

'Guilt ran through me like lightning': Holocaust Complicity in Popular Fiction

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Abstract: Although popular novels about the Holocaust are often ambivalently received, this article will claim the ability of works of this kind to represent the subjective experience of complicity. In the novels discussed here, the protagonist is a non-Jewish German woman who witnesses at close quarters the atrocities of the Third Reich, requiring reflection upon the possibility of her own implication in those crimes. These examples, Mandy Robotham's *A Woman of War* (2018), Louise Fein's *People Like Us* (2020) and John Boyne's *All the Broken Places* (2022), depict the changes in the protagonist's self-understanding and judgements on individual responsibility by means of first-person narrative. The novels use the dramatic or fantastic dilemmas befitting genre fiction, including taboo birth, forbidden love and personal vengeance, as a framework to draw connections between Holocaust history and concerns ranging from eugenics to sexual violence. The article concludes that, despite its liabilities, genre fiction's leeway to depict extreme scenarios and states of mind allows it to reveal, and take part in constructing, modes of contemporary engagement with the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Keywords: complicity, Nazism, Holocaust, popular fiction, first-person narrative

Introduction

In this article, I will ask what contribution popular fiction about the Holocaust can make in depicting a complicit consciousness. In the three examples discussed here, Mandy Robotham's *A Woman of War* (2018), Louise Fein's *People Like Us* (2020) and John Boyne's *All the Broken Places* (2022), the first-person narrator is a German-born, non-Jewish woman whose experience under the Third Reich establishes the narrative's moral dilemmas. I will explore the role of generic tropes in each novel, including taboo birth, forbidden romance and violent vengeance. The subjective viewpoint in each case enlists the reader's investment while also engaging their judgement of the characters and their construction.

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In these novels, the historical record is fictionalized to varying degrees in depicting the protagonist's quandaries. This takes the form of the dramatic plot devices demanded by popular fiction, in its quest both to ensure a wide readership and to 'sabotage our attachments' to 'dominant narratives about the past'.¹ Thus, we read in these novels respectively about the birth of Hitler's son; the escape from Nazi Berlin of a baby born to a young woman who is a member of the Nazi Young Girls' League and a Jewish man; and an act of belated and murderous atonement on the part of an Auschwitz commandant's daughter. In each case, the protagonist's experiences provoke them into questioning the Nazi world view, as well as their relationship to and level of responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich. This is accomplished by a focus on elements particular to a female experience and animating through first-person narration the competing standpoints and voices faced by the central character.

While none of the protagonists is a principal wrongdoer, in all three cases she makes, or is explicitly concerned about making, a 'secondary contribution'² to the persecution and murder of Jews and other victims of Nazism. The version of inner monologue constituting the body of each text is a reflection on this position, in which narrational unreliability conveys the psychological states of self-delusion and compromise. The first-person narrative lays bare the degree to which the protagonist's subjectivity is aligned with their behaviour or conflicts with it, accounted for variously as a reminiscence, diary or confession.

Constructing Complicity

The detail of these works' historical setting is constructed for the sake of the choices facing the narrator. Each novel includes a statement of the kind that appears on the copyright page of Boyne's *All the Broken Places*: 'This book is a work of fiction, and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental'.³ In addition, in a way that avoids this disclaimer's reli-

1 Mihaela Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care: The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 46. The quotation in the title is from Mandy Robotham, *A Woman of War* (London: Avon (2019 [2018])), p. 48.

2 Ivan Stacy, *The Complicit Text: Failures of Witnessing in Postwar Fiction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), p. 5.

3 John Boyne, *All the Broken Places* (London: Penguin, 2022), p. iv.

ance on the reader's ability to perceive the difference between 'historical fact' and invention, all three novels affirm their documentary basis. Each includes paratextual accounts of the research that has informed the plot and its relationship to the author's biography, implying auto-fictional legitimacy.

In *A Woman of War*, the protagonist Anke Hoff is, following Robotham's own earlier career but transferred back in time to 1940s Germany, a midwife. In the novel, after her illicit practice assisting at the labour of a Jewish woman in Berlin, Anke is imprisoned in the women's camp of Ravensbrück. Anke is shielded by her 'Aryan' status to the extent that, in a turn to historical fantasy, she is taken from the camp to Hitler's Berghof residence in Berchtesgaden to act as midwife for his lover Eva Braun. In the author's note to the novel and in interviews, Robotham stresses the fictive status of a child born to 'the Führer and his eventual bride', which is nonetheless central to this depiction of the 'test of [a] moral compass' where childbirth is concerned.⁴

Anke's habit of reflecting on the unlikely nature of her experience, imprisoned in a secluded castle for a secret purpose 'as if I was in some kind of fairy-tale', has a metafictional effect.⁵ Not only does Anke describe this scenario as exceeding fiction - 'the Berghof existed on another plane, a world *beyond the beanstalk*' - but other characters use the events' unlikeness as a way of silencing her: 'Who would believe you, Fräulein Hoff? Some madwoman from the camps, muttering about the Führer's baby'.⁶ Like the Jack and the Beanstalk fairy tale that Anke invokes, the plot of the novel in which she appears attempts to pose in fantastic form the 'complex ethical and existential' questions about birth and inheritance as embodied by her role as a midwife in a setting of this kind.⁷

Fein contrastingly describes *People Like Us* as 'inspired by her family history',⁸ in the sense that her father fled Leipzig for Britain as a child in 1933. However, the book is 'not about him'.⁹ Rather, in a change to Fein's original plan to 'write the book from a Jewish experience',¹⁰ the

4 Robotham, *A Woman of War*, pp. vii-viii

5 Ibid., p. 69.

6 Ibid., pp. 119, 344. My emphasis.

7 David Lewin, 'Between Horror and Boredom: Fairy Tales and Moral Education', *Ethics and Education*, 15.2 (2020), 213-31 (p. 215).

