

“Can you name one good thing that comes out of war?”

Adolescents’ Questions about War and Conflict Are Answered in Nonfiction Literature

“The lessons of the past offer hope as we invite a new generation to guide their lives with a deep regard for humanity, a commitment to the values of caring and respect for others, and the development of a strong moral and ethical fiber that will enable them to stand up for what they believe in and speak out against injustice.”

—Kassenoff & Meinbach xvii

Every day young people see disturbing images of violent current events on television, on the Internet, and in popular culture, such as movies, music videos, and even video games. In addition to hearing a myriad of inflammatory rhetoric, often in the form of threats, born of ethnic or cultural hatred from political and cultural leaders around the world, teens also read or hear comments from journalists, teachers, parents, and peers. Not surprisingly, many young people are questioning what is right or wrong, what is true or false, and what is really behind current events and their historical antecedents. Adolescents want personal answers from those who have lived in the midst of conflict, not talking points or historical rhetoric. Instead of obeying the rule to “pay no attention to that man behind the curtain” of situations, young people would much rather tear the curtain down and see war from the point of view of those who can tell the truth about it.

Keeping in mind that the adolescents of today will be the parents, power-brokers, and politicians of tomorrow, we, as teachers, need to respect, acknowledge, guide, and inspire them with resources that accurately, aesthetically, and authentically address their ques-

tions, curiosities, and concerns. Inspired by scholars of adolescent literacy (Baker 2002; Moje 2002; Beers 1996; Ivey 2002) who contend that adolescents must be heard and acknowledged before designing curricula to address their needs, I found it essential to record the articulate, passionate thoughts of young people about war and conflict. Ultimately, key questions of theirs emerged, questions which informed my selection of literature that would present them with what they were asking for.

What Are Adolescents Asking?

In *Helping Our Children Deal with War*, the National Mental Health Association alerts adults: “In this time of heightened anxiety over the war with Iraq, our children are experiencing fear and anxiety, too [...] But unlike adults, children have little experience to help them put all this information into perspective” (1). Adolescents also need guidance and direction to make sense of what it means to be at war.

To determine specific questions that adolescents are asking about war, I selected a sample of young people between the ages of thirteen and eighteen who serve on the Prime Stage Theatre Teen Advisory Board in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These students, with a

diverse range of academic skills, backgrounds, and interests are quite candid about their thoughts, questions, and comments when suggesting topics for the theatre to present. After I conducted an introductory interview session with twelve students, seven adolescents agreed to participate in this project.

An open-ended questionnaire was distributed through email. This survey invited them to share three to four questions they have about the topic of war, people involved in war, and what they would ask a survivor of war. To ensure that the questions were thoughtful, meaningful, and representative of young people, the participants were given up to two weeks to select and compose their thoughts.

Once all the responses were collected through email, each participant was re-interviewed to confirm, expand, or adjust his or her questions. The students and I then chose five provocative questions written by the participants that most effectively represented their concerns:

1. "Why do people have to insist that a certain religion is wrong, that a certain group of people are the root of the world's problems—how can your beliefs in God's teachings want you to kill innocent children?"
2. "I would ask a war survivor whether or not the stories we hear about the event 'live up,' in a sense, to the actual experience. Does the media portray, say, the War in Iraq as something worse than it is or something better than it is?"
3. "I would want to talk to youths that are constantly living under the threat of terrorism—what keeps them going? What do they think the future holds for them?"
4. "Their personal stories—how they survived, what they did to survive, what did they think about, what kept them going? Why?—so that I can better prepare myself for any future wars that I may have to live through. Maybe I can do something that may prevent that next war. . . . What would someone like me do or not do?"
5. "Can you name one good thing that came out of the war, whether it be a person you met or a lesson you learned?"

The answers to these questions are readily found in nonfiction, first-person diaries, stories, and other young adult literature written by and about survivors of wars. These works are literary windows into

turbulent worlds. "Adolescent literature provides an environment for young adults to see the results of decisions made by characters and to evaluate their ideas and behaviors" (Hayn & Sherrill 7). History and current news become more than facts or figures when authors relate their experiences or those of other teens living through the Holocaust, running from bombs in Sarajevo, hiding in Baghdad basements, or trying to keep safe from the crossfire in Lebanon, El Salvador, and Washington, DC.

