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Ruth Franklin, *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. x, 256. ISBN 978-0-19-997600-3.

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In *A Thousand Darknesses*, journalist Ruth Franklin<sup>1</sup> has not set herself to write a scholarly study of her subject;<sup>2</sup> rather, she means to dispel certain misimpressions about Holocaust literature by gauging the extent to which selected examples reflect historical fact. In particular, she rejects any notion of the singularity or sanctity of Holocaust fiction as expressed by, for example, Elie Wiesel and Alvin Rosenfeld. She prefers Lawrence Langer's view that "the literature of the Holocaust is neither awesome nor holy, only painful, and if a distance remains between us and this literature, the fault is ours...."<sup>3</sup> [Literature offers] an imaginative access to past events, together with new and different ways of understanding them that are unavailable to strictly factual forms of writing" (12-13). Literature elicits empathy and creates a secure place somewhere between memory and imagination where, Franklin writes, the dead can find some peace—"The best literature about the Holocaust manages to accomplish this" (18).

In Part I, "The Witnesses," Franklin considers the work of Tadeusz Borowski, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Piotr Rawicz, Jerzy Kosinski, and Imre Kertész, revealing critical generic distinctions that govern her own understanding of their work:

No memoir is entirely factual (because the act of memory is itself a kind of imagining), just as we can recognize that no novel is ever entirely fictional (because every character is in some way a composite, pieced together from bits and pieces of the novelist's experience with actual people). But an autobiographical novel works on both levels, relying at once on the authority it takes from the facts of its author's life and the literary quality of the imagined world it creates. And the two sides are very rarely in perfect balance. In the case of Borowski, Levi, and Wiesel, the weight is toward autobiography. For Rawicz, Kosinski, and later Imre Kertész, it tips—sometimes very strongly—toward fiction. (116)

Since this division is not that between the "lies and truth in Holocaust fiction" of the book's subtitle, some confusion results.

Chapter 1, "Angry Young Man: Tadeusz Borowski," contrasts Borowski's testimony in *We Were in Auschwitz*<sup>4</sup> with the short stories in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*.<sup>5</sup> The anger underlying Borowski's notoriously indifferent style of expression is directed not only toward the outer world but toward the author himself, since, in his fiction, he "viewed himself as a kind of perpetrator" (41). In "This Way for the Gas," the narrator "finds himself worrying about what will happen if the transports stop, since he and his fellow functionaries depend upon the steady influx of food and clothing" (33). Franklin is sensitive to the ethical horror that the fictional account conveys even more powerfully than a direct deposition.

1. A contributing editor at *The New Republic*, she has also written for the *New Yorker*, *New York Review of Books*, *Washington Post*, *Jewish Review of Books*, and other publications.

2. Only a few secondary sources are used and there are no citations of works discussed, nor any bibliography. Among the books Franklin should have consulted are Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1982); David Patterson, *The Shriek of Silence: A Phenomenology of the Holocaust Novel* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1991); Saul S. Friedman, ed., *Holocaust Literature: A Handbook of Critical, Historical, and Literary Writings* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993); David Roskies, ed., *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publ Soc, 1993); and David Patterson, *Sun Turned to Darkness: Memory and Recovery in the Holocaust Memoir* (Syracuse: Syracuse U Pr, 1998). Surprisingly, Franklin includes no women in her analysis.

3. Quoting from *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1975).

4. Polish orig. 1946; trans. Alicia Nitecki (NY: Welcome Rain Publishers, 2000).

5. Polish orig. 1959; trans. Barbara Vedder (NY: Viking, 1967).

In chapter 2, “The Alchemist: Primo Levi,” on Levi’s memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*,<sup>6</sup> Franklin uses the British edition’s title *If This Is a Man*, since it renders the Italian *Se questo è un uomo* more accurately. But she does not pursue the ramifications of the Nazis’ assault on the very notion of a “human being.” She stresses Levi’s linguistic sensitivity in the aftermath of the Nazi perversion of language (47), but does not connect this to the attack on human relations, so vital to Levi’s testimony. She writes of the key figure of the Muselmann that “The project of the Nazis was precisely to push the boundaries of what human beings could endure, physically and emotionally” (54). For Levi, however, the Muselmann signifies far more than that, as others have shown.<sup>7</sup> The truth and the lie here do not refer to the text’s fidelity to events but to Levi’s question about the sanctity of the human being.

