

# Child Protagonists:

## The 'Anne Franks' of Today

Ana Maria Klein

The literary works surveyed here were written by authors who, as children, witnessed apartheid, holocausts, imprisonment, escape, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other horrors that marked their lives. In each case, the selected texts are rendered as diaries or as first-person narratives describing disturbing situations which are resolved either through reading, writing or merely adjusting. Texts like these, portraying war so vividly, are intended for young adults age ten and up.

In this day and age, when young adults are gratuitously exposed to scenes of violence in the media, a genre like this one seems most appropriate. The global/transcultural nature of this collection provides a first-person perspective on compelling historical events that had not been unearthed so dramatically before.

### The Use of *Text Interrogation*

*Text Interrogation* is an instructional approach for instructors to use to introduce these pieces. Using this approach, the instructor uses focused questions to develop proximity to the text and to anticipate and address some of the historical and contextual information that will have to be carefully explained to youngsters. This forum of anticipation, exploration and reflection creates a comfortable environment for broaching themes of horror and strife.

The instructor guides the students through geographic and factual data, help-

ing them to understand the real historic, geographic, and geo-political tensions that led to war. Once these tensions are objectively addressed, the instructor can begin to guide readers through the psychological components.

In so doing, students are always reminded that they are working in a safe environment and that they can ask questions, share doubts and even choose to "gloss over" whatever details might bother them.

The collection has been carefully selected to represent diversity. It includes true stories told by young boys and girls as personal narratives, entries in diaries, and conversations with kin and peers, in diverse global settings including Europe, Asia, Africa and the United States.

The teaching approach, *interrogating the text*, provides students with opportunities to pre-read, read, and re-read the texts or segments of it, until they are able to resolve the focused questions. This approach promotes literacy in three ways: (1) using a compelling genre; (2) providing readers with opportunities to articulate reactions, personal positions, fears and concerns, and (3) the freedom to decide to *gloss over* what they don't want to read or deal with at the moment.

Before I continue, let me share some personal details about myself, and how this genre and approach enlightened me. I pre-

pare entry-level teachers at a North American college, promote literacy, and create safe environments for the exploration of authentic narratives.

In my college teaching, I find that my readers connect with the texts, resolve personal issues, and articulate their feelings because I create a safe environment for doing so. I also use the concept of interrogation of texts to promote literacy. I believe, from positive experiences, that this genre and this approach work.

My undergraduate teacher candidates share their thematic units after taking my course, and find them helpful in teaching about the world, about different social mores, customs, and about the traditions of diverse people. My graduate students also report that these units bring their own schoolroom students together, offering them opportunities to compare coming-of-age situations with the protagonists.

In some cases, for example with the book *Letters from Rifka*, teachers broach topics of health, cleanliness, and disease. As they discuss Rifka's life in the unsanitary, war-torn towns of Poland, they understand other realities that would not have surfaced, or are too foreign for them. On a more local note, stories like Rifka's entry into the United States, after being quarantined on Ellis Island, provide first-person insights into the treacherous travel

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conditions of that day and age. ESL specialists also enjoy using Rifka as an example of somebody who was able to quickly learn the English language using it as a survival skill and an opportunity to rejoin her family.

Interestingly as well, this collection portrays some protagonists as voracious readers and writers themselves. Young readers enjoy being mirrored in Rifka's readership. For example, when she felt lonely and sad, she read Pushkin to remember her family, heritage and her beloved Russian language. Other examples of reader/writers are Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic, who wrote in their diaries to replace the missing interlocutors in their existence.

This collection also focuses on the nature of transcultural literature, an authentic genre that takes readers to faraway lands and people. Because my target readership is young adults (ten and up), I want to continue motivating them to read. I know, from having been an elementary/middle-school teacher and librarian, that this age group sometimes lacks motivation to read. Also from experience, I know that good teaching, good teaching materials and providing a safe environment for reading are tools we can all benefit from. Hence, using the genre, the approach and a little coaxing, we should be able to: (1) create more opportunities for young adults to read more books; (2) rekindle a passion for reading; and (3) embark on a global journey.

However, before approaching some of the issues and topics presented in the collection, it is necessary to prepare the terrain. Young readers should be able to understand certain realities prior to reading about the horrors contained in this collection.

I recommend using the wordless book *Why* by Nikolai Popov, 1996. The author, a child-protagonist and survivor himself, explains why human nature is the way it is. He uses vivid pictures, and absolutely no words in his book, to portray the senseless feud between a field mouse and a frog.

In this wordless story, the peaceful field mouse is enjoying a day in the sun on his favorite rock. An angry, envious frog wants to overthrow the mouse and conquer the rock. The frog plunges, attacks, and takes over occupying the rock. As readers flip through the vivid images in the book, they see how this senseless feud evolves into war and total destruction.