Age-appropriate, nonfiction literature about teenagers, or books with comments from teenagers facing these horrible sorts of conflicts, enable students to read, hear, and feel the impassioned pleas, rages, and cries of young people like themselves in situations of anger, fear, loss, and hope. "There is no other genre that is so welcoming and accessible to teenage readers" (White 10). Creating opportunities for young people to identify with characters living harsh events helps students understand themselves better as they begin to understand the actions and choices of others (Davis & Watkins 16). Identification leads to empathy, and empathy leads to understanding. The provocative, personal questions of teens are answered in accessible, honest, and relevant ways by people they will listen to because, as one student said to me: "Those people matter."

Literature to Address the Questions of Adolescents

While there is a vast array of nonfiction books on war, the ones I selected to address the students' questions were written by authors who are sensitive to the thoughts, images, and experiences of adolescents.

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According to Totten and Feinberg, individual human stories within situations of persecution and genocide have the ability to engage students in ways that are beyond the ability of other genres of literature and resources of information. This is due to “deeply human aspects—including the passions and emotions—that are communicated” (111). Memoirs, diaries, and first-person narratives link adolescents to historical events so they can discover and vicariously experience, as David Russell wrote, the worst and best of humankind. “In these stories of suffering humanity, we may at times hear above the cries of despair, the faint, persistent murmuring of the compassionate heart that will lead us out of the darkness and toward the light” (280). These are some issues for which young people seek answers.

The literature I have chosen to answer the five questions that sprang from my conversations with young people ranges from memoirs of Holocaust survivors, comments of Hitler Youth, diaries of a thirteen-year-old girl in Sarajevo and an eighteen-year-old girl in Baghdad, to images and accounts of an author who traveled with children into the more contemporary war zones of Lebanon, Mozambique, El Salvador, and Washington, DC. Books that are well-written, true accounts about real people who made real choices as children and teenagers in extraordinary times “provide important and powerful messages for the youth of today” (Biro 2005).

The selections include Holocaust memoirs *Eleanor’s Story: An American Girl in Hitler’s Germany*, by Eleanor Ramrath Garner; *Eva’s Story: A Survivor’s Tale by the Step-sister of Anne Frank*, by Eva Schloss; *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*, by Livia Bitton-Jackson; *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*, by Judith Magyar Isaacson; and *Strange and Unexpected Love: A Teenage Girl’s Holocaust Memoirs*, by Fanya Gottesfeld Heller. I have also chosen books specifically intended to answer the questions of adolescent boys, *Children of the Swastika: The Hitler Youth*, by Eileen Heyes, which includes comments by young people who joined that organization, while *An Uncommon Friendship*, by Bernat

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Rosner and Frederic C. Tubach, gives compelling perspectives of the Holocaust through the reflections of a Hitler Youth and a Jewish boy. War experiences in Sarajevo and Baghdad are detailed respectively through *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* by Zlata Filipović, and *Thura’s Diary: My Life in Wartime Iraq* by Thura Al-Windawi. Finally, a global perspective of war is presented by Maria Ousseimi in her collection of compelling images and comments of young people in

Caught in the Crossfire.

Introductions of Selected Books

Although many of the selections have female protagonists, all the books are equally appropriate for boys. Each book has specific strengths in providing young readers with answers to the five questions. Short introductions of each book will demonstrate how the books also fulfill criteria established by Totten and Feinberg for literature that addresses war and conflict. Quality resources must assist “students to ponder how some are ill-treated or made to feel ‘other,’ to be maligned not because of what they have done or said, but because of their religion, beliefs, or background” (Totten & Feinberg 158). Quality resources must also realize a specific rationale and provide insights to the life and choices of others during the conflicts.

In *Eleanor’s Story: An American Girl in Hitler’s Germany*, Eleanor Ramrath Garner begins with a first-hand account of the Hindenburg explosion and then explores questions she asked as a young American girl surrounded by the Holocaust and World War II:

So much puzzled me about this war and how people behaved who were involved in it. Edit was always cheerful and friendly. She didn’t seem to appear to bear a grudge against anyone. I knew I would have been furious at the Germans if they had taken away my property and family and forced me to work for my enemy” (52).

