

# Classroom Activity: Teaching the Holocaust through Literature

## In the Classroom

*Students in Alex Mangum's 7th-grade class at New Dimensions CFA tackled a weighty history lesson by working in teams to read and discuss literary works about the Holocaust. Students read works of fiction as well as first-hand accounts by survivors, gaining awareness of injustice in the world while discovering ways that they can reach out to help those around them.*



Walking into my classroom on Tuesdays and Thursdays during the past four weeks has been an absolute joy. My 7th graders are working in teams, reading together, discussing, and connecting with novels. These novels do not contain ordinary tales; they are the voices and stories of victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Some are historical fiction, others non-fiction, like Eli Wiesel's haunting accounts of his survival of the Holocaust in *Night*. The stories range from the accounts of Holocaust victims and survivors to the stories of the heroes that helped save the lives of countless innocents.

Each student is grouped according to skill and interest and each week they change roles, from vocabulary enricher, test maker, researcher, and discussion leader. Each child reads and connects in a different way, drawing on their experiences. It has been amazing to see how each student reacts and learns from their novel. The students have had an overwhelming response to the stories, some even going so far as to write letters to the author of their assigned novel. In addition to the use of literature circles, as a class we have read aloud Jane Yolen's young adult novel *The Devil's Arithmetic* and selections from *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

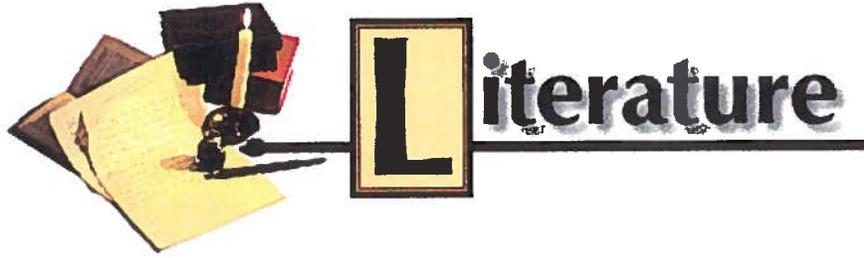
Through the combination of literature circles and read aloud the students have been more involved in our historical study of the Holocaust in social studies. My students have become more aware of the injustice in the world and how they can reach out and help those around them. They have learned that this can be accomplished by simply standing up for the person next to them.

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## A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE HOLOCAUST

Timeline • People • Arts • Activities • Resources



**L**iterature, with its various genres, is an invaluable teaching tool. The experience of reading heightens awareness in several ways, primarily by either conveying factual information or by evoking empathetic or sympathetic responses. An inherent value of literature is its ability to transport readers to different times, distant places, and unique circumstances. Through literature, readers can not only learn the facts about the Third Reich and World War II, but they can also make personal connections with those characters, real and fictional, who lived and died during the Holocaust. An enormous amount and variety of Holocaust literature is available today for study. This section is intended as a brief overview for teachers, students, and researchers who desire to comprehend the dimensions of the Holocaust as represented in literature. Works are summarized, and suggested grade designations are provided for each work.

- **The Voices of Victims.** This category focuses on the importance of personal writing as a means of understanding the Holocaust. These diaries, stories and poems also serve to humanize the vast number of Holocaust victims by introducing readers to individuals with understandable dreams, passions and agonies.
- **Survivor Testimony and Literature.** The poignant testimony of Holocaust survivors reaffirms the will to live and to retain human dignity in the face of terrible adversity. These biographies and memoirs can help to personalize historical events and to establish real faces in the overwhelming sea of facts and statistics.
- **Accounts of Resistance.** There are thousands of unsung heroes of the Holocaust, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who resisted the Nazis in ways big and small. These remarkable stories of defiance counter the myth that Nazi victims passively submitted to their fate.
- **Stories of Rescue and Heroism.** It is imperative that the world recognize and remember the actions of the "Righteous Gentiles," those relatively few individuals who took definite steps and frequently risked their lives to save fellow human beings. Many of those who deserve praise and honor are no longer alive to tell their stories.
- **The German Experience.** If the goal of Holocaust education is to prevent the recurrence of such a tragedy, then we must carefully examine the participants and the circumstances that permitted the rise of Nazism. The selections in this category focus on life in Germany during the rise and rule of the Third Reich.
- **Aftermath: Response and Reflection.** In the fifty years since the Holocaust,

what moral lessons has the world learned? Works in this section that attempt to respond to this question include critical analyses, as well as fiction, drama, and poetry that honor the victims and survivors of the Holocaust.

