

The Holocaust Fiction of Carol Matas

Ed Sullivan

Fiction writers who choose the Holocaust as their subject are faced with the daunting challenge of making the experience true for readers—to not only be accurate in depicting historical details, but also in conveying the intense emotional power needed to bring authenticity to these stories. The best Holocaust fiction includes those stories which make real for readers the inexplicable horrors of this darkest moment in human history. It brings those experiences to vivid life through characters and circumstances with which readers can empathize, and enables them to experience vicariously what it could be like to live in a world in which one's very existence is enough to warrant oppression, torture, and extermination. Canadian author Carol Matas has successfully brought these kinds of stories to life for young people several times over. I am struck by Matas' remarkable ability to craft compelling stories from real, but not very well-known events from the Holocaust, such as the struggle of homeless survivors to reach Palestine immediately following the war, or the dangerous attempt of an entire French Protestant village to save Jews from deportation. At the heart of these stories are adolescent protagonists who heroically confront their horrible circumstances with courage, dignity, and a fierce determination to survive.

Matas is an author I always recommend to teachers who are looking for alternatives to such standard Holocaust texts as Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Particularly suitable for middle school grades, Matas's fiction has strong appeal for young adolescents. The stories are relatively short in length, have fast-paced and engrossing plots, and always feature strongly developed adolescent protagonists whom readers can relate to and identify. For readers unfamiliar with the author's work, I have prepared a chronological overview of Matas's Holocaust novels.

Lisa's War, Matas's first Holocaust novel originally published in 1987, is about what is now one of the more familiar stories from the Holocaust—the largely successful attempt by the Danish Resistance to save its Jewish countrymen from deportation to the extermination camps. When the Nazis occupy Denmark, Lisa's family immediately commits themselves to fighting back. Her father, a doctor, secretly treats the resistance fighters, and her brother Stefan enlists as one.

Wanting to make a difference herself, Lisa joins the movement to seek revenge. The story asks the question raised in all of Matas's Holocaust novels: Can one person make a difference? The answer is yes. Lisa proves this through her decision to fight the Nazis, and the entire nation of Denmark proves it by saving nearly all of their Jews.

Lisa's War is inevitably compared to Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*, the 1990 Newbery Medal-winning novel which also tells the story of the Danish rescue. In a review comparing the two novels, *The New York Times* cites *Lisa's War* as a "much more powerful book," and I am inclined to agree. What lends more power to *Lisa's War* is Matas's choice to tell the story through the perspective of a Jewish protagonist, compared to Lowry who, in *Number the Stars*, filters the experience through the perspective of ten-year-old Annemarie, a Christian who

bears witness to what is happening to the Jews in Denmark. Lowry's narrative distancing lessens the emotional impact of the story. Experiencing the story through Lisa, a Jew, gives the story more of a sense of immediacy and makes it more compelling for the reader.

Kris's War, originally published in 1989 as *Code Name: Kris*, is a sequel to *Lisa's War*. Jesper, the main character in this story, is introduced in the first novel as a young member of the resistance with whom Lisa falls in love. In this story, set in 1943 German-occupied Denmark, Lisa and Stefan have already escaped to Sweden. Jesper, whose code name in the resistance is Kris, is not Jewish so he is able to stay behind in Denmark and continue fighting in the underground war against the Germans. *Kris's War* is a fast-paced, action-packed story that also depicts a strong, courageous adolescent protagonist who risks his life to make a difference.

Matas was commissioned by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. to write her third Holocaust novel, *Daniel's Story*. The book was published in conjunction with an exhibit at the museum called "Daniel's Story: Remembering the Children," a poignant tribute to the Holocaust's youngest victims. Daniel is a fictitious character, but Matas's creation of the character and his story is inspired by the real experiences of many victims. The story opens with Daniel and his family living in Frankfurt, Germany, in the late 1930s, when Hitler is taking his first steps toward ridding the country of Jews. They lose their right to practice their religion, to education, to work, and finally their prop-

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erty. Daniel and his family are forced from their home and sent to live in the Lodz Ghetto. From there, they are sent to the Auschwitz death camp. Along this horrible journey, Daniel loses nearly his entire family to disease, the gas chamber, starvation, and other horrors. Miraculously, Daniel, an adolescent whose experiences have aged him well beyond his years, survives the war and is finally liberated from the Buchenwald concentration camp. It is in *Daniel's Story* that Matas first displays her remarkable ability to describe some of the worst horrors of the Holocaust. An example is this scene in which Daniel describes what he witnesses during the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto:

It was a pitiful sight. Those who could walk were pushed out into the waiting trucks; others were carried out in stretchers. I could see people trying to escape, some running, some jumping from the windows. Everywhere around me people screamed, called out to relatives hoping at least to say goodbye, see them one last time, but we couldn't, we were too far away. And then, the worst . . . German soldiers threw babies, newborns, little children, out of the windows, and into the trucks below. I could stand no more. I turned, weeping, and stumbling back to our apartment (45-46).