Eva Schloss in *Eva’s Story: A Survivor’s Tale by the Step-sister of Anne Frank* portrays life in pre-war Amsterdam through friendship with her best friend, Anne Frank. Readers see girls shopping, going to

school, and flirting with boys. Then, Ms. Schloss takes the reader to the barracks of Auschwitz where she was imprisoned simply because of being Jewish, to forests in Russia, and back to Amsterdam, all before her sixteenth birthday:

Franzi shrugged and bent down to kiss me goodbye. I hugged her hard. She had been a constant companion and a dear friend. I watched helplessly as she joined the consignment to an unknown destination. We had been thrown together by fate and there was no knowing if we would ever see each other again. [. . .] She had given me comfort and courage when I had been at my lowest and now she had to go instead of me. [. . .] At that moment as I sat at the bench alone with the empty chair beside me, I knew Pappy's prayers had been answered again and I felt the hand of God truly protecting me. (135)

Elli, the thirteen year old protagonist of *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, dreams of going to a prep school in a large city where she will become "a celebrated poet, beautiful, elegant, and very talented" (13). Yet at 2:30 in the morning, her beloved world is turned upside down with the Nazi occupation of Hungary. Now, instead of being a place of friendships and learning, her school is a place where inflammatory anti-Semitic insults fill the halls and hopes of graduation dissolve. Livia is confronted with the possibility of being the only survivor of her family. When her father shows her where their family treasures are stored, she bursts out:

Why should I know about the jewels? Why? Tell me, why? I don't want to be the one to survive! I don't want to survive alone! Oh, God. Why? Why? Why? (28).

In *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*, Judith Magyar Isaacson, educator, author, and human-rights advocate, shares her experiences as a young, spirited teenage girl in a small town in Hungary prior to the Nazi invasion of Hungary, to her captivity in Auschwitz, the liberation, moving to America, and return to eastern Europe with her daughter thirty-three years after being transported to a death camp:

Our cattle car was packed with sev-

enty-five people. I was crouching on my pack, squeezed between mother and Nana Klein. An SS officer came in and closed the door. I heard him bolt it—from the outside. It was dark. The engine gave a sudden tug. "We're leaving," Nana choked. "I can't believe this. We're really leaving." Where to? I tensed. The train was moving east. [. . .] "No one came to see us off, I murmured. "No one." (58)

Strange and Unexpected Love: A Teenage Girl's Holocaust Memoirs expands the adolescents' perspectives of the setting of the Holocaust from Eastern Europe to German occupied Ukraine. Heller vividly recounts how she, her brother and parents survived against the war in barn attics, cellars, forests. Heller also found love, loyalty, and life with a Ukrainian boy who saved their lives:

I longed for word from my parents. Jan could tell me nothing more than he'd heard they were safe and that they had a hard life in the Borszczow ghetto. One day he brought news that our house had been taken over by the Germans for offices, since it had the reputation of being the cleanest on in Skala. [. . .] Chronological time had become meaningless, since I had no clock or watch. On gray days, time played tricks: I'd think it must be eight o'clock in the morning and it would turn out to be five. [. . .] I trained myself to become more and more adept at using "false time" to advantage. Sometimes I managed to get Arthur to join me in braiding straw figures. I made a whole settlement of houses and people. Other times I made up new stanzas for old songs, and Arthur joined in the refrain. (99)

In stark contrast to each other, the authors of *An Uncommon Friendship* share their parallel memoirs of

life under Hitler and the Nazis. Frederic Tubach, a German youth who attended Pre-Hitler Youth rallies, and Bernat Rosner, a twelve year old Jewish boy who was the sole survivor of his family, detail these opposite experiences of the same war:

When you are twelve years old you feel immortal. Bernie and I both felt that way then. I remember looking through an open vent on the tiled roof of my grandparent's house, feeling invulnerable as I watched low flying American Mustangs strafing the countryside. I asked myself whether Bernie felt fearless, even invulnerable, while he was being transported to Auschwitz. (14-15)

In *Children of the Swastika: The Hitler Youth*, Eileen Heyes relates the comments of boys and girls who were seduced by the charisma and promises of Hitler to fulfill the "dreams" of their country devastated by the aftermath of World War I.

