

Article

Children's Literature and the Holocaust

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Abstract: The aim of my paper is to examine children's literature written in Italy and centred on the Holocaust. It is quite common for people to deem the subject matter inappropriate for young audiences, whilst it is also considered disrespectful to write inventive literature for children about the death camps. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to inform children about such a major historical event. Moreover, the stories written on this subject aim to introduce children to themes like prejudice, discrimination and racism. My research focuses on the recurrent patterns that occur frequently in these books. In these books, the focus lies on the victims rather than the perpetrators. They deal with the story of a Jewish family and frequently feature a child as the protagonist. These books will undoubtedly provoke questions by young readers, but they are most likely best read with an adult who can answer any questions appropriately and deepen the historical frame. These narratives are important because educators have a responsibility to teach others and read about the Holocaust.

Keywords: children's literature; Holocaust; Italian writers; education

1. Introduction

I work as a museum educator in the Synagogues of Florence and Siena. Meetings, workshops, lessons and informal conversations are the core of my work. Usually, a museum class consists of between ten and 20 students, whose age range between six and 19 years. Students usually come from a variety of backgrounds: some from primary schools, some from secondary schools, and others are of adult age. I consider Holocaust education in schools and museums a mission which is intertwined with emotional experiences. The choice of sources and textbooks is undertaken with sensitivity to the emotional needs and specific circumstances of the learners. If it is difficult teaching about the Holocaust, teaching children about the Holocaust is even harder, because it demands responsibilities and keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter (Sherman 1988).

One concern of educators is how to present horrific, historical images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. It is important that images and texts do not overstimulate children's sensibility and that they are not perceived as disrespectful to the victims themselves. Can we teach this issue without frightening children? In fact, one of the main problems is the extreme and horrifying nature of the event, and some educators feel that the subject matter is inappropriate for young audiences. What is the inherent value inside and outside the classroom? How then do we attempt to analyse this topic? Nevertheless, from my point of view, children must be educated about such a significant historical event, and literature (see Lang 1989) is a central tool for this purpose. In particular, narrative testimony (Barzel 2002) aims at providing knowledge about the events of the past such as the Holocaust. Lawrence Langer affirms that what is important is to shed light on the Holocaust and all kinds of representations, as literature or poetry, can be a useful and valuable mean (Langer 1975). He argues for the crucial role of fiction in making the Holocaust understandable for the human imagination. Dan Bar-On asserts that there are 'historical truths' that explain "what happened", but there are also 'narrative truths' that depict "how someone tells what happened" (Bar-On 1995).

The ethical aspect is a crucial component of the problem of Holocaust representation to children, especially because it is bonded to the question of the limits of representation. On the one hand, educators are worried that an overload of factual information will overwhelm children and that they may not be able to cope with all such information (see [Jordan 2004](#)). Adrienne Kertzer opens her book by asking the question: “How do we tell children about the Holocaust without terrifying them, and what kind of knowledge do we convey when we are determined not to frighten?” ([Kertzer 2002](#)). On the other hand, if narratives are too bland or too naïve, they run the risk of not reaching their readers. In this context, literature for the young can contribute towards trivialising education and neglecting the historical depth of the Holocaust.

[Baer \(2000\)](#) mentions that there is a paradox that characterises Holocaust literature for children: on the one hand, it is unspeakable but, on the other, something that must be spoken about. Nevertheless, it is a commitment towards those who died writing and speaking about it, and also because as Primo Levi affirms, “historical events acquire their chiaroscuro and perspective only some decades after their conclusion ([Levi 1996](#))”.

Literature is supplementary, not antithetical, to history. Studying the history is not enough: literature is, as [Franklin \(2010\)](#) highlights, a retort to the Nazis’ cruel plan of dehumanisation. [Totten \(2001, p. 50\)](#) emphasises that: “If educators seek to assist students in gaining deeper insight into the Holocaust, to become more reflective and thoughtful human beings, to ponder and care about man’s inhumanity to man, and to examine one’s lived life in regard to personal and social responsibility, then the thoughtful use of Holocaust literature is a valuable vehicle for reaching toward those goals.”

