



Two Views of the Past:

Historical Fiction and Autobiography

Authors Debra Seely and Eleanor Ramrath Garner may take two different approaches in their writings, but both assist today's adolescent readers in stepping into the past. Debra Seely's works of historical fiction, set in nineteenth century Kansas, highlight the 1800s ranching country. Meanwhile, Eleanor Ramrath Garner takes a more personal approach with her memoirs of

World War II in *Eleanors Story: An American Girl in Hitler's Germany*. At a time when teens may have a tendency to focus on their own current interests, Seely and Garner help them discover new insight into the past and, hopefully, give them a broader perspective for the future. Lori Atkins Goodson

You Can't Change History, Can You?

By Debra Seely

When I first started researching my juvenile historical fiction novels set in nineteenth century Kansas, I kept bumping into facts that didn't fit my 1950s movie-western image of the American West. They included Black communities of homesteaders and Jewish communities of homesteaders. African-American and Hispanic cowboys constituted one-third of the drovers riding the Texas cattle trails (Porter 343). Female cowhands numbered far fewer but were still among the populace. These aren't unfamiliar facts anymore, thanks to historians devoted to telling the stories that haven't always been told in history, stories about people and events that changed and shaped the West as profoundly as those in the more well-known stories. I began to think seriously about the responsibility the historical fiction writer has to tell these stories, particularly to young people.

It's not likely to surprise anyone that historical fiction can be a wonderful addition to teaching history. Historical fiction can take the reader into the world of the past through imagination. Well-written historical fiction can be authoritative, too, because it must be accurate to be believable. Thomas Fleming, historian and author of over forty works of both nonfiction and fiction, writes,

a historical novel is not 'made up.' Its vitality can and should come from history itself, and the deeper its roots in reality, the better (8).

Yet readers should expect the historical novel to serve only as a springboard into the study of history. Historical fiction may provide a broad context, but more often than not, what intrigues a writer of historical fiction is the anomaly, the part of history that is different from the rest. Fleming writes that

often, what sparks the imagination “may be the discovery of a set of little-known facts or a situation that has relevance to our own time. I believe a prime function of the historical novel is to surprise as well as intrigue the reader” (8). The historical fiction writer, in other words, looks for what serves the story.

Here’s a story I found: In 1914, two sisters, Elsie and Amy Cooksley, in Wyoming’s Hole-in-the-Wall country of Butch Cassidy fame, hired out as cowhands, rounding up cattle, branding, and doing all the other rugged work right alongside cowboys. The sisters did this work for years. They loved the job, and it was a way to contribute to the family income. They didn’t see themselves as rebels. Most of their female friends, however, did not work cattle, and some thought Elsie and Amy’s work was strange or even scandalous. When we think of the typical cowboy of the American West, Elsie and Amy are not who come to mind. Yet there they were (Jordan 2-12).

The atypical character has its place in historical fiction for young people; however, Professor Anne Scott MacLeod (1998) cautions against letting current sensibilities intrude upon the accuracy of their portrayal. In critiquing young adult novels such as *Catherine Called Birdy* and *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, she argues that such books inappropriately foist a contemporary feminist viewpoint on their historical setting, including heroines acting with an independence more consistent with today’s values. MacLeod writes that it is wrong to show these heroines behaving contrary to the accepted mores of the day. She claims the reality of history is that

most people in most societies are not rebels; in part, because the cost of nonconformity is more than they want to pay, but also because, as members of the society, they share its convictions. Most people are, by definition, not exceptional (34).

Her objection to writers grafting contemporary mores onto historical periods is a valid consideration, of course, but it is a mistake to think that women of earlier times did not have the desires for their lives that feminism has allowed contemporary women to express. History has not always told these women’s stories, but just because something wasn’t recorded in history doesn’t mean it didn’t exist.

Newbery Medal winner Avi, author of *Crispin Cross of Lead* and *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, has said that “most of history was written by

Debra Seely’s second book, The Last of the Roundup Boys, was published earlier this year. It follows a companion work, Grasslands, which received numerous accolades and awards. In her two novels, Seely showcases, through the eyes of her teenage characters Tom and Evie, the life of pioneers trying to tame the harsh prairies of Kansas. We asked her to share some details about her writing career and how she lassoed such an interesting topic for two young adult novels.