Thura shares her inner-most responses to the physical sights and sounds of living during the regime of Saddam Hussein, to experiencing the “Shock and Awe” on March 20, 2003, and walking along deserted, debris-filled Baghdad streets.

In *Children of the Swastika: The Hitler Youth*, Eileen Heyes relates the comments of boys and girls who were seduced by the charisma and promises of Hitler to fulfill the “dreams” of their country devastated by the aftermath of World War I. A former Hitler Youth, “Johann,” son of a German businessman, reflected on his service to the Fuehrer that sounds ominously familiar to the words of young people today:

Like all kids at that age, you had to join because all your friends did. During the war, it became very important [to belong], when food became scarce and food rationing set in, it was a wonderful way to punish people by simply not giving them rations: “If you’re not willing to do your share by joining the Hitler Youth, you don’t deserve to eat.” [. . .] What really was the motivation for a lot of people was that it was a lot of fun. There was always a two or three-week summer camp. When you’re young, you hardly know what’s going on. It’s only later on that you realize that there were subtle pressures and subtle indoctrinations taking place. (38-39)

While accounts of the Holocaust address aspects of students’ questions, the words of teens experiencing conflicts in Sarajevo and in Bagdad, bring situations closer to the present day. *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo*, written during the 1990’s war in Sarajevo, and *Thura’s Diary: My Life in Wartime Iraq*, written during the 2003 bombing of Iraq, connect American readers with worlds studied in school and seen on the news.

In *Zlata’s Diary*, readers encounter more than historical accounts of the war in Bosnia. Her words, as a pre-teen girl, convey intense emotional confusion. An example is her entry on Monday, June 29, 1992:

BOREDOM!!! SHOOTING!!! SHELLING!!! PEOPLE BEING KILLED!!! DESPAIR!!! HUNGER!!! MISERY!!! FEAR!!! That’s my life! The life of an innocent eleven-year-old school-girl! A schoolgirl without a school, without the fun and excitement of school. A child without games, without

friends, without the sun, without birds, without nature, without fruit, without chocolate or sweets, with just a little powdered milk. In short, a child without a childhood. A wartime child [. . .] God, will this ever stop, will I ever be a schoolgirl again, will I ever enjoy my childhood again? (61)

Thura’s Diary: My Life in Wartime Iraq brings young readers forward in time, as an eighteen year-old girl writes about her experiences in Iraq. Thura shares her inner-most responses to the physical sights and sounds of living during the regime of Saddam Hussein, to experiencing the “Shock and Awe” on March 20, 2003, and walking along deserted, debris-filled Baghdad streets. On March 20, she wrote: “I hear and feel the first missiles exploding—when the earth shakes, your whole body shakes as well. What’s going to happen to us? There is only fear in my house” (13). Her April 3 diary entry is particularly significant for adolescents:

I don’t know where to start. Everything’s changing so quickly. Normal life is coming to an end [...] At the moment I’m sitting up in bed writing. I’m so worried—not just for me, but for all my friends from college. They’re scattered all over Baghdad, and now the fighting has started in the city. (46, 51)

Conflicts in other war zones that are more recent and close to home are reported by Maria Ousseimi in her collection of interviews and photographs titled *Caught in the Crossfire*. Ms. Ousseimi is a witness to war, having been born in Lebanon and left with her family as the seventeen-year-long war began. She writes in her author’s note:

I needed to find answers to [my] questions, to connect with the often forgotten victims of that war and other wars being broadcast into my comfortable living-room night after night. [. . .] I felt compelled to travel to as many different continents as I could to show people that war is not confined to a particular region or a particular culture. (vii).

Each of these selected books portrays the events of war in accessible, private, intimate, and personal ways, just as they happened to their adolescent protagonists. With this literature, adolescents have words and people to which they can return when they feel the need to do so.

Questions Answered in the Literature

Before I share how the chosen literature answers the adolescents’ questions, it is important to keep in mind three caveats:

- a) These literary works are only suggestions of literature than can be used.
- b) Within literary works, there are hundreds of images, thoughts, and reflections that address the concerns.
- c) Answers to provocative topics are not usually found in just one resource.