8 Louise Fein, *People Like Us* (London: Head of Zeus, 2020), p. 522.

9 Louise Fein, 'Why I Wrote This Book', *Louise Fein*, 19 November 2019, <<https://www.louisefein.com/blog/people-like-usdaughter-of-the-reich-why-i-wrote-this-book>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

10 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 513.

novel's narrator is Hetty Heinrich, the daughter of an SS officer who is the editor of a Reich newspaper. *People Like Us* thus adopts Hetty's perspective as one from 'inside the head of a Nazi', that of a young woman 'who has been taught hatred from day one', in Fein's words, as part of a fictive effort to imagine 'what could possibly change their outlook.'¹¹ The answer to this rhetorical question takes the form of a story about 'forbidden love', in the phrase of a review quoted on the novel's cover. Hetty's struggle is that between the tendentious 'outlook' with which she is brought up and her romance with a Jewish man, Walter Keller, demanding a critique of her own position. His becomes the most persuasive of what she calls 'a torrent of voices in my head', prompting her recognition of Nazism's lies and atrocities.¹²

The symbolic effect of this romance, with its enactment of personal intimacy across artificial but inflexible boundaries, is debated within and outside the novel. Hetty rebuffs the praise of a friend for having 'dared to think differently' by separating the personal from the political, as she puts it: 'I've only fallen in love'.¹³ By contrast, one of the 'Book Club Discussion Questions' at the novel's end suggests that Hetty would have doubted her own 'unquestioning support of the regime ... even if it weren't for Walter'.¹⁴ Despite the fictive efforts to make Walter eligible, as the former best friend of Hetty's brother Karl who once rescued her from a near-drowning, this implies that the romance is a sign of her resistant frame of mind rather than its source.

In the case of Boyne's *All the Broken Places*, the protagonist is the daughter of a former Auschwitz commandant who is now the ninety-something widow Gretel Fernsby living in present-day London. While Robotham's novel has mythical leanings and Fein's takes the form of a 'star-crossed' romance, Boyne's treats historical events allegorically. Boyne claims that the depiction of this father-figure, in both *All the Broken Places* and its bestselling, if controversial, young-adult predecessor, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006), is 'informed' rather than 'based' on the real-life Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, who did 'bring his wife and children to the camp' where they lived 'for several years'.¹⁵

11 Fein, 'Why I Wrote This Book'.

12 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 189.

13 Ibid., p. 316.

14 Ibid., p. 520.

15 Louise Priest, 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas', *BBC Norfolk*, 12 March 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/norfolk/hi/people_and_places/arts_and_culture/newsid_7939000/7939722.stm>

All the Broken Places relies on the reader's recognising details from the earlier work, in which Gretel was the older sister of the youthful protagonist Bruno. The earlier novel's conclusion on Bruno's death in a gas chamber has contributed to its divided reception. The implausible nature of this occurrence in relation to the camp commandant's son has been deplored in light especially of the novel's widespread educational use in Britain.¹⁶ *All the Broken Places*' inclusion of moments constructed explicitly as flashbacks to the earlier novel acts as an endorsement of both, even if a reviewer judged Boyne to have remained 'immune' to the true horrors of Holocaust history.¹⁷ Boyne's afterword to *All the Broken Places* implies the almost-factual nature of revisiting the character of Gretel, to 'discover, through the writing, what might have become of her'.¹⁸ Gretel's recall is often inextricable from a return to the earlier work and its dialogue, as in this case about the status of the Jewish prisoners: 'A memory – my father in his office – "Those people? Well, they're not people at all. At least, as we understand the term"'.¹⁹ Yet, despite this reference to the dehumanization and murder of the Jews, the focus of both Boyne's novels on the suffering of the commandant's family reveals one of the pitfalls of a fictional testimony about complicity.

Fictional Testimony

The technique of first-person narrative common to all three works is vital in portraying changes over time in the protagonist's 'self-understanding'.²⁰ Each narrator reflects explicitly on the extent of their 'agency and responsibility' in relation to their responses to the brutal social processes of Nazi Germany and their aftermath.²¹ The female

[accessed 9 March 2025].

16 Darius Jackson, "'I know it's not really true, but it might just tell us...': The Troubled Relationship between *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and Understanding about the Holocaust', in *Holocaust Education: Contemporary Challenges and Controversies*, ed. by Stuart Foster, Andy Pearce, and Alice Pettigrew (London: UCL Press, 2020), pp. 135–49.

17 Ann Manov, 'The moral corruption of Holocaust fiction', *New Statesman*, 17 October 2022, <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2022/10/john-boyne-striped-pyjamas-sequel-immoral-holocaust-fiction>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

18 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 369. My emphasis.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 330. Emphasis in original, quoting John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (London: David Fickling, 2006), p. 53.

20 *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond: Compromised Identities?*, ed. by Stephanie Bird and others (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 9.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

perspective entails the novels' addressing the 'structures of oppression' that range from patriarchal control and sexual violence to reproduction, as these are inflected by the historical context of genocide.²² The novels' allusion to, and indeed their taking inspiration from, the continuing relevance of these factors gives the imagery used to construct the wartime world a multidirectional potential. The Holocaust-era occurrences are alternately uppermost or stand-ins for contemporary concerns and a wider sense of complicity itself.

The first-person narration of Hetty Heinrich is vital to the cautionary and confessional form of Fein's *People Like Us*. It is also an explicit element of the fiction and its action. Hetty's brother Karl gives her the book that becomes her diary, its entries consisting of outbursts of her love for the Jewish Walter alongside her growing doubts about Nazism. These represent the essence of Hetty's internal conflict, as a witness to and beneficiary of Nazi racial policy, typified by her family's living in a formerly Jewish-owned house, in parallel to a romance which makes her question this status quo. The house is the subject of a debate between her and Walter, implying the possibility of overcoming complicitous 'culpable ignorance',²³ but also its reliance on essentialized positions. Only a Jewish-identified voice, in the world of this novel, can utter the 'inconvenient truth' about the former owners' dispossession.²⁴

Even when not rationalized as Hetty's daily record, the narrative has a diaristic form, each chapter opening on a date that allows us to follow her personal journey in historical time. The plot begins on 17 September 1933, after the Nazi accession to power in Germany and institution of anti-Jewish legislation, and ends on 18 August 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War. This structure acts for the reader as a countdown to incidents including the so-called Kristallnacht pogrom of 9/10 November 1938, to which Hetty is an eyewitness.

