

Anne and Me: A Frank Talk with Writers Cherie Bennett and Jeff Gottesfeld

Melissa Comer

Recently, writers Cherie Bennett and Jeff Gottesfeld joined me for a weekend workshop where they talked about their books, their screen plays, and their television show (*Smallville* on the WB.) They discussed their writing and their passion for telling a good story. After the workshop, most of the participants and I wanted more. We wanted more of their stories, more of their gift for gab, and more of them. With this thought in mind and my own personal interest in Holocaust literature, I presented this wife and husband pair with several questions concerning their latest publication: *Anne Frank and Me*. Their responses are forthright and enlightening.

CB & JG: First of all, we'd like to say that there are few things that make us want to crack open a beer (Jeff) or rip the lid off a pint of Haagen-Daaz (Cherie) and turn on *Monday Night Football* (Jeff) or *Blind Date* (Cherie) more than interviews where an author pontificates ad nauseam about his or her Work-with a capital W. So, if what we say here crosses the line between reasonably illuminating and insufferably self-important, feel free to email us at authorchik@aol.com and tell us off. That's what we'd do if we were you. Alrighty then. Moving on.

MC: Why *Anne Frank and Me* (AFAM)? In other words, why focus on this topic?

CB & JG: Lots of reasons. (A) Many teens either don't know about what happened to teens who lived under the Nazi occupation, or, if they do know, they don't see how those experiences could possibly matter to their own lives. But they do matter. Profoundly so. After they read AFAM, we hope they'll understand why. (B) The Internet is rife with Holocaust denial sites designed to suck in kids as easily as our Nicole and her kid sister were sucked in. Some of these sites look as innocuous as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and as academically rigorous as any legitimate scientific journal. Hundreds and thousands of middle school and high school students wander into these web sites without knowing what they are. No one can refute a lie unless they know the truth. To read AFAM is to be armed with the truth. (C) The story of the Nazi occupation of Paris, France, and the checkered French response to it, is one of the most morally troubling stories of the past century. Yet this story had previously been untold in a novel for young adults (YAs). (D) No one knows who will rise to heroism until they are tested. Many kids believe themselves to be ordinary (whatever that means); certainly not hero material. That's true of our protagonist, too. Nicole Burns is a middle-of-the-packer who

says, "Most of the time I'm just . . . there." But when this ordinary girl finds herself extraordinarily tested, she learns to find the hero inside of herself. And so, vicariously, does our reader.

MC: Describe your research journey, length of time from beginning to end in writing the book.

CB & JG: Gargantuan. We subscribe to the if-you-can-be-accurate, you-must-be-accurate theory of historical fiction. Maybe you can fudge a bit if you're writing about, say, a remote hamlet in fifteenth century France. Who the heck is going to fact check you? But it's quite another matter if you're writing about a time and place only sixty years ago and where your novel aims at the nexus of what the late C. Wright Mills called "the sociological imagination" — that intersection of private troubles and public issues.

Since our novel is in part a broadside against Holocaust revisionism, and since we know that young people sometimes have a hard time telling the difference between fact and fiction, we felt it crucial that we get the facts right.

Starting in 1994, when Cherie's stage version of *Anne Frank and Me* (Dramatic Publishing Company, 1997) was first conceived, we read everything we could get our hands on about life in Paris under the Occupation. Professor Jacques Adler, author of *The Jews of Paris and the Final Solution: Communal Response and Internal Conflicts, 1940-1944* and a professor of history at the University of Melbourne, became a personal friend and tireless fact checker. We vetted every detail of both play and novel with him. Jacques wore the yellow star as a teen in Paris and then fought with a Communist resistance cell. He should know.

Fortunately, Jeff speaks French, so we were able to call on French secondary sources, too. Among them, Herve le Boterf's definitive two-volume *La Vie Parisienne sous L'Occupation*, Henri Michel's *Paris Allemand*, and Claude Levy and Paul Tillard's *La Grande Rafle du Vel d'Hiv*, a brilliant account of the Velodrome d'Hiver round-up in Paris that is such a turning point in our book—though not in the way you'd think. And many more.

Then, we did our own interviews of about a dozen French survivors who now live in America. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was instrumental in putting those people in contact with us.

How meticulous were we with this research? By the time we sat down to write the novel, we knew such things as which Metro stations the Nazis closed during the Occupation and which stayed open (so Nicole wouldn't take the

Metro from a station that had been closed in actuality); whether Passover matzo were available for the Seder of 1944 (yes, and it was round); what street names were changed during the Occupation; who was on Alois Brunner's final transport as the Allied artillery boomed at the gates of Paris; and how many showerheads were inside the main gas chamber at Birkenau (14). Anyone reading AFAM is reading a novel, but they are also learning history.

MC: Were you intimidated by the original version of *Anne Frank*? How much did her story influence yours?