Lori Goodson spoke with Debra Seely by email.

LG: How did life bring you to writing? Was *Grasslands* your first attempt at a novel?

DS: I’m a former English teacher (junior high, high school, college) and have just recently become a full-time writer. I started writing in 1987 and earned an MFA in Creative Writing in 1997. *Grasslands* was my thesis, and yes, it was my first attempt at a novel.

LG: For a debut novel, *Grasslands* certainly won a lot of awards. Were you surprised with the success of this story?

DS: I didn’t think about winning awards when I was writing the novel. I just wanted to tell a good story, but I am pleased that other people liked it.

LG: Both of your books, *Grasslands* and *The Last of the Roundup Boys*, are young adult fiction set in the past. How did you develop an interest in historical fiction?

DS: I liked to read historical fiction when I was young. I also liked to listen to family histories. It’s been very helpful in my life to know the stories of people who’ve gone before me. It gives me a sense of connection to time and place. Historical fiction is satisfying in that it’s instructive to read about people struggling with the issues of their day and learn how they coped.

men, so it isn't accurate" (SCBWI). Revisionist history is often criticized for seeking to change the facts of history, but it seeks less to change the facts than to tell the rest of the facts—to tell the stories that haven't been told. Much of history has been the record of the workings of the great and powerful—armies, kings, and explorers. Many stories have been left out—the poor, the slaves, and women's stories, for example, and if these stories were told, it was often by others. Women on the frontier of the American West, for example, were portrayed in the popular imagination as long-suffering Madonnas—there is even a sculpture entitled *Madonna of the Prairie*—or as prostitutes, or outlaws. The latter two are certainly exceptional women, great for stories, but not the voice of most women of the West. If we read their stories as told in their voices through their letters and diaries, we find neither saints nor sinners, but complex women facing uncertainty and doing the best they can. A writer of historical fiction might find exciting stories in the West's Madonnas and prostitutes, but to be responsible to the mindset of the times, to portray the historical reality, the writer must look beyond these romantic images into the truths of stories that have been less often told.

Evie, the protagonist in my novel *Last of the Roundup Boys* (Holiday House 2004), has grown up on the prairies of Kansas with a great deal of freedom, common to girls of that time (1886) and place. Evie wants to remain a cowgirl, a role she's assumed since childhood and wants to continue, even though her parents pressure her toward a more conventional role. But when girls of that time and place became young women, they were expected to assume the fairly rigidly defined roles of their mothers, roles that didn't fit their experience growing up. The story asks what happens when someone rebels against the role she's been assigned. There is conflict, and conflict often begets change. Certainly change came for western women. They were the first to get the vote, including Wyoming women in territorial elections in 1869, and Kansas women in municipal elections in 1887, although the Nineteenth Amendment (women's suffrage amendment) to the Constitution would not be passed in the U.S. Senate until 1919.

Non-conformists are the agents of change in a culture—the makers of history. What drives change is dissatisfaction with the status quo. American women today would not be able to vote without the women of

LG: And why, specifically, did you choose to write for a young adult audience?

DS: The characters and concerns I like to explore seem to appeal to this age group.

LG: *The Last of the Roundup Boys* is not the typical look at pioneering and cowboy life. How did you arrive at such an idea for the novel?

DS: I used family stories as a starting point. I wanted to explore stories about the West that were perhaps atypical but true. Although no women in my family wanted to be cowgirls, there were cowgirls in the West and there were women in my family (very determined women!) who wanted choices in life that weren't offered to them. In that sense, they typified western women. I think the American West has historically offered a sense of freedom and possibility to everybody, but for some people the options were pretty narrow.

LG: Will adolescents identify with your characters even though it takes place more than 100 years ago? What is the appeal of YA historical fiction?