On the last page, Popov explains in a note to the reader, that his childhood on the banks of the Volga River in Russia was marred by similar images of war and devastation. He recounts how, while playing

in the fields amongst shrapnel and metal, he would be shocked to see maimed people limping home from battle.

Popov uses the feud between the field mouse and the frog wisely and well. Students exposed to this example before reading the texts from the collection are able to reflect on these issues and to process some of their fears, doubts, and concerns.

An important feature to keep in mind, while preparing the terrain for instruction, is to talk about human nature. Young children need to know certain realities about prejudice, discrimination, bigotry, stereotyping, etc. An excellent teaching format to use, while exposing young readers to otherwise complicated material, is Gordon Allport's four stages of prejudice development. In his book *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954) he delineates these stages: (1) curiosity about others; (2) emotionally charged language about others; (3) rejection of others; and (4) permanent prejudice. As we continue to process the ideas and relate the progressive destructiveness we already read about in Popov's book, Allport's ideas help us understand the psychological component.

Yet another instructional forum which I enjoy sharing with young adults is that of early traces of discrimination in children as portrayed in the books of Vivian Gusian Paley. (When I conjure memories of her work I always remember how instrumental she was in including different skin tones in crayons for children.)

In her 1979 book *White Teacher*, Paley explains that all children need to feel safe and appreciated by their elders and peers. She also points out that by age two, children already discriminate against each other, showing negative reactions to children who seem different. And in her 2000 book *You Can't Say You Can't Play* she offers suggestions for teachers to help youngsters learn how to manage these discriminatory feelings and to resolve the anger and anxiety that could ensue if these issues remain unresolved.

My college students enjoy learning about these studies. They often cry in disbelief when I reveal to them how mean young children can be to each other. I think they raise an eyebrow when I share these findings, because we have been nurtured to believe that children continue to be innocent and good through puberty.

I can say that once all of the above is carefully introduced, processed, and covered, we are ready to read, and to bond with the collection. Let me start with my own bonding. Reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* when I was twelve helped me cope with many things I couldn't talk about. Having

heard first-person accounts of the Holocaust from my own parents and relatives, I feared that this would happen again. I also remember feeling guilty because my life was so much better than theirs. I used to become truly saddened when my parents shared some of the details of the Holocaust with me.

I knew that more details would surface while I read Anne Frank's book. However, I consciously glossed over scenes of horror, concentrating mostly on things that interested me at the time. Hence, as the selective reader that I was, I focused on Anne herself, as a girl my age, going through the same growing pains, interpreting the many situations her family was experiencing and, fearing what the future had in store for her.

The newest edition of Anne Frank's diary contains authentic photographs and archival material that could be used well in a social studies or history lesson about World War II. I'm sure the young adults exploring these historical times would benefit from exploring these documents in depth.

This brings me to another major point. Growing up in the 1950s, I wasn't exposed to much archival and well-documented material about China, Japan, and Korea. I believe that global tensions then did not envision including instructional material on such topics as the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or an understanding of the struggles North and South Korea faced. The Japanese wounds were still healing in 1955, when I first had a Hiroshima survivor as art teacher. As school children in her care, we would keep our thoughts to ourselves as we watched her paint beautiful pictures and hide a huge scar on her face and arm. Nobody dared ask her how she was hurt. However, we all shared her pain.

These memories continue to haunt me today as I seek authentic texts from that part of the world. I found *The House of Sixty Fathers* by Meindert DeJong and *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* by Yoko Kawashima Watkins to be quite useful in helping me understand the Korean War and the Japanese situation during World War II. They also taught me about the historic Chinese presence in these parts of the world and their influence on social and cultural mores of its people.

Also, while reading Eleanor Coerr's *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* I learned to understand what the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima actually did to the inhabitants of this city. I finally resolved my childhood issue with the loving Japanese art teacher who masked her scarred face and arm from us through her art-work.

A disturbing finding, that I have yet to resolve as a college professor, is that I was never taught about the Chinese Cultural Revolution in school. During the 1960s, while I was enjoying my middle-school years, children my age like Ji Li Jiang in *Red Scarf Girl* were living tales of horror. They witnessed their families being destroyed, their family heirlooms ransacked and burned, and their personal freedoms taken away. There was a culture of vigilantes, who would accuse families of non-compliance, sending troops to their homes to destroy what they owned. Children could not be trusted, as they served as spies for the army, often accusing their own parents of non-compliance.

These revelations were new to me and hard to deal with as an adult. I do, however, remember learning about the Viet Nam War, during the 1960s and 1970s. I also learned about socialism and how it affected children during the communist regime in the Soviet Union. However, none of these first-person narratives touched my life or made any difference in my coming-of-age awareness.

