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Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature: Engaging Difference and Identity by Rachel Dean-Ruzicka (review)

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The Lion and the Unicorn, Volume 42, Number 3, September 2018, pp. 375-378 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2018.0033*

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Book Reviews

Rachel Dean-Ruzicka. *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature: Engaging Difference and Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

"What might be a more productive social justice project than liberal multiculturalism?" (10). Rachel Dean-Ruzicka poses this wide-ranging question about halfway through the introduction to her monograph, *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature: Engaging Difference and Identity*. She engages with the problem by zeroing in on young adult (YA) Holocaust literature, mostly memoirs and novels published or republished in the past forty years, asking what close readings of these works can reveal about literary encounters with history and difference. Dean-Ruzicka builds on the ideas of some of the most compelling political and cultural theorists of our time, from Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant, and Wendy Brown to Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Kwame Anthony Appiah. Dipping into their various frameworks along the way, she uses the lens of YA Holocaust literature to examine how literature can potentially complicate notions of difference to expand impressions of what, in Judith Butler's terminology, are all too commonly, and limitedly, determined to be "grievable lives."

Dean-Ruzicka's project is rooted in a resistance to what she describes as the promotion of "tolerance and toleration language," a reductive approach to identity and difference that often ignores broader systems of power and privilege as well as the historical dynamics that determine how such structures emerge and unfold (2). Under the veneer of tolerance discourse, citizens are encouraged to simply "live and let live," a stance that compels passivity and reticence instead of action and resistance in the name of social justice, and that also encourages a "troubling relativism" (152). At its core, she explains, tolerance discourse suggests "disapproval itself" as its "central unspoken element" (8). Dean-Ruzicka posits "the ability to embrace difference" as a counterweight, describing this capacity as, in her terminology, a form of "cosmopolitan engagement"—a direct and involved confrontation with, and embrace of, Others (7, 9). Using YA literature about the Holocaust as her case study, an apt subset of literature given her pedagogical aims, she turns over a variety of stories, fiction and nonfiction, conventional prose-based texts and those built around photography or in comics, to determine which might promote such active engagement.

Dean-Ruzicka divides her analysis into five discrete sections, a meaningfully constructed scheme that begins with a reading of Anne Frank and concludes

with literature starring Neo-Nazi characters. With its structure, the book implicitly asks readers to engage with questions of why certain texts come to be considered part of the category of Holocaust literature; the book also continually demands a reading of the past in the context of an urgent, always relevant present. In her first chapter, "Finding the Other in Anne Frank," the author astutely argues that the over-reliance on Anne Frank as an emblem of those who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators presents a variety of problems. Not only is Frank's *Diary* "misleadingly hopeful," ending as it does before members of the Annex were captured, sent to concentration camps, and, excepting Otto Frank, killed, but it also presents "few glimpses into Jewish culture's actual *differences*," given the Frank family's assimilated, generally nonreligious background (28; 31, italics in original). Dean-Ruzicka holds up, as evidence, the many problematic creative responses to Frank's text, which often involve an over-identification with her that glosses over her Jewishness. In other words, Frank's *Diary*, which happens to be "the most widely anthologized piece of literature, of any sort, for young adult readers in the United States," seems to have become such a cultural cornerstone precisely because it is so easy to forget that the author/narrator was Jewish (22).

In her second chapter, "The Complexity of Jewish Lives," Dean-Ruzicka goes on to consider a variety of texts featuring Jewish characters in relation to the Holocaust. She narrows down the vast canon to books that are often taught as well as those representative of the themes that encompass this literature. These include, among others, Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* (1989), Ian Serraillier's *Escape from Warsaw* (1956), Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1955), Ruth Sender's *The Cage* (1986), and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986, 1991). In addition to classifying and then assessing some of their common subject matters, such as survival and escape, prejudice and prosecution, and the search for meaning, the author asks whether these works "move beyond death as the defining aspect of Jewish characters" (54). Through careful readings focusing mainly on the content of the works, she finds that only some of them (a) ethically reconstruct real or imagined experiences without essentializing Jewish characters; (b) avoid mischaracterizing what it meant to live, or die, under such incomprehensible circumstances; and (c) correspond with historically accurate treatments of the past.

