony, in its emphases and omissions, could be interpreted as a distortion of the truth. With the support of other documented evidence, Walter proves Groening's testimony to be misleading. The shocking testimonies from the Holocaust survivors make clear, moreover, that Groening was involved in a coordinated system where each person's contribution played a role in the killing of millions as part of the final solution.

The trial continued for months after Jordana and the Holocaust survivors had returned to their lives. Eventually Groening was found guilty and received a symbolic sentence of four years. The story ends with Jordana's closing words to the Canadian Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center. In her report she states that the trial was a success "in sending a message to the world: A message to those who breed hatred—intolerance will not go unchecked." She continued with a promise to hold this history to and to "create a better tomorrow" (Kacer and Lebowitz 220).

To Look a Nazi in the Eye targets an older readership (young adult, fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds) and mixes narrative devices with non-fiction in the way that it reports on a legal process that took place in a German court a few years ago. Documentary evidence is presented wherever possible to support the historical truth, such as the photograph of the notes Jordana made on napkins and toilet paper after security officers confiscated her stationery when she entered the courtroom (Kacer and Lebowitz180). Supplementing this documentary angle are fictional strategies that help to propel the narrative forward, allowing the YA reader to progress through an otherwise dry legal process. The resulting interactions among characters have the added benefit of suggesting how one might begin to make sense of the reported events. The protagonist is shown to be a powerful, female character: inspiring, motivated, passionate, and highly emotional. The inclusion of the photographs of Jordana and the quotes from her blog (28) help connect the reader to her as the narrative character. Furthermore, her own text messages to her family and friends, such as "I haven't slept for forty-eight hours. I'm so tired! Now I'm snuggling up with candies in bed" (66), provide a sense of personal struggle. In the acknowledgements, Kacer states: "we began to meet regularly. Thousands of questions and a couple of years later, here we are!" (227), making it clear that the writing of the book was constructed from

many conversations with Jordana. The author's personal reflections on her conversations with Jordana highlight her close association with the finished book. Indeed, as Kokkola argues, literature based on interviews is generally assumed to be historically accurate and truthful in terms of characterization and emotional response.

Holocaust literature for young people needs to contain "the seriousness required to show respect for the subject and the instructional imperative to know and to remember" (Tribunella 104). *The Ship to Nowhere* and *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* are two narratives appropriate for the targeted age groups that address the trauma of history while showing how it has shaped the future. In *The Ship to Nowhere*, the resolution of the trauma for the Holocaust survivors was the struggle to build a new life. *To Look a Nazi in the Eye* addresses the many layers of recovery from such a trauma. This is children's literature that uses history with integrity, crafting compelling stories from documents and oral accounts. These books show that moving forward into a recovered future requires the remembering of a truthful past.

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