DS: Problems with parents and decisions about life's work and a mate are issues that transcend time and place. I hope young people will respond to the emotional struggles Tom and Evie have, but I hope adolescents learn something about the past, too. I hope they see it as a time that impacts and instructs the present – for me, that is the appeal.

LG: As a native Kansan, do you have any family background in ranching?

DS: My mother's family has been ranching and farming in Kansas for four generations.

LG: Since you live in a ranching area, what kinds of responses did you get from other

native Kansans as you shared your story of a girl dreaming of ranching and of the racism that existed?

DS: Some women have shared with me their mothers' stories of being ranch and farmwomen. Generally, these have been positive tales about coming to terms with farming and making it a creative life.

LG: In your article, you discuss conformists and nonconformists. It would seem that, as an author, you are a nonconformist by approaching a subject from an unusual perspective. Do you see yourself as somewhat of a rebel when sharing stories of America's history?

DS: Less of a rebel than just a storyteller who is intrigued by stories that haven't been told. But I do believe it is important to include a wide variety of stories from America's past, not just those that fit a certain way of thinking. Including untold stories from the past is a way of including people in the present.

LG: You've written two companion books—what are your plans for future novels? Are Tom and Evie coming back to us?

DS: I plan to stick with historical fiction, but I'm going to let Tom and Evie ride off into the sunset—for now, anyway. The novel I'm working on now does have cowboys, though.

Note: Be sure to read the review of The Last of the Roundup Boys in this issue's Clip and File section. For more information about Debra Seely, go to <http://www.debraseely.com>.

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who refused to accept the non-voting status of women. Change may not have occurred in their lifetime, but they continued to prod. The famous ones are known, but the contemporary historical fiction writer asks, what about the ones whose stories aren't known?

Historical fiction is not history. It is story, driven

by character and conflict. Avi says that historical fiction needs to be thoroughly grounded in historical fact and in the mindset of people of its period to be believable, but it aims to tell the story not told, to ask the "What if?" questions about history (SCBWI). A fiction writer will be more interested in what happens to a character who is different from the societal norm because a character who generates conflict is interesting and thus creates a story. Avi's Charlotte Doyle is, in fact, grounded in historical fact. She's based on a nineteenth century poem in which a woman dressed as a man to accompany her sailor-lover on his voyages. But Charlotte becomes her own character, and whether or not you agree that she's believable as a sea captain, she serves to illustrate the exception to the rule for women of the era, to explore the "What if?"; in this case, what if a person back then and there whom everyone accepted, thinking she was male, turned out to be female?

One value of looking at the anomaly in history, the little-known or unconventional act, is that history is made by the people who confront traditional mores and instigate change. History is a record of change. The story of the rebel is also the stuff of literature, the individual in conflict with the society. Historical fiction has the opportunity to examine a historical past imaginatively, at the level of an individual life, the actions that lead to change, that make history.

Every culture has its non-conformists, recorded and non-recorded. One of my writer friends asks, "Would anyone believe a fiction writer who created a young girl who dressed like a soldier and commanded armies in rebellion, saying God told her to?" Yet this is the story of Joan of Arc. Less recorded but more common is the girl who doesn't want to marry the man her parents arranged for her to marry in medieval England. We know she's there from the fifteenth century Paston letters which MacLeod mentions. They describe the girl who was beaten once or twice a week because she opposed her mother's choice of a match (MacLeod 28). We know that human nature, regardless of the time period, does not like to be coerced. Here is the opportunity for the writer to ask "What if?" What if a girl tried to rebel, to act out her feelings? What options were open to her? Thus we get Karen Cushman's Newbery Honor book, *Catherine Called Birdy*. MacLeod has criticized the novel for imposing contemporary ideology on medieval times. But to

portray a protagonist who is an exception to the culture is not imposing contemporary ideology on the past. Catherine's struggle against her culture, in fact, highlights the values of the culture and teaches us more about it. Contrast Catherine to her friend Aelis. Aelis is also disinclined to marry her parents' choice because they've chosen a seven-year-old boy. But Aelis, although she loves someone else, doesn't rebel against her parents' choice of spouse for her. We see, instead, the difference between the medieval and our own modern mindset.

