

## Notes From Girl X: Anne Frank at the Millennium

Holli Levitsky

Anne Frank has not come to us without controversy. As the 1997 *New Yorker* article by Cynthia Ozick compellingly showed, questions about “ownership” of the Anne Frank story have dogged the diary from the beginning of its translation into English. It has been called “a song to life”; a “poignant delight in the infinite human spirit”; “a lasting testament to the indestructible nobility of the human spirit”; and “an everlasting source of courage and inspiration.” Ozick calls such ongoing *celebration* of a diary recounting the terrifying life of an adolescent Jewish girl in hiding from the Nazis “the shamelessness of appropriation” (Ozick 78, 79). Who has appropriated Anne Frank’s story in the past, and who owns Anne Frank’s story now? Should we, with Ozick, consider the diary owned still by its author, a girl by nature optimistic but thrown into terribly doomed circumstances? If we follow Ozick’s line of thinking, the diary should remain Anne’s private thoughts. However, if we follow the lead of any number of Anne Frank revisionists, we basically ignore both the specifics of authorship and its context by re-making Anne Frank as a universal figure of courage and nobility.

The question I raise at the opening of the twenty-first century is this: Is Anne Frank’s diary still viable? Has it been too far removed from its original author, its original context? Are we better off wondering, with Ozick, whether the diary should ever have been discovered? Of course, notwithstanding Ozick’s disingenuous remark, we cannot change history. Anne Frank’s diary *was* discovered, published, read by millions around the world. Clearly, public interest in the story provided by the diary is widespread and international. But the inevitable movement of time forward leaves history in the past. The diary, as a dated, historical document, is part of history. And history has changed Anne Frank.

### Ownership of Anne’s Diary

The story of the diary’s changing “ownership” begins with the Chicago-born novelist Meyer Levin, who, as a war correspondent attached to the Fourth Armored Division, was among the first Americans to enter Buchenwald, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen. He of course could not fathom that which he saw: the repeated scenes of degradation and death, the piled up bodies. He wanted to act, to speak, to write, but he found that he could not tell the victims’ stories. These were stories

so personal they could only be told by the victims themselves. Yet by approaching the horrors of the Holocaust with a writer’s eyes, he was perhaps the first to see the need to *tell stories*, and thus among the first artists to question how we mediate the Holocaust. He dedicated himself to helping the survivors get to Palestine, in itself an almost impossible task at the time since the British had made such immigration illegal. Still, during the year following the war he reported on the uprising in Tel Aviv against the British rule, and in time produced several films on the survivors’ struggles to reach Palestine. In 1950 he wrote and published “In Search,” a narrative which examined the effects of the Holocaust on himself as an American Jew. When he received from his wife a copy of Anne Frank’s diary in French (just translated from the Dutch) he immediately felt that he had read the most personal and intimate story of the Holocaust, a story told from the mouth of a victim.

He contacted Otto Frank, offering to help secure American and British publication of the diary. While he assured Frank that there was no financial interest for him in the publication of the diary, he did ask permission to explore the possibility of producing a play or film from it. Frank encouraged Levin to go ahead with the idea with the understanding that a dramatization would necessarily differ in content from the diary. As Ozick points out, however, the real contents of the diary had already been radically altered by Anne’s father—in ways that suggest not just prudence and prudishness on his part but also a kind of deracination. One could guess (although we already know from the definitive 1991 edition published eleven years after Frank’s death) that the expurgations contained Anne’s budding sexual thoughts alongside other concerns, and, in fact, many contained such thoughts: Anne writes of contraception, describes graphically the development of female genitalia, rails against her mother. But Otto Frank had also already deleted numerous expressions of religious faith, of terrifying reports of Germans seizing Jews. As a result the diary was being read as a celebration of the human spirit (acknowledged by the oft-quoted line, “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart” (quoted in Ozick 81)) rather than what it really was, and is: a tale of fear. The German edition was further bowdlerized by the translator’s removal of hostile references to Germans and statements of German culpability, alterations also approved by Otto Frank,

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who claimed to speak for his daughter, although the accommodation is not found in the diary itself.

