

Joanna Krongold

**History with Heart:
Canadian Holocaust Literature for Young People**

Abstract

This article addresses the emergence of the Canadian Holocaust literature canon for young readers, closely examining the work of Carol Matas and Kathy Kacer to explore how the Holocaust can be narrated for children. Largely understudied despite their productivity and popularity, Matas and Kacer rely on the narrative strategy of blending invented or imagined characters with factually accurate situations and experiences. By using the tools that historical fiction offers, these two prolific Canadian authors demonstrate the possibilities of multifaceted, educational, and engaging texts about the Holocaust for young people while preserving the “open hearts” of the characters at the centre of their stories.

Résumé

Cet article traite de l'émergence de la littérature canadienne sur l'Holocauste pour les jeunes lecteurs, en examinant de près le travail de Carol Matas et de Kathy Kacer pour explorer comment l'Holocauste peut être raconté aux enfants. En dépit de leur productivité et de leur popularité, Matas et Kacer n'ont pas fait l'objet d'études approfondies. Elles s'appuient sur une stratégie narrative qui consiste à mêler des personnages inventés ou imaginés à des situations et des expériences factuelles exactes. En utilisant les outils qu'offre la fiction historique, ces deux auteures canadiennes prolifiques démontrent les possibilités de textes à facettes multiples, éducatifs et engageants sur l'Holocauste pour les jeunes, tout en préservant le « cœur ouvert » des personnages au centre de leurs histoires.

"I have tried to remember it all. To preserve it, no matter how much I would like to forget. A scholar cannot forget. A scholar has a duty. But I also will never forget the most important lesson I have learned: My scholarship must never take second place to my heart, because only there does God truly reside."

—Carol Matas, *In My Enemy's House*¹

Carol Matas concludes her 1999 children's book, *In My Enemy's House*, with the above words from her teenaged protagonist, Marisa. The text chronicles the Holocaust story of a Jewish girl who assumes a gentile identity and gets a job as a servant in the house of a high-ranking Nazi official. The masquerade carries with it potentially fatal consequences. Despite the risks, Marisa harbours a desire to pursue her education with a twofold purpose: to remember her murdered family and to document the atrocities she has witnessed and experienced during the Holocaust. Her description of a scholar's duty—to remember, and to preserve the heart and feeling of such remembrance—is central to the work of many Canadian Holocaust authors who write for young readers. Carol Matas and Kathy Kacer, two prolific Canadian authors of

children's literature, operate under the principle professed by Marisa, fashioning a Canadian approach to narrating the Holocaust in texts directed toward children and young adults. Through historical fiction, these Canadian authors demonstrate the possibilities of multifaceted, educational, and engaging texts about the Holocaust for youth.

Over the last seventy-five years, critics have expounded on the possibility of responding to and representing the Holocaust in literature. The Nazi genocide has been theorized and understood as a literary turning point of the twentieth century. When conventional assumptions surrounding humanism, morality, and religion broke down in the aftermath of the murder, imprisonment, and displacement of millions of Jews and other persecuted people, so too did language. Many questioned whether literature could exist after the Holocaust. As Elie Wiesel argues, "how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy?"² Theories of deconstruction and postmodernism were adopted and influenced by those who viewed the Second World War and the Holocaust as the logical end point or culmination of modernity. At the same time, millions of words have been written about the very dissolution of language that might otherwise render such words impossible. Countless memoirs, testimonies, novels, plays, and poems have attempted to represent the Holocaust in literature, and an abundance of critical texts have theorized such literature. "In order to know, we must imagine for ourselves," writes Georges Didi-Huberman in his influential text, *Images in Spite of All*, "Let us not invoke the unimaginable . . . we are obliged to that oppressive imaginable."³ Didi-Huberman's statement about contemporary society's obligation to imagine the Holocaust finds concrete expression in the constant growth of literature that uses imaginative techniques to address the Nazi genocide.