It is irresponsible to put a modern mindset into a historical character. But it goes against our knowledge of human nature and history to assume that no one ever questioned his or her lot in life or longed for change. While historical fiction must portray the mores of the day, its great stories arise from the conflict created by the rebels, often the unknown

rebels, who question and challenge social conventions and ultimately change history.

Debra Seely lives in Wichita, Kansas, with her husband and three children. She writes and lectures full time.

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Memoirs In Adolescent Literature

By Eleanor Ramrath Garner

Not enough has been written about the importance of memoirs in adolescent literature. With this article I hope to illustrate the unique learning experience memoirs can bring to classroom teaching and to demonstrate from my own experience the enormous appeal that personal stories have on adolescents. I refer mostly to my own story, since I know it best, but the insights are applicable to all young adult memoirs.

Eleanor's Story: An American Girl in Hitler's Germany is a World War II remembrance that spans the years 1939 to 1946, ages nine to sixteen, when I found myself as an American girl in Berlin, Germany, where I survived a repressive regime and the terrors and tragedies of war. After the book was published in 1999, I received many letters from readers and from classroom teachers.

Memoirs are in essence historical documents. They are timeless perennials that not only describe a period of history, but also address the universality of collective human experiences. History, after all,

happens to real people. It isn't just cold facts, but a living, organic changing thing. It is about life, human life, with all its triumphs and failures, its increases and decreases, its courage and weakness, its lights and darks. In his 1995 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, David McCullough, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author, says,

"We live in an era of momentous change, creating great pressures and tensions. But history (through our stories) shows that times of tumult are the times when we are most likely to learn.... History really is an extension of life. It enlarges and intensifies the experience of being alive."

Our personal stories make history texts jump alive. They provide the texture, the details, the sights, the sounds, the smells, and, above all, the emotions of important events in the past. Faceless statistics suddenly become real people. With the death of an eyewitness, whose story has not been shared, a piece of the past is lost, and the world is poorer for it. It is this fact, and the enduring truths, that make memoirs

so precious. Over and over again teachers and students who had read my book told me, “your story is so compelling because we know it happened to a real person, not a fictional one.”

Historians tell us that approximately 55 million people lost their lives in WWII. Besides the Holocaust with its loss of 6 million lives, 500,000 civilians, mostly women, children, and the old, died in Allied bombings over Germany. Twenty-two thousand civilians were killed within an hour and a half in the middle of a sunny day in Berlin. These are staggering figures, but they have no human value in attempting to understand the brutality and inhumanity of war. Questions arise: How did it feel to be bombed day after day, night after night, sometimes seventeen times in twenty-four hours, fully aware the next minute might be the last? What was it like when home and neighborhood became the battlefield? How did people live in a totally decimated city with none of the basic necessities, like electricity, gas, food, and drinking water, amidst plunder and rape by occupation forces? How did war impact children physically and psychologically? How did they cope with constant fear and insecurity?

War literature answers questions like these in a way that young people, who never personally felt the effects of armed conflict, can understand. Memoirs are written honestly without political or historical bias and without the usual Hollywood spin.

Statistics have no face or soul. We can't feel compassion for numbers. They make an abstract of the fact that history happens to real people. For instance, the tragedy of the Twin Towers bombing on 9/11 in New York City, where almost 3,000 people lost their lives, didn't really hit us until we read their stories. It brought home the horror in a personal way we could not forget. Hundreds of American soldiers have died and continue to die in the war in Iraq, and thousands of innocent Iraqi civilians have lost their lives, but not until we read stories of individuals did we mourn and lament the senselessness and cruelty of war.

When survivor stories are told, history moves from mythic quality to reality. The enormity of the Holocaust didn't become real to us until we read *Anne Frank's Diary* and the many other survivor stories. Eyewitness accounts can do what history books alone cannot do. Pamela Thomason, a teacher at Valley High

Eleanor Ramrath Garner continues to receive praise for her World War II memoir, Eleanor's Story: An American Girl in Hitler's Germany. While her journal article discusses the significance of memoirs, she generously agreed to be interviewed. She shares critical insight into how she became a temporary resident of Hitler's Germany and just what that time in her life entailed. Additionally, she tells how sharing her story has helped her reflect on such a solemn and crucial time in her life.

