

A long time coming

This Major Work is personal. Deeply personal. And its seeds were sown long before I was born. As the granddaughter of four Holocaust survivors, the most cataclysmic of all chapters of human history constitutes a large part of the fabric of my being. Each year, periods of sombre reflection about the grimness of the Holocaust compete with episodes in which, unannounced, the wasted limbs and anguished cries of those who perished invade my consciousness. Disturb my sleep. And linger.

These haunting background factors,¹ combined with a zeal for written expression and passion for critical analysis, conspired to lead me to undertake writing a Major Work with a Holocaust theme. Of the array of projects that beckoned, I was drawn to study children's picture books, dismayed by their apparent vulgar deviation from "accepted" history while simultaneously pondering their utility for those muted by the horror. The subgenre was sizeable and burgeoning, yet had received negligible scholarly attention. For example, Kokkola's 2003 book, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*,² contains limited discussion about picture books. What was the function of Holocaust picture books, what form did they take, and who was the intended reader? The original proposal, encompassing a study of all (eighty-six) Holocaust picture books, centred on addressing those questions.

As replete with pathos and as challenging as the initially mooted Major Work promised to be, I decided to add even more layers. Incorporating the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, a significant figure of postmodernism, and subsequently the technique of fictocriticism – a blend of creative writing and critical response – has duly enriched it. After undertaking research about postmodernism and reading Baudrillard's key publications, including *Simulacra and Simulation*³ and *Screened Out*,⁴ the application of a Baudrillardian framework appeared eminently suitable. In my preliminary investigations, I gleaned that Baudrillard scrutinized

media portrayals of catastrophes and the manner in which representations (“simulacra”) depart from recorded events. From my family narrative, school education and visits to libraries and museums, it was apparent that Holocaust picture books often bore little resemblance to the dismal reality of the Holocaust – developing and then applying a Baudrillardian template would enable me to formally ascertain whether these books were distorted, and attempt to understand why. Moreover, there remained scope for innovation: Baudrillard had not broached Holocaust literature and a structured, step-wise method of Baudrillardian analysis, based on his chief tenets, had never been devised.

Supplementing my intended foray into postmodernism with fictocriticism had a rational basis. Dr Richard Niesche (UNSW) impressed upon me postmodernism’s rejection of modernist orthodoxy and this in turn provided encouragement to explore fictocriticism as a literary vehicle for it, too, is inventive and strays from conservative writing. In addition, through weaving in the posthumous voice of my grandmother, fictocriticism promised to inject poignancy and implant intrigue by triangulating the picture book appraisal: with whose pronouncements might a reader side – Baudrillard’s, my grandmother’s or mine? Cognisant of the solemn nature of genocide as a subject, I also surmised that a literary form that entailed a shift from one style to another would offer the reader respite, not unlike picture books themselves which allow transitioning between text and image for their reader.

In the Major Work’s embryonic stages, discussions with Professor Stephen Muecke (UNSW) and Dr Rebecca Johnson (University of Sydney) were especially reassuring, confirming the plurality of fictocritical styles and the precedence of injecting biographical material. Professor Muecke’s article, *The fall: fictocritical writing*,⁵ about how to approach a fictocritical task, was extremely helpful for crafting my Major Work. The mode in which fictocriticism was inserted required careful deliberation. My enquiries revealed that in some fictocritical pieces, like Muecke’s *Momentum*,⁶ virtually every sentence includes fictional and

critical elements, while in other examples, to be found in in Nettelbeck and Kerr's *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*,⁷ sentences appear to alternate between those that are primarily creative and those that critique. Adopting such methods for this Major Work may have detracted from the coherent progression of Baudrillardian analysis and muddled the reader. Therefore, I settled on a clear demarcation between fictional and critical elements, and a less frenetic modulation between the two.

There were other significant influences upon the Major Work. Attending the Sydney Opera House lecture-concert, *Wordless*,⁸ in which Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus*, reflected upon his corpus, yielded insight into the non-textual elements of picture books. This was pivotal to my overall appraisal of the picture book sample and facilitated my detailed deconstruction of selected passages from *Erika's Story*,⁹ *Let the Celebrations Begin!*¹⁰ and *Hilde and Eli*¹¹ that were included in the Major Work. (Including these passages not only demonstrated my deconstruction, but also enabled the reader to formulate an independent opinion about the books.) Additionally, viewing Roberto Benigni's film, *Life is Beautiful*,¹² a provocative, tragicomic "copy" of prisoner life in Auschwitz, heightened my awareness of how the creative interplay of a shattering event and its media interpretation can manipulate an audience to cast doubt upon previously unassailable dogma. By creating a highly unconventional Holocaust plot, the film demonstrates that the process by which people become familiar with calamitous events is not uniform, and that myriad "portals" may be required to access historical reality. These experiences and ideas underpinned my blossoming conceptualisation of the "interreal zone" ("interreality"), and I was subsequently emboldened to dispel Clendinnen's notion¹³ that reader perplexity in Holocaust literature is an "unaffordable indulgence", confront Baer's highly prescriptive approach¹⁴ to how such literature should be crafted, and, ultimately, debunk Baudrillardian hyperreality. My proposed interreal zone could accommodate the "shards and fragments"¹⁵ constituting not only

Holocaust picture books but books about *any* severe, historically documented trauma; to help the reader visualise this new concept, I provided a schematic representation as an Appendix.