As with Holocaust literature, children's and young adult literature has also experienced rapid growth over the past decades, with worldwide bestsellers read by people of all ages. The aim of children's literature is "instruction with delight"—a goal purportedly established by John Newbery in the mid-eighteenth century—and authors of youth literature have responded in varying ways to this representational injunction.⁴ Anxieties surrounding the roles of pleasure and education in children's literature continue to occupy authors and critics alike, especially when dealing with a subject as difficult and disturbing as the Holocaust. As J.D. Stahl, Tina L. Hanlon, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser argue, a major shift in children's literature occurred in the 1960s, "when social problems of all kinds, such as divorce, racial tensions, sexuality, and conflict between the generations, became (with much initial resistance) standard themes of a new breed of writers."⁵ Youth literature in the postwar period thus became more introspective, psychologically nuanced, socially conscious, and skeptical of adult authority as it embraced a new kind of realism.

By the time authors began to write about the Holocaust for a young readership, imaginative and fictional literature had long been a staple of the field, from folk and fairy tales to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to *Harriet the Spy*. Appealing to young people's expansive imaginative abilities, these texts and contexts situate youth in a unique position vis-à-vis Didi-Huberman's argument. Already poised and primed for imaginative ventures via literature both realistic and fantastic, true and not true, young people become, in certain respects, ideal readers of the Holocaust. This statement will of course be seen as controversial to many who believe that some of the most difficult subjects associated with the Holocaust—death, war, genocide, abuse—are not suitable for young people's consumption. Questions arise about whether traumatic events and experiences can be transmitted to children without inflicting secondary trauma on them, and whether children can understand the trauma if such communication is attempted.

Such fears often overlook the diversity and specificity of youth Holocaust literature in favour of generalized worries about suitability and anxieties over inflicting the wounds of the past onto future generations. In opposition to these concerns is the pedagogical desire of those who believe that children must be taught the facts about the Holocaust and learn the associated, often simplified, lessons of history, whether respect for human life and dignity, remembrance, or universal morality. The many contradictions raised by youth Holocaust literature therefore relate to its encounter with at least two figurative conundrums: one in the form of the representational difficulties (or impossibilities) facing all Holocaust literature and the other in the assumptions surrounding its appropriateness for certain age groups based on perceived levels of maturity. Addressing the former, the Canadian scholar Adrienne Kertzer, one of the foremost specialists of children's Holocaust literature, argues that "if all language is inadequate, as many Holocaust writers say, then ultimately all literature about the Holocaust may be a form of children's literature, trying to describe events with a very limited vocabulary."⁶ Kertzer highlights the ongoing relevance of a flourishing field that has been dramatically understudied in academia.

The latter representational muzzle of appropriateness often leads to fears that children will absorb vicarious trauma from Holocaust literature or, contrarily, become inured to it. To borrow a phrase from Betty Bacon's 1988 Marxist collection on socioeconomic politics in youth literature, "how much truth do we tell the children?"⁷ Can and should young people find pleasure in the Holocaust texts they read? There is certainly no consensus around these questions, and youth literature spanning the last seventy-five years can be seen grappling with their difficulty. Authors of Holocaust literature for young people struggle with either oversimplifying the events of the Second World War to the point of distortion or terrorizing children with the brutal truths of historical fact. Similarly, such authors must navigate the ambiguous ground between artistic freedom and historical accuracy, a feat all the more difficult

because, in Lydia Kokkola's words, "Holocaust literature for children can be conceived as having a greater moral obligation to be historically accurate than historical fiction dealing with less catastrophic events."⁸ The issue of historical accuracy and authenticity in youth literature becomes highly contentious when the subject is the Holocaust, an event that is viewed by many as the epitome of inexpressible horror and that has simultaneously been politicized, reified, and denied in the decades following the Second World War. Redemptive and generalized narratives clash with those that attempt to represent or gesture at the gruesome, near-fantastic reality of the Holocaust, leading to a wide array of texts both inventive and informative.

