

2025 Elie Wiesel Competition

3rd Place Senior Essay

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Fact vs. Fiction: The Perspectives Shaping the Unfathomable

The first book I ever read about the Holocaust and Nazi threats against Jews during World War II was *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry when I was ten years old. My month of reading that book was my foray down a rabbit hole of fascination and horror with the Nazi regime in the 1940s. For the next six years, my free reading became taken over by factual and fictional stories of survivors, bystanders, liberators, victims, and even supporters of Hitler and his anti-Semitic beliefs. I began with the facts—I learned of the true concentration camp atrocities down to the details of the system by which SS officers would sort and prepare the newly delivered Jewish and political prisoners. After discovering the systematic physical torture from strictly historical accounts, I moved on to first-hand experiences, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night*. While I was familiar with the actions of the German officers and their handling of prisoners, the first-hand accounts of Jews in these camps were vital to forming my understanding of the emotional and psychological torture they endured as well as their strategies to survive the nonchalant brutality of their wardens. From there, I dove into countless historical novels about the Holocaust time period, and what I found was rather shocking: the fictional stories of those in concentration camps are extremely similar to the first-hand accounts of survivors. Ultimately, the wicked acts of the Holocaust are too horrid and disgusting to even attempt to fabricate. While most aspects of these novels align with factual information, the emotional connection to a first-hand account has no rival, and reading the words of a well-researched novelist can not compare to the untarnished truth of a survivor of Hitler's regime in terms of credibility.

One theme in Wiesel's *Night* that carries through to Martha Hall Kelly's World War II centered novel *Lilac Girls* is the notion that to survive in a concentration camp, one must have a loved one to sustain them. Elie and his father have each other throughout almost their entire experiences as Jewish prisoners, and thus always have someone for whom to live. The two come across a relative of theirs, Stein, at Auschwitz, and Elie informs him that his wife and children are doing fine. While this is a small lie, Elie understands that it will give the man a lifetime of strength. Stein begins "weeping for joy" and explains to Elie and his father, "The only thing that keeps me alive is to know that Reizel and the little ones are still alive. Were it not for them, I would give up" (Wiesel 44-45). Hanging onto this hope of his family's survival is enough to keep him going through the unimaginable suffering. However, Stein discovers the deaths of his family, and Elie never sees him again. Similarly in *Lilac Girls*, Kasia along with her sisters and mother are all placed in Ravensbrück concentration camp from Poland, and Kasia and one of her sisters remain together through their entire horrific journey, keeping them alive to the end of the Holocaust. As soon as she arrives at Ravensbrück, Kasia's beloved math teacher, Mrs. Mikelsky, is stripped of her newborn baby in the selection process and quickly declines as Kasia's sister diagnoses her with "dysentery and severe depression, a bad combination" (Kelly 164). While Mrs. Mikelsky is still with dear friends, losing her closest loved one causes a rapid decline in physical and emotional strength. Kelly's *Lilac Girls* displays this harrowing scenario, but Kelly describes Mrs. Mikelsky's physical symptoms, letting her audience see the progression of Mikelsky's death, while Wiesel uses cryptic language, leaving the reader without closure, an emotional perspective only offered by a first-hand perspective.

First-hand and fictional accounts of the Holocaust are not limited to victims of it; photographs and stories of those involved in Hitler's regime offer both insight about high-ranking officers' priorities and

appalling evidence of what went on in the minds of those supporting Hitler. However, some accounts are more moving than others. In 2007, SS officer Karl Höcker's photo album of his time at Auschwitz-Birkenau was donated to the Holocaust Memorial Museum. The photos do not portray the Nazi's atrocities against Jews at the infamous camp, but activities, festivities, and everyday lives of SS officers. Two of the most notable photographs are too insensitive and purely evil to imagine: one depicts an accordionist leading a group of the highest ranking SS officers in song to commemorate and celebrate their killing 350,000 Jews in 55 days, and one depicts a group of young, female auxiliaries mourning the loss of blueberries in their bowls. During this pivotal time when Auschwitz gas chambers were operating at maximum capacity and hundreds of thousands of people were being exterminated behind them, these SS contributors were laughing, singing, and eating blueberries. An audience simply can not peel their eyes away from the compelling and unbelievable nature of this original album. Conversely, Marie Benedict's historical fiction novel, *The Mitford Affair*, highlights the lives of three of the infamous and controversial Mitford sisters, who took the London political and social scenes by storm in the 1940s. One of them, Unity Mitford, was unabashedly obsessed with Hitler. Benedict accounts for several key moments between Unity and Hitler—like Unity's always waiting for Hitler at a restaurant he frequented to hopefully catch his eye—, but most of her story is more disturbing than truly compelling, as its being fictional tarnishes its credibility. The constant questioning of authenticity dulls the impact of Unity's perspective, allowing other more viable sources like Höcker's photo album to override Benedict's interpretation.

While fictional interpretations of the Holocaust are relatively historically accurate, the first-hand experiences of those who endured the results of Hitler's mastermind are crucial to forming a clear understanding of what the Holocaust was and how it transformed people into living corpses and monsters. This understanding comes from a combination of photos, films, and literature, all from different perspectives; from the blueberry-eating auxiliary, to the emaciated Holocaust survivor, every story must contribute to a well-rounded depiction of the unfathomable.

Works Cited

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