Matas's horrific imagery captures the intense brutality and utter inhumanity of the Holocaust. Still, for all its bleakness, *Daniel's Story* will leave readers inspired by this young man's determination to find hope and life in the midst of relentless despair.

In *After the War*, Matas explores territory almost completely ignored in Holocaust literature in general, and entirely overlooked in books written for young people. What became of survivors immediately following their liberation from the camps? This is a subject seldom addressed in Holocaust studies, but Matas

brings it to life in a story about fifteen-year-old Ruth Mendelson. Recently liberated from Buchenwald, Ruth returns to her hometown in Poland to search for family and friends. She finds herself the sole survivor of over eighty relatives. With nowhere to go, Ruth joins up with an underground organization smuggling displaced Jews to Palestine, which at

this time in history is still controlled by Great Britain. She and several other young adult survivors lead a group of orphans on a harrowing, danger-filled journey that eventually brings them to their new homeland. In addition to being unique for telling a little-known but important story, *After the War* is also significant for showing that the persecution of European Jews did not end with liberation from the camps. When Ruth returns to her village, the Gentiles living there taunt and threaten her. The British would not allow displaced Jews to settle in Palestine. Jews like Ruth and her comrades who tried to enter Palestine did so at great personal risk.

That is a subject Matas addresses in *The Garden*, a sequel to *After the War*, which finds sixteen-year-old Ruth living on a kibbutz. Ruth is charged with tending the garden, and as

she begins to settle into a life of peace and spiritual awakening, her world is again shattered when British soldiers destroy the garden, looking for illegal guns. As the United Nations prepares to partition Palestine into two separate lands, one Arab and one Jewish, war breaks out with Arabs and Jews fighting one another, and factions within the Jewish community fighting amongst themselves. The British do little to stop the escalating violence. Ruth becomes a reluctant combatant in the conflict, caught between political extremism and her own desperate, personal desire just to live in peace. Like *After the War*, *The Garden* offers a rare perspective on this seldom told story of Holocaust survivors struggling to forge a new life in Palestine.

In *Greater Than Angels*, Matas returns to the subject of "Righteous Gentiles" risking their own lives to save Jews. Matas tells the story of the citizens of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in Vichy, France who courageously risk their lives to save the many Jews who took refuge there during the Nazi occupation. This fictional account is told through thirteen-year-old Anna Hirsch and her family and friends. Anna and her family are deported from Germany to Gurs, a refugee camp on the French-Spanish border. The journey is a terrifying ordeal during which Anna's grandmother dies. Her mother and aunt are deported to a concentration camp and never heard from again, but Anna and several other young people are saved from this fate by relief workers who arrange to have them sent to Le Chambon, where the citizens there allow them to live a life of relative normalcy and safety. Anna is one of the few members of her family who survives the war, thanks to the righteous Gentiles of Le Chambon. *Greater Than Angels* is an inspiring story of courage and self-sacrifice. It shows that, even in the midst of the overwhelming evil of the Holocaust, compassion and goodness can still prevail.

Matas's most recent novel, *In My Enemy's House*, explores a darker dimension of the Holocaust. Marisa is a Polish Jew whose blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion enable her to pass as an "Aryan." When the Nazis invade Poland and arrive in Marisa's hometown of Zloczow, they immediately begin rounding up Jews and putting them into a ghetto. With all of her family either scattered or dead, Marisa steals a Polish girl's papers and goes to Germany to find

work as a laborer. After a terrifying ordeal working for an abusive farmer, Marisa travels to Weimar to work as a house servant for the Reymanns, a wealthy farm family whose patriarch is a high-ranking Nazi official.

Marisa finds herself in an extraordinary situation. Marisa is a Jew forced to live a lie so she can survive. She literally has to live among the enemy. Believing her to be a Polish Gentile, the Reymanns treat Marisa well. She becomes close to the children, and almost part of the family. Marisa even finds herself identifying with the Heymanns as time passes. When someone tells her how Aryan she looks, Marisa has a disturbing thought:

For a split second I swelled with pride at the compliments.
For a moment I *was* the perfect German girl, ruler of the

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universe. A shudder passed through me. ...But how easy it was to be seduced. For a moment, even after what they had put me through, I could feel the magic of that dream. How tempting to be better than anyone else in the entire world. Better, smarter, prettier, entitled to all the good things. Oh yes, how tempting. (84-85)

This is a powerful and disturbing revelation for Marisa—a Jew hiding among the enemy to survive suddenly finds herself admiring, envying the very people responsible for destroying her life. Matas depicts the seductive power of Nazi arrogance, their dark ethnocentrism that fueled their genocidal campaign for racial purity in Europe. Even a Jew, a victim of that very madness, can succumb. Matas makes an appallingly effective commentary on the human condition.

After seven novels, Matas will not stop writing about the Holocaust: there are too many stories to tell, and our young people need to know them.

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