LG: Why did you decide to write about your years in Hitler's Germany? Were you planning to turn it into a book, or was it simply for you and your family? Have you always been a writer?

ERG: We who were eyewitnesses of World War II are fast dying out. It is important to the understanding of history that our stories be told. An editor friend I met during my years at Harcourt Brace, who later became an acquisitions editor with Peachtree Publishers in Atlanta, encouraged me to write down my stories with young adults in mind. I had often thought about doing this, if for no other reason than to preserve family history, but I lacked the courage to tackle such a daunting task, particularly considering the painful material I would have to work with. But with Sarah Smith's strong emotional and editorial support, I was able to write a successful book and release the young girl from her prison of dark memories. I have always been a writer at heart. I have written articles, short stories, and children's stories, but *Eleanor's Story* is my first book.

LG: Had you been encouraged by family members to share your story?

ERG: No, it was solely my decision and the desire to share my story with others. My siblings were most supportive.

School in West Des Moines, Iowa, wrote to me:

As a high school teacher, I've had the opportunity to share your story with U.S. history students as part of their social studies curriculum. We quickly became engrossed in all you experienced. I've seen once again that story can affect individuals as no other medium; truth draws us into its grip. In the context of story, we make connections about human nature, its potential, and its complete depravity.

Someone once said, "A story of real importance is at once a presentation and an invitation." I think what it means is an invitation to readers to make an imaginative response to reality. It invites them to find their own connection to the story. Much like dreams, good stories allow the expression and the experience of both personal and collective material. They coax readers into the imaginal realm where they can fully participate in the life of another. A middle school student wrote: "Even though your experience wasn't mine, the story made me feel as though it were mine." Indeed, a strange kind of intimacy spins between the author of a memoir and the reader. It's like sharing secrets with a stranger. Students often tell me, "I feel I know you after having read your book." They know me because so much of what I reveal of substance is universal and belongs to all human beings. Feelings we find in ourselves, we also find in others. It is what binds us together as human beings. As a writer, I was able to articulate what is still relatively unformed and without words in a young person's psyche, and yet wants to be expressed. A student wrote: "It must take a lot of courage to write about your feelings for everybody to read. I could never do that. I would write it as if it happened to a friend."

Eleanor's Story became a watershed for an eleven-year-old who wrote: "Your story had such a huge impact on me because I have never before seen death or been afraid to go to sleep at night. I have never had the screaming of bombs in my ears or felt terror. Your book made me feel as though I was there right with you. It made war come alive."

Another student made a connection to the present situation in Iraq and to his own experience as a refugee from Vietnam. He wrote: "I see some similarities with the war in Iraq and your story. They had a dictator, too, like Hitler, and there are many innocent people who had to suffer. We are immigrants from Vietnam. After the end of the Vietnam war and as the communists were taking over the territories in the

LG: Could you give us an idea of what led up to your being in Germany during World War II?

ERG: During the Depression years, my father lost his position as engineer for General Electric Company in Philadelphia. He was eventually able to get a low paying job as draftsman with RCA in Camden. We moved from Philadelphia to a less expensive area in Stratford, New Jersey. In 1939 my father was offered a challenging engineering position with AEG—the general electric company of Berlin. He took the position with the understanding that we would return to the States in two years. En route on a German ship, the war broke out and we were unable to return, and two years turned into seven years of trying to survive WWII in Nazi Germany.

LG: Without taking too much away from the book for those who haven't read it yet, what were some of the key events and experiences you observed? What was the most traumatic for you?

ERG: Leaving the secure world of a happy childhood in Stratford for the frightening unknown in a foreign country; having to learn how to read and write in a foreign language at age 9—always afraid of not measuring up to others. Adjusting to an unfamiliar culture and the repressive Nazi regime. The constant fear of losing family members, friends, home, and neighborhood to bombings. The heartache of many family separations. The emotional impact of historical and political events on my life. The early loss of childhood due to increased responsibilities and the daily presence of death. The most traumatic for me was the ever-present fear of being buried alive by a blockbuster. The desperate knocking of people still alive under bombed out buildings haunted me for years.