In the Italian context, it is in particular the paratext of children’s Holocaust literature that plays a significant role. The notion of paratext appears in Gérard Genette’s study *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. It is related to the concept of threshold because the function of paratexts is to produce a correlation, an interface, between the basic text and the reader. Paratexts, in children’s fictional literature, have an educational impact as they guide the reader’s expectations and facilitate cognitive knowledge about the story. Such paratexts direct the audience’s attention to the facts, and without this attention, relevant information might be missed.

In fictional literature, comprehension of the meaning of the story can be deepened by its paratexts which become an important addition to the texts themselves. The paratext is a second source of information that provides key knowledge to the reader and helps to contextualise the fictional story.

This article will delve into contents and perspectives of the principal books written for children on this topic in Italy. For the purpose of analysing children’s literature about the Holocaust, I have chosen some books employed by educators here in Italy ([Gordon 2012](#)). I have chosen paradigmatic examples of Italian children’s literature about the Holocaust, grouped into three main categories: a narrative that puts a stress on historical events and characters (Section 2, Bartali e Sarfatti), the presence of a child narrator (Section 3, Lia Levi), and first-person narration (Section 4, Segre, Andra e Tati, Finzi). These books will be evaluated taking into consideration how they contribute to remembering the Holocaust. All of these texts approach the genocide from an oblique or even implicit angle, telling local stories, following predictive moments or reverberations. They stress Italian aspects of this history and pay attention to the local history of the Holocaust.

2. Fictional Literature: Sarfatti and Bartali

[Sarfatti \(2012, 2013, 2015\)](#) is one of the most respected authorities on the history of the Shoah in Italy. *L’albero della memoria. La shoah raccontata ai bambini* ([Sarfatti and Sarfatti 2013](#)) (*The memory tree. Narrating the Shoah to Children*) is written by Anna and Michele Sarfatti and was published in Italian in 2013. The book is set in Florence, and the authors carefully tell the story of a Jewish boy named Samuele Finzi and his family during the fascist regime and subsequent Nazi occupation. In the book, the linear development of the story is interrupted by historical paratext, where the reader learns historical data and facts. The historical documents help to learn and reconstruct the context of Samuel’s life. Additionally, an appendix provides more detailed information about Jewish culture. Sarfatti, in

an article written in 2017, affirms that: “we must continue to assert that in school knowledge must definitively prevail over memory” (Sarfatti 2017).

The book begins with a moment of joy and happiness during the Jewish Holiday of Sukkot,¹ which is then brutally interrupted by worrying news: King Vittorio Emanuele III has placed Mussolini in charge of the government. The persecution of Italian Jews starts: Samuele’s uncle loses his job as a railway worker and then the same happens to his father. However, the worst is yet to come, and the Italian racial laws force many to flee or live in hiding. Samuele remembers that before he was separated from his parents, he used to hide special things in the splits of a huge olive tree. After the end of the war, Samuele decides to go back to his old house. He searches in the tree trunk and he finds not only his hidden treasures, but also a small box that his father apparently left him. The box contains an old pocket watch that belonged to his father with a picture of Samuele hidden inside it. Every time Samuele hears the tick tock of the watch, he is reminded of his parents and the happiness of his past.

In the book, the paratext explains, defines and adds background information about the historical situation in Italy during WWII. In 1938, the imposition of the racial laws made Italian Jews second-class citizens. Among other things, Jews were no longer allowed to attend school. That is the reason why Samuele was excluded from the classroom and he suffered isolation and loneliness. During the Nazi occupation, the deportation from Florence to Poland started. Samuele is lucky as a previous classmate, Francesca, helps him move to the countryside so he can avoid deportation. He takes on a new name to avoid being identifiable. His parents, however, stay in the city and are soon deported.