Individually, each book provides a personal answer to be reflected upon and explored. Collectively, the books show an historical perspective of the intensity and profundity of the questions posed. Holocaust survivor Livia Bitton-Jackson wrote in *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*: “This is the story of triumphs in the face of overwhelming odds, of extraordinary events in extraordinary times. And yet, I believe it is essentially the story of a teenager [. . .] That teenager could have been you” (2). Like dear friends sharing secrets, the authors of young adult nonfiction, along with the authors of the other books disclose why teens did certain things, and how they survived ridicule, fear, confusion, starvation, or worse.

The First Question

The first question, which seeks answers to issues of ideology and prejudice, establishes the level of concern posed by the young people:

Why do people have to insist that a certain religion is wrong, that a certain group of people are the root of the world’s problems—how can your beliefs in God’s teachings want you to kill innocent children?

That complex question is a common theme in the books. Each author in our selected works shares how political conflicts in his or her decade and country were the results of people who lived by ideologies of hate, prejudice, destruction of others. Ousseimi offers disturbing answers through comments of young “soldiers” in the chapter “Children Killing Children—Mozambique” of her book:

Having witnessed or been forced to commit acts of extreme violence on their own parents at a very early age [. . .] grew up with no emotional bonds. Like Ricardo, they often justified their acts on the grounds that they were only obeying orders. I was a soldier. I lost my finger in combat. I killed many people. I was told to do it, so I did. Those were the rules. I was ordered and I obeyed. (53)

The political ideology of hate was also witnessed by

Judith Isaacson whose words reflect the transformation of an educational system and a school professor in 1938 Hungary:

After the occupation of Austria on March 13, 1938, the condition of Hungarian Jews deteriorated daily [. . .] Jewish students lost their scholarships, and new Nazi textbooks changed history overnight: from Roman times to the present, the Jews emerged as villains. Most of our professors ignored the new politics; Aladár Kövary, my history teacher, was the only exception. He suddenly emerged as an avowed anti-Semite, and he seemed to get a perverse enjoyment out of spouting obscenities at the Jewish girls. (12)

Another look at the fervor of anti-Semitism resounds in the words of Melita Maschmann, a former Hitler Youth member interviewed by Eileen Heyes who explored why young people joined that organization:

We dreamed then of a strong Germany, respected amongst the nations not from fear but from admiration—and Hitler promised to fulfill this dream for us. Dreams are something dangerous in politics. They stop the dreamer from seeing what is really happening. Hitler whipped up our yearning political dream into a fanatical passion. When he succeeded in doing this we followed him blindly. . . . In this state of bondage we had forfeited our freedom of conscience. (52)

Zlata recalls the moment of discovering that her friend from kindergarten was killed by a bomb that fell in a park near her house in Sarajevo:

NINA IS DEAD. (sic) A piece of shrapnel lodged in her brain and she died [. . .] Nina, an innocent, eleven-year-old little girl—the victim of a stupid war. I feel sad. I cry and wonder why? She didn’t do anything. A disgusting war has destroyed a young child’s life. (43)

The diary entry on April 9, 2003, by Thura Al-Windawi expresses thoughts that are particularly significant for young people as Saddam Hussein’s statue was pulled down:

But now it was time for him to pay the price for everything he’d done in the past. How can I explain all this to Sama, who used to have to say “Long live our leader Saddam Hussein!” several times a day at school, and all the children would clap at the mention of his name? [. . .] Sama won’t understand, she’ll still say, “We love Saddam, we will sacrifice ourselves for him”—it’s the result of a kind of brainwashing. But where is the sacrifice? Where’s the loyalty to Saddam? It’s all lies. It’s as if we have been teaching our children make-believe things that don’t really exist at all. (71-72)

The Second, Third, and Fourth Questions

Those answers to the first question bridge the second, third, and fourth questions, which focus on victims of war. Adolescents want to know not necessarily about specifics of wars, but how survivors found inspiration and support to live, hope, and envisioned a future in the confusion of their present circumstances:

2. "I would ask a war survivor whether or not the stories we hear about the event 'live up,' in a sense, to the actual experience. Does the media portray, say, the War in Iraq as something worse than it is or something better than it is?"
3. "I would want to talk to youths that are constantly living under the threat of terrorism—what keeps them going? What do they think the future holds for them?"
4. "Their personal stories—how they survived, what they did to survive, what did they think about, what kept them going? Why?—so that I can better prepare myself for any future wars that I may have to live through. Maybe I can do something that may prevent that next war. . . . What would someone like me do or not do."

