

Acts and Monuments: Jane Yolen's *Devil's Arithmetic*

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Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, our Phoenix Honor Book for 2008, is a well-wrought book that has stood the test of time. It is widely available twenty years after its first publication and the basis of countless theme units. It has been made into a television movie aired during Passover each year, and it is a story calculated to emotionally move today's children—in this case fairly young (North American) children—by giving a glimpse of Nazi occupied Poland in 1942. As children's literature scholars, we all realize that the novel is inevitably controversial: that it is well-wrought can be used to condemn the novel since the “no poetry after Auschwitz” dictum sometimes seems to preclude a good style, and “well-wrought” may necessarily mean giving a shape to an event that should not be approached as meaningful. Holocaust stories, often written with a passionate desire to make children aware that the events happened, are also by definition purposely didactic stories. They are meant to give a lesson to children, and—within our own circles as children's literature scholars—we are often worried about literature that has an overtly didactic message.

As Adrienne Kertzer has noted in *My Mother's Voice*, the issue of how much information children can be given, and the legitimacy of officially censoring information that might be used to attempt to justify the Nazi murders—asking or answering “why?”—remains a controversial issue within this genre. Further, as Kertzer also notes, the issue of “hope” that we often associate with children's fiction—and historical fiction in particular (since we wish to encourage children to like history and to believe they can make a difference)—may appear simply inappropriate, adversely sentimental, or treacherously false within the definitions of what the meaning of the Holocaust might be.¹

There is no possibility of settling such issues today. As a panel member who voted for the inclusion of *The Devil's Arithmetic* for this award, however, I would like to discuss Yolen's approach in a particularly audacious novel. Although Kertzer did not apply her idea that children's literature may be successful in approaching the Holocaust because it is “more honest about limitations” to *Devil's Arithmetic*, I will use this idea as I outline what I believe to be Yolen's successes and partial successes within the book.

As most of you already know, *The Devil's Arithmetic* is a time-slip fantasy. The young teenager, Hannah, dragged to a seder at her father's father's house fresh from Easter dinner at the house of her best friend, is established as a story-teller, an affectionate but complaining sister, and a child with a special bond with her Great-Aunt Eva. She is embarrassed by her paternal grandfather's symptoms of mental illness, but she has evidently tried to be closer to him in the past, as, for example, when she (as a child) put ballpoint numbers on her arm like those on his own in an effort to please him. Great-Aunt Eva and Grandfather Will (siblings) are the family members with stature in Hannah's life, and the time-slip is apparently conjured up by their desire to be understood and to be closer to this beloved child. This is exemplified in the text by Eva's kiss, which will not come off Hannah's forehead, and by Grandfather's insistence that Hannah is

old enough to have wine this year at the Seder and that she, in spite of the usual tradition, should be the child to open the door for Elijah at the appropriate moment of the ritual.

When Hannah returns from the door after her adventure, the siblings' complicity in the time-slip is concluded by Eva's insistence that Hannah sit in the seat next to her, the one reserved for Elijah, the undying prophet who can, it seems, slip through time and aid in the lessons that they wish for her. The lessons have to do with how to live as a Jewish adult and a giving person. When Hannah walks through the door in her grandfather's apartment, what she finds is a Jewish village in the Polish countryside in 1942, a village that is about to be transported to a death camp.

The time-slip in this story, though daring, to say the least, works in several specific ways that we can anticipate from this genre. First, Hannah reacts as the young reader would to the 1940's village life of the tale. The clothes, the religious intolerance, the lack of technology, customs about marriage and a girl's place within society are all new to her and, thus, necessarily explained. Her adaptation to them involves the reader in the closer relation that is sometimes lacking in biographies of the period. Children, even teenagers, frequently lack the historic sense or experience to feel involved in a different place, culture, and time, in much the same way that Hannah did back in the United States.