South, our family fled the country for new hope, as did thousands of others. Like your family, my family was separated many times.”

A twelve-year-old related to the evil of war, again finding parallels to the current situation in Iraq: “Your book taught me a lot. I learned about the evils of war. Reading your personal story made me think about everybody in the Middle East. I realized that civilians living in Iraq are just as innocent as you were. It inspired me to want to help them in any way I can through methods such as prayer. Your story also inspired me to want to help prevent war in the world.”

A fourteen-year-old related to the injustice of prejudice:

When I was first taught of WWII and the Holocaust, I thought, ‘Oh, those horrible Germans! They must all be bad,’ and I have been prejudiced ever since. But your book has shown me that many innocent German people were also victims of this cruel man, Hitler.

These are just a few of the many, many letters I have received from young people expressing the strong impact my story had on them. They related my experience to a need to understand themselves, and to find their own place in the insecure world of today.

What touched me so was that these students showed a remarkable capacity for reflective thinking, drawing comparisons, and asking good questions when encouraged to do so. They corrected my misconception that young people today were only interested in lightweight, fun books. I could see that, once introduced to more serious literature, the students took off, bringing their own imagination to the contents of my book. For instance, they developed in-class skits and readings, kept thematic journals, arranged for author interviews, emailed questions to me, wrote essays on how the experiences in the book related to their own lives, created art projects by designing their own book cover, crafted mobiles out of coat hangers with key elements in the story, painted posters, prepared time lines, all ways of expressing in concrete form what they had read and understood. On their own, they sought out similar memoirs on World War II and the Holocaust, exploring commonalities and differences in the various experiences.

For instance, Anne Frank and Eleanor were the same age. Each lived under totally different circumstances, one child Jewish, the other Roman Catholic,

LG: Was there any joy that you experienced during that time? Or was it all terrifying and dreadful?

ERG: No, it was not all terrifying and dreadful. Even in the worst of times the heart can still dance. There were two more babies born into our family who brought me joy and needed my protection. There were family and holiday celebrations despite the war, visits to relatives, a best friend to share things with, the joy in nature and its promise of renewal, easy access to memories of happy, carefree times in America, a fervent belief in 14 protective angels that surrounded me, and the ability to lose myself in the magic of books that could transport me into a better world. Above all, it was the love for my family, the close relationship to my brother, and the intimacy of a best friend that brought me the most joy and made the day-to-day drudgery of war bearable.

LG: One can’t help but make the comparison to Anne Frank; why do you think adults and young people are so moved by seeing World War II through the eyes of a child?

ERG: My book is often compared to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, perhaps because we were about the same age, both living under a totalitarian regime and both having our childhood cut short. I think the eyes of a child see things the way they really are. There are no political, historical, or psychological biases. The child perceives the events in total honesty without the distortion of adult perceptions. The child is not interested in pleasing anyone and so says it like it is, without guile. I think it’s this honesty and innocence that a child brings to war literature that intensifies the experiences and so deeply moves both adults and children.

LG: After you left Germany in 1946, where did you go and what did you do?

yet both were caught up in the terrifying drama unfolding around them, one in Holland, the other in Germany. What were the commonalities, and how were they different? How did each child cope with fear and insecurity and still find hope in a world gone awry? One survived; the other did not. How about Jean Wakatsuki Houston's experience in growing up as a Japanese American behind barbed wire in the United States during that period (in *Farewell to Manzanar*)? In what way did prejudice play a role in the lives of these three girls?

These are great springboards for discussion and reflective thinking. Students can be encouraged to find parallels to what is happening in the world today. Have the images of war changed since WWII? Students can also explore acts of courage and compassion in these personal stories and how they might relate to everyday school and home life.