While Levin was continuing to press for British and American publication of the diary and searching for a theatrical producer, the diary was slowly gaining independent notice. Although it was rejected by sixteen English language publishers, Levin finally attracted a London publishing house, but then Doubleday contacted Otto Frank directly and secured American publishing rights for the diary. However, Levin believed that Frank still supported him as the potential dramatist for the diary's theatrical debut.

The book was finally translated into English, then reviewed by Levin on the front page of the Spring, 1952, *New York Times Book Review*. Levin then joined Doubleday and the book's editor (with Frank's blessings) in the project of choosing a producer. The events following those moments were so full of recriminations, contradictions, and hostilities that they have lasted for years and are in fact the subject of two fairly recently published works of scholarship: *An Obsession With Anne Frank* by Lawrence Graver, published in 1995 and *The Stolen*

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*Legacy of Anne Frank*, by Ralph Melnick, out in 1997. While Levin toiled on a script, Doubleday withdrew as Frank's theatrical agent, and Frank moved away from his support of Levin. Finally the producer Kermit Bloomgarden (recommended by Lillian Hellman) and the director Garson Kanin were chosen, along with Hellman-recommended scriptwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett (a married couple who also wrote *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Father of the Bride*).

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Otto Frank began the process by expurgating numerous passages from the diary which he felt were inappropriate (for several different reasons), then came editors, writers, a director, and a producer who felt that the story needed to be diluted and popularized for Broadway's ends: to entertain the public without depressing them. I quote directly from Ozick:

Where the diary touched on Anne's consciousness of Jewish fate or faith, [the writers, director, and producer] quietly erased the reference or changed its emphasis. Whatever was specific they made generic. The sexual tenderness between Anne and the young Peter van Daan was moved to the forefront. Comedy overwhelmed darkness. Anne became an all-American girl, an echo of the perky character in "Junior Miss," a popular play of the previous decade.

The Zionist aspirations of Margot, Anne's sister, disappeared. The one liturgical note, a Hanukkah ceremony, was absurdly defined in terms of local contemporary habits ("eight days of presents"); a jolly jingle replaced the traditional "Rock of Ages," with its sombre allusions to historic travail. (Kanin had insisted on something "spirited and gay" so as not to give "the wrong feeling entirely." "Hebrew," he argued, "would simply alienate the audience.") (Ozick 85)

Meyer Levin eventually sued Otto Frank in court, gaining small satisfaction from his triumph over accusations of plagiarism. But the Hacketts' drama went all over the world,

finding huge audiences even in Israel among populations of Holocaust survivors and in Germany, where theatre-goers in the fifties still belonged to the Nazi era. It was enthusiastically embraced wherever it was performed, eventually being adapted into an extremely successful film. It continues to be adapted even today.

Ozick's questioning of the ownership of Anne Frank in the *New Yorker* was not without its own critics. Theatre critic and academic Robert Skloot considered Ozick's essay "passionate and misguided" (20) in his own essay, "A Multiplicity of Annes" one year later in *The Nation*. He notes that "Ozick's 'answer' keeps its distance from the very question that provoked her ruminations" (20). Skloot's "A Multiplicity of Annes" gives us an important reminder about context. He sees a wiser response to the question of "Who owns Anne Frank?" in incorporating the knowledge that "historical interpretation and historical documents are neither fixed nor exempt from the pressures of culture and time, and that absent this awareness 'new cycles of misunderstanding and hatred will result'" (Skloot 20, quoting historian Albert Lindemann).