CB & JG: Anne Frank has been Cherie's personal heroine since she first discovered her diary at age eight. We've both read it many times since. So we weren't so much intimidated by her diary as hyper-aware that we were charging headlong into a critical free-fire zone by deciding to include Anne in the story, however briefly, as a living character.

Anne is, after all, one of the two or three best-known teenagers of all time. She's been the subject of a controversial Pulitzer-prize-winning play, a controversial rewrite of said play, a controversial Oscar-winning motion picture, myriad controversial biographies, etc. From the moment we conceived *Anne Frank and Me*, we could imagine voices shouting, "Enough already. Stop exploiting her story!"

But we did not exploit her story. That is why the protagonist of the novel is Nicole Bernhardt, and not Anne Frank. Nicole, a 21st century Christian girl living in the suburbs, is assigned Anne's diary in school. Like so many of her peers, she never finishes reading it. It is, after all, "ancient history," from another country, in another century. Besides, she's not even Jewish. Nicole goes to the "Anne Frank in the World" exhibition more worried about the guy she likes than about learning Anne's story. Then, Nicole's world gets rocked in a way that she could never have anticipated.

We were as meticulous in our research about Anne as with anything else, because Anne is, for a dozen pages or so, in the action. Nicole meets her on a transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau in early September 1944, and they arrive at this camp together. We agonized, prayed over, wrote and re-wrote this small section of the novel. Our effort was to capture a complex mix of hope and fear, insouciance and upheaval, feelings of doubt, and transcendent faith. We wrote neither the overly optimistic Anne of the Goodrich/Hackett stage production nor the mirror image Anne that some would prefer (as she was, by all accounts, just before her death at Bergen-Belsen in late February/early March 1945): a dispirited and broken victim.

Did we get Anne right? The only people who could really say are those who knew her. Which is why we were thrilled to receive an email from her last direct surviving relative, Buddy Elias, a couple of weeks after the novel came out. Here's what he wrote, in part:

I hope this mail reaches you. I don't know if you know about my existence. I am Anne Frank's last living direct relative, her cousin, she called Bernd in her Diary. My mother was Otto's sister. I am also President of the ANNE FRANK- Fonds, Basel (AFF). I received your book from Penguin (London) as they wanted my opinion. I had never heard of [it] before, nor your play. Well, I like your book very, very much. It is excellent, wonderfully suited for young people to learn about the Holocaust and to get to know Anne Frank. It is interesting, exciting and true to the facts, which is not always the case. I can see that your research

was done in perfect manner and your dedication to Anne warms my heart. You are to be congratulated and thanked. It is an important book.

In some ways, what's *not* in Anne's diary had more impact on us than what's in it. Elaine Culbertson, a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Mandel teaching fellow and a respected Holocaust educator, wrote a powerful essay about why she doesn't teach Anne's diary any more (Totten, 2001.) Culbertson's position might be extreme—in fact, we think it goes too far—but the thrust of her argument is well taken: Anne's diary takes place entirely within the four walls of the Secret Annex. There's no context as to what's happening in the outer world. The diary comes to a screeching halt when Anne and her family are arrested in the Annex.

Culbertson's point is that it's too easy for students to overlook the rest of the story because, well, there is no more rest of the story in the diary itself. The truth in Anne's diary is Anne's truth inside those walls. But the story outside those walls is of vital importance. And you can't really understand what happened inside unless you understand what happened outside.

What we tried to do in *Anne Frank and Me* is tell something of the story outside—not in Anne's Amsterdam, but in Paris. Paris after mid-June, 1940, was a place beset by an attenstiste population doing its best to muddle through the Occupation. There was, from the outset, a strong current of collaboration with the occupiers, especially during the early years of the war when it seemed that German victory was imminent. This collaborationist current met with a growing countercurrent of resistance, but only as the tide of the war turned.

Onto an even more major minefield: Anne's budding sexuality and romance with Peter van Pels (called Peter van Daan in the diary.) The diary is filled with the romantic yearnings of a newly pubescent, quite dramatic girl, locked up for twenty-four hours a day with one and only one young boy. She is in the throes of first "love." At times, it consumes her. Anne's writing at age 14 about Peter had a big impact on our construction of Nicole, at age 16 and 17, and her relationship with her own boyfriend, Jacques.

MC: Why the back-in-time angle?

CB & JG: It's such a powerful device for YA books because time travel makes the past feel real. It's a wonderful way for teens to realize that their lives, now with pop culture, music, film, etc., aren't that different from teens' lives then. We drop 21st century Nicole into the most sophisticated city on the planet: Paris, France, circa 1942. There's a lot of Holocaust literature for young people—some of it time-travel themed. But we think AFAM is the first book that looks at the experiences of both Jewish and Gentile teenagers in the hip, urban, utterly relate-able setting that was Nazi-Occupied Paris. Because Nicole is a gentile Every Girl in the present, she becomes a place card for the reader who might not normally be able to relate to the events in the book. When it happens to Nicole, it is happening to the reader.