Formal studies and musings in the Advanced and Extension 1 courses also moulded my deliberations. For instance, the portrayal of the Holocaust through picture books, coupled with Baudrillard's assertion that simulacra may become more real than an original harrowing event, resonates with the concept that we often only have access to representations of truth, versus truth itself, a cornerstone of the "Representation and Text" module. Through my study of the picture book subgenre, I came to appreciate that even though representations never perfectly mirror reality, they can afford the reader a more profound understanding of events that have transpired. The "History and Memory" elective, in which I was challenged to evaluate the interplay of history and memory in texts such as *The Fiftieth Gate*,¹⁶ was highly pertinent to the Major Work, given the significant proportion of picture book authors who are Holocaust survivors and descendants.

Through the study of textual integrity in the English courses and having access to an entire subgenre of Holocaust picture books, I have been inspired to adopt a metaview: textual integrity is sometimes resolved more by a subgenre than by a single work. In order to accomplish the multipronged mission of protecting children, educating, and cathartically healing their authors and illustrators, Holocaust picture books must, collectively, be variegated and "discordant". The excerpts from *Erika's Story* and *Hilde and Eli* attest to disharmony between text and image that may occur within a given work, and the radiant cover and title – with exclamation mark – of *Let the Celebrations Begin!* encapsulates the dissonance between that book's style suffusing every page and the grave topic. It is noteworthy, however, that the subgenre as a *whole*, in an interreal zone, is coherent and furnishes a meaningful understanding of the Holocaust.

It is anticipated that the Major Work will hold appeal for niche audiences because it traverses discrete subject areas. The target audience includes educators, Holocaust (and other genocide) survivors and descendants, picture book authors and illustrators, those seeking stories of trauma, courage and resilience, and scholars in the fields of literature, postmodernism and the Holocaust. Above all, the Major Work is intended to *challenge* its audience. For example, will an author, in the midst of writing a picture book about the Rwandan genocide, now balk at using the word “exterminate”, partly in the knowledge that celebrated writer Tony Kushner removed that word from an early draft of *Brundibar*?¹⁷ Similarly, will an elderly woman with a Polish accent, eyeing several Holocaust picture books at a bookstore, concede that she may purchase them as much for herself as for her grandchildren, and that those books are partly therapeutic? For each of its readers, the Major Work is designed to prompt reflection; in some cases, it will trigger the dismantling of prevailing ways of thinking and behaving.

The Major Work was not devoid of challenges. At every turn, I feared inadvertently trivialising the Holocaust or otherwise sullyng its memory, whether through choice of study material (ostensibly “basic” picture books) or potential validation of a pivotal figure (Baudrillard) tainted with accusations of denialism. Most importantly, in opting to introduce the biographical material, I found myself wrestling with the competing tasks of, on the one hand, honouring my late grandmother’s narrative and personality (through careful attention to idiom in her posthumous voice) and, on the other, not having that imperative encroach upon my artistic integrity and freedom. Nevertheless, I was prepared to dignify and empower my grandmother through my prose, illustrated by her caustic metaphorical denouncement of the depiction of Jews in a cattle car in *Erika’s Story* being akin to persons experiencing “a fleeting nuisance on a Sydney peak-hour train”. My grandmother’s voice was introduced to guide me and keep me accountable through the course of my writing and prevent me being

consumed by Baudrillard's inflammatory theories. Her feisty incursion, "I am onto you, Monsieur Baudrillard, onto you, your postmodern mates and your perverse, postmodern mumbo jumbo", incorporating the idiomatic expression, "mumbo jumbo", generates an authentic voice that reminds the reader and me that even though picture books themselves may not accurately reflect reality, their core, namely people's experiences, *are* real. Parenthetically, to help fashion the tone of my grandmother's contributions, I elicited the views of other Holocaust survivors about the picture books: "What next," an impassioned survivor wryly quipped to me, "a Holocaust *wall calendar*?"