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#### Anne and History

Perhaps, then, there is a way to teach Anne Frank's story within the *context* of history, if we reach back to the historical Anne Frank through the prism of a contemporary Anne Frank. Several young adult novels compellingly bring the Holocaust to contemporary moments (Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, among them). The best among these is Cherie Bennett and Jeff Gottesfeld's *Anne Frank and Me*, a novelized version of Bennett's play of the same name. This finely crafted tale, carefully contextualized for a contemporary young adult audience, raises Anne Frank's story to the level of a pedagogy. That is, by retelling the story through contemporary issues the voice of Anne Frank reaches out from history to teach its readers *how* to read the Holocaust. Thus, a teacher wanting to construct a unit on the Holocaust for middle or high-schoolers might pair the unexpurgated *Diary of Anne Frank* with the recently published novel of *Anne Frank and Me*; teaching these pieces together will guide students through the historical Anne Frank directly into their own culturally and historically complex lives.

Skloot examines Bennett's 1995 play *Anne Frank and Me* in his essay. He is not so far from Ozick's position in his criticism of the drama: he finds the protagonist—a contemporary 14-year old American (Christian) girl who after a head trauma becomes a French Jewish girl in 1942 occupied Paris—awkward and sentimental, as he finds the play itself. His point is that Anne Frank's story is merely the framework to provide comparative images of white middle-class American adolescent trauma and the Holocaust. While I believe the play (which has won numerous awards) offers its viewers much more than a simple (and unwarranted) comparison between typical adolescent life-anxiety and the Holocaust, such a view, that Anne Frank's anxiety could be that of any teen-age girl, persists even after the publication of the original and complete diary in 1991. In the 1993 Introduction to *Anne Frank: Beyond the Diary*, Anna Quindlen writes that

Mortality is not what younger readers recognize when they

read the diary. Quite the contrary: Anne's odyssey of self-interrogation within the claustrophobic confines of the Secret Annex becomes an extraordinary metaphor for life, in particular for the life of the adolescent, bursting to be free while trapped in a close net of family, friends, and constant scrutiny, real and imagined. Any thirteen-year-old can instantly understand Anne's feelings in the first few pages, when she says she will call her diary Kitty because she really has no bosom friend—"just fun and joking, nothing more". (x)

Further, Quindlen repeats the lines from the diary which seem to suggest that Anne herself sees her situation less in terms of being a Jewish girl and more in terms of being ANY-girl.

Cooled up, misunderstood, she is every teenager when she bursts out, halfway through her time in hiding, "Would anyone, either Jew or non-Jew, understand this about me, that I am simply a young girl badly in need of some rollicking fun?" (x)

Would *any-girl*, however, need to say "all the fear I've ever felt is looming before me in all its horror...Let something happen soon...Nothing can be more crushing than this anxiety. Let the end come, however cruel...We are Jews in chains" (Frank, quoted in Ozick 78). Clearly, the deracination persists as well.

Returning to Ozick, however, we learn that for her the diary "cannot count as Anne Frank's story," since it is without end, and a story "may not be said to be a story if the end is missing" (Ozick 78). And since the end is missing, in the fifty years since it was first published, readers, critics, and teachers of the diary *as her story* have, according to Ozick, falsified it in numerous ways through bowdlerization, distortion, reduction, infantilization, Americanization, sentimentalization, and denial. Perhaps the most terrible part of these persistent revisions of Anne's story is that they glorify a subversion of history where Anne Frank could say meaningfully, "In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart," rather than what one might speculate a young girl hiding from the wrath of the Nazis might say, that is, "Everyday I am afraid for my life and the lives of my family."

Is the end what history gives us: on August 4, 1944 Anne Frank and her family were arrested in the Secret Annexe; on September 5, 1944 Anne Frank and her family arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau; on October 28, 1944 Anne and her sister Margot are transferred to Bergen-Belsen; in February or March of 1945 Anne Frank dies of typhus in Bergen-Belsen? Should the diary be seen as a story with an end (that is, the death of Anne Frank), and subsequently conclude our discussion of it? Or should the diary persist as "unfinished" but within an historical context that speaks to the "everything" that her hopefulness was able to defer, resist, and repress? If we follow the latter line of thinking, how then can a teacher of the Holocaust keep from creating the same false hope while teaching essential truths of the Holocaust? For Ozick, "Anne Frank's story, truthfully told, is unredeemed and unredeemable" (Ozick 78). For Skloot, a play like *Anne Frank*

*and Me*, which uses Anne Frank as a character who becomes a foil for the teenage protagonist, is awkward and sentimental. As a teacher of Holocaust literature who still regularly uses the *Diary*, my concern is the following: is the *Diary* still powerful enough to engage this generation of students in a truthful, serious, and artistic conversation about the Holocaust?