Hannah's slight confusion caused by the watered wine is expanded in the text by her new identity as a city child named Chaya, a convalescent and newly-made orphan who has come to live with her affectionate aunt and uncle in this village. Her recent fever and loss explains her oddity to her relatives and neighbors. When her new uncle's wedding party is sent to a death camp, the replacement of her name by a number, the head-shaving, and the inexplicably brutal situation adds a third layer to her confused personality: she is a child in the "now" of a day-by-day hellish life; she is a Yiddish-speaking Polish orphan who has heard stories of her youth from her new relations; and she is a young American teen from New Rochelle who has learned enough history about the Holocaust to understand earlier than her new relatives do what is happening to them, without, of course, any reason to suppose that this is an advantage. Since Hannah is closer to the young American reader in nationality and time, it is reasonable that what happens to her and what she sees registers more successfully with the reader than tales without this assistance. In terms of the limitations of Yolen's mission, however, it is important to reflect that Hannah is a present-day child, not an attempt at a real portrait of a Holocaust victim, with a lesson to be learned for her post-Holocaust life.

Secondly, Hannah's contemporary status allows her to ask some of the questions that a present-day child would certainly ask: We should fight this! How can we let this happen? How can there be no choice? From most points of view, this is a difficult aspect of conveying Holocaust history in an honest way. For this reason, the time-slip, however audacious an approach, has the advantage of being able to directly address the question of why active resistance was not a workable method for most people. Hannah asks; Rivka explains; events illustrate.

Within the story, Rivka, Hannah's death camp mentor and role model, is very clearly the hero. She is one of the child-adults of the genre, a ten-year-old who has lost a family of eight, except for her ruined brother Wolfe who is forced to serve in the corps of persons handling and cremating the victims of the ovens. Her most remarkable qualities are her sense of duty, her

practicality, and her will to keep alive. She feels a duty to Wolfe, to the little children who will be instantly executed if they are publicly seen, and to Hannah, for whom she sacrifices her mother's wedding ring to keep her at tasks that do not involve heavy physical labor, thus rescuing her from certain death. She is not falsely optimistic, and there is not much she can do. But her ability to forge "rules" for a chaotic place is the act of a leader, and her leadership is able to do a little. The definition of "choice" is, it seems to me, realistically rendered in this story, not giving the idea that such a thing existed in the way that we would like modern-day children to think that it does.

Within the story, Rivka's ability to endure, trying to help in small, practical, often deceitful ways, is a worthier trait than anyone else's choice of death. A number of people are willing to risk death, a number of people choose death rather than grief or humiliation, but Rivka lives. She says that her mother said, "It is much harder to live this way and die this way than to go out shooting" (142). So although Hannah/Chaya is remembered as a "hero" for taking Rivka's identity and going to the gas chamber in her place when her group of village girls is "chosen" for death, this is still easier than Rivka's life; Rivka's life, which Chaya puts first, was more valuable because she had the will to endure in order to serve.

Finally, the time-slip itself is a form that we expect to educate and which has hope inherent in it. Because this is the form used here, we know, for example, that the Holocaust did end, that some people survived, and that some faith survived, just as lives and faith and reason were lost. This is not a lie, but it belongs to the *frame*, not the experience itself. Because of the time-slip, Chaya also knows when she takes Rivka's place that some semblance of her own personality will be alive in Hannah's future, a mystical idea related to her family's adherence to the custom of naming children to honor the dead but not knowledge available in the same way to any other person. She is in a protected space, which saves Yolen from the pitfalls of actually creating a fictional Holocaust victim.

James Janeway's Early Modern introduction to *A Token for Children* is a straightforward explication of what we often wish to do in children's literature but are not so honest about: we want to soften their hard hearts; we want to induce humility and, in our modern era, compassion. The original *Acts and Monuments*, after which this paper was named, was about acquiring the faith necessary for holy dying, and Yolen's work is about sustaining a desire to live a faithful life, but in both cases exemplary role models are set before the young to help them see with our eyes. In this story, the emphasis is upon making sure that children are close enough to a situation a half-century old that they can feel for its victims while simultaneously realizing that survival meant having human qualities that they probably do not possess but might strive to acquire.

Yolen's book is genuinely moving, and its moments of greatest emotion are primarily religious moments. They are not the deaths of the little children because the children are so obviously not in the right place. They might include the "sentimental" moment we knew was coming when Chaya's uncle and his bride are married by being shot rather than under the festive canopy they had anticipated. The emotion centers, however, on the bride's declaration that they are being married under "God's canopy, the sky,"—a statement of renewed faith from a daughter of a rabbi who had, instead, succumbed to grief. It surely includes the moment when the man

tattooing Chaya's arm recognizes her newly-acquired rags as a dress of his own daughter, thus confirming her death. His disciplined and kindly response to Chaya, his automatic "God is good," when discovering that her name, which means life, is the same as that of his daughter, is not logical—his own Chaya has, after all, been recently murdered, in who knows what misery. But his perseverance in trying to keep her namesake alive is an impressive example of strength and generosity.