Fein claims that the portrait of what seems to be Hetty's extreme gullibility arises from the fact that 'People at the time didn't have the benefit of knowing where this was all going to lead'.²⁵ However, the

22 Stephanie Bird, *Responses to Nazi Perpetration in Fiction: Complicity and Continuities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), p. 3.

23 Stacy, *The Complicit Text*, p. 6.

24 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 126.

25 Anne Garvey, 'Book Review: *People Like Us*', *Jewish Chronicle*, 20 August 2020, <<https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/books/book-review-people-like-us-b1rv2kn>> [accessed 9 March 2025]; Paul Spalding-Mulcock, 'Interview: Louise Fein Author Of *People Like Us*', *Yorkshire Times*, 31 October 2020, <<https://yorkshiretimes.co.uk/article/Interview-Louise-Fein-Author-Of-People-Like-Us-1>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

balance between contingency in the personal realm and teleology in the historical is hard to maintain, given the apparent inevitability of the events we know to be imminent and about which the characters too have surprising foresight. As early as April 1939, after Kristallnacht but before the outbreak of war, let alone the invasion of the Soviet Union or Wannsee Conference, Hetty's father declares that not only is war 'inevitable' but that its goal is to 'annihilate the Jews'.²⁶

While the romance plot, charted in parallel to the historical events, is crucial to the status of *People Like Us* as genre fiction, it also underlies the novel's ethical ambitions. Our uncertainty about what will happen between Hetty and Walter substitutes for the absence of suspense in relation to Germany's goal of war and the fate of the Jews. The combination of this sideshadowing effect with that of readerly certainty makes Hetty's doubts about Walter on account of his Jewishness as prompted by Nazi propaganda seem repetitive and hard to dislodge. Set against this is not only Walter's having saved Hetty's life but the contrast between what she calls his 'polite and proper' demeanour and that of a group of 'brutes' who harass her on a tram.²⁷ The importance of acknowledging misogyny is compromised here by the bathetic account of Walter's virtues in this context, as well as the implication that his acceptability as a Jewish man is 'conditional' upon his good behaviour.²⁸ Hetty considers his attributes and actions, ranging from the heroic to eschewing everyday sexism, to prove that Walter is either not really Jewish, or at least innocent 'of this Conspiracy of International Jewry', a notion so preoccupying to her that she challenges him with it and considers his refutation to affirm her suspicions.²⁹

This dramatization of the discourses and slogans surrounding Hetty is answered most definitively by her pregnancy with Walter's child. Their son Stanley is the proof and personification of the notion that her romance with Walter 'made me see' the falsity of Nazism's claims.³⁰ Hetty at last confronts her schoolmate, the Nazi loyalist Tomas, with an incontrovertible assertion that, 'There is no evil conspiracy to take over the world, unless you're Hitler, of course!'³¹ Not only does she declare Walter personally to be 'a wonderful, kind human being', but that 'everyone is the same, Jew and

26 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 438.

27 Ibid., p. 115.

28 *The Good Immigrant*, ed. by Nikesh Shukla (London: Unbound, 2016), p. 231.

29 Fein, *People Like Us*, pp. 115, 122.

30 Ibid., p. 378.

31 Ibid., p. 462.

non-Jew, African or Aryan'. This liberal humanist affirmation prompts Tomas' riposte of 'Shut up!';³² emphasizing the sentiment's anachronistic standing by shutting down the argument.

The value of Hetty's journal for the plot lies in its fictional version of the 'immediacy and materiality' characterizing Holocaust-era diaries.³³ Suspense is generated by Hetty's hiding the diary under her mattress or floorboards, and it is indeed incriminatingly found by the family maid Ingrid. Walter's incredulity at Hetty's writing down what happens between them echoes the reader's, and we learn by this means of her determination to continue: 'I know I should destroy this journal. But I just cannot bring myself to do it'.³⁴ The journal is vital to the novel's resolution of Hetty's conflicted state and her disavowal of the Nazi regime. She sends the diary with her newborn baby Stanley on his Kindertransport journey to safety in Britain since, with its record of what she calls 'the best and the worst of me', it is 'his story' and indeed the only one to which we as readers have access.³⁵

In the novel's coda, set in 1995 when Hetty is belatedly reunited with her son, the diary embodies her metamorphosis from participant to victim. A change of status of this kind is toyed with in all three novels, to ironic effect in *All the Broken Places* when Gretel is mistaken for a former Auschwitz prisoner, to a more destabilising effect in *A Woman of War*, where Anke seems to see traces of Jewish women's fraught experience of childbirth in that of the unhappy Eva Braun, whose look, like theirs, is that of 'a woman who had lost'.³⁶ In *People Like Us*, the stepmother of Hetty's long-lost son Stanley comes to greet her on their reunion in London some three decades later, carrying 'a book, its textured cover in faded, geometric patterns'.³⁷ The journal's presence stands for the link between the two stories, that of Hetty's German childhood which we have just read, and of her son in Britain.

Even more significant in affirming that Hetty's transformation is based on personal and bodily experience rather than intellectual conviction alone is her journal's likeness to the similarly 'geometric' cover of the well-known red tartan diary given to Anne Frank on her

³² Ibid.

³³ Katherine Roseau, 'The Diary as Witness to the Holocaust: Materiality, Immediacy and Mediated Memory', *Holocaust Studies*, 25.4 (2019), 492-513 (p. 492).

³⁴ Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 365.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 495.

³⁶ Robotham, *A Woman of War*, p. 343.

