

History over Literature: *Daniel's Story*

Daniel's Story. Carol Matas. Scholastic, 1993. 136 pp. \$4.95 paper. ISBN 0-590-46588-0.

It's a brave soul who's willing to tackle the Holocaust as a subject for a children's book. How to impart enough detail to convey its horror and inhumanity, without overwhelming and frightening a young reader? How much weight to give to telling the grim history, and how much to creating a work of literature?

In *Daniel's Story*, Carol Matas has chosen detail and history over literature, resulting in a work that is, if useful, ultimately unsatisfying. While no book that honestly tries to portray the Holocaust can be utterly without worth, the import of the subject matter cannot make up for pedestrian writing.

The book follows Daniel, a young Polish Jew, through his adolescence before and during the war. His family is forced out of their business in Frankfurt, to the cramped ghetto of Lodz, the terrors of Buchenwald and finally Auschwitz. Through flashbacks prompted by his precious photos, we learn about his life before the war from age six, in 1933. The brutal reality of the present takes over, until the liberation of his death camp in 1945.

The details are disturbing, and many children may find them deeply upsetting. It is important not to hide the ugliness of the Nazis' actions, but almost any child will have difficulty reading about babies being thrown out of a hospital window. Children on the younger end of the suggested nine- to fourteen-year-old age range may well need a parent or teacher to help them process the grief and fear the bare events of the book will likely evoke.

And it is, ultimately, the brutal reality of the Nazis' cruelty that is the only truly moving part of Daniel's story. None of the characters is fully developed; they exist solely as plot devices. We get a glimpse of an interesting character in Daniel's grandmother, only to have her commit suicide a few pages later. Characters use unconvincing dialogue to express the author's intention, as when Daniel's little sister Erika, seeing the date on one of his photos, chimes in helpfully "Just after you took that, we had to change our names." Well, yes, but it's an awkward way to tell a story.

The book feels as though its events were flowcharted in advance, and the characters manipulated to fit them. Perhaps this is because the book was written to mark the opening of the Holocaust museum in Washington DC, and particularly its memorial to children, also titled "Daniel's Story." From the pictures and memories in that exhibit, Matas fashioned a composite character, attempting to weave in the experiences of several real children. A noble goal perhaps, but not one that makes for the best literature.

The language is leaden and saturated with clichés. It is the language of adults, and bureaucratic adults at that, not the language of children. Daniel's home neighbourhood is described only as "a quiet residential area." We

are told of a hundred people packed into a rail car, but not what that feels or smells like. Another time Matas lapses into callous banality, writing of concentration camp victims "going up in flames."

Too often details are ignored when they get in the way. Daniel's love for photography is a central plot device, enabling him to somehow keep a full complement of developing and printing supplies even after virtually all personal possessions are confiscated. Erika suddenly changes from a shy little girl to a compelling figure who leads a work camp revolt, with no hint as to what caused her transformation.

It is difficult to know to what extent Matas might have explored the Nazis' justifications of the Holocaust. Of course the events of the book were without reason of any kind, but would it not be better to expose such evil thinking, rather than let it lurk in the shadows? There are scattered references to the Nazis seeing Jews as less than human, but never is the subject directly engaged and, as it always will be, destroyed by its own repulsive inhumanity.

To her credit, Matas doesn't leave virulent anti-Semitism in the camps, but shows how deeply it runs in society at large. When Daniel finally returns to Lodz, he and a friend are beaten by boys who jeer that the two should never have escaped the gas. Matas does use some devices that will touch a chord with many modern young readers. For instance, children of divorce may relate to Daniel's veneration of photographs of happier times. There are also useful maps, a glossary of unfamiliar terms, and a chronology of European Jewry's destruction.

The book ends with much-needed relief from the litany of horror, and some guarded hope for the future, as Daniel and his girlfriend Rosa plan for a life in Palestine. *Daniel's Story* is a book that illustrates the terror of the Holocaust, and, on those terms, would be a useful addition to a school library. But a parent or reader in search of a well-written, powerful literary work should look elsewhere.

Nancy Payne is a producer with CBC Radio in Ottawa, and has a special interest in children's literature.

A Partisan's Memoir

A Partisan's Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust. Faye Schulman (with the assistance of Sarah Silberstein Swartz). Ed. Rhea Tregobov. Second Story, 1995. 224 pp. \$18.95 paper. ISBN 0-929005-76-7.

We all have images of Jews during the Holocaust with stars on their breasts or tattoos on their arms. But carrying guns? Probably not.