Historical Fiction in Canadian Children's Holocaust Literature

Historical fiction about the Holocaust in youth literature has arisen as one mode of responding to Newbery's prescription of "instruction with delight" in which Canadian authors flourish.⁹ This is not to say that Canadians hold the monopoly on children's historical fiction about the Holocaust, but rather that the two most prolific Holocaust writers for young people in Canada, Carol Matas and Kathy Kacer, rely on and implement historical fiction in effective and influential ways. Arguably the most famous example of children's Holocaust literature is *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, an American author. The *New York Times* published a 1989 review comparing Lowry's work to Matas's *Lisa's War*, as both texts address the Holocaust in Denmark. The newspaper declared the latter a triumphant and nuanced exploration of the subject, in contrast to *Number the Stars*'s evasion of the stakes of the German invasion.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Lowry's text has received far more publicity over the last thirty years and is frequently used in grade school curricula. The reasons for this are numerous, but one is surely *Number the Stars*'s perceived palatability and accessibility precisely due to its lack of a Jewish protagonist. Jews in *Number the Stars* play secondary roles, whereas they hold agentic positions in *Lisa's War*. Matas argues that this problematic response to the supposed universality of non-Jewish characters—and the wider implications of Jewish erasure in youth Holocaust literature—affects young people's willingness to accept a story focusing on the Jewish experience.¹¹

The conception of Holocaust literature for young people as "history with heart" (that is, placing invented or reimagined characters in historically accurate situations) has therefore been pioneered and expanded by Canadian authors. Fiction based on historical fact is one way that Matas and Kacer express ideas that might otherwise be incomprehensible while allowing children to have a meaningful "emotional connection to the story."¹² As Kacer argues, "I hope I do that by creating characters that are compelling and real"; her statement raises the relevance and necessity of fiction in establishing "real" characters and allowing for a connection between young contemporary readers and the increasingly distant past, especially when facts and figures

about the Holocaust are too overwhelming to comprehend.¹³ This effort to combine reality with fiction, accuracy with invention, and (in Matas's character Marisa's formulation) remembrance with an open heart often contrasts with the many Holocaust texts for young people, whether from the United States or elsewhere, that construct a redemptive or sanitized narrative from the horror and trauma of the Nazi genocide.

Commitment to historical accuracy is a defining feature of both Matas's and Kacer's fiction. Telling the truth is an author's job, Matas states, and "the rest follows. Sometimes the truth is extremely painful, but you can't shy away from it."¹⁴ This understanding informs her perspective on writing children's literature in which characters live through (and sometimes die because of) shocking, traumatic, or horrifying events. Despite her status as a prolific and "award-winning author for young readers," Matas maintains that she does not write *for* young people but rather *about* them: "once you're writing about a person, you're just writing about a person of a certain age . . . there's no censorship or condescension, because you're simply describing that person's experience at that age."¹⁵ With the exception of one act of censorship while writing *Daniel's Story*, in which Matas omitted a graphic scene that she herself deemed inappropriate for readers of any age, her dedication to communicating the facts and experiences of her characters, whether based on real people or not, is central to her writing.¹⁶

Kathy Kacer's work arrives at a similar conclusion in terms of historical accuracy and commitment to authenticity, though she approaches the subject from a nearly opposing angle. In contrast to Matas, who does not write *for* children, Kacer is acutely aware of her young audience and the limits that youth literature imposes: "the fact that you write for children automatically means that you leave stuff out. I believe that this literature has to be sensitive to age and stage of development. We know that information that is too graphic too soon will deter young people from wanting to seek out more information later."¹⁷ Kacer's parents, both Holocaust survivors, had an "innate sensitivity about what to tell me at each stage of my development," a sensitivity that she endeavours to bring to her Holocaust fiction for children.¹⁸ Kacer deliberately furnishes her books with "satisfying" endings (as opposed to "happy" endings), leaving children with a sense of hope while honouring historical fact.¹⁹ Thus, although the methods and approaches that the two authors adopt in writing historical fiction differ in motivation, their goal of facilitating learning and emotional connection via authenticity in their Holocaust literature has much in common.

Carol Matas's Holocaust Fiction: "One Person Can Make a Difference"²⁰

The trend of youth historical fiction about the Holocaust began in 1987, when Matas published her first book set during the Second World War, *Lisa's War*. Released two

