

Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandis, eds. *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*. New York: MLA, 2004. 512p.

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As its title indicates, this book is about the sophisticated issue of the representation of the Holocaust at a time when, as Efraim Sicher writes in his essay on second-generation Holocaust fiction, the survivors “once more face mortality” (263). The extent of the challenge becomes evident as soon as we look for a term by which to refer to a subject that, as the editors say in their introduction, “stretches the limits of representability” (22). The word “Holocaust” bothers many people, including me, on account of its religious associations (8); its connection with a popular series of programs on television, of which survivors complained, according to Geoffrey Hartman, that it “sanitized and distorted what they had lived through” (206); and the fact that the word can be applied with equal justification to other genocides. “Shoah,” the Hebrew word for catastrophe, which I prefer, is objectionable because it conceals the perpetrators (8). Alternatives include “*hurban*,” the Yiddish synonym of Shoah; the French “genocide”; and the German “*Endlösung*”: “final solution” (8-9). Like Primo Levi and the editors I will use Holocaust “to be understood” (8). Once we agree, however reluctantly, on a name, the question arises of its definition: Doris L. Bergen examines the competing claims of groups of victims (44-46), including the children with disabilities who were the first through “the euphemistically named Euthanasia Program” (45-46).

The essays that make up the book are organized in four sections. The first offers large overviews of the field, considering for instance the debated criterion of authenticity, representations of the perpetrators, the treatment of trauma and comparative genocides in teaching, gender, and the use of English, a happily peripheral language in the Holocaust, to write about it afterwards. The second section looks at genres and includes, besides essays on the traditional categories of poetry, fiction, drama, children’s literature, and cinema, a consideration by Jared Stark of diaries, memoirs, and memorial books and one by Geoffrey Hartman of audio and video recordings. Such texts provide a view of the Holocaust, Stark writes, “from within” as the authors experienced it, without the reader’s sense of the phenomenon as an entire sequence with a beginning, middle, and end (195). The third section discusses specific texts, and the last consists of essays about programs and courses in a variety of institutions. The two editors provide an introduction and afterword. There is a useful index.

A fine article by Susanna Heschel and Sandor Gilman on the traditions of European antisemitism probes the deep and obstinate roots of the Holocaust. At

least some of the resilience of this prejudice is attributable to its sheer irrationality, which resembles that of unconscious defenses. Heschel and Gilman point out that antisemitism is “closed to falsifiability: when Dreyfus was eventually exonerated, French antisemites claimed his freedom proved not his innocence but the power of Jews to win freedom for a guilty Jew” (98). Similarly at the Reformation, Protestants and Catholics alike put the Jews on the side of their antagonists (96), and later Jews took the blame for “capitalism and socialism, modernity and the failure to modernize” (100), for assimilation and the failure to assimilate (101), for their religion and, when the prestige of religion in society declined and that of science increased, for their hereditary characteristics (97).

As in other volumes in the series *Options for Teaching*, many of the essays go beyond the concerns of pedagogy to offer fresh readings of texts, for instance Gary Weissman’s on Wiesel’s *Night*, Michael G. Levine’s on Ozick’s *The Shawl*, and Adam Zachary Newton’s on A. B. Yehoshua’s *Mr. Mani* and W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*. In her essay on teaching the *Diary of Anne Frank*, Pascale Bos suggests how a second look can be useful for college students who will already be familiar with the text from their earlier education. By exploring the backgrounds of the Franks as a privileged assimilated family, the historical record concerning the Jews of the Netherlands, of whom over 75% were murdered (353), and the mediation of the text through editing and adaptation for stage and screen, teachers can counteract the prevailing idealization and universalizing of Frank and her writing.

Some of the most interesting essays in this collection are by Israeli scholars. These include Orly Lubin’s subtle and theoretically informed analysis of the various genres of cinematic representations and Sicher’s essay on fiction by the children of survivors, which compares and contrasts David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* and Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* as self-referential stories about members of the second generation who try to cope with their families’ past by becoming tellers of stories.

Although it doesn’t have a chapter dedicated to it, *Maus* keeps coming up. *Maus*, as Sidra De Koven Ezrahi notes in her essay on authenticity, challenges convention in its allegorization of Jews as mice and Germans as cats and in its acknowledgement of the emotional distress of survivors and their children (57). Adrienne Kertzer uses it for instance in her essay on children’s literature as evidence of her thesis that the subject of the Holocaust dissolves the frontiers between children’s literature and literature for adults (259). Perhaps the challenge of the Holocaust to representation elicits the appropriation for the purposes of serious art of a radically unconventional medium, one inextricably associated with modernity, technology, mass production, and mass marketing and that is recognizable as “an inherently American form of

art,” as Joshua L. Charlton observes in his essay about teaching the Holocaust in a course on American literature (463).

The Holocaust defies our notions of art. In his essay on visual culture David Bathrick interprets the concept of barbarism in Adorno’s famous statement that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric as a reference to “the inevitable feelings of pleasure evoked by certain historically contingent aesthetic expressions—the notion, more specifically, that a transfiguration can occur and that some of the horror of the event might thereby be ameliorated” (294). Bathrick also quotes Claude Lanzmann on *Schindler’s List*: “the Holocaust erects a ring of fire around itself, a borderline which cannot be crossed because there is a certain amount of horror which cannot be transmitted” (295). In his essay on Paul Celan’s “Todesfuge,” Ulrich Baer interprets Adorno’s statement as “an indictment of all culture, which had proved powerless in averting atrocity” (316). Similarly, Rani Omer-Sherman, writing on Dan Pagis’ poem “Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car,” remarks that his students “reasonably assume that they are expected, somehow, to wrest meaning from atrocity” (307). Representing the Holocaust then requires either an attempt to force art beyond its limits or what amounts to the same thing: a withdrawal from European high culture and its conspicuous failures to the comic book and the ubiquitous *Maus*. *