Across the Broad Atlantic: Diverse Treatments of the Holocaust in American and European Literature

Even a cursory survey of Holocaust literature for children reveals some striking differences between that written by Americans and that written by Europeans.

Americans have a tendency, if not to romanticize the experience, at least to emphasize the ennobling effects that a shared danger may have on some people. There is then on this side of the Atlantic almost a subgenre of "feel good" Holocaust literature in which everyone emerges from the experience purified and enriched by suffering. There are, of course, exceptions such as *Summer of My German Soldier,* where the reader is confronted with the complexities of human behavior on many levels and forced to contemplate how good people can be caught up in an evil system.

When we look at European writers, however, we find a grittier approach to the whole experience. Even the children who survive are portrayed as bearing scars, as in Ida Vos's post-holocaust novel *Anna is Still Here,* in which Anna's father takes her to the beach to teach her to yell because Anna survived the Holocaust by being hidden and was told that the slightest noise could result in her discovery and death. The somewhat humorous *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* still makes it clear that though the family has fled Nazi Germany to the relative safety of Paris, the whole experience of relocating, of parents taking lesser jobs and children being forced to learn a new language, is unsettling, to say the least. Similarly, the sheltering family in *The Upstairs Room* is portrayed as very human, showing fear of being caught and resentment at the danger the Jewish children are putting them in, as opposed to the almost preternaturally noble Danes of *Number the Stars* who seem to think nothing of risking their personal safety for their friends.

Does this contrast between gritty realism and idealism come from the fact that Americans writers are experiencing the Holocaust at a distance, through the glass of memory and story, while the European writer has more immediate contact, or has reminders closer to home in the grim sites of Dachau and Auschwitz? Or is there simply an American tendency to idealize the experience and report it as larger than life?