At this point in time, I have strong feelings about what we teach and how we introduce realities of the world we live in. The world of the 1960s certainly left out huge chunks of information for people like me, growing up during the Viet Nam War, but even now, there are gaps in our teaching and learning about global realities. I believe we need to reconsider how we bring global issues into our classrooms. The media-produced accounts of the world aren't enough.

One way to close this gap is to embrace transcultural literature, especially titles that are boldly written by their protagonists. Including this type of literature in our classrooms helps us promote concepts of equity and social awareness by providing concrete examples of unjust situations. Transcultural literature acts as an agent of change, stretching borders, sharing values, and developing an appreciation of our ancestral heritage.

Transcultural texts portray the culture, language, geography, life-style, resources, needs, and political system of the country. They usually begin with a map, explaining the location and the history of the place. They also include photographs and real artifacts that illustrate the events being discussed. Hence, while reading Ji Li Jiang's account of the Cultural Revolution in China in *Red Scarf Girl*, readers are able to understand why families had to comply with the new set of rules established by Mao Ze-Dong in the years between 1966 and 1976.

Most of the texts also provide detailed

guides and glossaries explaining family genealogies, societal roles, laws, rules, and regulations that changed the protagonists' daily existence as they experienced captivity.

We are now ready to interrogate the texts. In so doing, we ask students to answer the following questions:

- (1) Who are the protagonists?
- (2) What is their story?
- (3) What is their journey?
- (4) Where does their journey take them?
- (5) How do their lives change?

As I group the titles of the collection, I will walk readers through some of these questions.

#### Diaries and Child Protagonists in Europe

This group consists of diaries and letters from young girls in Europe. To reinforce some of the concepts discussed here, I would begin by situating the reader geographically. Then, through authentic artifacts, maps and historical accounts, I would present the political and historical situation in a manner that young adults can handle.

I would provide a shared context by screening selected segments of Roman Polanski's film "The Pianist," to show young readers what the streets of Poland looked like during World War II and how difficult it was to maintain sanitary conditions, find food, and deal with constant relocations. With respect to *Zlata's Diary*, there is much current footage of the breakup of Yugoslavia and her recent plight.

We begin with a very current version of *Anne Frank, The Diary of Young Girl*, with added details provided by the Anne Frank Institute in Amsterdam.

Otto Frank. (1952). *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*. Boston: Doubleday. ISBN 0-553-29698-1.

Anne's diary, called "Kitty," becomes her confidante and friend, and the repository for her thoughts and fears. The diary is both a scrapbook and roster of daily events as they affect Anne. She writes about her perceptions of war, her interpretations of what is going on around her, and tries to explain this complicated state of affairs to her readers. At certain points in time, "Kitty" is almost a person with a life of her own.

Karen Hesse. (1992). *Letters from Rifka*. New York: Puffin Books. ISBN 0-14-131196-7.

Rifka's family flees the Ukraine in

hopes of immigrating to the United States. During their travels, unsanitary conditions lead Rifka to contract typhoid fever, making her ineligible to travel, and her family is forced to leave her behind. When the family finally reaches the United States, Rifka contracts ring-worm, loses her hair and is quarantined on Ellis Island. Her poor health produces temporary baldness, which makes her a "burden" to the state. During her illnesses, she continues to read Pushkin, learns to speak French and English and teaches a Russian boy to read.

Zlata Filipovic. (1994). *Zlata's Diary*. New York: Penguin. ISBN 0-14-024205-8.

Like Anne Frank, Zlata writes in a diary she calls "Mimmy." The events in this account are very contemporary (1991-1993). Zlata gives us a first-person account of the war in what used to be Yugoslavia. Her diary pages are filled with familiar names (MTV, Pepsi, Claudia Schiffer). It is unbelievable that a girl her age in today's day and age is experiencing similar life-struggles as Anne Frank's. Zlata's diary, is also used as a scrap-book where she includes photographs, newspaper clippings, artifacts, and mementos of what Sarajevo was like, as host of the 1985 Winter Olympics. The city is now at war. Zlata's daily life changes constantly. She writes about her experiences candidly. She and her family are able to relocate and survive.

Lois Lowry. (1989). *Number the Stars*. New York: Laurel Leaf. ISBN 0-440-22753-4.

Lowry's story takes place in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943. Two close childhood friends experience the Nazi invasion and deportation. Through their eyes, the reader is able to witness harsh changes, difficult decisions and a total change of pace. One girl remains home while the other is deported. The way this sudden separation is handled is unique and compelling.