If Levi’s concern is with the assault on human sanctity, Elie Wiesel’s is with the assault on God. Franklin addresses this issue in chapter 3, “The Kabbalist in the Death Camp: Elie Wiesel,” but, once again, should have gone further. Of Wiesel’s *Night*<sup>8</sup> she writes, “The book’s poetic austerity comes at a cost to the literal truth. This cost, it must be said, does not detract in the least from *Night*’s validity as a Holocaust testimonial.... [S]uch a cost exists, if only to remind ourselves that no memoir can be at once an unerring representation of reality and a genuine artistic achievement” (75). But the link between poetic austerity and the truth of a higher relation that might sanctify humanity—the truth of Judaism, in Wiesel’s case—eludes her.

Chapter 4, “The Antiwitness: Piotr Rawicz,” is a welcome discussion of a neglected Holocaust author and his novel *Blood from the Sky*.<sup>9</sup> Franklin explains that, while “to write about atrocity is impossible [for Rawicz], not to write about it—though to do so is absurd, obscene, repugnant, insectlike—is equally impossible” (96). His main character, Boris, takes the position of an “antiwitness.” A chief moment of “antiwitnessing” comes when two characters mistake human heads lying on the ground outside a Gestapo office for cabbage heads, with no judgment or emotion indicated (98). Franklin argues convincingly that the ambiguity of voices audible in the novel invites the reader “to engage with and accept the story on a deeper psychic level than is experienced by the reader of history.... [I]t is this aspect that Rawicz’s novel so brilliantly embodies: the tension between the desire to commit imaginatively to the story and the fear of usurpation, of overstepping the bounds of propriety, of disturbing the rest of the dead” (102).

Chapter 5, “The Bird Painter: Jerzy Kosinski,” concerns the misperception of *The Painted Bird* as autobiographical (104), with the caveat that “a look at Kosinski’s theoretical writings shows that it is misguided—not to say impossible—to insist on a strict division between truth and untruth” (107). For Kosinski, what took place in the novel “was true—but in the sense that all great art is true, because it reveals something essential about humanity” (112). While accurate, this observation undermines Franklin’s own distinction between truth and lie—what took place and what did not.

Chapter 6, “Child of Auschwitz: Imre Kertész,”<sup>10</sup> adds clarity Franklin’s previous point about Kosinski: among survivors who became authors, “Kertész has been the most emphatic about distancing his books from testimony” (123). The task of saying what cannot be said falls to the novelist, not the autobiographer. Thus, “for Imre Kertész, to write a true story about Auschwitz, and to keep it true in the telling, requires the spinning of mystical layers, ever shifting, ever unresolved, ever untrue” (140). Franklin does not explain how such untruth may coexist with the notion that all great art is true.

In Part II, “Those Who Came After,” chapter 7, “A Story for You: Thomas Keneally, Steven Spielberg,” Franklin adds the film *Schindler’s List* (1993) to the canon of Holocaust literature. Here the term *authentic* pertains to the truth of history not literature: “When the subject is the Holocaust, the question of represen-

6. Subtitle: *The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (NY: Collier, 1959); Italian orig. 1958.

7. E.g., Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Jewish Return into History* (NY: Schocken Books, 1978) 246; David Patterson, *Open Wounds: The Crisis of Jewish Thought in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Seattle: U Washington Pr, 2006) 144–72; and Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness of the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (NY: Zone Books, 2002).

8. French orig. 1958; trans. Stella Rodway (NY: Hill and Wang, 1960).

9. French orig. 1964; trans. Peter Wiles (NY: Harcourt, 1964).

10. The Hungarian Nobel Laureate best known for his novel *Fatelessness*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (NY: Random House, 2004 [orig. 1975]).

tation presents the eternally inescapable moral quandary. On the one hand, a convincing portrayal can go far in achieving pedagogical purposes, educating audiences who might not otherwise have been familiar with the events. On the other hand, there are all the usual problems that go along with the representation in film of any historical event” (158). Keneally and Spielberg manage to evoke the infinite moral responsibility for which each of us is chosen, according to the Judaism that the Nazis sought to obliterate. That assignment, however, finds no place in Franklin’s analysis.

Chapter 8, “The Ghost Writer: Wolfgang Koeppen,” examines another relatively unknown author. Koeppen wrote a fictionalized version of actual Holocaust survivor Jakob Littner’s memoir, *Aufzeichnungen aus einem Erdloch* (Notes from a hole in the ground; 1948). The reader is asked to believe that Koeppen is the true author of what had been thought to be an authentic Holocaust memoir (167). Koeppen, however, never pretended to be doing anything other than writing a novel (175). This leads to a key question: when a survival narrative is declared to be fiction, is the Holocaust being denied, or affirmed in artistic terms? “What matters ... is the work’s own internal dynamic: its creative ambition, its motivations” (179). Franklin fails to realize, however, that Holocaust denial is about anti-Semitism, not the facts of history.

