

# Béatrice Finet: The Holocaust Told to Children, a Literary Education? – A Secondary Publication

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**Abstract:** Béatrice Finet’s work significantly contributes to pedagogical reflection on the formative potentials and limitations of the tripartite encounter of narration, fiction, and history through historical fiction on the Holocaust. In her previous writings, Finet emphasized the importance of avoiding strictly utilitarian readings, instead advocating for a nuanced understanding of events through the reading process. Expectations were high for her recent work, which largely met them. In this book, Finet focuses on describing and analyzing a youth-oriented work on the Holocaust, a significant historical event mandated in primary school curricula since 2002, to illuminate the educational implications it raises. While primarily aimed at educators, the book will undoubtedly interest anyone interested in children’s literature or Holocaust history. Finet presents a diverse corpus of works, such as *Les Arbres Pleurent Aussi* or *Otto. Autobiographie d’un Ours en Peluche*, which, despite their educational value, can personally appeal to both young and adult literature enthusiasts. The title, posed a question, *La Shoah Racontée Aux Enfants, Une Éducation Littéraire?* immediately prompts reflection on how literary reading of children’s literature can lead young readers to critically engage with literature, better understand and interpret its revelations, and consider what it may omit. This title also suggests that the Holocaust story is being told to children, prompting the potential benefit of adult mediation to guide them toward literary education.

**Keywords:** Pedagogical reflection; Historical fiction; Béatrice Finet

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## 1. Introduction

Right from the start, let’s emphasize the significant contribution of Béatrice Finet’s work to a didactic reflection centered around the formative potential and limitations of the tripartite encounter of narration, fiction, and history through historical fiction on the Holocaust. In her previous writings <sup>[1-3]</sup>, for example, discussed the importance of not falling into the trap of a strictly utilitarian reading. On the contrary, she suggested focusing on the reading process that could lead young readers to a sensitive and nuanced understanding of the event. Consequently, we had high expectations for her most recent work. And for the most part, these expectations were met. In this book, Finet notably describes and analyzes the contours of a youth book on the Holocaust, a significant historical event prescribed in primary school curricula since 2002, to shed light on the educational

issues it raises.

## 2. The Holocaust Told to Children, a Literary Education?

This book, published in the “Teaching and Reforms” collection, is primarily intended for education professionals, but it can certainly engage anyone interested in children’s literature or the history of the Holocaust. Finet also offers a rich corpus of works of various genres (for example, *Les Arbres Pleurent Aussi* or *Otto. Autobiographie d’un Ours en Peluche*) which, while presenting significant educational interest, as shown by the analysis throughout this book, can personally appeal to both young and adult literature enthusiasts. The title, posed a question, *La Shoah Racontée Aux Enfants, Une Éducation Littéraire?* (The Holocaust Told to Children, a Literary Education?), immediately prompts questioning on how literary reading – a concept related to literature didactics not explicitly mobilized by Finet – of a work intended for children can lead young readers to reflect through and with literature, to better understand and interpret what it reveals, but also what it may silence, perhaps out of caution, about the event. This title can also suggest that the history of the Holocaust is told to children. Therefore, the presence or intervention of an adult mediator may be desirable to guide them toward a literary education (Chapter 5).

The first four chapters, through the different yet complementary aspects they analyze, also contribute to a better understanding of how literature education can play an important role in “the formation of the individual and the citizen”<sup>[4]</sup>. Finet, by analyzing the images and stereotypes surrounding the event (Chapter 2) and the characters (Chapter 3) and highlighting the testimonial pact resulting from the depicted event, whose sober description can both conceal and reveal the extent of the evoked tragedy (Chapter 4), succeeds in highlighting the main characteristics of historical fiction on the Holocaust.

At the end of the proposed reading path, an attentive reader may be better able to grasp not only the French school context, presented in the first chapter, which, strongly marked by memorial laws, makes teaching the Holocaust mandatory in schools, but also the universal scope of this education, whose educational issues resonate notably in North America. Thus, the learning outcomes that may result from teaching through fiction on the Holocaust go far beyond scholarly or factual knowledge; they can set thought in motion through the power of the heart, which rarely remains indifferent to a character’s fate (Chapter 3). Indeed, this is one of the interests or privileges, according to Finet, of literature education: it can “allow each reader to build a literary, aesthetic, and pictorial imaginary, to become capable of identifying symbols to decipher their meaning and significance”<sup>[4]</sup>. That said, this force could, in our view, be enriched by employing another mode of apprehension, namely historical thinking.

