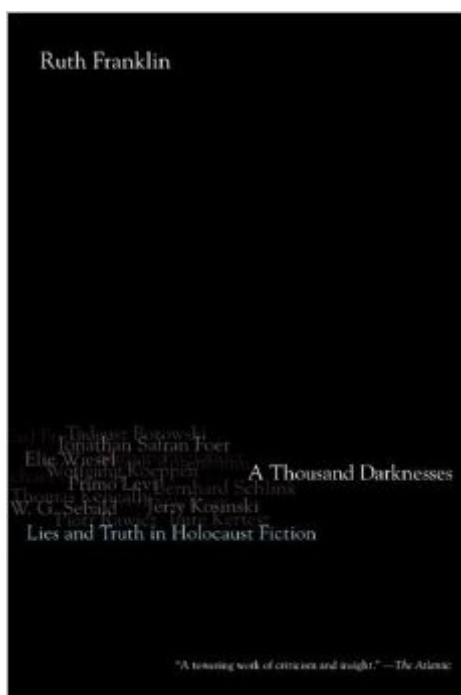


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A Thousand Darknesses: Lies And Truth In Holocaust Fiction



Synopsis

What is the difference between writing a novel about the Holocaust and fabricating a memoir? Do narratives about the Holocaust have a special obligation to be 'truthful'--that is, faithful to the facts of history? Or is it okay to lie in such works? In her provocative study *A Thousand Darkesses*, Ruth Franklin investigates these questions as they arise in the most significant works of Holocaust fiction, from Tadeusz Borowski's Auschwitz stories to Jonathan Safran Foer's postmodernist family history. Franklin argues that the memory-obsessed culture of the last few decades has led us to mistakenly focus on testimony as the only valid form of Holocaust writing. As even the most canonical texts have come under scrutiny for their fidelity to the facts, we have lost sight of the essential role that imagination plays in the creation of any literary work, including the memoir. Taking a fresh look at memoirs by Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, and examining novels by writers such as Piotr Rawicz, Jerzy Kosinski, W.G. Sebald, and Wolfgang Koeppen, Franklin makes a persuasive case for literature as an equally vital vehicle for understanding the Holocaust (and for memoir as an equally ambiguous form). The result is a study of immense depth and range that offers a lucid view of an often cloudy field.

Book Information

Paperback: 272 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; Reprint edition (April 1, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199976007

ISBN-13: 978-0199976003

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 0.9 x 6.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #189,163 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in Â Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > Jewish #191 in Â Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Literature > World Literature #3231 in Â Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History

Customer Reviews

This is a well-considered evaluation of the literature that surrounds the Holocaust. Rather than discuss the events of the Holocaust, Franklin evaluates the different ideas that have grown up around the tremendously diverse media about the Holocaust. This is a refreshing perspective and gives the reader a good sense of how media can be used to cope with the trauma of an event as

well as the taboos that seem to have developed about that media.

How future generations will know about the horrors of the Holocaust has been a question in the minds of survivors, scholars, artists, politicians and many others from as early as the war period itself. In the depths of the Warsaw Ghetto, Emanuel Ringelblum was concerned enough with this issue that he organized the collecting of the Oyneg Shabes Archive to document and describe, in every format possible, that which was witnessed in the ghetto. Ruth Franklin realized, when she set out to write her book, that there are those, who like Theodor Adorno and Elie Wiesel, insisted that only a person who actually lived through the Holocaust could truly tell future generations about it and that in some way art and the Holocaust could not coexist. So it seems that the memoirs and oral histories of the survivors would be, to this school of thought, the only sources of acceptable evidence about those terrible, incomprehensible times. On the other hand, Franklin insists that "if we look to literature...to teach us about life, then it is no wonder that we desperately desire it to teach us also about the Holocaust... one of the most obscene catastrophes in history." So the compromise must be "to find a secure place, somewhere between memory and imagination (Langer)," in order to properly remember the victims. Franklin accepts the premise that there really is no clear line, but rather a fuzzy one, separating memoirs and literature, truth and fiction, history and art. The author thoroughly researched the literature, classical and the most contemporary, for all that she could find on the tensions mentioned above. She then chose to study writers on the Holocaust, witnesses as well as 'those who came after' and analyzed their works in a most brilliant manner. The first group includes Borowski, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Rawicz, Kosinski and Kertesz. In the second group are: Keneally and Spielberg, Koeppen, Sebald, Schlink and, of course Wilkomirski and other writers of very recent works. It is regrettable that she did not include Aharon Appelfeld as one of the authors to analyze, even though he was very young during the Holocaust. He would have been an excellent example of someone who could belong in either of the two groups and, as James E. Young stated: "If there is a line between fact and fiction, it may by necessity be a winding border that tends to bind these two categories as much as it separates them, allowing each side to dissolve occasionally into the other." That is certainly true in Appelfeld's body of work. Any library, academic, high school or synagogue with a good collection of Holocaust works, fictional as well historical, should include this superb work of analysis of some of the most important and controversial Holocaust fiction. Michlean Amir