³⁷ Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 506.

thirteenth birthday. Hetty's change of status derives from the birth of her son with Walter after he too had fled to Britain. She turns from a loyal Nazi youth-group member into the mother of a baby who is under threat, as 'a mischling child ... whose existence may also be the end of mine'.³⁸ In this retroactive way, Hetty has herself become a potential victim of the Nazis' racialized persecution. This plot twist acts both to caution Hetty by showing that the tables could be turned on her, and to demand the reader's pity and regard through an ambivalent shift to biological determinism.

Inner Conflict

In *All the Broken Places*, the process by which Gretel's self-critical view develops is asserted rather than fully depicted. This is partly the consequence of her construction as an unreliable narrator with a longstanding habit of suppressing the uncomfortable past, as well as the extra-diegetic demand for suspense that this suppression enables.

The plot revolves around Gretel's conviction of her guilt, a term she uses frequently, to describe having benefited from and 'enjoyed' her father's position as camp commandant, with the additional dubious legacy of what another character calls that of her father's 'blood'.³⁹ Although Gretel assures herself that she 'could never have done what [my parents] did', she challenges her own utterance soon afterwards in perceiving 'Father's shadow' in her reflection in the mirror.⁴⁰

A condensed version of debates about perpetrator inheritance for successive generations, and its psychic or bodily form,⁴¹ is thus dramatized in the novel. The legacy of the atrocities for which Gretel's father received a capital sentence after the war takes the form of what she is convinced is a culpable liability in her case. This is represented by Gretel's sometimes defending herself on the legalistic grounds of her youth and not having personally committed a crime. But conversely, and beyond the notion of a tainted bloodline, she self-critically asserts the injustice of not having 'paid any price for [my father's] crimes' and that, at 12 years old, she was old enough to know the difference

38 Ibid., p. 438.

39 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 345.

40 Ibid., pp. 47, 52.

41 Joanne Pettitt, 'Holocaust Narratives: Second Generation "Perpetrators" and the Problem of Liminality', *The European Legacy*, 23.3 (2018), 286-300.

between 'right and wrong'.⁴² The kinds of distraction that Gretel chose in Auschwitz to shield herself from knowledge, as depicted in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* – to play with her dolls and 'flirt with a handsome young lieutenant'⁴³ – are given a gendered specificity that also reveals the ambiguity of her age. It is the incompatibility of Gretel's ethical awareness and inaction that makes her, she insists, 'partly responsible'.⁴⁴

However, the grounds for Gretel's self-condemnation are presented by means beyond her unreliability and shifts in self-blame. Her opening declaration that immediately after the war, 'I [began] to question my own involvement in the events I had witnessed',⁴⁵ is not just the result of soul-searching but of information new to the reader. The portrait of what she calls her guilt is therefore the opportunity to revisit and embellish – or, as a reviewer claimed, cash in on⁴⁶ – the earlier novel, as part of the story of Gretel that Boyne declares he had always planned to write. In substantiating her conviction of wrongdoing beyond that of a 'bystander',⁴⁷ we learn from the later novel that Gretel encouraged her brother to cross the camp fence in the action that led to his death. She did so not for the sake of his friendship with the prisoner Shmuel and the latter's search for his missing father, but because 'I wanted to get [Bruno] into trouble ... to be sent away', a wish that was definitively granted.⁴⁸

Admitting in this way to a misdeed that did not appear in the earlier work and for which there are no surviving witnesses is foundational to the fictional confession. It assists in turning the historically situated story into one that is about more general ethical questions. This admission, and the extreme action Gretel takes in atonement, relates to family matters, as befitting the novel's allegorical challenge to passive witness. Although the fate of the Jews is not wholly absent from Gretel's reckoning, it is only explicitly mentioned a third of the way through the novel and remains in the background.⁴⁹

42 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, pp. 354, 347.

43 Ibid., p. 116.

44 Ibid., p. 355.

45 Ibid., p. 8.

46 David Herman, 'Did *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* need a sequel?', *Jewish Chronicle*, 15 September 2020, <<https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/did-the-boy-in-the-striped-pyjamas-need-a-sequel-xi8eut02>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

47 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 8.

48 Ibid., p. 260.

49 Ibid., p. 104.

Gender Lessons

In all three novels, the perspective of a female narrator expands the text's ethical boundaries and implies the protagonist's tangential relation to the wartime murders. While this viewpoint supports the depiction of fascism's extreme patriarchy and exertion of biopolitical control, the novels attempt to transcend the historical particularity of the Holocaust era in implying those factors' persistent relevance.

In *People Like Us*, it seems that Hetty is not only oblivious to the dangers of segregation and murder, but to male privilege more generally. Indeed, the enforcement of gender inequality is shown as a central moral flaw on the part of her father, on a par with his SS officer status. He insists against his daughter's wishes that her most important goal should be to 'learn how to run a home' rather than become a doctor;⁵⁰ yet his hypocrisy is shown through the affair he is conducting with Hilda, his secretary and the mother of their daughter. This depiction is part of the text's 'Janus-like' construction, 'looking back to a tumultuous past and forward to our own tainted epoch'.⁵¹ The role of her father's secret for the plot is to give Hetty a hold over him to enable Walter's escape from Germany. However, although Hetty calls finding her father's love-letters 'a distraction' in her search for correspondence about launching the pogrom of 9 November 1938,⁵² their being uncovered together implies an uneasy parity of historical and social concerns. He guesses the identity of the father of his daughter's unborn child partly to shield himself against his wife's demanding with unconscious irony, 'What can be worse than a married man?'.⁵³ The unstated answer – a Jewish man – gives the notion of moral disgrace a historically specific form in the novel even as it is contradictorily likened to the everyday instance of marital infidelity. This likeness is conveyed by Hetty's silent address to her father, 'we are the same, you and me'.⁵⁴

Like her daughter, Hetty's mother only questions the status quo through personal experience. This animation of an ethical quandary for the reader's benefit takes the form of the death of Hetty's brother Karl in an aeroplane accident, about which her father says, to the horror of his wife, that it was 'for the best' that he did not survive with a

50 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 81.