MC: What makes the novel accessible to today's teens?

CB & JG: The same thing that makes any book accessible to anyone: plot, character, dialogue, and writing style. In other words, a good book is a good book.

More specifically, though, we wanted AFAM to be read

by a widest possible audience—not just tomorrow’s doctors, but also tomorrow’s nurses, orderlies, and janitors. So we wrote it in what we hope is a very readable style, with a protagonist who obsesses at times about what all of us obsess about: her love life.

This was risky, we know. A lot of teen novels with strong romantic arcs are designed to be mere beach reads. We knew that some would dismiss AFAM on this basis, as if passionate teen romance by definition makes a work flimsy.

Notice the same does not apply to a book about adults.

We think we do a disservice to the emotional lives of teen readers by assuming that a YA novel with a driving romantic arc is ipso facto lightweight. There is a powerful romance, ultimately, a romantic tragedy, in AFAM. It’s amazing how many of the emails we get from teens focus on that romance. Again, we took our cue from Anne’s diary and her feelings for Peter van Pels.

Teen readers get Nicole from page one for the same reason that adults might dismiss her. That is, she’s just so . . . imperfect. Self-involved. Superficial, really. If readers are not Nicole, they ride the bus with her, eat lunch with her, go to school or church with her. So when her story unfolds, it’s like it’s happening to the reader. And when Nicole becomes a hero, readers understand that heroism has nothing to do with your GPA or your IQ score. It has to do with your courage, with what’s in your heart.

There were plenty of inflated IQs among the human beings who organized the transports and designed the gas chambers.

MC: What do you hope readers gain from reading *Anne Frank and Me*?

CB & JG: Ah ha! Our moment to pontificate on all the important themes in our book, right? Blah, blah, blah. Theme, theme, theme. Wow, are we ever brilliant.

The most important thing we want readers to gain from AFAM is a great reading experience. That is, a book that grips them, twists and turns in ways that don’t anticipate, and depicts a heroine’s journey that in some way becomes their own.

Teens today grow up on stories. In fact, with the media explosion of the 1980s and 1990s, there’s been a story explosion too. Kids are far more savvy than we were at the same age. You’d be shocked at how many YAs tell us they’re far ahead of the plot with too many YA books—on page 50 they can predict what’s going to be happening on page 200, and then tell exactly how the book is going to turn out.

Which is so not a fun reading experience.

Okay, onto theme.

We do a great deal of speaking in middle schools and high schools about our fiction, plays, and television writing.

We love it, and so do the kids and educators to whom we talk. When the subject turns to AFAM, (we have a multimedia presentation/writing workshop including videotape of professional productions of the stage play) some student raises his or her hand and says: “It’s important to remember what happened in the Holocaust because the people who lived through it are dying, and soon there won’t be any of them left. We need to be witnesses.”

That kid is right. But that answer only gets you so far. Witnesses weren’t the problem. There was a continent full of witnesses to the atrocities of the Germans and their sympathizers, including in France. It’s not as if these men and women kept their feelings a secret. They rounded up Jews not just in Polish shtetls, but in sophisticated cities like Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam.

And what did the vast majority of these witnesses do in response to their neighbors’ blood being shed? Nothing. They did nothing.

Miep Gies—the Franks’s protector during those days in the Secret Annex—wrote in her 1987 autobiography about how there were only two types of people in Holland in those days. Collaborators and resisters. If you stood by and did nothing, you were part of the problem. In France. Everywhere. If kids stand by idly today in the face of evil, they too are part of the problem. And history is destined to repeat itself on

Review of *Anne Frank and Me* (Cherie Bennett and Jeff Gottsfeld, New York: Putnam, 2001)

Nicole Burns is your typical teenager. She is, in fact, middle-of-the-road normal. Nothing exciting ever happens to Nicole. She does get noticed in crowds and the boy she has a major crush on does not know she exists. For all intents and purposes, Nicole is “just there.” And so goes the life of main character Nicole Burns in *Anne Frank and Me*. Nicole is very much a 21st century girl. Internet savvy, she creates her own web page called Girl X. It is here that she records her thoughts, her secrets, her desires.

Nicole doesn’t give much thought to anything but the present. All of this changes, however, when she is assigned to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*. On a visit to the state museum’s *Anne Frank in the World* exhibit, Nicole’s life is forever changed. She enters the museum in modern day and through a freak accident is transported back in time to Occupied Paris, as a Jewish girl.

a lesser or greater scale.

By the book’s end, Nicole does not stand idly in the face of evil. She is more than a witness. She acts. And she passes on to her sister the truths she’s learned. We hope our readers, whatever their age, take her journey, and her passion, to heart.