years before Lowry's *Number the Stars* and thus contributing to (if not catalyzing) a renewed interest in Holocaust historical fiction for young readers, *Lisa's War* tells the story of the Danish resistance during the Second World War as witnessed by some of its adolescent members. Efforts to make *Lisa's War* and its sequel *Jesper* accessible to young Canadian readers are evident from the language used in both works and in the foreword to *Lisa's War*, in which Matas situates Canada within the wider context of war. *Lisa's War* foregrounds complex Jewish characters, although the specific persecution of Jews and the genocidal ideology of the Nazis are not explicitly mentioned in the foreword, leading to a curious retreat from the subject of the Holocaust itself. On her website, Matas concedes that she does not believe that *Lisa's War* and *Jesper* are in fact Holocaust texts "in the strict sense. One was about the *rescue* of Jews, the other about the resistance."²¹ The question of what constitutes Holocaust literature is a fraught one, and generic categorization continues to be a subject of contention to survivors, writers, and readers alike. If, however, Matas considers *Lisa's War* and *Jesper* to be works external to the realm of Holocaust literature as they do not address ghettos, concentration camps, mass murder, and starvation, *Daniel's Story* is unequivocally a Holocaust text.

In 1992, the organizers of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), having encountered her book *Sworn Enemies* (notably, not a Holocaust text) through her publisher, approached Matas about a collaborative project.²² Still in its incipient stages of development, the USHMM enlisted Matas to undertake the project of writing a book for young people that would in some way complement a planned exhibit at the museum, also called "Daniel's Story." Matas was given certain parameters: the protagonist had to be named Daniel; he had to move or be moved from Germany to Lodz, then Auschwitz, and on to Buchenwald; and he had to survive the war. The task of filling in the details of the story was left to the author's discretion. In writing the text, Matas achieved a kind of historical fiction that, partly due to its association with the Museum in Washington, D.C., became a model for how to write about the Holocaust for a young audience. More than its American counterpart, Canadian children's Holocaust literature began, in the wake of *Daniel's Story*, to develop an increasing realism: the Holocaust was not portrayed solely as a triumphant story of hope and endurance, but rather as a traumatic event of seemingly unimaginable proportions that defied simple narratives. In Canada, the prefabricated "scripts" of the Holocaust (as seen in the USHMM's narrative parameters for Matas in *Daniel's Story*) gave way to more nuanced, reflective, and open-ended stories that did not avoid problematic or terrifying historical facts.

One of the hallmarks of the Canadian mode of narrating the Holocaust in youth literature is therefore the highlighting of ambiguity and uncertainty. As Matas comments, "when I was a kid, there was nothing I hated more than being patted on the head."²³ In *Daniel's Story*, *Jesper* (which preceded it), and many of Matas's works that

followed, children and young adults are treated as complex human beings with desires, fears, and interior lives equal to their adult counterparts. Teenaged characters are confronted with loss, death, and despair; they question their own and others' actions from theological, political, familial, and emotional perspectives; and they are often faced with what Lawrence Langer calls "choiceless choices."²⁴ In *Jesper*, the protagonist must decide whether or not to kill a childhood friend who has become a Nazi officer, confronting the moral implications of such a decision. In *My Enemy's House* sees Marisa grappling with mixed feelings of gratitude and disgust when, disguised as a Polish gentile, she is taken into the home of a Nazi official's family and treated with kindness. Children and teenagers in this literature are presented as characters who, despite (or perhaps because of) their age, encounter monumental challenges, and their agency, skills, and capacities for moral judgment emerge as defining features of Canadian youth Holocaust literature.

Although most texts in Matas's Holocaust canon are written in the first person and employ frame narratives to look back on wartime experiences (thus ensuring the protagonists' survival, as in Kacer's work), many family members, friends, and strangers are killed in brutal ways that Matas addresses directly. *Daniel's Story* culminates in Daniel's near murder of the son of an SS officer responsible for the barbaric killing of a young Jewish child. Although Daniel ultimately decides not to take "a life for a life," Matas seldom shrinks in her texts from depicting the atrocities of the Holocaust as they are understood today.²⁵ In describing Canadian children's historical fiction, Judith Saltman argues that it "is often harsh in tone and atmosphere, showing the physical hardships, relentless labour, [and] prejudices towards cultural groups" that contribute to young people's experience of the past.²⁶ This method of writing, as opposed to sanitized or distorted narratives of the Holocaust, represents one way (and increasingly, the Canadian way) of communicating genocide to children and young adults through historical fiction.