Being that each book shows war through the lens of young people who lived through or are living through war instead of a lens of journalism, young readers hear, see, feel, and vicariously experience the actual events. Granted, the memoirs are written by people recalling their situations, in contrast to the diaries and the book by Maria Ousseimi that goes directly into the crossfire. However, each book presents unedited truths about war. Garner's sentiments in the chapter titled, "Childhood Lost" of *Eleanor's Story* capture the essence of a child in a war torn world:

The war was now part of my life. No longer somewhere else, but right here in my own neighborhood. I realized that all of us were as vulnerable to death as any soldier on the front line. The battleground was no longer out there, but right here on our doorsteps. *Today we survive, but what about tomorrow?* The next morning I wrote these words in my Poesie Album: *Oh, if only I could have the Courage of a hero. I would conquer the fear of death, Instead I cry.* (108-109).

Although her recollections are as a young American girl in Germany, the intensity of threats,

murders, and insults against people evicted from society by the Nazis were daily occurrences. Isaacson and Tubach share smaller moments of hope poignantly contrasted against the graphic details of Auschwitz and Mauthausen. Isaacson recalls a particular roll call:

Predawn *Zähl Appell* was never an easy task for the kapos—too many prisoners fainted out of the ranks—but a predawn head count during our second week was the worst I recall. An icy rain lashed viciously in the dark, and it chased mother, Magda, and me from the edge of the [rectangular military formation]; the more the kapos lashed, the more everyone shoved toward center. I could see how panic mounted at each sweep of the searchlights. Shivering uncontrollably, I wedged myself deep into the midst of the crowd. This is it! [. . .] By noon, the truck had carted away more than the day's portion of the dead, then the sick were made to undress, and to crawl nude into the emptied vehicle. Magda and I held mother up by the armpits, so she would be allowed to stay [. . .] Was it hours or was it minutes? All I know is that I woke to singing liquid echo to rain: "Above me weeps the sky," I hummed with my comrades, and for the first time since our arrival the tears came. Afterwards, I sang full-throated if slightly off-key. The kapos stood by without trying to stop us—The Rain Song was stronger than they. (76-77).

Frederic Tubach shares the experiences of his friend Bernat Rosner who, as a young teen, was at a sub-camp of Mauthausen known as Gusen:

Shortly after his arrival at Gusen, Bernie teamed up with another Hungarian teenager, Simcha Katz, a member of the original shipment of prisoners from Auschwitz to Mauthausen, to form a survival unit. The ultimate test of this relationship came in mid January 1945 when Simcha's shoes—the officially issued wooden-soled clogs—were stolen. For two days Simcha trudged to work through the winter ice and snow in his bare feet. If he was going to survive, he would have to repurchase his shoes from an inmate who used thievery as his survival strategy and who offered to "sell" Simcha his own shoes, which the thief claimed he had "found." The ransom for the shoes was two day's bread rations, but such a great sacrifice would have spelled Simcha's death. The only way to save his life was for both boys to go without their bread rations for one day. This they did, and Simcha got his shoes back. (127-128)

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Similar dangers resonate in the diaries of Zlata and Thura. Adolescents see how wars are not limited to certain people. While set in Sarajevo, the interests, confusions, and hopes of Zlata as expressed to Mimmy in her diary are vividly similar to young people in 21st century America. Zlata loved pop music, MTV, boys, birthday parties, piano lessons, television, birthday parties, skis, and school. But because of war, she “had lost her [childhood] innocence” (x):