- **[Teacher Resources](#)**. Here you will find lesson plans and other resources for the study of the Holocaust through literature.

| [Victims](#) | [Survivors](#) | [Resistance](#) | [Rescue](#) | [German Experience](#) | [Aftermath](#) |  
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### [A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust](#)

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## Why Teach the Holocaust?

**By: Rose Brock and Michael Brock (2009)**

Teachers often find the Holocaust to be an overwhelming subject to approach with their students. While the Holocaust offers important lessons to today's students, it can be a difficult to find the appropriate amount of information to share with young learners. This article highlights the importance of the Holocaust in today's classroom, and offers suggestions for integrating historical fiction into the unit of study.

This watershed event in history is often daunting to educators, given the complexities of the issues involved with the topic, its disturbing characteristics, the difficulty of tackling historical events whose full effects have yet to be realized, and its tendency to consume large amounts of instructional time relative to its specificity. Acknowledging these challenges, teaching the Holocaust across the curriculum could not be a more relevant subject for the classroom today than at any other point in the last century.

In spite of efforts by survivors, scholars, educators, civic leaders, and citizens to uphold the mandate "Never again!," genocide continues to plague humanity. According to the activist agency Genocide Watch, within the lifetime of today's graduating seniors acts of genocide or "ethnic cleansing" have been perpetrated in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, East Timor, and Sudan. Additionally, high-profile Holocaust denials have made very recent headlines, issued from sources ranging from heads of state to religious leaders. The passage of time exacerbates this problem. The generation who lived through the catastrophe of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust—those who can bear most vivid witness—are passing from us. With them fade the scars of memory, but we who follow have not learned the lessons they taught. As educators, we must make this relevant for young people today.

A truism in times of war is that those in affected societies who are least involved in perpetrating the conflict are also the most vulnerable to suffer its horrors. Historically, the "most vulnerable" in wartime have been women and children, and as a collection, these five novels certainly speak to that point. However, they also present young characters that show all readers that the most vulnerable need not suffer idly. They provide voices for those like them who during the Holocaust also were not idle.

The heroine of *In My Hands*, Irene Gut Opdyke, is the historical touchstone for characters like Liesel Meminger (*The Book Thief*), Misha Pilsudski (*Milkweed*), Annemarie Johansen (*Number the Stars*), and Bruno and Schmel (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*). Each of these young characters, in ways great and small, makes some effort to cast aside their vulnerability and act for humanity in the midst of barbarity. The Holocaust provides striking examples of human resiliency in the face of the greatest adversity, particularly on the part of those who seem least likely to summon it.

In a larger sense, teaching the Holocaust also provides students with unique opportunities to learn about themselves and about the people they want to become. Examples from this catastrophe bear out the very worst human qualities, and the very best. Using the books suggested here as teaching resources provides remarkable opportunities for this level of learning. By inviting students to sharpen their focus on personal perspectives—real or fictitious—they are able to get a sense of what it is like to be an individual in the midst of landmark events, and the role each person can play in their unfolding.

Students taking up these texts face developmental challenges and are learning life skills for which the Holocaust is a particularly suitable subject. Young adults are primed to investigate themes

such as identity and intolerance, family and friendship, innocence and loss, fear and courage, anger and forgiveness, and anxiety and hope. We as teachers should be emboldened by these rich concepts to develop lessons for this daunting historical subject. Utilizing these works of fiction can provide powerful insight into the spirit of the human qualities that were most essential in surviving the horrors that serve as their setting, so long as the instructor dutifully distinguishes between the literary liberties taken by their authors and the realities of the documented history. Succeeding in this important task bolsters the authenticity of work by paying due respect to the actual events of the Holocaust while maintaining the literary relevance of the work for the student and for our curricula.