As Matas explains on her website, "Over two million children were murdered in the Holocaust. They cannot tell their stories. I hope I can tell some of their stories for them."²⁷ This trend of "telling some of their stories for them" is not uncontroversial. Elie Wiesel, viewed by many as the unofficial proprietor of Holocaust testimony, repeatedly declared in his lifetime that only those who experienced the horrors of the event can claim some linguistic or literary possession over it: "The past belongs to the dead and the survivor does not recognize himself in the words linking him to them. We speak in code, we survivors, and this code cannot be broken, cannot be deciphered."²⁸ In Wiesel's conception of Holocaust writing, language itself fails to do justice to memory. Figurative or fantastical devices, formal or generic experimentation, and fictionalization of the Holocaust are consequently considered inappropriate. Novels about the Holocaust, Wiesel argues, do not and cannot exist: "A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka."²⁹ Given his critique of

Holocaust fiction, Wiesel's metonymizing of Treblinka in this quotation is significant; he employs a notable figurative device while declaring the impossibility of a literary approach. His dictum therefore results in an apparent paradox given that many critics frequently use the word "fiction" to describe Wiesel's work, blurring the lines between literature in general and novels in particular.

This paradox demonstrates the difficulty that scholars encounter with assessing writing that seeks to render through language what many agree to be unspeakable. Wiesel's *Night*, for example, though true and accurate according to his own memory, contains conversations and scenes that must have been reimagined and rephrased. No literature is entirely reflective of reality and so most Holocaust literature amounts to fiction in the eyes of certain critics.³⁰ This preoccupation with authenticity and its impossibility in literature leads scholars like David Roskies to argue, in agreement with Wiesel, that most (if not all) legitimate Holocaust literature was written during the wartime years or by those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand.³¹ Matas, in fact, states on her website that her initial perspective on the subject was in accordance with this prescription: "I'd felt it was a topic only to be tackled by those who had been through it."³² Her books, however, tell a different story. She knowingly fictionalizes the Holocaust but does so for the same purpose that Wiesel outlines as a guide for survivor testimony: to remember. That Matas is remembering fictional people rather than real ones allows her to narrate experiences of the Holocaust that risk going untold in children's literature (as was the case with the story of Danish rescue detailed in *Lisa's War*).

The link between memory and literature is a significant theme throughout much of Matas's work, most clearly evident in her 2013 text, *Pieces of the Past*. Subtitled "the Holocaust Diary of Rose Rabinowitz," *Pieces of the Past* tells the story of a fictional teenaged girl orphaned during the Holocaust and sent to live with an adoptive family in Winnipeg in 1948. Rose's diary, suggested by her guardian as a way of coming to terms with the traumas of her recent experiences, provides a point of access between the present and the past and, significantly, a space for Rose to remember her murdered family. In an act of narrative and chronological inversion, Matas, through the protagonist, highlights the immediacy of the past: when she describes events taking place in present-day Winnipeg, she uses the past tense while events from Rose's past in Europe are situated in the present tense. After Rose has committed her family's story to the pages of her diary, she realizes the result of her literary endeavour: "I suppose that in one way, I don't feel afraid of my memories anymore . . . So at least the Nazis didn't take that away from me too—the memories of my family . . . In some odd way, I feel as if I have saved them from the void, from the blackness that took away everything. They are here, now, written in black and white, remembered, real."³³ Rose's diary grants her the power to re-animate, re-member, and re-present her murdered loved ones, embodying Amy Hungerford's thesis that "the text is not only

like a life . . . but it can become the actual experience of another life, an experience that then becomes ours.”³⁴ Through the generative act of writing, Rose thus renders her family tangible, accessible, and ever-present.

Contradiction and Generic Fluidity in the Work of Kathy Kacer

Kathy Kacer unites facts and imagination to create texts for children that are both informative and accessible. Emerging on the scene of Canadian children’s literature several years after Matas, Kacer has written numerous works of historical fiction on the subject of the Holocaust.³⁵ Kacer, like Matas, explores the paradoxes of the Holocaust in her texts for young people, evident in her 2001 novel *Clara’s War*. The middle-grade novel details the experiences of the thirteen-year-old protagonist Clara, her younger brother Peter, and their parents as they are transported from Prague to Theresienstadt.³⁶ Separated from her parents and brother, Clara tries to adjust to her new life, prepares for the inspection of visiting Red Cross officials, and even auditions for the children’s opera *Brundibár*. Clara is given the role of the sparrow in the opera and pours much of her time into the performance.