We waited for September 27 and 28. The 27th was the Assembly of Bosnian Intellectuals, and the 28th was the session of the B-H Parliament. And the result is “conditional acceptance of the Geneva agreement.” CONDITIONAL. What does that mean? To me, it means the non-acceptance of the agreement, because there’s no peace. To me it means the continuation of the war and everything that goes with it. Once more the circle closes. The circle is closing, Mimmy, and it’s strangling us. Sometimes I wish I had wings so I could fly away from this hell. Like Icarus. There’s no other way. But to do that I’d need wings for Mommy, wings for Daddy, for Grandma and Granddad and . . . for you, Mimmy. And that’s impossible because humans are not birds. That’s why I have to try and get through all this, with your support, Mimmy, and to hope that it will pass and that I will not suffer the fate of Anne Frank. That I will be a child again, living my childhood in peace. (181)

In addition to Zlata, Thura’s words, as an older, eighteen-year-old girl in Baghdad, reflect present perspectives of war and views of hope. In both diaries, one hears the voices of today’s young people and the question: “What would someone like me do or not do?”

I’m always being asked how I feel about what is going on in Iraq. It is difficult to know from the news, but I’m worried about my family. They’re facing the danger of being kidnapped or robbed—or just living life. I hope there aren’t more confrontations with the Americans and that the two sides can come to understand each other. That is the reason I wrote this diary. I wanted to try to bring about a greater understanding of my country and to show what Iraqi’s are really like. I wanted people to know what it’s like for children to have no hope. I wanted them to know what it means for a father to work for hours just to feed his family. I wanted them to know what it is like to have to flee from home. I wanted to make the Americans and the British understand that we are not their enemies. We just need some security and the chance to lead normal lives. Let’s give the children the opportunity to be happy; let’s give people the chance to live and hope, to help others, and bring an end to all their suffering [. . .] There will still be fighting between the Iraqi’s and Americans and the problems in Iraq will continue. I know they will be fixed one day, but I am not sure exactly

when that day will be. [(125-126, 130)

Looking at other conflicts around the world, including war zones in our nation’s capital, Ousseimi found teens whose fears were disturbingly similar to those from World War II, Sarajevo, and Baghdad. The following four comments are from teenagers living in our nation’s capital. The first harshly realistic point of view is from a male teen gang member:

When someone steps on your shoes, you kill him. Don’t matter it’s an accident. Don’t matter he says, “scuse me.” All that matters is that he stepped on your shoes and nothin’ can ‘scuse that. He gotta die. (102)

An idealistic sentiment comes from Donnell, a teenager wounded in drive-by shooting:

After I was shot at I was tempted to get a gun to protect myself, but I came to the conclusion that another gun would just take another life. I think that anyone that is in a gang or has a gun needs attention and is basically insecure. It has a lot to do with family background. If you pray, you don’t need a gun for security. (105)

A realistic view is presented by Tanya who sees violence being a part of life and something that she feels every teen should be prepared to handle:

I wouldn’t want to live in a safe place because it is boring, nothing happens. And plus if one day I am forced to move away from that safe place, I would like to know how to handle myself in dangerous situations. If you live in a safe place you never learn about the real world. (110)

The fourth perspective is from Tameka who sees her schools that were once considered neutral territory, like the experiences of Isaacson in 1938 Hungary, become part of battlefields horrifically similar to those in war-torn countries of Hungary, Ukraine, Sarajevo and Baghdad. She echoes the sentiments of other witnesses of war:

I get mad about the violence. At my school there are always shootings, so we sometimes have to lay on the ground. So we don’t go to the playground that much. The worst thing about this place is that you could just be looking at someone and he can say “what are looking at!” and shoot you just like that. It’s crazy. Disneyland is the safest place I have ever been to. I would like to live there. (98)

The Fifth and Final Question

The last question posed by the adolescents I interviewed and surveyed is not as skeptical as it first seems.

5. “Can you name one good thing that came out of the war? Whether it be a person you met or a lesson you learned.”