51 Spalding-Mulcock, 'Interview: Louise Fein Author Of *People Like Us*'.

52 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 323.

53 Ibid., p. 443.

54 Ibid., p. 444.

disability.⁵⁵ The Nazis' placing the "health" of the State or "Volk" above that of the individual through the murder of those considered disabled is challenged by the plot.⁵⁶ The targeting of those living with disability is an even more prominent plot device in Robotham's *A Woman of War*. The novel's counterfactual story of the birth of Hitler's son is defused by having the baby written out of history. The child is born with a missing hand and secretly spirited away for adoption, never to be heard of again, resetting the story to the historical record, in which Eva Braun's baby did not appear. In addition, through an uncomfortably symbolic use of the image of disability, this resolution implies that even Hitler might suffer from his own strictures.

In *All the Broken Places*, the animation of gender-related discourses also combines historical specificity with longer-lived injustice, concluding with emphasis rather on the latter. In contemporary London, Gretel witnesses a neighbour, Madelyn Darcy-Witt, being subjected to her husband's violence. It prompts Gretel's recall of the past, including the revelation that in post-war Paris she and her mother underwent *la tonte*, that is, the public head-shaving of French women designated as collaborators on the grounds of their relationship with German men.⁵⁷ In this case, it is a punishment for proximity to the crimes of the former commandant that is exacted.

The sexualized nature of this punishment appears ambiguously in Boyne's novel to affirm its political status, by screening out its misogynist form. The teenage Gretel's French boyfriend Émile is implicated in the trap set for her and her mother, as hinted at in a conversation between them. Gretel observes that young women are attractive to men of Émile's father's age because 'they appreciate our *innocence*'.⁵⁸ Émile's ungallant response, 'I'm not sure that's the word I'd use to describe you', refers to Gretel's status as a Nazi's daughter and not, as we are led at first to imagine, her sexual history. This uncomfortable normalization of the discourse of women's chastity as a figure for historical guilt reappears when Gretel's mother affirms her loyalty to her dead husband: 'I may have made mistakes in the past,

55 Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 263.

56 Shmuel P. Reis, Hedy Wald and Paul Weindling, 'The Holocaust, Medicine and Becoming a Physician: The Crucial Role of Education', *Israel Journal of Health Policy Research*, 8.55 (2019).

57 Helena Duffy, *The Holocaust in French Postmodern Fiction: Aesthetics, Politics, Ethics* (Oxford: Legenda, 2022), pp. 67-69.

58 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 83. My emphasis.

but my virtue has never been in question'.⁵⁹ The double meaning of 'virtue' echoes that of 'innocence' in casting doubt on a woman's ethical probity in sexualized terms.

Like the racialized threat facing Hetty in *People Like Us* as the mother of a Jewish man's child, these political and sexual registers construct Gretel as both a victim and as justly chastened, making her 'consider for the first time my culpability'.⁶⁰ The head-shaving in Paris embodies both positions, by echoing the fate of women in the camps but prompting Gretel, as she begs for mercy, suddenly to understand that 'others' in 'that other place' might have done likewise, but, 'Their pleas had gone unanswered, despite their innocence, so why should mine be heard?'.⁶¹ The repeated invocation of 'innocence' shows its range of meanings, as a state of being for the (here unnamed) Jews but a reference to responsibility for the crime against them in Gretel's case.

In expiation of what she has come to consider her wartime inertia, Gretel becomes an active avenger in the present. Gretel's being blackmailed by Madelyn's husband Alex Darcy-Witt into keeping quiet about his abuse of his wife and son in return for not divulging her true past seems at first to succeed in silencing her, but ultimately drives her to murder. This, it is implied, is a fitting conclusion to Gretel's ninety-year-long life. Against Alex's insistence that she is guilty and he is not – 'You can't compare my behaviour to yours'⁶² – Gretel is shown to redeem herself by putting an end to another kind of male violence. In a further dramatic development placing atrocity firmly within a recognisable space, Gretel withholds the admission to killing Alex that she is tempted to make to her future daughter-in-law Eleanor – '*I slit his throat with a box-cutter then dragged his body into the spare room ... I imagine I'll have to deal with the consequences reasonably soon*'⁶³ – so that she can attend her son's wedding. Gretel killed Alex on grounds that suggest not just a parallel, but a common root, between the wartime genocide and a more domestic toxic masculinity.

Studies in critical masculinity accord with some elements of this notion and readers might welcome its exposure in these terms. The distinction between 'real' and 'good' masculinity analysed by Michael Kimmel suggests a habitual priority of action over ethics, while other

59 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 60.

60 Ibid., p. 115.

61 Ibid., p. 111.

62 Ibid., p. 338.

63 Ibid., pp. 360–61. Emphasis in original.

critics have identified the success of neo-Nazi groups in idealizing the intersection of racial categories with violence in the form of a 'strong, white and combat-ready masculinity'.⁶⁴ However, in literary terms, for *All the Broken Places* the plot is placed at the service of an allegory in which the wartime events and construction of 'hyper-patriarchal gender roles'⁶⁵ stand in for their more everyday counterparts. Despite its crucial presence for creating this link, Nazism is 'reduced to a fringe belief'.⁶⁶

In establishing the basis for this allegory, we see characters glance at Gretel's 'long-sleeved blouse', imagining her to be a former camp prisoner to the extent that she 'instinctively covered the place on my left [arm] where a tattoo would have been'.⁶⁷ Yet the irony of mistaking the eyewitness position of a commandant's daughter for that of a survivor is abandoned at the novel's end, where a bodily sign testifies to familial rather than historical violence. Alex's son Henry's 'long-sleeved T-shirt' covers a bruise sustained from his father's bullying, and he likewise 'instinctively' shields his 'left forearm' from public view. It seems that Gretel's experience of the camp has alerted her to this possibility: 'I reached over', she says, 'hoping to roll the sleeve up, but he pulled away'.⁶⁸ Indeed, Gretel is reminded of the camp world by Alex's facial expression: 'The soldiers had worn it, almost to a man. A desire to hurt'.⁶⁹ Her restoration of a specific meaning to the phrase 'to a man' affirms this viewpoint. When Alex claims that he, unlike Gretel, is free from anti-Jewish 'prejudices', her riposte is that, 'you reserve your aggression for women and little boys'.⁷⁰ In addition to likening genocidal and domestic violence, her words suggest the now-contested truisms that perpetration and complicity were divided by gender and that Nazi-era atrocities, including those in the camps, can be explained on the grounds of personal cruelty or sadism.⁷¹