### Beyond Anne's Diary

Supplementing the *Diary* with the adaptation of the Bennett play might offer a corrective to the false hopes generated by various other uses of Anne Frank's story. My experience is that *Anne Frank and Me* offers a pedagogy even while it entertains as art, raising the questions serious artists of the Holocaust raise, the questions which specifically and intentionally contribute new perspectives to our understanding of the Holocaust. At the same time, in a return to Meyer Levin's original wish, the authors let the victims speak for themselves. This novel *teaches us how to teach the Holocaust*, by re-creating an ordinary teenage life as a way for us to imagine the ordinariness of Anne Frank's life. Just as Anne Frank could only write the reality of her present and not the reality of her death, so too the protagonist of this novel remains deaf to history but perfectly tuned-in to her present in the way that only a fifteen-year old girl—across time—can be.

We first enter the novel *Anne Frank and Me* in the form of the journal, "Notes From Girl X." Using the journal format takes the reader back to Anne Frank's diary "Kitty"; it is soul-baring self-reflection. Yet we must remember that the diary also provided Anne with a kind of empowerment (she could construct her feelings for others through her words) and a form of resistance (she could offer Kitty the retorts, recriminations, and doubts that she could not verbalize to the others). In *Anne Frank and Me*, the form also looks forward. The diary is written as a Website—the book begins after all in the year 2000, where schoolgirls learn the mechanics of building Websites even as they learn their ABC's. In a recent *Los Angeles Times* article, it was pointed out that the proliferation

of online diaries gives teens "a forum for expression that is anonymous in origin...and international in audience...a virtually uncensored environment and interactivity." The anonymous Girl X—AKA Nicole Burns—immediately gives us entries for Day 1, 2, and 3 of her online diary, frankly assessing her achievements, her friendships, her potential Internet audience. She imagines her future—and why shouldn't she—just as Anne Frank did, including an assessment of her present and future love life. She writes the journal for many of the same reasons Anne Frank did: because she's a 16-year old girl who, like most teenage girls, is confused, typically unsure of herself, testing her limits in the world, and just figuring it out as she goes. And in the year 2000 it goes on-line.

In "Notes From Girl X" (Nicole Burns, year 2000), we get precisely the language of this generation—teens in the year 2000—which prepares them for later hearing the somber (and deadly) experiences of Girl X- (Nicole Bernhardt, years 1942-44) as she narrates her terrifying ordeal in hiding

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from the Nazis, in the deportation camp, in Auschwitz, and finally in the gas chamber. These same experiences, and their narration, could have been Anne Frank's. The problem is that, without the contemporary context offered by the Bennett and Gottesfeld book, we move further away from Anne Frank's time—a different century now!—and her language and idioms shift, and become, for this generation, a foreign tongue.

Through the protagonist's use of the Internet, this novel brings the most timely and significant events of the Holocaust to its readership. Bennett and Gottesfeld take their readers on a journey through the dark world of Holocaust denial. It is a journey of discovery for Nicole, who is initially taken in by the intellectual-sounding title of the organization she finds as she searches for information on Anne Frank on the Internet: "The Center for the Scientific Study of Genocide: Bringing the past into harmony with the truth." They claim to offer her the "revisionist viewpoint on history" (Bennett and Gottesfeld 21). She gets the idea that perhaps this organization, which sounds so legitimate, could help her write her Anne Frank paper. When she begins to scroll around on the site, she discovers so-called scholars who believe the diary to be a forgery. She begins a conversation with one about historical accuracy and the Holocaust. Dr. Bridgeman, the historian on duty, tells Nicole that during the 1950's, "a Jewish man named Meyer Levin sued the writers of [the diary's] movie version, claiming that they had stolen his work. And he won...We won the war, so we get to write history. It lessens our guilt to think that what Germany did was more awful than what we did" (23). Of course, at this point Nicole has no means to contest Dr. Bridgeman's theories. Neither does the reader. But what is teaching if not a journey of discovery? We are all sucked in to the deniers' position in order to take that journey with Nicole.