Young adult memoir is storytelling at its most powerful. This type of literature reveals so much of human behavior and is embedded with "instructions" that guide young people through the complexities of life. These stories offer a different kind of hero from the usual football player, rock star, or movie idol. The young heroes or heroines in these memoirs are forced to grow up way before their time and are often called on to make mature decisions that can affect the lives of others. They deal with the challenges of everyday life courageously and are not swayed by collective thinking. In spite of Hitler Youth, Nazi indoctrination, propaganda, cultural pressure, and Allied bombings, loyalty to my own country never wavered. Children of war become streetwise and learn the art of survival by tapping into deeply buried instincts, finding reserves of strength they never knew they had. They find hope and reassurance in the ever-repeating cycles of nature and belief in a higher order of things. They learn to appreciate the love of family, the gift of friendship, and, above all, the preciousness of life itself. The major theme that binds all these personal stories together is the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

I want to mention some guidelines in selecting a good memoir as literature for classroom use: what to look for. As a teaching tool, it must not only be a personal story authentically told, but it should also reflect the social issues of a larger group. What conditions and experiences shape a country and its

ERG: In the final chapter of my book, titled "Home is the Stranger," I return to the States. Here I was once again confronted with enormous acculturation problems as I did in 1939 Germany. I had just come from day-to-day brushes with death, from constant hunger, and a totally decimated city, into a country untouched by war. I entered high school in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, and tried to fit in. It took enormous courage to overcome the many problems I encountered on the way back to some kind of normal life. My education had suffered because of sporadic school attendance in Germany, and nightmares haunted me. I felt like an outsider, not belonging anywhere. The readjustment to America was another big task of overcoming as so many before.

LG: After you wrote your memoir and it received such strong reviews, what was your response? Joy? Sorrow at the memory of it all?

ERG: I was totally awed at the wonderful warm reception my book received from reviewers and readers and the many awards it won and continues to win. I remember saying to my editor, "I don't think anyone will be interested in my story." I wasn't heroic to my adult way of thinking, but after the book was completed, I realized with amazement that the young girl in me had indeed been heroic and spunky in the pure act of day-to-day survival and the overcoming of incredible odds. She deserved to have her story told.

LG: What do you feel is the role of your book for young people?

ERG: I see my book as a learning experience for young people. It makes World War II come alive by taking the reader into the heart of war, what it was like living under Hitler, what it was like trying to survive under Allied bombings, house-to-house combat in the battle for Berlin, and the terrors of Soviet

people like Germany under the Nazis? A memoir must show the universal themes and drama that expose the underlying patterns of life, not only as a witness to history, but also as a mirror to the vulnerabilities that we share with all humanity. The story cannot be all sad, depressing, and full of pathos. It must also contain a counterbalance of light moments and humor to show that even in the most difficult times, the heart can still dance, that hope never goes away completely. The experiences of growing up must be told compellingly and honestly so that young people can find themselves in the feelings and emotions of the storyteller. No one is all good or all bad. Authors who write memoirs for adolescents must be willing to share their own vulnerabilities and include not only the triumphs, but also the failures.

The emotions of growing up are common to everybody. What child doesn't struggle with low self-esteem, with fear of being different and of not fitting in, with parental tensions, with wanting independence from parents, but at the same time needing their support and approval? The reader wants to know that the main character in the book struggled with these same themes.

Authenticity, not only historically, but also psychologically, is of great importance. Does the character ring true?

I think the mistake authors often make in writing memoirs is to view their experience as a child through the developed critical ego of the adult, not allowing the child to express its own truth, thus unwittingly creating a distortion in perception: a child then emerges that isn't quite real. In other words, the adult ego—manipulated, bent, and shaped over a lifetime by parental and societal expectations—no longer truly represents the perceptions of the child, and a distortion happens that a sensitive reader can detect as inauthentic.