Thus, although reading this book has been most enjoyable, with the different chapters being well articulated with each other, certain elements would have benefited, from our perspective, from being clarified, while others could have been addressed. Indeed, although works on the Holocaust in the French context are introduced “in classrooms for a specific purpose”<sup>[5]</sup>, their use seems to carry the danger of causing “an overemphasis on emotions instead of offering rational and historical knowledge of the event”<sup>[6]</sup>. However, can this danger not transcend French borders? In the first chapter, a comparison with other curricula or states could have broadened Finet’s chosen angle to examine the works of the studied corpus and recall the nearly universal dimension of the event. Furthermore, the legitimate questioning that the author exposes regarding the “Birth of a literature?” (Chapter 1) seems difficult to dissociate from a political and cultural context that may have some influence on the elaborated and implemented accompanying methods, in primary as well as secondary school, in France as elsewhere.

Furthermore, this “danger” can also open exciting perspectives, such as the possibility of transcending the disciplinary barriers of the literature class. This crossing could lead students to exchanges that invoke a dual reading pact, which would be both literary and historical. The interaction between literature and history would allow for the exploitation of the potential of work on the Holocaust by reinforcing the visibility and relevance of processes that can lead young readers to read, but also to articulate, sensitively and critically. This could also strongly highlight the memorial dimension that underlies youth literature on the Holocaust, even sealing its “pact” (Chapter 4). An iconographic analysis of images (Chapter 2) could also contribute to highlighting the permeability of the mind to the influences of mass media, especially to the ideas they convey through illustrations <sup>[7,8]</sup>. Images speak and make things “real” <sup>[9]</sup>, and therefore, they can gradually establish in the classroom an open, respectful, and constructive dialogue that allows young readers to formulate hasty generalizations and critical judgments. This dialogue could thus serve to draw enlightening parallels between historical references and collective memory, which also belong to children. Such descriptive and analytical work, inherent in the historian’s method, resonates with relevance, it seems to us, in the words of Didi-Huberman chosen by Finet to conclude Chapter 2: “To show is to give time to look, to open the possibility of a connection, of contextualization, of thought, of montage” <sup>[10]</sup>. The conclusion of the work, entitled “Telling the Holocaust: Literature and History,” which explicitly presents the fiction and history tandem, could thus be further developed: in this concluding chapter, the contribution of the “history” discipline remains somewhat discreet. It almost blends into the educational dimension that also resides, in a certain way, within each discipline, without revealing its (trans)formative potential to “bring about an autonomous subject and, consequently, a citizen of a democratic society” <sup>[4]</sup>.

This path seems to resonate somewhat with one of Finet’s questions, which seeks to see and document how one could proceed in class “to... intelligently read to the youngest [the works on the Holocaust] with the perspective of citizenship education” <sup>[11]</sup>.

Drawing notably on the works of Nussbaum and Friendländer, she argues that “(t)he formation of the individual and the citizen, [...] demands more rigorous pedagogical devices” <sup>[12]</sup>. However, this proposition, while relevant and coherent with the aspects highlighted throughout the different chapters, does not seem to take into account research conducted in history didactics. In this regard, we propose avenues to explore, including those focusing on historical empathy <sup>[13-15]</sup> or the recognition of perspectives and the importance of feeling, as an individual and social actor, concerned by the theme being addressed <sup>[16]</sup>. These works, which appear to align with the approach proposed by Friendländer (2008), notably emphasize the importance of reinforcing the emotional dimension by supporting it with contextualization, corroboration, and the exploration of multiple perspectives, elements at the heart of critical and historical thinking <sup>[16,17]</sup>. Thus, this final chapter would have benefited from a more thorough (and attentive) examination of the potential contribution of the “history” discipline and an integrative dynamic between literature and history, certainly ambitious, but promising in terms of learning outcomes; it could also have highlighted more clearly the need to establish accompanying methods based on clear and precise didactic intentions, an important issue for the study of the Holocaust or any theme related to the values that underpin democracy from a text, whether literary or not.

### 3. Conclusion

Ultimately, this book can certainly interest didacticians, trainers, and teachers eager to deepen the study of a work on the Holocaust that can lead young readers to a reading that is both sensitive and critical. Some will find food for thought and discover relevant avenues to explore and question, including those surrounding the

evocative power of characters, the choice of writing, and narration marked by unspoken elements. Others will derive proposals to enrich not only the use of a work intended for youth for literature teaching and learning but also the history of the Holocaust. However, as Finet herself reminds us, to fully exploit the educational potential of historical fiction in schools, the conception and implementation of pedagogical activities in this direction are necessary.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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