Another paratext explains the history of the resistance movement. After September 1943, partisan Resistance groups were active throughout northern and much of central Italy. The Resistance movement welcomed fighters of all political backgrounds. They fought against Nazi occupation and against the Republic of Salò. In the book, Samuele is helped by one such “partisan”.

Therefore, *L’albero della memoria* includes information about the Holocaust from a historical point of view. It is important because children can gain an understanding of the historical context of the text they have read. By the time the young readers have finished the book, they are aware of the persecution of the Jewish population of Italy (and wider Europe) and the existence of extermination and death camps. Incorporating historical paratexts along with fictional accounts provides readers with a more profound and significant look at the fictional stories. This paratext (Gérard 1997) is useful to inform the readers and tell them what exactly is based on evidence or investigation, and what is added by the writer’s imagination. Thanks to the paratexts, questions such as “what”, “how” and “when” are dealt with. Paratexts stimulate children to develop historical awareness, which is the capacity to distinguish between different fiction and historical accuracy. Consequently, this book is well organised because it also involves elements that do not belong to the genuine story of the book. It expands Samuele’s story and it helps develop children’s education.

Francesca, Samuele’s friend, is a central character in the novel. She represents the people who took great risks to save the lives of Jews during the Holocaust, in a time when indifference prevailed. Most rescuers were ordinary people who cared about the people among them. Others were popular people, like Gino Bartali. His story is recalled in a comic book for children *La bicicletta di Gino Bartali* (Gandini 2015), *Gino Bartali and his Bike*, published in 2015 in Italian.

Bartali was a champion cyclist and a beloved public figure during his lifetime. He won his first *Giro d’Italia* (Tour of Italy) in 1936. Bartali used his celebrity status to help save the lives of Italian Jews during the German occupation of Italy in early September 1943. He was recruited into the Resistance movement by the Archbishop of Florence, Cardinal Elia Angelo Dalla Costa, who began helping Rabbi Nathan Cassuto of Florence. Unfortunately, Rabbi Cassuto was arrested by the Germans and deported to Poland. He later died on a death march. However, even after Rabbi Cassuto was arrested, the

¹ Sukkot is a Jewish holiday centred around giving thanks for the autumn harvest and commemorating the 40 years that the Jewish people spent wandering the desert after leaving slavery in Egypt. The word “Sukkot” means “booths” and refers to the temporary dwellings that Jews construct/live in during this holiday in memory of the period of wandering.

network continued functioning. Gino Bartali acted as a courier for the network. He hid messages and communication in the handlebars of his bike, transporting them throughout Florence and to surrounding areas as well. Whenever he was stopped by the Fascist police, he would demand that his bike not be touched, claiming it had been specifically set up to attain maximum speed.

Bartali is a model, both as a cyclist and an Italian citizen. For many years after the war, he did not speak about his role in saving hundreds of people. He once said: “Good is something you do, not something you talk about” (Gandini 2015). It was only after his death that Bartali’s rescue activities came to light. Subsequently in 2013, Yad Vashem recognised Gino Bartali with the honour of *Righteous Among the Nations*. Bartali epitomises the conviction that all people, no matter their status, are of equal value. Life is about fulfilling your duty towards other humans. This also represents independence of mind and spirit against propaganda and totalitarianism. The story is a re-telling of a legend. This book represents a specific category of children’s literature of the Holocaust: historical fiction based on real persons or events.

3. Lia Levi: Semi-Fictional Literature

In the previous section, I have presented fictional literature about the Holocaust in Italy. In the following section, I discuss an autobiographical, semi-fictional text that is evocative of the Fascist Regime and the Holocaust. This narrative is a combination of actual events with completely fictional characters. It is therefore crucial to balance historical accuracy with creativity. Moreover, it is important to look at how writers who experienced the Holocaust as children transformed their views and conceptions when authoring accounts of their own experiences in fiction or semi-fictional literature. In Italy, Lia Levi is an excellent example of this form of writing about the Holocaust.