As noted in the Major Work, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel once infamously lambasted Holocaust scholarship, contending that the gruesome events that occurred defied understanding.¹⁸ Wiesel has also separately opined, "Words can sometimes, in moments of grace, attain the quality of deeds."¹⁹ This Major Work is deliberately vital and lively – a necessary foil to the silent ashes of Holocaust victims – but it is fervently hoped that it constitutes a respectful and informed²⁰ study of a tract of Holocaust literature and that its words will foster contemplation, encourage debate and, potentially, presage change.²¹

Endnotes

1. The psychological impact of the Holocaust on the grandchildren of survivors has been the subject of several studies, and was addressed most recently in: P. Perlstein, R. W. Motta. An investigation of potential Holocaust-related trauma in the Third Generation *Traumatology* 2013; 19: 95-106.
2. L. Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*, Routledge, New York, 2003.
3. J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (S. Glaser, Trans.), University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1994 (Original work published 1981).
4. J. Baudrillard, *Screened Out* (C. Turner, Trans.), Verso, London, 2002 (Original work published 2000).
5. S. Muecke, The fall: fictocritical writing, *Parallax* 2002; 8: 108-112.
6. S. Muecke, Momentum, in N. Anderson, K. Schlunke (ed.), *Cultural Theory in Everyday Practice*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 287-295.
7. A. Nettelbeck, H. Kerr, *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*. University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, WA, 1998.
8. A. Spiegelman, P. Johnston, *Wordless*. Sydney Opera House. 5 October 2013.
9. Major Work, p. 7, 8 (R. Vander Zee, *Erika's Story*, (R. Innocenti, Illus.), Jonathon Cape, London, 2004).
10. Major Work, p. 9, 10 (M. Wild, *Let the Celebrations Begin!*, (Illus. J. Vivas), Orchard Books, New York, 1991).
11. Major Work, p. 9, 11 (D.A. Adler, *Hilde and Eli*, (K. Ritz, Illus.), Holiday House, New York, 1994).
12. R. Benigni (Director), *Life is Beautiful*, Miramax Films, 1997.
13. I. Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.
14. E. Baer, A new algorithm in evil: children's literature in a post-Holocaust world, *The Lion and the Unicorn* 2000; 24: 378-401.
15. The term "shards and fragments" was applied by A.H. Rosenfeld over 30 years ago to Holocaust literature generally, before the Holocaust picture book subgenre emerged, but it is a particularly apt term for picture books (see A.H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1980, p. 33).
16. M. Baker, *The Fiftieth Gate*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 1997.
17. Major Work, p. 16 (T. Kushner, *Brundibar*, (M. Sendak, Illus.), Walker Books, London, 2003).
18. Major Work, p. 19. Source is E. Wiesel, For some measure of humility, *Sh'ma* 5/100. (October 31, 1975), 314.
19. E. Wiesel, *Legends of our Time*, Schocken, New York, 2004. p. 8.
20. I am particularly indebted to the following, among others, for their time and advice:
 - (i) Dr Richard Niesche, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, Faculty of Arts, UNSW;
 - (ii) Prof. Stephen Muecke, Professor, School of the Arts and Media, Faculty of Arts, UNSW;

- (iii) Dr Rebecca Johnke, Lecturer, Department of English, University of Sydney;
 - (iv) Prof. Konrad Kwiet, Pratt Professor, Department of Jewish History and Holocaust Studies, University of Sydney;
 - (v) Dr George Foster, Psychiatrist and President, Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants;
 - (vi) Marie Bonardelli, Education Officer, Sydney Jewish Museum;
 - (vii) Yotam Weiner, Education Manager, Sydney Jewish Museum;
 - (viii) Tinny Lenthén, Chief Librarian, Sydney Jewish Museum;
 - (ix) Timorah Perel, Librarian and Archivist, Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, Jerusalem;
 - (x) Vincent Slatt, Librarian and Archivist, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington;
 - (xi) Dr Yuval Bloch, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychiatry, Tel Aviv University;
 - (xii) Dr Pamela Weisberger, Vice President, US Jewish Genealogical Society, Los Angeles;
 - (xiii) Beth Wigoder, university student and aspiring teacher;
 - (xiv) David Adler, author of several Holocaust picture books;
 - (xv) Ellen W, Holocaust survivor;
 - (xvi) Frank W, Holocaust survivor;
 - (xvii) Dr Vicken Babkenian, Researcher, Armenian Genocide, Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.
21. It is intended to disseminate the study findings more broadly, by oral presentation and publication, following completion of the HSC. An invitation has been extended to me by Dr George Foster, President, Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants, to present the work at the annual conference of the Association in 2015. The most relevant postmodernism journal for this Major Work is the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies*. Among the suitable Holocaust-themed journals are *Dimensions: a Journal of Holocaust Studies* and *Genocide and Holocaust Studies*, while two pertinent journals in the field of children's literature are *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *Bookbird*.