The strongest moment, I would claim, is the moment that Gitl slaps Chaya for referring to the many neighbors who had been murdered on the first choosing day as "rubbish," using a disingenuous camp term for any victim. After she reprimands Chaya/Hannah, Gitl begins to recite the Kaddish because "in here, we say the prayer for the dead properly, like good Jews" (134). Chaya/Hannah responds, with a religious humility, "Gitl is right," before joining the others. This contrition is later reinforced by her own feeling of inadequacy over not being able to save a little boy who failed to hide when the commandant came for an unscheduled "choosing."

The text, in other words, being a lesson about religious discipline rather than, strictly speaking, a lesson about the realities of the Holocaust, reinforces lessons that a modern-day family might wish to reinforce:

That the Holocaust is not a reason to abandon religious faith.

That there are more things present in the world than can be explained logically.

That although life is demonstrably not "fair," the wisest and strongest people in Hannah's life have been made strong by their faith and are appropriate role models.

That no one can escape guilt because falling short is part of the human dilemma; therefore, compassion for other people's stories is the wise response.

That faith enjoins giving to others.

In other words, the end result of Hannah's time-slip will undoubtedly be compassion for her grandfather's ruined mind and even more loving admiration for her great-aunt's dedicated, sacrificial life—they were Rivka and Wolfe. She will see the world, a bit, through their faithful, wounded eyes. She will realize that no one is ever secure in this life, and parents cannot protect her, but that she should try to protect the others who share her journey. That we want our children to understand us and understand our sense of the world order is a given in parenting and often the source of fiction in this field. Yolen appears to me to have carried out this function in a very traditional way.

There are many other aspects of the story that could be examined—Yolen's assertion that fiction has a legitimate role in conveying the Holocaust, for example, which she has also asserted in her *Briar Rose* story for young adults—but the extent to which Yolen is telling youngsters that the Holocaust can be seen as part of God's plan is perhaps the most pressing. As a fantasy and fiction writer who has often, throughout her extensive and distinguished career, used folktale and myth as a basis for her stories, Yolen has purveyed world order, the beauty of Nature, and the triumph of justice in many forms, to some extent, taking on the Holocaust is a test of her own career and the legitimacy of her own message. To my mind, her *Devil's Arithmetic* still stops short of violating the sacred space of Holocaust experience while not turning her back on her other works.

Rivka, as a young girl in an evil place, tells the others that one day they will see God's plan and that everything is part of it. Gitl is characterized as a woman whose adherence to Jewish tradition is a defiance of her enemies and a practical technique to bring order out of chaos and evil. But the meaning of the swallows flying around the chimneys of the death camp remains undeciphered for the reader, and Hannah is never brought to any conviction stronger than that of her author.

The swallows, with their mating and swooping and chattering, are a symbol of the life force in the tale and also of the extreme indifference of Nature to the people's plight. Hannah reflects that in a story the swallows would weep and mourn around the smokestack, not flutter and have a fine busy time. The often repeated contrast is striking, and it seems surprising, in fact, that Yolen ends her "what is true" section with the reminder that "the swallows still sing around the smokestacks" (170). It sounds like a conventionally graceful cop-out of one kind or another, but to someone who has just read the story, it suggests that devotion to Life is a difficult decision, and that only the strong can manage; perhaps it is a renewed dedication to try.

In a world with no universally acceptable children's stories about the Holocaust, and yet a felt responsibility not to neglect the topic, *The Devil's Arithmetic* has been for twenty years a brief, accessible, and moving story, within honest limitations, to give children a glimpse of understanding. It has not, I think, misled. It has stood the test of time.

Note

¹Professor Kertzer thoroughly explores these issues throughout her book, starting with the preface, introduction, and "Do you know what 'Auschwitz' means?" chapters, and then applying them to diverse materials. Her book also includes an extensive bibliography of books and articles in the field.

Works Cited

- Kertzer, Adrienne. *My Mother's Voice: Children, Literature, and the Holocaust*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2002.
- Yolen, Jane. *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1988). New York: Puffin, 1990.