Teens, who feel mired in what seems to be conflict without end, seek answers that will help them see life beyond war. All books, except *Caught in the Crossfire*, include revelations that lasted a moment, a day, or a lifetime. Ousseimi wrote that while many of the scenarios she chose to present where young people tried to survive in nightmarish worlds, the fight still continues in our country:

Despite the fact that Reggie has been involved with gangs, he still dreams of a hopeful future [. . .] his strongest wish “is to live to be real old.” However [. . .] in its own way, Washington, a city that symbolizes the best of America in so many ways, is as much a battlefield as Mozambique, Beirut, and El Salvador once were. For them, the fighting has stopped. Even in Sarajevo, cease fires give hope that an end to the fighting is in sight. In Washington, though, the war goes on day after day (117-118)

Positive and hopeful revelations are presented by other authors who share miracles of friendship, food, and compassion from unlikely sources that helped them survive. Isaacson wrote:

I never believed in fate or wonders. But I often think now, that I had to come to Auschwitz and Lichtenau, and I had to remain in Leipzig with the ill women and I had to go all those things through, only to meet Ike [her husband]. We met ourselves quite by accident. But as I was too occupied with my own troubles to pay any attention to him, so by another accident we met ourselves after a week again [. . .] If I wasn't so accustomed to unusual things to happen, I couldn't believe, it's sure. (179)

As adults, when Frederic Tubach and Bernat Rosner found each other and the uncanny parallels in their lives during World War II, instead of harboring hatred and resentment, they chose to write about the Holocaust with a profound intent:

They began to talk to each other about their pasts and made the decision to record their stories. In order to keep his past life as a victim at a distance, Bernie preferred that his story as an Auschwitz survivor be told in the third person, as a narrative by his German friend. The daunting task of writing the story of his Jewish friend helped [Frederic] confront his own past in Nazi Germany along with that of his family and childhood village. Both Bernie and Fritz believed that their lives [. . .] needed to be revisited for the sake of the dead, the living, the innocent, and because of the guilty. Ultimately, both men refused to allow Hitler's agenda to define their lives and prevent their friendship. Their stories are about bridge building [. . .] there is a search for re-

demption through narrating the story of one of Nazi Germany's victims together with his own. (x)

The final diary entry of Thura Al-Windawi from the streets of Baghdad is a fitting conclusion to the last question of the adolescents:

I leave my story in your safekeeping—the story of an Iraqi girl who hasn't discovered much about life yet; a girl who already had missiles exploding all around her when she was in her mother's womb; a girl who has lived through war and fear and cruel sanctions on her country; a girl whose parents are always worried; a girl whose little sisters are terrified by the bombs and the looters, and come to her for comfort; a girl with American soldiers all around her neighborhood, every bit as scared as she is; a girl born in the wrong place at the wrong time—but a girl who still has hope. I'll get to America one day- not to take revenge, but to study and live and love like anyone else [. . .] And once I'm there, I'll go and see the families of American soldiers killed in Iraq and those who are still fighting too, to offer them my condolences [. . .] I'll tell them the same things I said to Iraqi families who have lost sons and yet still cling on to life: *The future is shining in front of us like a bright light, and eventually we'll find that we can all live together as long as there's not darkness and no injustice between us. While there's still light, no one will be able to destroy our lives completely.* (120-121)

The author and adolescents seem to be asking the same question: “Can you name one good thing that came out of the war? Whether it be a person you met or a lesson you learned.” The answer to this fifth and final question about war might be best summarized as the only good things that come from it are the relationships it often galvanizes that might have never happened otherwise, the understanding of others it can force upon those experiencing its horror, and the hope that it will one day end.

Concluding Thoughts: War Goes On, and So Do the Questions of Adolescents

As history shows, wars do end but new ones always seem to be on the horizon. Wars and the world have become increasingly more complex on what seems to be a daily basis. Adults must be cognizant of what adolescents are feeling, asking, questioning, and discussing. What are their questions? What happens when we, as educators, cannot provide their answers? Where do they and can they get the truths?

The questions posed were only a glimpse of how adolescents perceive conflict whether in the world or

in their community. The nonfiction books presented were gateways to help young people hear, see, and vicariously experience truths not from the media, websites, or history texts, but from the souls of those who have lived through war. Adolescents want and deserve answers to their provocative questions that transcend mere facts, figures, maps, and political rhetoric. They need meaningful words and inspiration from those who have experiences to which they can relate. Thank God for authors who share their most intimate reflections of conflict. Young people need not only answers from yesterday, but answers for tomorrow that can be used forever.

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