Ultimately, interpersonal relationships have a far greater influence on the results of our development as individuals than larger institutional events. While the events around us often compel us to make choices, it is typically the impact that our decisions will have on ourselves and on those important to us that ultimately guides that process. Each of these books drive home that point, as their characters are defined by relationships that are created, developed, and tested by the historical processes occurring around them, their value as characters of praise or scorn is determined by their commitment to those relationships.

The Holocaust is unique as a topic of study in that we have no choice but to be awed by the ability it has to illustrate how our value as individuals has more to do with how we treat those around us than with the times in which we live. Teachers seeking an approach to introducing this complicated subject would be well served to start with the strength of character in individuals attempting to overcome adversity, and the power of their relationships with others to embolden them to succeed, even in the face of an attempt to destroy them. Even students who are most skeptical about the ability of ordinary people to make a difference can acknowledge the resolve we all have to act on behalf of friends and family. To be sure, the Holocaust is a daunting topic for instruction. However, if we effectively utilize the resources now available, we can provide students with an unparalleled learning experience. Few other subjects offer young people the chance to develop respect for the vital importance of preserving dignity and human rights as well as an appreciation of history and a love for quality literature.

## Additional resources

### Discussion guides

- **Number the Stars** by Lois Lowry
- **The Book Thief** by Markus Zusak
- **Milkweed** by Jerry Spinelli
- **The Boy in the Striped Pajamas** by John Boyne
- **In My Hands** by Irene Gut Opdyke

### Teaching resources

- **Curricular Connections: Holocaust Remembrance**

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## Teaching About the Holocaust: Why Simulation Activities Should Not Be Used

Recently a Holocaust simulation activity at a Florida Middle School upset students, parents and community members by selecting children to be exposed to “persecution.” Without announcing or explaining the specific purpose of the activity in advance, eighth-grade students whose last names started with the letters L-Z were given yellow five-pointed stars and designated the “persecuted”, while their peers received “privileged” treatment. Throughout the activity the star-wearing students were subjected to enforced rules which ranged from forcing them to stand at the back of the class or the end of long lunch lines, to barring them from using some bathrooms and preventing them from using school drinking fountains. At the end of the day, many children were distressed, and one child even went home crying, telling his parents, “The only thing I found out today is that I don’t want to be Jewish.”

**While empathy-building activities in the classroom may be compelling and a popular technique for engaging young people in the history of the Holocaust, the Anti-Defamation League and other institutions with expertise in teaching the Holocaust strongly caution against using simulation activities for the following reasons:**

- They are **pedagogically unsound** because they **trivialize the experience of victims** and can leave students with the impression at the conclusion of the activity that they actually know what it was like during the Holocaust
- They **stereotype group behavior** and **distort historical reality** by reducing groups of people and their experiences and actions to one-dimensional representations
- They can **reinforce negative views** of the victims
- They **impede critical analysis** by **oversimplifying complex historical events** and **human behavior**, leaving students with a skewed view of history
- They **disconnect** the Holocaust **from the context of European and global history**

**There are numerous effective and pedagogically sound methods that can be used to achieve these goals. Students can develop empathy and understanding with the experiences and explore the motivation, thoughts, feelings and actions of those who lived through the Holocaust era by:**

- **Drawing on primary source materials**, such as photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, government documents, and visual history testimony
- **Assigning reflective writing exercises** or **leading in-class discussions** that explore various aspects of human behavior such as scapegoating or making difficult moral choices
- **Inviting survivors and other eyewitnesses** to share their stories

### **Recommended Resources:**

For more information on teaching about the Holocaust, consult *Teaching about the Holocaust: A Resource Book for Educators*, a free resource from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, available in PDF-format at: [http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/teachabo/teaching\\_holocaust.pdf](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/teachabo/teaching_holocaust.pdf)

*Echoes and Reflections – A Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust.* This standards-based, interdisciplinary multimedia curriculum includes primary source materials such as photographs, artwork, diary entries, letters, poems, maps and government documents as well as 2 ½ hours of visual history testimony by Holocaust survivors, rescuers and other eyewitnesses. Created by ADL, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and Yad Vashem. Visit [www.echoesandreflections.org](http://www.echoesandreflections.org) for a sample lesson, visual history testimony, supporting materials, additional resources, and order information.