64 Michael Kimmel, 'Ask a Feminist: Michael Kimmel and Lisa Wade Discuss Toxic Masculinity', *Signs*, 44.1 (2018), 233-54; Callum Jones, Steven Roberts, and Brady Robards, 'White Warriors and Weak Women: Identifying Central Discourses of Masculinity in Neo-Nazi Telegram Channels', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2024), 1-26.

65 'Gender and the Far Right', Amadeu Antonio Foundation, n.d., <<https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/en/gender-and-the-far-right/>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

66 Manov, 'The moral corruption of Holocaust fiction'.

67 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 91.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 100. My emphasis.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 335.

71 Sarah Cushman, *Women in Auschwitz* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2025).

Gretel's deciding on action, rather than continuing to cover her ears to 'block Henry's cries',⁷² is a specific instance of a general wish. In this way, it resembles the fence separating Bruno and Shmuel in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which can be seen as a cipher for the many kinds of division that keep people arbitrarily apart, including those in Boyne's native Ireland. This seemingly unrelated national history has an explicit role in the earlier novel. A version of Gretel's eventual fully-fledged refusal to block her ears is established through Bruno's paternal grandmother claiming that, 'somewhere in her family there was Irish blood'.⁷³ Far from this being a distant connection, as this phrasing implies, the grandmother herself is constructed as Irish, possessing Celtic-seeming 'long red hair ... and green eyes' and a fondness for music, voiced with a version of Irish-English phrasing: 'Is it a song you're wanting?'.⁷⁴ These attributes underlie the grandmother's forthright, if ineffectual, reproaches to her son for 'the terrible, terrible things you do'.⁷⁵ In this allegorical scheme with its eye on the present, Ireland is constructed as sufficiently distant and down-to-earth to perceive the self-delusion and wrongdoing on the part of others, yet subject to enacting its own crimes in turn.

In *All the Broken Places*, the relevance of Gretel's actions for Irish history is asserted in the afterword by means that imply the plot's biographical authenticity, yet risks diffusing the precise nature of the novel's context. Boyne describes growing up 'in Ireland in the 1980s', among others whose 'childhoods and teenage years were tainted by those who were entrusted with our education'.⁷⁶ This refers to the clerical child abuse that took place in Dublin on a 'huge scale' during that era and its being 'covered up' by church and police, as revealed in a series of 'devastating' reports issued two decades later.⁷⁷ That experience, Boyne claims, makes it inevitable that his concern should lie not with 'the monsters' or perpetrators but 'the people who knew what the monsters were doing and looked away'.⁷⁸ In the novel, Gretel can hardly be accused of 'looking away' from Alex Darcy-Witt.

72 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 344.

73 Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, p. 87.

74 Ibid., p. 87.

75 Ibid., p. 92.

76 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 370.

77 Henry McDonald, 'Irish church and police covered up child sex abuse, says report', *Guardian*, 26 November 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/26/ireland-church-sex-abuse>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

78 Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 370.

Bioethics

Like *All the Broken Places*, *A Woman of War* transfers contemporary attitudes back into a wartime scenario to imply the persistence of those historical tendencies in the present. Robotham's author's note describes the novelistic conundrum that occasioned the historical context, as one in which 'we as midwives may not *want* to give body and soul towards the safety of mother and baby'.⁷⁹ The answer to the subsequent question, 'who and or where would that be?', is put forward even at this prefatory stage as the fictional instance of a child whose father was Adolf Hitler.

In an expansion upon the mixture of socially and bodily transmitted traits with which Gretel contends in Boyne's novel, Robotham cites the 'very genetics' that might seem to be a liability for a descendant of the Führer.⁸⁰ While this notion of tainted inheritance is not carried forward in the plot beyond Anke's musings, this thought-experiment points to the potential value of returning to the 'maleficent manipulation of reproductive function in the Nazi era' for health-care professionals as a means of evaluating 'today's world of stem cell research and gene manipulation and modification'.⁸¹ In the novel's ethical design, the notion of 'pregnancy manipulation' conflicts not only with the 'innocent, entirely pure' status of any newborn baby but also the fundamental equality of all women in childbirth, including that of Hitler's wife-to-be: 'Eva, at the moment of labour, is one of those women'.⁸² To resist the birth of Eva's child would, for Anke, be to repeat the Nazis' unethical interventions in reproduction.

As these prefatory comments suggest, Anke's role as a narrator is put together from what Robotham calls 'two strands',⁸³ those of contemporary midwifery alongside the history of the war. The interaction, and sometimes the mismatch, between these elements is foundational to the novel's formal and temporal structure. Robotham's factual sources, including Sarah Helm's *If This is a Woman* (2015) about the women's camp of Ravensbrück, are repurposed not only in terms

79 Robotham, *A Woman of War*, p. vii. Emphasis in original.

80 Ibid.

81 Beverley Chalmers, 'Lessons from the Holocaust for Perinatal Care Today', *Birth*, 47.1 (2019), 8–12 (p. 10).

82 Chalmers, 'Lessons from the Holocaust', p. 10; Robotham, *A Woman of War*, pp. vii–viii.

83 'Mandy Robotham Shares the Inspiration Behind her Incredible Debut, *The German Midwife*', *Better Reading*, 10 August 2020, <<https://www.betterreading.com.au/news/author-related/mandy-robotham-shares-the-inspiration-behind-her-incredible-debut-the-german-midwife/>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

of the prisoner experience but also formally, since, following Helm's study, each of the novel's flashbacks to the camp is named after the woman whose story is told.⁸⁴ Although Robotham describes her research into 'how German midwives worked' and the 'equipment they had access to', the nature of Anke's commitment to a maternity ethics aiming to 'recognise diversity and individual choice' is obtrusively that of the present.⁸⁵