In her next chapter, "Recognizing All the 'Lives Unworthy of Living,'" Dean-Ruzicka moves beyond Jewish experiences in the Holocaust to focus on the affected "other" victims who are least often regarded in the literature, as in broader discussions. Acknowledging that additional categories yet exist, she zeroes in on stories featuring Romani characters, gay characters, and characters with disabilities, all groups who were also violently, and detrimentally, targeted. Looking at a selection of texts from a much smaller

available collection than in her previous chapter, she includes readings of works such as Jerry Spinelli's *Milkweed* (2003), Alexander Ramati's *And the Violins Stopped Playing* (1986), Ann Clare LeZotte's *T4: A Novel in Verse* (2008), and E. L. Konigsburg's *The Mysterious Edge of the Heroic World* (2007). As in chapter 2, here she is invested in flagging works that do not reinforce stereotypes or transgress historical accuracy, though she also carefully examines how these characters, and characterizations, intersect with related Jewish ones. In other words, she probes whether these stories problematically reinforce these characters as marginal, or whether they are given full and due consideration as having lived particular, "grievable" lives.

The final two chapters of the book, not including the epilogue, turn to works that explore the lives of perpetrators as well as those who potentially could have become perpetrators. In "Good Nazis and German *Volk* as Victims," Dean-Ruzicka looks to texts such as Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), David Chotjewitz's *Daniel Half Human and the Good Nazi* (2000/2004), and Susan Bartoletti's *Hitler Youth* (2005). She finds that only some of them give full context to the events depicted therein, avoid recycling common myths and misrepresentations of past events, and deploy the full ambiguity and complexity that must accompany any examination of Nazi motivations. In chapter 5, "Neo-Nazi Values and Community Response," she turns to works explicitly connecting the past to the present, including, in part, Laura Williams and Erica Magnus's *The Spider's Web* (1999), Han Nolan's *If I Should Die Before I Wake* (2003), and Carol Matas's *The Freak* (2002). Here she focuses on the question of whether these works plainly bridge individual histories with broader narratives, especially systems and structures of inequality and prejudice. Her litmus test, particularly in these final chapters, is essentially whether the works reflect "an open acknowledgement of our own fallibilism" (153); that is, whether they make space for continued interrogations of our understandings of, and responses to, events past and present.

Though she does not (and rightly so) come up with a simple formula to settle on what makes for an effective work of YA Holocaust literature, in the end Dean-Ruzicka argues for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach, one that takes into account historical accuracy and complexity of characters as well as considerations of individual works as part of a broader catalog. The book seems like an especially useful resource for those engaged, in a variety of ways, in Holocaust education as well as, more broadly, the field of genocide studies. It would easily complement essential works out there such as Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes's edited collection, *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust* (2004), or Anastasia Ulanowicz's *Second-Generation Memory and Contemporary Children's Literature* (2013). In the

end, Dean-Ruzicka's explorations left this reader with further questions and concerns, all hinging on her vital central search for "a more productive social justice project than liberal multiculturalism": about how these texts have been taught and received until now, and about what particular sorts of pedagogical deployments of them might lead to the very "cosmopolitan engagements" that *Tolerance Discourse and Young Adult Holocaust Literature* makes the case for. Certainly, now as always, there is more work to be done.

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Sean Ferrier-Watson. *The Children's Ghost Story in America.* McFarland, 2017.

Sean Ferrier-Watson's *The Children's Ghost Story in America* opens a scholarly conversation about the ways in which ghosts have, over time, taken particular shapes in children's literature published in the United States. Ghost stories included in Ferrier-Watson's discussion involve the spirit of a dead person returning to the land of the living, as well as stories in which only the perception of a ghost—"a mock ghost story" (11)—is featured. Not included are stories featuring "reanimated corpses" (10), such as those about zombies or vampires, as Ferrier-Watson focuses on "qualities of the ghost that appear to transcend traditions, specifically those qualities that distinguish the ghost from some of its more gruesome doppelgangers" (11). Within these parameters, Ferrier-Watson traces the development of the ghost story in North American English-language children's literature from its early appearances in nineteenth-century periodicals, such as *The Youth's Companion* and *St. Nicholas: An Illustrated Magazine for Young Folks*, to its twenty-first century new-media manifestations termed *creepypastas*. Ferrier-Watson identifies three types of ghostly constructions in texts for young readers—as mock ghosts with rational explanations, as supernatural beings with otherworldly origins but little agency, and as transmediated and transnarrative creatures that take on increasingly horrific lives of their own—and he explores the sociocultural implications of such constructions. First, however, he steps back and describes some of the conditions that affected the transmission of ghost stories prior to the nineteenth century.