Lia Levi is a well-known author of children’s literature, who has published more than a dozen books. The issue of Italy’s co-responsibility for the Holocaust is a recurrent concern for Levi. Her books describe and discuss the integration of Jews into Italian society, with a specific focus on the consequences of the Racial Laws promulgated in Italy from 1938 to 1943 to enforce radical discrimination against Italian Jews and the inhabitants of the colonies.

Lia Levi’s biography is relevant to understand her work and poetry, as her life experiences illuminate her work. Lia Levi (Clementi 2013) was born in Pisa in 9 November 1931. She therefore lived through the historical period in question as a child, and feels that she has absorbed it deeply. As a result, she is helped by her imagination in the creation of fiction to evoke an accurate and true atmosphere that relates to such historical events. Lia Levi moved to Rome from Turin because her father lost his job due to the racial laws of the time and, in Rome, he obtained a “secret” job because Jews were not allowed to be employed anywhere. Suddenly, her parents became vulnerable and the family needed protection. She was still a child but felt as if she was older than her age.

During the Nazi occupation, the situation changed and things got progressively worse. Towards the end of September 1943, the Germans proposed a deal to the leaders of the Jewish community: the Jewish population were to hand over fifty kilos of gold within thirty-six hours in exchange for a promise that no member of the community would be harmed. Although the Jewish community appeared to believe this promise, Levi’s mother decided to load her children onto a bus and moved to the countryside into a convent. In the convent, the children were safe and well-looked after, thanks also to the school placed inside its walls. The children could stay there using a false name and remain hidden. Following on from the proposal, at dawn on October 16th 1943, the Germans deported every Jewish citizen. Levi’s parents were safe because someone warned them on the telephone beforehand and advised them to escape. The German occupation of Rome lasted nine months. The Americans then arrived and with them came freedom.

Most of the books written by Lia Levi are based on her experiences of hiding and of the persecution of the protagonist and/or their families. For example, Levi’s novel *Una valle piena di stele* (Levi 2010), *A Valley Full of Stars*, emphasises the distressing and dangerous consequences of discrimination and persecution. The book narrates the story of Brunisa, a little girl living under Fascist rule. The text leads

the reader through her personal suffering and turmoil caused by racial persecution. It allows readers to follow the experience of the young protagonist, who expresses in the first person the way of life of thousands of persecuted Jewish-Italian children (Picchiotti 2013). The storyline recalls another book written by Lia Levi, *La portinaia Apollonia* (Levi 2006), *Apollonia, the porter*, which through a small text and painted illustrations, allows us to observe the life of a Jewish young child during the Second World War. In *Una Bambina e basta* (Levi 1994), *Just a child*, the narrator is a little girl and this fact facilitates the circulation of the book in schools. As a result, the primary readers are young children. The book gives a deeper insight of the role played by the Fascist regime in excluding Italian Jews from the social, political, and economic spheres of society, as a consequence of the racial laws issued in 1938. The text also condemns the passive stance of the Catholic church in challenging the persecution of the Jewish community of Rome.

These novels additionally contain didactic elements such as historical records and chronological timelines, that, as Lydia Kokkola remarks, “lend veracity to historical fiction” (Kokkola 2003). According to Kokkola, it is imperative to maintain historical accuracy in this kind of literature. She examines the relationship between fiction and historical data, disapproving texts that distort historical episodes. This is imperative also because Holocaust denial has in fact increased in recent years (Lipstadt 1993). Authors who write about the Holocaust have a great responsibility to prevent any form of writing being twisted to instead incite people to deny that these atrocities ever took place.

Many didactic sections are dedicated to the Italian antisemitic turn that began on 14 July 1938 (Luconi 2004), with the issue of the *Manifesto della razza* (race manifesto). Following the publication of the *Manifesto della razza*, Italian Jews were expelled from the Fascist Party, were told that they could not hold property or maintain their belongings and were dismissed from positions in public administrations. They were deprived of their livelihoods and their right to public education. This therefore banned Jews from teaching in or attending schools and universities and expelled them from academic and cultural institutions. As Liliana Segre² affirms, she cannot forget the day in 1938 when suddenly she was told she could no longer go to school—because of her religion.