The period leading up to the infamous Red Cross visit documented in *Clara’s War* was a time of incongruities in Theresienstadt. In addition to 7,503 inmates being immediately deported to Auschwitz to make the ghetto appear less crowded, prisoners were forced to beautify the grounds, plant flowers, remove barracks and other evidence of their mistreatment, while presenting a soccer game, concerts, and plays, one of which was *Brundibár*.³⁷ The inmates knew that everything they were doing was staged for Nazi propaganda purposes, but the activities were nonetheless unheard-of luxuries and rare sources of fun in the ghetto. Transports to Auschwitz or other killing centres ceased in anticipation of the Red Cross visit. Every prisoner in Theresienstadt was occupied with the grand charade of making the ghetto look more presentable. It is during this time that Kacer sets her novel, providing a backdrop for other personal (and fictionalized) events that take place in Theresienstadt; one of Clara’s best friends, Jacob, hatches an escape plan, while her brother Peter falls ill and dies from a chest infection.

Demonstrating the paradoxes of Theresienstadt, whereby Clara can participate in and enjoy a theatrical production while grieving the loss of her brother, Kacer’s novel exemplifies the impulse to combine fact and fiction. Kacer thus reveals the contradictions presented by the Holocaust in both the form and content of her work. Despair and hope, death and life vie for dominance in Theresienstadt and Clara’s experience of it: “One minute, you were angry and scared. The next minute, you were looking forward to something. Was it really possible to hate and enjoy a place at the same time?”³⁸ Kacer demonstrates that although cultural and sporting events

were performed amid great deprivation and oppression in Theresienstadt, they were still creative and recreational outlets for many inmates who had limited avenues for self-expression. Grounding the fictional Clara in historical reality (based on Kacer's meticulous research) renders *Clara's War* an epitome of the history and heart that Canadian children's authors employ in their Holocaust fiction.

Perhaps cognizant that historical fiction itself might be perceived as a contradiction in terms, Kacer in her 2008 novel, *The Diary of Laura's Twin*, meditates on the nebulous problem of generic categorization that is presented by most if not all Holocaust literature. In this text, the thirteen-year-old Laura receives a diary written during the Second World War as part of a Bat Mitzvah twinning program. Readers gain access to the diary as Laura encounters it, gradually discovering the story of a young woman named Sara Gittler. Laura is so engrossed in the journal that one night she ignores her well-meaning friend's phone call to continue reading Sara's story. When confronted by her friend the next day, Laura inadvertently summarizes the difficulties of categorizing youth Holocaust literature. Aware of her penchant for reading, her friend asks her, "So what was it this time? Fantasy? Mystery? Biography?" to which she responds, "Kind of a bit of everything, I guess."³⁹ These words could be applied to Kacer's own work; in writing a fictionalized diary and repeatedly returning to Laura's "present-day" frame narrative to defer the conclusion of Sara's story, Kacer engages in an imaginative exercise in order to achieve, paradoxically, a kind of literary realism. As she states, "the characters that I create are based on the many survivors I have met over the years, even if they're fictionalized."⁴⁰ In this way, she combines the literary features of fantasy, mystery, and biography to arrive at a mode of historical fiction used to both educate and appeal to young readers.

Kacer's sense of generic ambivalence, signalled by Laura's conversation with her friend, pervades the text in metafictional and often contradictory ways. Laura, trying to justify and explain her fascination with the diary to herself, reasons: "This wasn't a novel and it wasn't a history textbook. The words on the page were real; the lives were real."⁴¹ This statement is complicated by the fact that, although the words on the page are real, the lives are not; they are invented by Kacer to *seem* real. Readers are left to wonder how this text and Kacer's work more broadly fit into Laura's description. *The Diary of Laura's Twin* is in some ways both a novel and a history textbook, or, more precisely, a novel attempting to illuminate the past, grounded in historical research. Viewed in this light, the lives about which Laura reads *are* real within the imagined world that Kacer creates; they are real to Laura and are meant to become real for the reader. At the same time, by drawing attention to her own mode of narrating the Holocaust within the text, Kacer highlights the difficulty of writing historical fiction for children. That she continues to write and find an audience for youth Holocaust literature demonstrates the impulse to combine pedagogy and accessibility that defines the genre in Canada.