This jewel of a book addresses difficult questions concerning the representation and narration of the

Holocaust and also the use of that dark episode of history as material for creative writing. My apprehensions about it, having read only one of the books the author considers, were soon put to rest. The author provided enough relevant detail to give me a sense of those books and steer me through her argument. If anything, I'm now looking forward to reading some of them. The writing is clear, elegant and direct. The book is evidently based on extensive research and draws on a number of authors and texts, many predating the Holocaust, Oscar Wilde, for instance. The tone of the book is lively and engaging and I think it was this that kept the grimness of the subject from overwhelming my reading experience. Quite possibly the only uncontroversial thing one can say on the subject of the representation and literary treatment of the Holocaust is that it's fraught with controversy. I hope it's not too controversial to suggest that books such as these might have a wider relevance than only to issues arising out of the literary treatment of the Holocaust. The author's discussion and argument must have some use in thinking about how we reflect on major historical events generally, not just artistically and not just the Holocaust.

It is truly wondrous when an author possesses such an authoritative voice and passion for her subject that she can fully immerse the reader into the topics and issues she holds so dear. For an area easily considered (at first glance) dry, or overwrought-- indeed, the author acknowledges "Holocaust fatigue," among other important subjects, head on--Ms. Franklin's fervor and fascination quickly becomes the reader's own. Exhaustive in its analysis yet always engaging, doggedly researched but never lacking a humanizing, personal element of its subjects, "A Thousand Darkesses" is a masterful, mesmerizing compendium of three generations of Holocaust literature. Seven decades on-- as the last of the survivors in our midst are passing-- a work of this nature is more important than ever. For the "fourth generation" now coming up through grade school, Franklin's work will serve as a touching conclusion-- or perhaps the perfect starting point-- for newcomers to learn and choose how to immerse themselves into the reams of material available. It will also pose as a helpful guide for them to heed caution, since they will undoubtedly encounter conundrums and contradictions in the works available along the way. Franklin deftly reveals how even the literary "touchstones," held high in the public consciousness (Shindler's Ark-- converted to film as Shindler's List), are rife with exaggerations, embellishments, or outright fictionalizations, while condemned works were correctly called "novels" all along (Kosinski) but simply interpreted otherwise, although said authors, on the literary upswing, were not so quick to clarify misconceptions. But can heralded and censured works alike nonetheless be worthy of our affection? In a nuanced, impassioned (but always reasoned) tone, the author makes the case that

indeed, most can, even after an her impressive deconstruction-- which she rightfully finds preferable to more the common uncritical and overblown praise. Our collective infatuation with the Holocaust's unspeakable tragedy now seems to be subsiding, but earlier eras offered an array of artistic interpretation, from straightforward factual accounts (Weisel, Borowski) that condemned anything derivative or indulgent to more taboo interpretations involving poetic license (Levi, Rawicz) to outright usurpations of authentic narratives by frauds (Wilkomirski) and later descendants (Schlink-German; Rosenbaum- of Jewish survivors). Not a shade of this is missed by Franklin's all-encompassing analysis, the work at times even delving into more over-arching paradoxes of psychological (unreliability of witness accounts, poetic license even in the later synthesis of real experiences), cultural (literary careers defined by "authenticity" leading to fraud and embellishments), linguistic (Franklin engages in many direct translations, and takes to task original translations, by so-called scholars and blood relatives), religious / philosophical (whether any sense can be made by unspeakable suffering, and whether faith is justified in its aftermath) and legal importance (statutes of limitations and limited scope of certain prosecutions). There are candid reveals, counterweight stances against normative trends of praised and discredit authors, and surprising revelations. Through Franklin's work, newcomers and erudite scholars alike can choose how to (further) immerse themselves, taking stock of the varying shades of artistic influence inspired by this 20th century horror, and ensure-- most importantly-- that we never forget.

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