The novel *Il segreto della casa sul cortile* (Levi 2013), *The Secret of Courtyard House*, prepares children to cope with the horrors of the Holocaust and Lia Levi shows great care and concern for her young readers. She describes darker aspects of humanity in ways that allow child readers to progressively understand some of the events which can lead to a conflict. Moreover, she offers hope that the world can be a more non-violent place. Kimberly Reynolds affirms that “childhood is certainly a time for learning to negotiate and find a place in society, but it is also about developing individual potential suited to a future in which societies could be different in some significant ways” (Reynolds 2007, p. 2).

Il segreto della casa sul cortile is set in 1943 when Nazi-Germans occupied Rome. The main characters are Ludovico, the father and a scriptwriter; Patrizia, the mother; Paolo, the younger brother; Mauro Folliero, Ludovico’s best friend, who signed the novel of Ludovico with his name and Piera, the main character and the daughter of Ludovico and Patrizia.

During the Nazi Occupation of Rome, in September 1943, Herbert Kappler, the head of German police, demanded the extortionate sum of 50 kilograms of gold (*Goldaktion*) from the Jewish community of Rome. Kappler stipulated that if the request was not met within 36 hours, then a group of 200 members would be immediately deported. The community eventually presented the requested sum of gold at the German police station. However, whilst Kappler had guaranteed the community safety if they paid, following the delivery of the gold, in October, the government deported the entire Jewish population of the ghetto in Rome to Auschwitz.

Ludovico resolves to flee to a hiding place before the deportation, because he does not trust Kappler’s words. The family moves to a huge townhouse in Rome’s suburbs, in a working-class district, and change their surname to Sergi. Thousands of people live in this neighbourhood, and

² In January 2018, Italian President Sergio Mattarella named 87-year-old Holocaust survivor Liliana Segre Life senator.

as such, it seemed easy to remain hidden. The new house is less charming and comfortable than the previous one, but there is a lovely courtyard, where the family can stay together, forgetting the atrocities outside for a while.

Piera forges a close friendship with Carlo, a young boy who lives nearby. However, because Carlo is the son of a fascist policeman, Piera has to hide her real identity. Carlo feels very strongly about Piera and soon realizes that she is in trouble with the Nazi-Fascist regime. At home, Carlo overhears his father and discovers that the Germans have found out about his friend's hiding place. Carlo promptly informs Piera and the family manage to escape to the countryside. As a result, thanks to Carlo, Piera, Paolo, Ludovico and Patrizia avoid being discovered. At the end of the war, Carlo and Piera are still friends, but now without secrets and false identities.

In order to avoid the Holocaust and its victims from becoming abstract impersonal representative figures of suffering, the books written by Lia Levi mention specifics for the particulars of the experience. Instead of seeing the Holocaust as the death of 13 million people, or six million Jews, students learn about the Holocaust by researching and reading about a specific person or a small group of people affected.

4. First-Person Narration: Liliana Segre, Andra e Tati, Cesare Moisè Finzi

In this section, I consider some examples of first-person narratives in children's literature written in Italy. I have chosen three authors that represent Italian testimonial literature: Liliana Segre, Andra e Tati Bucci, and Cesare Moisè Finzi. These books recognise the faults, failures and role played by Italy in the persecution of the Italian-Jewish population. They address themes of generational memory, family secrets, and the ethical representations of the present in relation to the past.

Although books such as these are strong texts in their own right, both as works of history and literature, they are suitable to be used in Holocaust education classes because they take large, possibly overwhelming statistics and translate them into more personalised accounts. In each story lies the painful discovery of the very human experience of adjusting ourselves to the frightening realities in the world around us as we struggle to maintain control over our lives in such a vastly changing, demonising world. The reader sees everything from the author's perspective, and the human dimension to the catastrophe of the Holocaust is always vividly established.