In chapter 9, “The Effect of the Real: W.G. Sebald,” Franklin moves from “actual events” to “their after-effects,” Sebald’s special interest (186). Writing of *Austerlitz*,<sup>11</sup> *Vertigo*,<sup>12</sup> and *The Emigrants*,<sup>13</sup> Franklin explains that “for Sebald, the purpose of literature is the excavation of a secret history” (193). Regarding his view of literature as a kind of “restitution,” she asks, “If fiction inescapably takes something away, what does it return?” Answer: it restores the dead to life (194). But what does that mean? Does Holocaust literature not restore the bond between word and meaning that joins human to human? Does it not restore the testimony to the sacredness of human life that the Nazis strove to annihilate?

Franklin does display a sense of that sanctity in chapter 10, “Willing Executioners: Bernhard Schlink,” which deals with *The Reader*,<sup>14</sup> in which, Franklin perceptively notes, Schlink “hinted at very serious ethical questions but did not make an effort to provoke any kind of rigorous thought” (201). In the novel, Hanna, the older lover of Michael after the war, faces charges as a Nazi war criminal. She is so embarrassed by her inability to read that she confesses to war crimes rather than expose her illiteracy. Franklin points out that not only is this implausible, but Michael views Hanna’s determination to conceal her shame over her lack of education as somehow exonerating (204). She adds that, if Hanna’s illiteracy symbolizes the blindness of the German people to what was happening during the war, the facts do not bear this out (206). The real lie of Schlink’s work is, then, not only that it exploits the Holocaust, but also that it diverts the reader from any moral engagement with it.

Similarly, in Chapter 11, “Identity Theft: The Second Generation,” Franklin criticizes Melvin Jules Bukiet and Thane Rosenbaum. The overriding theme of Bukiet’s anthology *Nothing Makes You Free*<sup>15</sup> is “that the Holocaust was not simply an event that happened to the previous generation, but something, as one second-generation character puts it, ‘that we went through’” (227). As for Rosenbaum, though he claims not to write about actual events of the Holocaust, “his follow-up to *Elijah Visible*,<sup>16</sup> tastelessly titled *Second Hand Smoke*,<sup>17</sup> determinedly asserts the opposite” (228). Here the ethically dubious and self-indulgent misappropriation of identity falsifies the Holocaust.

In her conclusion, “The Third Generation,” Franklin comments on the value of Holocaust literature: “Art ... emphasizes the fundamental sameness of the human condition” (242). That sameness, she believes, constitutes whatever truth Holocaust literature may impart. This, however, risks reducing the Holocaust to

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11. Trans. Anthea Bell (NY: Random House, 2001).

12. German orig. 1990; trans. Michael Hulse (NY: New Directions, 2000).

13. German orig. 1992; trans. Michael Hulse (NY: New Directions, 1996).

14. German orig. 1995; trans. Carol Brown Janeway (NY: Pantheon, 1997).

15. Subtitle: *Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors* (NY: Norton, 2002).

16. NY: St. Martin’s, 1996.

17. NY: St. Martin’s, 1999.

an event as meaningful or meaningless as other events. Franklin succumbs to that danger in her closing paragraph. After a few words about the children's book *Brundibar*, which her child received as a gift, she writes, "*Nothing ever works out neatly—bullies don't give up completely. One departs, the next appears, and we shall meet again, my dears!* A difficult lesson for a three-year-old. But this, in the end, is the lesson of all Holocaust literature. In this way, perhaps Wiesel was right to say that 'A novel about Auschwitz is not a novel, or else it is not about Auschwitz.' For a novel about Auschwitz can never *only* be about Auschwitz: it is a novel about Armenia, about Siberia, about Cambodia, about Bosnia, about Darfur" (243). These closing thoughts belie an ultimate failure to grasp the distinctive meaning of the Holocaust.

The defining fact of the Holocaust was the Nazis' assault not only on individual human beings, but on the inherent and transcendent holiness of the human being; it is this that makes other catastrophes, too, more than matters of mere academic curiosity. Neither the Nazis of Germany nor the Jihadists of Sudan were simply "bullies"—they were murderers. Although Franklin distinguishes between truth and lie in Holocaust fiction, she overlooks the truth of the sanctity of human beings and their profound responsibility for one another—the truth that Jews and other peoples and their traditions attest to, the truth that the Nazis intended to systematically obliterate.