

Reading Genre in Holocaust Perpetrator Narratives

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REVIEW OF: Ned Curthoys, *The Bildungsroman in a Genocidal Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024). 168 pp. (hardcover). GBP 72.00. ISBN: 9798765103890.

Ever since the *Bildungsroman* genre was first theorised by Johann Karl Simon Morgenstern in 1819, its basic parameters have been set: a youthful (usually male) protagonist sets off on a quest during which he must overcome some form of obstacle in order to develop into a mature, socially-aware member of society.¹ The notion of *Bildung* (formation) suggests a coming of age, a process of maturation that brings the youthful individual into contact with the social, historical, or political norms they (he) must reconcile with in order to become a functioning adult. As the young protagonist undergoes this process of discovery, so too is the reader expected to enter into an arena of didacticism, learning lessons about morality and acceptable behaviour as they read. The hermeneutic quality of the *Bildungsroman* is thus an essential aspect of the genre as Morgenstern conceived of it. With questions of morality, social conformity, and reader response shaping the structure and form of coming-of-age narratives, it seems well-placed to engage with the ethical imperatives of Holocaust literature and film. At least, this is the premise of Ned Curthoys's recent monograph, *The Bildungsroman in a Genocidal Age*. The suspicion that the *Bildungsroman* form necessarily relies on a focus on the individual over and above the political context and an 'end-oriented' perspective that would be inappropriate in the context of the Holocaust is here reconsidered with the 'polyfunctional protagonists' (p. 129), viewed as vehicles for more nuanced appraisals of history that 'facilitate an exchange of views and stimulate interrogation of cherished ideas' (p. 139). Engaging with both novels and films, male and female characters, and protagonists of various ages and at different points on the historical timeline, this volume offers a diverse discussion of a range of primary materials, often providing readings that go against the grain of existing scholarship. It is therefore a useful critical tool that will be of broad interest.

1 Karl Morgenstern, 'On the Nature of the Bildungsroman', translated by Tobias Boes. *PMLA* 124.2 (2009), 647-49.

In one of the book's more intriguing innovations, Curthoys focuses entirely on examples in which issues of guilt and complicity are at the fore. This is a welcome intervention and fits well with the recent turn to perpetrator perspectives in Holocaust studies.² Much of the existing scholarship in this area has centred around the question of identification, which is usually viewed as an implicit consequence of the reading experience that, in Holocaust perpetrator fiction, runs the risk of aligning the reader's perspective with that of the Nazi antagonist. The ethical implications of reading perpetrator literature are thus central to the fabric of the works. Curthoys takes a different approach by considering the ways in which the reader's perspective is shaped by the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre; the evolution of the protagonist's thinking, which emerges in different ways and under different circumstances, is here understood as a vehicle through which the reader can discern the cultural, social, and moral messages of the works.

Guilt is taken by the author as a phenomenon that takes many forms. In some cases (Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, Chapter 2) the protagonist's culpability is unequivocal, rendered obvious from the outset. In other examples, the question of individual responsibility is more vexed: Stefan Ruzowitzky's *The Counterfeiters* (Chapter 5) and Lyudmila Ulitskaya's *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (Chapter 3) both feature central characters whose complicity with the Nazi enterprise complicates their status as Jewish victims. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (Chapter 1) centres around Stevens, the long-standing butler of Darlington Hall, whose support for his erstwhile master (a Nazi sympathiser) forces him to re-evaluate his unthinking obedience in the postwar era. Chapter 4 puts Jackie French's *Hitler's Daughter* in conversation with John Boyne's controversial *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*; guilt is here tied to the family unit while the protagonists themselves must grapple, in very different contexts and in very different ways, with the issues that are faced by the descendants of those responsible for the genocide. Curthoys's book ends with a discussion of Margarethe von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt* (Chapter 6), a cinematic telling of the eponymous philosopher, whose evolution in thinking following

2 See, for example: Erin McGlothlin, 'Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response', *Narrative* 24.3 (2016), 251-276 and *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2021); Jenni Adams & Sue Vice, *Representing Perpetrators in Holocaust Literature and Film* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013); Joanne Pettitt, *Perpetrators in Holocaust Narratives: Encountering the Nazi Beast* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and 'What is Holocaust Perpetrator Fiction?', *Journal of European Studies* 50.4 (2020), 360-372.

her coverage of Adolf Eichmann's trial, as well as the controversies it provoked, leads her on a mission of self-acceptance. While a more sustained discussion regarding the implications of putting these various forms of guilt and 'becoming' in one volume would have been welcome, these chapters come together to offer a rich and varied reflection on the role of individual identity in politically turbulent times.