When I was writing my memoir, I soon became aware that the older me, like any parent, criticized the young girl as she tried to express herself with brutal honesty. I wanted to soft-pedal some of her actions and thoughts, mitigate them through my adult perception and, at times, make excuses for her behavior. However, I would promptly hear from my editor saying, "That's not the child speaking, that's the older woman. Don't editorialize! I want her voice, her feelings." The big question was how do I do this?

occupation. It puts a human face on the horrors of war and helps them to understand that each casualty of war is a person, not a statistic. In war many innocent civilians have to suffer and die. The book also teaches self-awareness and independence. It juxtaposes wartime ordeals to the universal experiences of growing up.

LG: As a middle-school educator who teaches about World War II in her language arts classroom, I'm still concerned that students don't understand the true terror of that time. How can we help them better understand it?

ERG: History lessons alone cannot make students understand the terror of war, but when they read personal accounts by peers, the understanding of fear and human suffering shifts to comprehension—that could have been me! What would I have done under the same circumstances? Personal stories are powerful tools in teaching history, social studies (propaganda, Nazism, dictators, fascism, outcome of war) and language arts. They encourage students to reflect and to find connections to their own lives. They awaken interest in history and the desire to explore other books on the same subject. It's important that what the student has read and understood be put into some kind of tangible form like writing or poetry or the arts. (Please note, Peachtree Publishers provides free of charge, *Peachtree Pointers*, suggestions to teachers and librarians how to teach *Eleanor's Story*.)

LG: What did your experiences in World War II teach you?

ERG: My experiences in World War II taught me about the terrible legacy of hate and prejudice and intolerance that have led, and continue to lead, human beings to unspeakable evils in the world. They taught me to appreciate and value the freedom of speech and the press,

How can I keep the older woman from interfering? Then I had an idea. Why not allow the older woman her point of view in a journal? I began to keep a daily journal that ran simultaneously with the manuscript. It turned out to be the most creative decision I ever made. Here I recorded my adult reflections, insights, and thoughts, dialogued with the young girl, listened to her complaints and her feelings as she struggled hard to emerge into my conscious life. Best of all, I began to find my adult emotional connection to her. I realized with shock just how deeply I had buried my child-self under the ashes of painful memory.

After completion of the first draft, my editor pointed out a curious thing: The manuscript showed a natural progression of language and thoughts from a nine-year-old to a sixteen-year-old. This was not done intentionally. It had happened naturally because I was so immersed in telling her story that I actually became that young girl again.

After publication, a reviewer wrote: "Eleanor recounts her story with the chilling innocence of the child, thereby intensifying the scenes of prejudices, bombings, and evacuations. She captures the mistrust, fear, and passions of wartime Germany with details we can physically sense. The story promises to forge an intense bond with readers." A reader wrote: "...your ability to convey events through the eyes and mind of a young girl is absolutely extraordinary. The young Eleanor was wonderfully appealing, in part because of the honesty with which you drew her character." Behind reviews like these are two long years of incredible emotional drain, dogged perseverance, hard work, and an awesome process of self-discovery.

Finally, in a personal story, students look for touchstones that validate their own feelings. A middle school student from Plain City, Ohio, wrote, "When I first read your book I was so caught up in it that I didn't pay attention to anything else going on around me. I felt like I was standing right there with you in all the scenes, watching and feeling what you were feeling. Your feelings were my feelings. I have since read it four times."

Encounters with readers show me again and again how amazingly interconnected we all are as human beings and how the written word has tremendous power.

and what a privilege it is to live under a democratic form of government, flawed as it may be. They taught me about the sustaining power of love of family and friends, and the joy of hope that never really dies. They taught me that all experiences in life, both the good and the bad, have meaning, and are there for growth and maturity.

LG: What does your life involve now? Are you writing other books or involved in any other projects?

ERG: Today I continue writing books, painting in oils, writing my daily reflections in journals, reading at least one or two books a week, working along with Mother Nature in my beautiful garden, nurturing and loving everything that grows there, making presentations to schools, community, and teacher organizations. I'm enjoying the visits from children and grandchildren, and the loving company of my husband of 54 years. I am in a profoundly different place today after writing my book. I feel an authenticity and self-confidence I never had before that grew out of the painful task of picking up the disparate pieces of my traumatic childhood and putting them into a story. The young girl and I are one!