In contrast to this ethical structure, Anke's trajectory begins in relation to the 'genocidal' murder of people judged to be 'unworthy of life'.⁸⁶ In her role as one of the 'gatekeepers of our future population', as a 'man in a black suit' tells her in pre-war Berlin, Anke vows 'not to be complicit' in the reporting of babies born with a 'disability of any nature'.⁸⁷ Indeed, she later takes part in ensuring that a baby is sent away from danger in hospital to safety at home.⁸⁸ In additional affirmation of her ethical credentials before she arrives at Hitler's Berghof retreat is Anke's assisting at the birth of a Jewish child which leads to her imprisonment in Ravensbrück. Her unquestioning solidarity is conveyed by wearing a yellow star to visit the Jewish woman and even the detail of her appearance, as she hears a sentry observe that she is 'too dark, too much of a Jew's look about her'.⁸⁹

The need for Anke to provide a narratorial perspective on extreme events along with a personal blamelessness that turns her into one of the Nazis' victims means that she attends pregnant women in Ravensbrück, as 'the only non-Jew in the hut'.⁹⁰ In this role, she even participates in the terrible triage that was enacted in the case of camp births. Despite its basis in episodes related by Helm where this was an atrocity committed by a criminal German 'nurse-perpetrator', here Anke takes part in the killing of a newborn baby in the entirely different spirit of saving the

84 Helm's work is cited in the Acknowledgements, Robotham, *A Woman of War*, p. 354.

85 Thomas Hadfield, 'Bestselling author Mandy Robotham on making the switch from midwifery to writing', *Local Answer*, 26 February 2020, <<https://www.thelocalanswer.co.uk/news/entertainment/literature/2003-stro-literature-mandy-robotham.aspx?area=gloucestershire%20south>> [accessed 9 March 2025]; 'The Code', *Nursing and Midwifery Council*, 29 January 2015, <<https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/nmc-publications/nmc-code.pdf>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

86 Dagmar Herzog, *The Question of Unworthy Life: Eugenics and Germany's Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

87 Robotham, *A Woman of War*, pp. 21, 24.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

mother's life.⁹¹ The difficulty of integrating this occurrence is shown by its oblique representation and belated appearance in the narrative, despite its status as a flashback to earlier events. Anke's anguished doubts – 'Was it murder, or mercy?'⁹² – insist on her personal integrity as well as the high stakes of actions like these, which led even Jewish prisoner doctors later to be accused of war crimes.

The recall of these conditions from her new position is one of the grounds on which Anke reproaches herself for what she recognizes as her increasingly 'servile' demeanour at the Berghof.⁹³ But it is the prospect of the arrival of Eva Braun's child that is at the centre of the novel's ethical drama. Anke worries that in facilitating the birth she is making 'this loathsome war ... smoother for the Nazi Party'.⁹⁴ Her symptomatic phrasing identifies atrocity with the 'war' and its origins with the 'Nazi Party' alone, since, as she later concludes, its 'bullyboys were the spineless few' by contrast to the generality of 'honest Germans'.⁹⁵ Anke's disinclination to entertain the notion of a real adherence to Nazism on the part of anyone beyond 'a few notorious malefactors' appears even in relation to Eva Braun, who is shown to be naïve and 'pitiable', her unborn baby 'a child within a child'.⁹⁶ While Anke acknowledges Braun to be 'infuriatingly blinkered' about the world beyond the Berghof, she is praised for being 'selfless' where the 'life of her baby is concerned'.⁹⁷ In the clash between the different kinds of material constituting the novel, the discourse of midwifery and birth as 'the ultimate equaliser' is in the ascendant here.⁹⁸

Thus, in the novel Anke's declaration of a universal care, 'I'm here to ensure safe passage of the mother and baby', is followed by a historically specific addition: 'I may not empathize with Eva, approve her choice of mate, but that's not my concern'.⁹⁹ Although this suits the novel's

91 Sarah Helm, *If This is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (London: Abacus, 2016 [2015]), p. 266; Susan Benedict, 'The Nadir of Nursing: Nurse-Perpetrators of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp', *Nursing History Review*, 11.1 (2003), 129–46.

92 Robotham, *A Woman of War*, p. 311.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 136.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 346.

96 *Bioethics and the Holocaust: A Comprehensive Study in How the Holocaust Continues to Shape the Ethics of Health, Medicine and Human Rights*, ed. by Stacy Gallin and Ira Bedzow (Cham: Springer, 2022), p. 48; Robotham, *A Woman of War*, pp. 59, 83, 62.

97 Robotham, *A Woman of War*, p. 175.

98 Mandy Robotham, 'A Woman of War', *Avon*, 29 November 2020, <<https://www.avonbooks.co.uk/2018/11/29/a-woman-of-war/>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

99 Robotham, *A Woman of War*, pp. 181–82.

plot, with its personal drama of medical ethics under pressure, Anke's statement also marks her distance from Nazi perinatal care, according to which, as Tessa Chelouche puts it, 'physicians implemented these policies, not with the fate of their patients in mind, but rather in the name of the "state"'.¹⁰⁰ For Anke, the individual comes first, even when it is Eva Braun.