Perhaps owing to the motif of 'becoming' that is the mark of the *Bildungsroman*, all of the characters under discussion in Curthoys's work embark upon a physical journey that is vital for their eventual transition. It is the combination of geographical movement and innate curiosity that enables the characters to open themselves up to new experiences and perspectives, returning, if at all, with a revised worldview, or at least a better understanding of the 'self', which the reader and/or characters can, according to Curthoys, view as fluid, evolving, and full of potentiality. The role of these characters (and sometimes narrators) as witnesses is also important for the analysis: it is through this testimonial quality that the reader can also glimpse the true horrors of Nazi genocidal practices, even when the protagonists themselves warrant scrutiny. This is a central part of the hermeneutic function of the genre as the author conceives of it.

At the same time, the focus on the perpetrator perspective means that, in all of the primary texts, the *Bildung* of both reader and character is shaped in response to highly specific questions about socialisation, indoctrination and the role of the individual in society. Indeed, Curthoys's book is 'haunted' (p. 9) by Arendt's highly influential (if also controversial) notion of the banality of evil.³ While actively side-stepping the criticisms that have historically been levelled at Arendt, Curthoys relies on the so-called 'Eichmann problematic', a term he uses to refer to the 'questions that arise when one resists occulting evil and diabolising those who commit atrocious deeds' (p. 7). The flawed humanity of the protagonists is here considered as part of a process of 'becoming' while alternative potentialities are revealed as the characters move through the texts, being exposed to other perspectives and ideas in the process. This is an important observation that feeds into ongoing conversations about the fundamental humanity, and therefore potential relatability, of those who implemented the Nazi genocide.

3 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

The implication, one that could perhaps have been developed further, is that those responsible for the Holocaust were products of their environment, influenced by the people they met, the social and institutional education they received, and the conditions in which they operated. When circumstances change, and different ideas are allowed to seep in, so too do the perpetrators show the capacity for transformation. Likewise, those who contributed to the genocide as a result of extreme coercion (the subjects of Chapter 3 and 5) become, according to this reading, symptoms of a much broader, and more extreme, history. The question of how we are to understand the role of individual agency in such circumstances sits in the background of these arguments, though it ultimately remains unanswered. The focus of the book is thus less on the philosophical nature of individual responsibility in times of extreme violence and more on the ways that personal histories of complicity can be used symbolically; by employing generic conventions, authors of fiction and film are able to produce meaning and guide readers to better understand the social, political, and moral complexities of the era.

Ultimately, then, Curthoys draws on a rich array of ideas relating to genre and narratology. He offers unique and convincing readings of material that is well-known and has already been subject to a significant amount of critical attention. This is no mean feat. Nevertheless, despite the many innovations of Curthoys's work, the reader may be left with some unanswered questions. First, and perhaps most prosaically, the title is misleading. This is not a book about the *Bildungsroman* in a genocidal age. It takes a variety of texts about the Holocaust and considers what the central characters learn – consciously or otherwise – and what they may be able to teach the reader in relation to the specific context of the Nazi genocide. While the field of genocide studies has indeed grown out of Holocaust studies, with significant areas of overlap, the title of the book unwittingly affirms the centrality of the Shoah in thinking about atrocity more generally. Perhaps it is the case that the role of the *Bildungsheld* – the hero of the *Bildungsroman* – is the same in all instances of genocide representation, which is what is subtly implied through the title. However, the lack of discrimination here risks devaluing the importance of historical context, something that is particularly problematic given the central claim that the material under discussion can help to add depth and nuance to the reader's historical understanding.

Secondly, the author does not always go far enough in showing the full impact of his interpretations on perpetrator studies: what does it mean if we consider a perpetrator or collaborator of genocide a *Bildungsheld*? What does this inflection tell us about the role and responsibility of the individual in such societies and what does it actually mean in practice? So what if Littell's Maximilian Aue and Ishiguro's Stevens demonstrate 'discursively generative disillusionment with their earlier worldviews' (p. 6)? Does such a reading – in itself controversial – fundamentally alter our understanding of the texts' meaning? If the point Curthoys makes is simply that, through an ethical epiphany or ideological shift, the morally compromised protagonist can reinforce the text's (and, presumably, the readers') rejection of Nazism and its genocidal practices, then that is fine, but does such a transformation also hint at the potential for redemption? Are we supposed to understand the perpetrator-protagonists as somehow more likeable because (perhaps) their views begin to align more closely with ours? Of course, Curthoys is not suggesting that we exonerate Aue for his deeds, nor does he absolve Stevens of his complicity, but he does suggest that, by virtue of some form of realisation and/or acknowledgement of wrongness, the characters are able to transform into unexpected sources of moral instruction. This is an intriguing claim that warrants further discussion and scrutiny.

The Bildungsroman in a Genocidal Age is a welcome intervention in perpetrator studies. Curthoys's readings are insightful, detailed, and well-supported. They raise important questions about the role of the reader, the symbolic features of literature of atrocity, and the methods used to represent those who contributed to genocide, or whose post-war reflections have come to shape thinking around the period. In applying a genre-based approach to representations of the Holocaust, the author aptly shows that, through geographical movement, avid curiosity, and interlocution, the protagonists are able to re-evaluate their worldviews, gain confidence in their perspectives, and offer insights into the nuances and complexities of history.

Works Cited

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