The narrator is typically an adult survivor looking back at his/her childhood, because young readers respond in a better way to narrators who speak through a youthful voice. Through the survivors' first-person stories, the Holocaust is recalled in chronological order.

Liliana Segre was one of only 25 Italian child survivors of the 776 Italian Jews who were sent to the Nazi death camps. She began telling her story in the 1990s and has since become one of the most prominent survivors of the Shoah in Italy, bringing her experience into many Italian schools. In her book, *Fino a quando la mia stella brillerà* (Segre 2015), *Until My Star Will Shine*, she narrates her life during the Fascist Regime and the Nazi occupation. Liliana's mother, Lucia Foligno, died prematurely from a tumour and Liliana grew up with her beloved father Alberto Segre.

Liliana was expelled from her school after the declaration of the Racial Laws. This was traumatic for young Liliana; her family was rather indifferent to religion and she was well-integrated into life in the city of Milan. After 1938, her family lost all their civil rights and freedoms. They were relegated to the borders of society. Liliana was compelled to change shops, doctors, and schools.

Subsequently, on 7 December 1943, Liliana and her father attempted to hide and then to escape to Switzerland from Milan. Unfortunately, an Italian fascist betrayed them. They were captured at the border and suffered the pain of imprisonment before being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she found herself alone to face the atrocities of the death camp, including forced labour. When they arrived in Auschwitz, the selection for life and death began: to the left, in five columns, the men, and to the right, the women. She thought that she had survived the selection of children being sent to the gas chambers because she was rather tall for her age. However, Liliana was separated from her father in the selection and never saw him again. The memory of her beloved father always moves her, even

now. Liliana was freed during the liberation of Malchow, as sub-camp of the main Ravensbrück camp, on 1 May 1945. Following the war, she lived with her maternal grandparents, the only survivors in her family.

In this book, Segre encourages young readers that even through profound loss and pain, we all have to make choices. She warns of the horrors of indifference—that it is fact stronger than violence. Liliana was deported to Auschwitz from the Milan Central Station, track number 21, where the Shoah Memorial stands today. Liliana Segre is one of the founders of the Shoah Memorial of Milan. The word *indifferenza* (indifference), has been placed there, written in big letters at the entrance on her advice. This is the keyword chosen to represent the entire educational project of the memorial. Silence and indifference grew until the day of deportation.

Segre therefore wanted to engrave this word on the grey entrance wall to remember the indifference of the Milanese people about what was happening before their eyes, in a spirit of vigilant attention towards the present. She says that no one had any pity for them; no one lifted a finger to help them: “Suddenly we were thrown into the grey area of ‘indifference’: a fog, a wadding that wraps you softly, then paralyzes you in its invincible pincer. An indifference that is more violent than any violence, because it is mysterious, ambiguous, never declared: an enemy striking you without ever seeing it distinctly” (Zuccalà 2013).

The book *La stella di Andra e Tati, Andra and Tati's star*, tells the true story of two sisters, Andra and Tatiana Bucci, who, aged four and six years old, were deported to Auschwitz. Separated from their family, they were sent to a *Kinderblock* with their cousin Sergio. Thanks to their perseverance and vigilance, coupled with the care of Kapò, the sisters managed to survive. Sergio, however, was subjected to Nazi human experiments conducted by the infamous Doctor Mengele and later died as a result. This is therefore a story of endurance and survival, in the form of cartoons and texts that target children who are old enough to grasp the historical situation. This story is narrated with empathy and sensitivity. Andra and Tati's story is hopeful, and it is written in a language suitable for young readers despite the subject discussed. Stunning illustrations capture Andra and Tati's every emotion in this powerful historical novel. It is important to realise that the illustrations of the Holocaust are a necessarily didactic art, and they have greater power to stir reader emotions and a sense of engagement. In this novel centred around the Holocaust, we see children telling their story to children—not to shock them, but to share their experiences in the hope of securing a happier future.