Conclusion

The ethical dilemmas dramatized in the novels discussed here construct their protagonists as 'participating observers' to varying degrees in the crimes of the Third Reich.¹⁰¹ We see Hetty in the act of coming to understand her collusion with injustice; Anke never assenting to the regime's ideology but being protected by it; and Gretel, who is already reconciled to her complicity but ready to act in expiation. The success of the novels' portrayals depends on first-person narration, affirming testimony's association with 'historical veracity' yet challenging it by mingling public with fictive events.¹⁰²

The novels' protagonists are not direct perpetrators. Indeed, while fiction told from a Nazi or Nazi-affiliated perspective remains unusual, that of women in those roles is even less common.¹⁰³ However, well-known singular instances including Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1995), with its focus on the camp guard Hanna Schmitz, have been supplemented by recent novels about women's role in persecution and murder under Nazism, like Emma Venables' *Fragments of a Woman* (2023) and Angharad Hampshire's *The Mare* (2024). These works acknowledge a wide spectrum of women's behaviour under authoritarian regimes. In the examples discussed here, it is rather the balance between structural pressures and the potential for individual agency typifying complicity that is at stake.¹⁰⁴ The novels' use of the testimonial mode marks a crucial distinction from the representation of Schlink's Hanna

100 Tessa Chelouche, 'Doctors, Pregnancy, Childbirth and Abortion During the Third Reich', *Israel Medical Association Journal*, 9.3 (2007), 202-06 (p. 202).

101 Elżbieta Janicka, 'Pamięć przyswojona. Koncepcja polskiego doświadczenia zagłady Żydów jako traumy zbiorowej w świetle rewizji kategorii świadka', *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 3-4 (2015), 148-227 (p. 149).

102 Antony Rowland, 'Fiction as Testimony', *Literature and History*, 33.1 (2024), 37-52 (p. 38).

103 Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021), p. 27.

104 Stacy, *The Complicit Text*, p. 7.

Schmitz, whose story is told by a male first-person narrator so that her voice is not heard directly.

All three novels posit a connection between women's marginal positions in political and ethical terms. This is shown to involve the protagonists' partial or questioning assent, in intellectual and active terms, to the demands of their roles under Nazism, as sisters, daughters, pupils, romantic partners and mothers, in addition to being members of youth groups or as professionals. In this way, the role of cultural and familial norms versus the possibility of individual action is established. As these novels attest, women's social positions make them likely to take the fictive role of 'impure' resisters beyond the sharply distinguished figures of 'moral heroes or monstrous wrongdoers'.¹⁰⁵ This 'impurity' is enhanced by the elements of genre fiction, including in all these instances a romance plot and the presence of stock figures including the demonic versus the 'good German'.

Yet each novel also 'makes visible',¹⁰⁶ through implication, enactment or direct statement, the notion that the historical scenario, for all its intricate representation, has connections to the reader's present. In addition to plot trajectories that endorse independent thinking and direct action, while deploring violence against women and those judged disabled, links to specific occurrences ranging from Brexit to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to clerical abuse, are mentioned in the authors' afterwords or by the characters.¹⁰⁷ In each case the novel's title points to a general moral position, *People Like Us* implying that readers might find themselves similarly tested, *A Woman of War* that femininity is at odds with violence, *All the Broken Places* that even those on the perpetrator side might end up damaged. The telling absence of historical markers from these titles is emphasized by the North American versions of Fein's and Robotham's, renamed respectively *Daughter of the Reich* and *A German Midwife*, where specificity has been restored.

Although the novels' connections between past and present rely on 'analogies' rather than 'equivalences' between the Holocaust-era atrocities and current concerns,¹⁰⁸ some instances might nonetheless prompt the reader's disquiet. There are risks in likening family hypocrisies, coercive control and public secrets to genocidal power relations, includ-

¹⁰⁵ Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*, pp. 13, 17.

¹⁰⁶ Nickianne Moody, 'Methodological Agendas: Disability-Informed Criticism and the Incidental Representation of Autism in Popular Fiction', *Popular Narrative Media*, 1.1 (2008), 25-41 (p. 25).

¹⁰⁷ Fein, *People Like Us*, p. 513; Boyne, *All the Broken Places*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁸ *Bioethics and the Holocaust*, p. 2.

ing the diminution of Nazi ideology's appeal and prioritizing perpetrator suffering. The 'exaggerated' or even fantastic plot devices of genre fiction, including here forbidden love, unexpected parenthood and vigilante killing, might seem at odds with the Holocaust-related setting and its 'historically specific social hierarchies'.¹⁰⁹ Doubts of this kind on commentators' part include finding the insistence in Fein's novel on the Jewish Walter's exemplary status to be 'alienating'; that Anke in Robotham's shows too much sympathy to 'pro-Nazi' characters; and that the violent conclusion to Boyne's is 'out of character' for Gretel and turns it into 'pulp'.¹¹⁰

However, the ready availability and popularity of these works, since each is a bestseller with glowing online reviews and reading-group adoptions, arises from their animation of persistently crucial concerns.¹¹¹ Although these might sometimes invoke 'the incompatible morality of the post-war present day', the use of unexpected literary devices, ranging from the fairy tale to a daily record of complicity, 'enable[s] an escape from the formulaic'.¹¹² As well as complicitous silence or wilful ignorance, the connections established relate to gender, socialization and violence, eugenics and inheritance, while posing implicit questions about the moral or educational outcomes of contemplating Holocaust history itself.

109 Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, 'Popular Fiction Studies: The Advantages of a New Field', *Studies in Popular Culture*, 33.1 (2010), 21–35 (p. 22); Bird, *Responses to Nazi Perpetration in Fiction*, p. 87.

110 Garvey, 'Book Review'; Tanya Gold, 'All the Broken Places by John Boyne review: misjudged thriller sequel to *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*', *Telegraph*, 15 September 2022, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/broken-places-john-boyne-review-misjudged-thriller-sequel-boy/>> [accessed 9 March 2025].

111 Lisa Maurice, 'Introduction', in *Rewriting the Ancient World: Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians in Modern Popular Fiction*, ed. by Lisa Maurice (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 1–15 (p. 2).

112 David Dickson, 'Continuing Trends in Popular Holocaust Fiction: Heather Morris and the Corporealization of Women's Suffering', *Genealogy*, 4.1 (2020); Laura Major, 'Fictional Crimes/ Historical Crimes: Genre and Character in Philip Kerr's Berlin Noir Trilogy', *Genealogy*, 3.4 (2019).

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