While most of Kacer's work includes an awareness of Canadian national identity and a desire to target a specifically Canadian audience, her most recent text *Broken Strings*, a collaboration with Eric Walters, is transplanted into an American setting. Kacer and Walters situate their story of middle-school theatre, ethnic and racial intolerance, and Holocaust memories within the devastated community of 2002 New Jersey still reeling from the events of September 11, 2001. This "interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic" that Michael Rothberg terms "multidirectional memory," which places in conversation diverse historical tragedies and experiences.⁴² That young adolescents today have no direct memories of either September 11, 2001 or the Holocaust requires a leap of imagination on which Kacer and Walters capitalize in *Broken Strings*. In doing so, they bring the genre of young people's Canadian Holocaust literature back to the starting point that Carol Matas established in her collaboration with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Canadian stories penned for a primarily American audience. Through their particular mode of historical fiction, however, Kacer and Matas grant a kind of accessibility that invites readers of diverse nationalities to encounter the material. Their combination of historical research and creative invention allows for education and affective engagement, as well as the kind of multidirectional and cross-cultural dialogue that Rothberg theorizes.

History with Heart

Both Carol Matas and Kathy Kacer thus engage with the Holocaust in their historical fiction for young readers in ways that directly relate to present circumstances, demonstrating that, as Kacer puts it, "this history is not dead; there is still a place for it in the lexicon of children's literature and there's a place for it on the shelves of schools and in the homes of young readers."⁴³ This "place" for the history of the Holocaust in children's literature, carved out by two Canadian authors, grants exploratory access to young people seeking to understand the current historical moment by gaining knowledge of the past. Both authors cite the American political situation during the summer of 2020 to be a distressing reality against which they write: the COVID-19 pandemic, the violent repercussions of systemic racism and police brutality, and the enduring popularity of fascist and neo-Nazi ideologies. While Kacer addresses this in her work by emphasizing the moral courage and good citizenship of helpers during the Holocaust, Matas sees each of her books as a simultaneous warning and acknowledgement that great or small acts of prejudice, oppression, racism, and antisemitism still persist. In this way, she claims that the overarching theme of her books is that "they're all about now . . . yes, it's a history lesson, but it's about right now."⁴⁴

In demonstrating the sadly perennial relevance of the Nazi genocide, Matas and Kacer also explore, and in some cases make explicit, how the Holocaust can continue

to be understood in the minds of children who might otherwise have no exposure to it. Their method of highlighting the persistent presence of the Holocaust animates historical facts through living, breathing, and accessible characters. Moreover, by preserving what Matas calls an open heart,⁴⁵ young readers can make meaningful connections with these characters, as Kacer puts it. The emphasis placed on the individual in each of their Holocaust narratives reveals and illuminates the importance of specificity amidst generality. Historical fiction is the conduit that allows both authors to locate themselves, their readers, and their characters among the six million—the widely cited number of Jews murdered during the Holocaust. The particular experiences of characters, grounded in solid research, leads to a type of significance and applicability in these Canadian authors' works that could not be achieved through pat generalizations or trite, untruthful conclusions about the Holocaust. Matas's and Kacer's works establish and fulfill the mandate or organizing principle of Canadian children's Holocaust literature, especially historical fiction, as outlined by Marisa in *In My Enemy's House*: to remember those affected by the Nazi genocide while preserving the open heart at the centre of their stories.⁴⁶

1

Carol Matas, *In My Enemy's House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 122.

2

Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, [1958] 2006), ix.

3

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

4

J.D. Stahl, Tina L. Hanlon, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, eds., *Crosscurrents of Children's Literature: An Anthology of Texts and Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

5

Stahl, Hanlon, and Keyser, 5.

6

Adrienne Kertzer, *My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature, and the Holocaust* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 39.

7

Betty Bacon, ed., *How Much Truth Do We Tell the Children?: The Politics of Children's Literature* (Minneapolis: MEP Publishing, 1988), i.

8

Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

9

Stahl, Hanlon, and Keyser, 4.

10

Edith Milton, "Children's Books: Escape from Copenhagen," review of *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and *Lisa's War* by Carol Matas, *New York Times*, May 21, 1989, section 7, p. 32.

11

Carol Matas, virtual interview with Joanna Krongold, Zoom, July 9, 2020.