#### Realities in the Far East

China, Korea, and Japan remain a mystery to many in the western world. Many of the topics broached by these child protagonists were not taught in schools. It is interesting to find out what went on during the Cultural Revolution in China, how the Japanese people rebuilt their cities after World War II, and what North and South Korea experienced at the turn of the century. I would probably screen segments of Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* to show students how families who emigrated to

the United States left an entire segment of their own lives behind them. Amy Tan has also written a children's book, which is highly instructive regarding the traditions of Chinese people living in the United States. I would also share some of Yoshiko Uchida's personal accounts, and even have students read these on their own, as they work through the texts from the transcultural collection.

Ji Li Jiang. (1997). *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution*. New York: Harper-Trophy. ISBN 9-7800-64-462082.

Ji Li, the young protagonist, describes her life, her struggles and her new reality in Communist China during the late 1960s when Mao Ze-Dong's Communist Party Red Guard invaded homes, towns, and villages seeking to eliminate family heirlooms, traditions and the memory of a nation. Ji Li was not allowed to apply for a role in one of the events held in school because her parents hadn't complied with the new rules and regulations. Her parents explain to her how they might be affected if the higher authorities discover that they have preserved some family heirlooms. At this point in her life, Ji Li realizes that she needs to protect her family.

Meinert Dejong. (1956). *The House of Sixty Fathers*. New York: Harper Trophy. ISBN 0-06-440200-2.

This is the account of the escape of a Chinese family from Japanese-occupied territory. Tien-Pao is a ten-year-old boy who gets left behind as he tries to conceal his pet piglet. He describes the atrocities he witnesses and the fear he experiences as he hides, before finally making the journey to safety by himself. The soldiers and guards treat him like any other prisoner or escapee, with no regard to his innocence and young age. Childhood is lost amid the mud, the hiding and the distrust.

Yoko Kawashima Watkins. (1986). *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*. New York: Beech Tree Paperback. ISBN 0-688-13115-8.

Yoko, an eleven-year-old Japanese girl, must flee North Korea during the Second World War because Japanese workers are no longer allowed to live and work there. This true survival story takes the reader through an incredible escape. Again, coming of age happens much too quickly as children are forced to take care of their parents and make critical decisions.

Eleanor Coerr. (1977). *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. New York: Dell Yearling Books. ISBN 0-440-47465-5.

Sadako, an aspiring Olympian runner, is struck with leukemia at an early age and is suddenly bed-ridden. Having been exposed to radiation after the bombing of Hiroshima, her body is progressively weakened as her friends try to keep her alive. They remember an old saying that if you make a thousand paper cranes, the person you love will live forever. Although Sadako doesn't survive, their attempt is not futile, as she sees her days with friends extended as they weave the paper cranes. This true story resulted in a monument remembering this message of peace. Every year, children in Japan and all around the world remember Sadako by weaving paper crane strands of their own.

### First Person Narratives from Africa

To introduce Africa, I would screen segments of the film "Sarafina." The scenes I would share with the children are those that depict the questions children ask about their own rights and their controlled learning environments during Apartheid South African rule. I would also share the open manner in which their teacher, played by Whoopi Goldberg, confronted these situations and took a stand.

Students viewing this film would also enjoy listening to the language spoken in South Africa, as children switch from Afrikaans, to English, to their own African dialects. The musical portions of the film, the songs and well-choreographed dances, would perhaps help create an uplifting environment of hope. I would also share the biography of Nelson Mandela, to situate students with the issues that were going on in South Africa, to present to them this wonderful role model, and to discuss the new South African government.

Amy Bronwen Zenser. (1998). *Beyond the Mango Tree*. New York: Harper Trophy. ISBN 0-06-44-786-1.

Sarina's family has moved to Liberia from Boston. Her mother ties her to a mango tree to protect her while she goes off to work in the field. The child meets Liberian children who update her on life in Liberia. The child protagonist's perspective allows the reader to witness what it means to be uprooted from the urban life of Boston to the village life of Liberia.

Nancy Farmer. (1996). *A Girl Named Disaster*. New York: Puffin Books. ISBN 0-14-131.

This story takes place in Mozambique. Nhoma, the child protagonist, becomes orphaned and escapes slavery by running away. The story of her voyage to freedom illustrates the landscape and lifestyle in this part of the world. Had she not escaped, she would have had to comply with the tradition of marrying whomever her parents had chosen for her.

Beverly Naidoo. (1986). *Journey to Jo'burg: A South African Story*. New York: Harper Trophy. ISBN 0-06-440237-1.

The child protagonist in this story tells us about life under Apartheid in South Africa, where young children were in constant danger, parents walked long distances to work and were not guaranteed safety, a roof, or a name. Through this account, we learn about life in this unsettling part of the world. The children in the story need to find their mother, who works in another part of town. If they don't find her, their younger sibling's life is in danger. It is interesting to read about children at an early age being given adult tasks, such as caring for each other. Coming of age in this situation comes in haste.

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