

Threads of Complicity

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Review of: Stephanie Bird, *Responses to Nazi Perpetration in Fiction: Complicity and Continuities* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 288 pp. (hardcover). GBP 85.00. ISBN 978-1-3504-2409-8

Stephanie Bird begins *Responses to Nazi Perpetration in Fiction: Complicity and Continuities* by addressing the ethical problems of representing perpetrators. This is an issue of increasing interest in academic discourse, as evidenced by the existence of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* itself, alongside a number of other recent notable publications.¹ She notes the ‘disquiet that is frequently discernible in responses to representations of perpetrators that give them a voice, present their point of view, or give access to their subjectivity and motivations’ (p. 1). In response, she makes a case for the value of fiction as a form that can ‘interrogate boundaries that seek to contain people’s involvement in mass atrocity, be this in conceptual categorization, moral evaluation, temporal distancing or exculpatory discourses, including cultural and philosophical discourses’ (p. 3). It is specifically this tendency to discursively ‘contain’ the roles of individuals within mass atrocity, often through a process of categorization – such as in the tripartite model of victims, perpetrators and bystanders that she critiques (p. 8) – that Bird seeks to challenge through an emphasis on continuity. The aim of the book is therefore to examine the ‘disturbing continuities’ identified and explored in fictional responses to Nazi perpetration, and that function on a number of levels. As she explains:

At the diegetic level, such continuities may manifest themselves in questions of an individual’s agency, and compulsion and how retrospective justifications enable an individual to continue to function in society (or not). The novels also explore continuities of practice evident in institutions and occupations ... [and] political and economic continuities across ostensibly very different forms of state systems. At the textual

1 For example: Leigh Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth nor Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence* (Duke University Press, 2008); Ute Hirsekorn and Sue Vice, ‘Perpetrator Testimony’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, ed. by Sara Jones and Roger Woods (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 567–95, and a number of chapters in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (Routledge, 2020).



level, the novels engage with discursive and cultural continuities (p. 17).

The introduction thus makes the case for an exploration of such continuities and does so in the context of extant work on complicity. Following this, the book is structured into three sections. The first is 'Victims and Perpetrators: East European Dictatorships', and discusses texts by Imre Kertész, Borislav Pekić and Aleksandar Tišma. The second is 'Beneficiaries: (West) German Liberal Democracy', which takes as its subjects Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Volker Kutscher and Merle Kröger. The third and final section, 'Ordinary People: Complicity, Counter-Narratives and Globalization', focuses on Nir Baram and Olga Tokarczuk. Much has already been written on the politics of Holocaust representation, with swathes of scholarship dedicated to the relative merits of, for example, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*,² Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*³ and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*.⁴ As the content of *Responses to Nazi Perpetration in Fiction* indicates, Bird makes a determined effort to move beyond this well-worn ground.

Her analysis of the texts is characterized by close reading although it is solidly framed by theory, and particularly by theories of complicity. The arguments are primarily drawn from the richness of these texts but given her focus on the way that fictional forms interact with historical evidence, Bird is also careful to read the texts against their historical context and in light of the available archival and historical sources.

2 *Shoah*, dir. by Claude Lanzmann (New Yorker Films, 1985).

3 *Schindler's List*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Universal Pictures, 1993). In analysing its reception, Miriam Bratu Hansen argues that 'if there were a Richter scale to measure the extent to which commercial films cause reverberations in the traditional public sphere, the effect of *Schindler's List* might equal or come close to that of D. W. Griffith's racist blockbuster of 1915, *The Birth of a Nation*'. Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Schindler's List Is Not *Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory', *Critical Enquiry*, 22 (1996), pp. 292-312.

4 John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (Definitions, 2008). Many academic responses compare the representation of the Holocaust in *Schindler's List* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* unfavourably with *Shoah*. As Yosefa Loshitzky notes in his contribution to an edited collection dedicated to *Schindler's List*, despite unease about aspects of its mode of representation, both it and *Shoah* 'have already been canonized as the best films ever made on the Holocaust'. The University College London Centre for Holocaust Education raised concerns that *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* is being used by a large number of teachers despite the fact that it appears to cause pupils to 'draw mistaken and/or misleading conclusions about the Holocaust'. Yosefa Loshitzky, 'Holocaust Others: Spielberg's *Schindler's List* versus Lanzmann's *Shoah*', in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on Schindler's List*, ed. by Yosefa Loshitzky (Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 104-18 (p. 105); 'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas in English Secondary Schools', Centre for Holocaust Education, 27 January 2022 <<https://holocausteducation.org.uk/research/the-boy-in-the-striped-pyjamas-in-english-secondary-school/>> [accessed 23 October 2025].