Nicole Burns—Contemporary American Christian teenager—becomes Nicole Bernhardt—Occupied Parisian Jewish teenager—after an accident knocks her unconscious at the "Anne Frank in the World" exhibit she visits on a school field trip. At first, she remembers everything about her life in the year 2000, but soon those (limited) memories are replaced by her current life as a Jewish girl in occupied Paris. Her life quickly becomes extremely difficult, and in many ways mirrors the kind of life Anne Frank must have led. The family goes into hiding in a small attic room, Nicole writes an anonymous journal, also called "Notes from Girl X," the pages of which her friend Mimi distributes around Paris. Eventually they are betrayed to the police, deported, and sent to Auschwitz. After being offered an opportunity to escape, Nicole chooses to remain with her extremely ill sister Lizette.

The imagined meeting between Nicole Bernhardt and Anne Frank on the train from Westerbork, which seemed awkward

and sentimental to some critics of the play, here becomes a true moment of identification for the protagonist, whose own identity was confused even when she was clearly the Girl X of the year 2000. The two characters meet in the train after Nicole recognizes Anne (in a limited recovery of memory) from the cover of the diary she was supposed to have read for her English class (year 2000). Anne talks about her faith in God, Nicole talks about Anne's diary, both girls talk about the future. Anne tells Nicole, "Everything is possible. Don't you see?" (227). And an interesting thing happens. Nicole does begin to see, finally, the truth of history, the truth about the Holocaust.

Anne's eyes searched Nicole's, and Nicole saw herself reflected in them—grimy, hungry, lice-ridden. But this much she knew: she would not change places for a moment with the people who had made her that way. (227)

Nicole finally does see who she is. She *is* Anne Frank as we are all Anne Frank. And although she never finished *reading* Anne Frank's diary for her English class, she reads the

future for Anne as she waits in line to be gassed at Auschwitz: Nicole yells across to Anne: "I do know what happens to you!...You become a famous writer. And you break a million hearts" (234). This is the end Ozick claims was missing; neither falsified nor bowdlerized, the Anne Frank Bennett and Gottesfeld rewrite becomes a famous writer, proven by the continued interest in her diary, which breaks every heart that reads it. Nicole Burns begins as we all do in

ignorance, but from ignorance she moves to experience, the experience of witness, where one could say of her that, "She really had been there. And with that knowledge, she left behind the earthbound girl who had believed she would always revolve around someone else. She was free" (278). Transformed by Anne Frank's experience, she becomes free to think for herself: that is, free to remember history, free to teach the truth, free to deny the deniers.

In the final pages of the novel, Nicole Burns, now returned to the year 2000, realizes that every life has the opportunity to change the world. She writes another journal entry, naming herself, describing her new role as a teacher for her sister. When she was hiding in Paris, sending out her "NOTES DE JEUNE FILLE X" missives she did help change the world. She is offered proof of that at the end of the novel. But how do ordinary suburban teens like our students change the world today and tomorrow? By identifying with those who make the right choices. Clearly, Anne Frank's *Diary* needs to be taught today, perhaps more than ever. Teachers can maintain the historical integrity of the story by pairing it with a compelling novel that rewrites the story for a contemporary young adult audience without altering history. *Anne Frank and Me* offers historical accuracies about the Holocaust while placing its readers squarely at the millennium.

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*Editor's note: Please look for the interview with Cherie Bennet and Jeff Gottesfeld, co-authors of Anne Frank and Me, that Melissa Comer conducted, and which will appear in the spring/summer, 2002, issue of The ALAN Review!*

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*We grieve the loss,  
yet celebrate the life and home going  
of Newbery-prize winning author  
Virginia Hamilton  
1936 - February, 2002.*