12

Kathy Kacer, virtual interview with Joanna Krongold, Zoom, July 13, 2020.

13

Kacer, virtual interview.

14

Matas, virtual interview.

15

Carol Matas, "Index," *Carol Matas, Award-Winning Writer for Young Readers*, accessed July 20, 2020, <http://carol.carolmatas.com/index.html>; Matas, virtual interview.

16

Matas attributes her truth-telling impulse to her upbringing, citing her father, a judge, as an important influence on her thought and writing. Her one act of censorship involved omitting a story about which she read during her research for *Daniel's Story*: German soldiers with bayonets would position themselves beneath ghetto hospital windows and Jewish babies would be tossed out and impaled on the bayonet spikes. Matas, virtual interview.

17

Kacer, virtual interview.

18

Kacer, virtual interview.

19

Kacer, virtual interview.

20

Matas, virtual interview.

21

Carol Matas, "My Story – My Journey as an Author," *Carol Matas, Award-Winning Writer for Young Readers*, accessed October 20, 2018, <http://carol.carolmatas.com/carol-matas-author-journey.htm>. Emphasis in original.

22

Matas, virtual interview.

23

Matas, virtual interview.

24

Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), 72.

25

Carol Matas, *Daniel's Story* (New York: Scholastic, 1993), 116.

26

Judith Saltman, "Canadian Children's Literature at the Millennium," in *Windows and Words: A Look at Canadian Children's Literature in English*, ed. Aida Hudson and Susan Cooper (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2003), 31.

27

Carol Matas, "Questions and Answers about Carol Matas," *Carol Matas, Award-Winning Writer for Young Readers*, accessed October 20, 2018, <http://carol.carolmatas.com/carol-matas-questions-and-answers.htm>.

28

Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," in *Dimensions of the Holocaust: A Series of Lectures Presented at Northwestern University*, by Elie Wiesel, Lucy Dawidowicz, Dorothy Rabinowitz, and Robert McAfee Brown (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 7.

29

Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," 7.

30

See, for example Irving Halperin, *Messengers from the Dead: Literature of the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

31

David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

32

Matas, "My Story."

33

Carol Matas, *Pieces of the Past: The Holocaust Diary of Rose Rabinowitz* (Toronto: Scholastic, 2013), 124.

34

Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 104.

35

The latest, co-authored with Eric Walters and entitled *Broken Strings*, was published in September 2019, and she is at work on several more. Kacer, virtual interview.

36

The Nazi ghetto/concentration camp/transit centre located in what was then northwestern Czechoslovakia.

37

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Theresienstadt: Red Cross Visit," *Holocaust*

Encyclopedia, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/theresienstadt-red-cross-visit>.

38

Kathy Kacer, *Clara's War* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2001), 59.

39

Kathy Kacer, *The Diary of Laura's Twin* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2008), 32.

40

Kacer, virtual interview.

41

Kacer, *The Diary of Laura's Twin*, 47.

42

Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

43

Kacer, virtual interview.

44

Matas, virtual interview.

45

In a virtual interview with the author, Matas revealed that *Stony Heart* was the working title of *In My Enemy's House*. Matas, *In My Enemy's House*; Matas, virtual interview.

46

See Anne Renaud and Richard Rudnicki's 2018 picture book *Fania's Heart* for a continuation of this theme in Canadian children's literature. The text tells the remarkable story of the so-called "Heart of Auschwitz," a small heart-shaped book that unfolds like origami created by several inmates of Auschwitz for their fellow prisoner Fania Landau's twentieth birthday. While enduring starvation, abuse, and the constant threat of death, the friends managed, at great personal risk and sacrifice, to organize and assemble the materials of the heart. They astonishingly procured cloth for the cover pages, paper and pencil for the inscriptions, thread for the binding and decorative embroidery, and paste made of a mixture of bread and water (scarce and valuable commodities in Auschwitz) to glue the booklet together. Landau smuggled this booklet, crafted by her friends and bearing messages of love and courage, out of Auschwitz by tucking

it under her arm, next to her heart. The paper heart is now housed in the Montreal Holocaust Museum and has thus become a token of Canadian Holocaust narrative. Anne Renaud, *Fania's Heart*, ill. Richard Rudnicki (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2018).