Il giorno che cambiò la mia vita (Finzi 2009), *The day that changed my life*, is an autobiographical novel written by Cesare Moisè Finzi, who, at the age of eight, suffered the consequences of the Racial Laws and was expelled from his primary school. He recalls the discrimination and humiliation that occurred in his everyday life. The main character, Cesare Moisè Finzi, is forced to leave school and to take lessons from teachers and educators who he meets by chance on their journeys. He represents the desire for knowledge, the necessity of studying, against those who wanted him to be ignorant, alone and obedient. After the 1943 armistice, Cesare and his family tried to hide somewhere, because it seemed to offer their only chance of survival. At the same time, in an occupied Italy, they lived through constant bombing. In the ensuing escape, he faced starvation, bombing and the constant fear of being arrested by the Fascist police.

Finzi depicts, through the words of a child, all the stages of war; from the participation of Italy in the Second World War, to the awful consequences that tormented each and every civilian. He enriches his book with historical facts of events he personally experienced as an innocent victim, aware of the full realities of the events unfolding around him. Educators can therefore use this text to deepen students' understanding and knowledge of the Fascist period and the aftermath of the war in Italy. This story, therefore, is a formative one, and it is dramatic but not a full tragedy thanks to the protagonist's survival. Through Finzi's account, told through the eyes of a child survivor, children today can assume, for a moment, the perspective of a child who lived during the Fascist regime in Italy. As a result, they then may be able to begin to address their own questions of what it was like and how it could have happened.

5. Conclusions

This article was an attempt to offer a brief insight into Italian Holocaust literature specifically aimed at children. I have categorised the books mentioned in this text into three branches: historical fiction, semi-fiction, and memories. The books selected provide an additional educational approach to curriculum and programmes adopted in museums or in classrooms about the Holocaust.

This analysis showed that with fictional books, it is advised to use the supplement of a paratext, or didactic comments or historical schemes, to implement accuracy and correctness. As a result, readers can put the narration into a historical perspective with the knowledge that they have acquired from the book.

The fictional and semi-fictional books show that it is important to present the story in a manner that is as balanced as possible; communicating the facts, demonstrating the scope and magnitude of the event, and not losing sight of the human aspect. History records events and compiles the statistics; literature then translates the events and statistics into real events experienced by real people.

Testimonial literature does not present a paratext or similar appendix because the testimony of Holocaust survivors has both a historiographical and psychological value. However, the genre of Holocaust testimony demands an implicit bond of trust between the reader and the author that is necessary to study and deepen history before reading it. A historical account is demanded of teachers or of educators to provide adequate prior knowledge to be able to approach this narrative.

Finally, there is one aspect that fictional, semi-fictional, testimonial literature all have in common: they all present a clear message against indifference. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act, regardless of the consequences. The focus of these texts is on the ordinary people – not politicians or those in power –, who remained indifferent to the suffering and persecution of others. In Italy, silence and indifference began in 1938 with the application of the fascist “race laws”, which brutally expelled and isolated Italian Jews—including those who did not actively identify as Jewish and/or held a Jewish surname—from the rest of the Italian population. This oppressive indifference meant forcing others to become invisible and deeming Italian Jews as an “other”. Focusing on these decisions (as a lack of action) leads to insights into history and human nature, and therefore can help young readers to become better critical thinkers.

In these novels, young readers are encouraged to distinguish, for example, the differences between concentration camps and specifically death camps – as opposed to a place of murder outside of the context of genocide, in addition to the themes of prejudice and discrimination, guilt and responsibility, collaborators and bystanders.

Italian children’s literature focussed on the Holocaust provides present generations with a way to engage with the past. It focuses on individual tragedies, and specifically, on biographies of local Italian survivors and those who lost their lives. Italy’s younger generations obtain a deeper understanding of their nation’s past when they read about historical events that happened in the same area where they live presently. Local stories act as an antithesis to the anonymity of the system of concentration camps. This is the reason why maintaining the focus on individual stories concerning survivors, escape, and rescue can be appropriate for younger audiences. These children’s books present a human dimension of the Holocaust that is often missing from state-sponsored narratives and representations of the past.

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