MC: How do you answer the critics of the novel? What do you say to the Holocaust Deniers?

CB & JG: At the risk of skating dangerously close to the email-inducing line, Chekhov’s Trigorin, in *The Seagull* (a play with an important role in our next novel, *A Heart Divided*) said this when asked about reading reviews of his writing: “When they praise me, I’m pleased. When they hate me, I feel badly for a day or two.”

AFAM got some fantastic reviews, and AFAM got some crappy ones. We felt pleased at the good ones (especially when reviewers actually got what we were trying to do in the book) and badly at the crappy ones. Jeff says he felt crappy for a “a day or two.” Cherie says she needed a bit longer to recuperate. And our families stay angry at our critics forever. Gotta love ‘em.

What did burn our butts was critical suggestion that AFAM was more gimmick than history. We’ve gotten so many letters from Holocaust scholars, including many United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Mandel high school teaching

fellows, praising the book's ability to meld fiction and scrupulous historical accuracy. We've been asked by the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and others to participate in teacher training because of the historical accuracy of our book.

Uh . . . more gimmick than history? You might or might not like the novel—hey, that's why they call it art. But you cannot fault its "history."

As for the deniers, especially those who'd seek to suck our kids in via the Internet, we have only this to say: WE'RE ON TO YOU, YOU LYING POND SCUM! Not just us, but teachers, educators, and groups like the Simon Wiesenthal Center and ADL. Kids are learning the truth, which sets them free and sends you packing.

In the long run, deniers don't have a chance.

MC: Both of you are Jewish. Did this influence your decision to write this book? Did you find it difficult writing from Nicole's (who is not Jewish) point of view?

CB & JG: We're both fairly observant Jews. In 1994, we saw Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel spouting his hate on *60 Minutes*. He looked so normal. He sounded so reasonable. And we thought: "Okay, this is not some neo-Nazi skinhead with a tattoo on his forehead." If you're a kid, and you don't know the truth, you could believe this guy. Why wouldn't you? He's just telling "the other side of the story."

Only sometimes there is no other side to the story.

Our faith definitely was an impetus in our decision to construct a play—and later, a novel—that would thematically do battle with Zundel and his ilk. It has been, and continues to be, a subject of the deepest passion for us both. We've devoted a substantial chunk of our professional lives to this project. And we're glad.

That said, we do not subscribe to the theory that the Holocaust is a story only to be told or commented on by Jewish writers anymore than only the Irish can write about the potato famine. That is just ludicrous. The proof of the work is the work, not the faith, national origin, color, or external whatnot of the storyteller.

We've written protagonists who are Jewish, practicing Christian, Catholic, non-observant Christian, and no faith at all. Hopefully, we've written them all truly.

MC: When writing this storyline, how did you decide what was most appropriate for the audience?

CB & JG: Uh . . . gee, we really don't know. We just tried to tell a great story that hadn't been told before and stay out of the way of the plot and the characters. We wrote the kind of story we like to read. Our one guiding light was not to make this a story about life and death in the concentration and death camps. It isn't. The sequence at Auschwitz-Birkenau is about a dozen pages, no more.

MC: What was your hardest struggle in writing this or any book?

CB & JG: Plotting. We are utterly intolerant of bad or lazy plotting in books, movies, or play for adults, and we don't think that teens should have to tolerate it either . . . no matter how lofty the theme or how educational the underlying work might be. We hate plot holes and predictable plots.

We went through an astonishing number of file cards as we outlined this novel sequence by sequence, and then re-outlined the last fifth of it prior to a top-to-bottom rewrite. Our intrepid editor Susan Kochan's notes were very helpful, as well as some comments from teen readers to whom we gave early drafts of the manuscript.

The other struggle was in containing the novel's length. Originally, our grandiose scheme was to not only tell Nicole's story, but also the stories of her friends Mimi, David, and Jacques, in a Marge Piercy *Gone to Soldiers* kinda thing crossed with Herman Wouk's *Winds of War*. If we'd written that 1000+ page tome, not only would our editor have launched an ICBM in our direction, but we'd probably still be wearing it. Our first draft was gigantic by YA standards, anyway. Then we took out the chainsaw, ax, knives, and scalpel, and went to work killing off our darlings.

MC: Shifting gears a little. How often do you write things that you never develop into works to be published?

CB & JG: It doesn't really happen with books anymore; publishers trust our outlines. We know we're very fortunate to have publishers who believe in us. Sometimes Cherie starts a play that doesn't go where she thought it would go, and she puts it away for a week, a month, a year. But it's still incubating . . .

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Please see Holli Levitsky's article in the Winter, 2002 issue of The ALAN Review pages 11-15; Levitsky, a Holocaust scholar, praises Anne Frank and Me for the authors' careful treatment of their subject.