This said, she remains keenly aware of these fictions as fiction, and her readings are guided by the notion that novels possess the ‘capacity for play’;⁵ are not required ‘to reconcile paradoxes, ambiguity or competing perspectives’, and possesses an ‘interpretative openness [that] resists the constraints of argument and moral clarity’ (p. 16). A corollary of this is the argument, made in the conclusion, that ‘the ethical potential of fiction resides in the interaction of competing voices and discourses ... which is also what makes it unsettling when it addresses mass violence and complicity in less than clear-cut moral terms’ (p. 245). Mikhail Bakhtin is cited in passing in the chapter on Tokarczuk, but in this reference to dialogue and throughout, it seems to me that a Bakhtinian approach, with an emphasis on the mixing and interplay of voices and styles, informs the readings of the texts. This combination of approach and content means that the book is most likely to be of direct interest to literary scholars, although it will certainly prove useful to anyone engaged in the fields of perpetrator research or complicity.

The book’s linking of complicity and continuity raises a number of important issues. Foremost among these is the extent to which perpetration and complicity can be distinguished. One advantage of zooming in from theoretical abstractions to focus on the individual cases represented in fiction is that the complexity of these specific examples becomes apparent, one aspect of which is the way that a person might slide between these behaviours (namely perpetration and complicity) in different contexts – and these do not preclude the same person from being a victim of violence in others. Secondly, the discussions of the texts often address the uncomfortable issue of the reader’s empathetic response. Thirdly, the focus on continuity not only connects quotidian behaviours and personal lives to larger historical events but also emphasizes the way in which instances of mass violence are not finished and closed off, and that their legacies persist into the present.

The best way to illustrate this approach is to take one chapter as an example, and the section on Merle Kröger will serve well. This chapter discusses her novel *The Experts* (*Die Experten*),⁶ a thriller set in 1960s Cairo and detailing Gamal Abdel Nasser’s recruitment of former Nazis to the Egyptian rocket programme. Central to Bird’s interest in this text is the fact that it shows the ‘seamless integration of former

5 In this respect, Bird follows on from some of the arguments made in her earlier monograph: Stephanie Bird, *Comedy and Trauma in Germany and Austria after 1945: The Inner Side of Mourning* (Legenda, MHRA, 2016).

6 Merle Kröger, *Die Experten* (Suhrkamp, 2021).

perpetrators into civil society and commerce' (p. 168). The historical continuities that Bird highlights in the text include the way in which what it meant to be a Nazi shifted and was retrospectively redefined in the years following the end of the war, while the later sections of the chapter open out into discussion of how the Holocaust is contextualised with respect to other European genocides and racist policies; Bird also connects the novel to current debates about Israel / Palestine (an issue that looms large at several points in the second half of the book). The discussion of the text also goes far beyond its thematic content. In terms of its form, for example, Bird discusses the way that its emplotment as a thriller positions the reader in a particular way, inviting affective responses of both pleasure and indignation (p. 170). The novel also integrates archival material, typographically signalled by the use of a different font, and referenced at the end of the text. As Bird notes, this mixture complicates any reading of the novel, and not just in terms of the way genre guides reader response: she also notes that Kröger's repeatedly references one particular document that supposedly proves the existence of the 'Odessa organisation', a purported secret society of SS men, despite the consensus among historians being that it is of doubtful veracity. As this example illustrates, Bird's detailed readings interweave considerations of both content and form to highlight the ways in which continuities of complicity are perpetuated into the present, through cultural and discursive forms.

Both the texts and Bird's readings of them thus perform an expansion outwards from perpetration to continuities of violence – and hence to complicity. The very notion of complicity involves chains of cause and effect. These can be long and complex, and so any attempt to address continuities of complicity is likely to run up against the question of at what point – if any – a line can be drawn around complicity with a particular event. If it cannot, the risk arises of a situation in which, to misquote Arendt, all are complicit, so no one is. This issue becomes evident in the final chapter, on Olga Tokarczuk. In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*,⁷ the narrator-protagonist commits a series of murders of men who responsible for killing animals. As Bird notes, the novel connects the de-valuing of animal life with the Nazi genocide. This stance is not presented didactically, but rather with the purpose of the novel being to confront 'the reader with her willingness to believe justificatory narratives if she is more sympathetic to the values the

7 Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, trans. by Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Fitzcarraldo, 2018).

violent action is upholding or the individual advocating them'. Yet we are a long way from the historical events of the Holocaust here, and the notion of continuities of complicity is therefore stretched to its extreme. To note this is not necessarily to identify a weakness in the argument, as testing a concept to its limits is a valid exercise; however, the implications of this expansion of complicity are the questions raised by the tracing of continuities that is central to the book's project.

In summary, *Responses to Nazi Perpetration in Fiction* is a valuable resource for scholars working on the Holocaust and those in the fields of complicity and perpetration studies. In terms of the former, it represents a welcome move to expand the corpus of Holocaust texts. In doing so, and in terms of the latter, it explores the uncertain boundaries between perpetration and complicity by drawing out threads of continuities that link institutions, behaviours, and discourse.

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