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Common Core and the Holocaust

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The [reading list](#) for the New York State Common Core English/Language Arts curriculum looks like someone took a handful of darts and threw them at a wall with boxes labeled with different grade levels. There are no discernible themes and at a first glance no patterns at all.

If you look deeper you realize books are assigned to the boxes based on something called "text complexity." [Text Complexity](#) is defined on the Common Core website as a combination of "levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands"; "readability measures and other scores of text complexity"; and "reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)." Fortunately you do not have to worry if you cannot understand what they are talking about, I certainly can't, because they start with the assertion that "A number of quantitative tools exist to help educators assess aspects of text complexity that are better measured by algorithm than by a human reader," although they also concede that "the tools for measuring text complexity are at once useful and imperfect."

My biggest problem with assigning students books and articles to read based on text complexity is that it makes for really bad content choices, something Common Core either seems unaware of or unconcerned with. One of the worst examples is the way books on the European Holocaust are distributed amongst the different grade levels.

Because the focus in English/Language Arts classrooms is on plot, character, theme, and vocabulary rather than history, and because the books are selected based on text complexity, students are introduced to the European Holocaust without historical background, often by teachers who never studied about the Holocaust themselves. I think this sets the stage for horrific student misunderstanding about one of the most difficult and sensitive subjects to teach.

In New York State, where social studies has been virtually abandoned before high school because it goes untested and there is tremendous pressure to prepare students for ELA standardized test, students first learn about the history of the European Holocaust and the systematic extermination of European Jews by Nazi Germany in the second semester of 10th grade. Before that they are briefly introduced to the Holocaust through literature, but not as history. [The Diary of Anne Frank: A Play](#) by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett is recommended for 6th - 8th grade; [The Book Thief](#) by Markus Zusak and the a speech, ["Hope, Despair and Memory."](#) by Elie Wiesel are recommended for study in the 9th and 10th grades.

I am especially concerned with use of *The Book Thief*, selected because of text complexity, before students have learned anything about the European Holocaust and I think social studies teachers, informed parents, and Holocaust educators need to be in an uproar about this. In a *New York Times* book review, [Janet Maslin](#) described it as "Harry Potter and the Holocaust." In one case I am familiar with an English/Language Arts class was reading *The Book Thief* and students were scheduled to watch and read [Hitler's Triumph of the Will](#) speech as a study of propaganda (theme) and as a supporting non-fiction text. I recommended that instead students could learn about Nazi propaganda with a brief quote on the "Big Lie" from *Mein Kampf* by Hitler or a statement on propaganda by Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels.

"In the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie." - [Adolph Hitler](#)

"It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and a psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. They are mere words, and words can be molded until they clothe ideas and disguise." - [Joseph Goebbels](#)

The [National Holocaust Memorial](#) in Washington DC recommends the following guidelines for teaching about the European Holocaust, none of which are met by teaching *The Book Thief* prior to historical examination of the events that took place.

Be sensitive to appropriate written and audiovisual content. One of the primary concerns of educators teaching the history of the Holocaust is how to present horrific images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the objective of the lesson. You should remind yourself that each student and each class is different and that what seems appropriate for one may not be appropriate for all . . . Some students may be so appalled by the images of brutality and mass murder that they are discouraged from studying the subject further. Others may become fascinated in a more voyeuristic fashion, subordinating further critical analysis of the history to the superficial titillation of looking at images of starvation, disfigurement, and death . . . There is also a tendency among students to glorify power, even when it is used to kill innocent people. Many teachers indicated that their students are intrigued and, in some cases, intellectually seduced by the symbols of power that pervaded Nazi propaganda (e.g., the swastika and/or Nazi flags, regalia, slogans, rituals, and music). Rather than highlight the trappings of Nazi power, you should ask you students to evaluate how such elements are used by governments (including our own) to build, protect, and mobilize a society. Students should also be encouraged to contemplate how such elements can be abused and manipulated by governments to implement and legitimize acts of terror and even genocide.

As a history teacher, an aspect of *The Book Thief* that I found particularly problematic was the use of "Death" as the narrator, especially given the "Harry Potter" or magical quality of the book. Apparently, Death is unhappy with what he is assigned to do and confides to readers "To me, war is like the new boss who expects the impossible." Death, the narrator, claims "that I picked up each soul that day as if they were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks. I listened to their last, gasping cries. Their vanishing words. I watched their love and freed them from their fear." But the reality is that death did not cradle their souls, kiss their cheeks, or calm their fears." I do not believe that is the lesson students should learn about the European Holocaust or genocide. At another point, Death tells readers "Even death has a heart." But Death does not have a heart, there is no way to make the European Holocaust less horrible, and genocide, which continues into the 21st century, should not be made less horrible.

The *New York Times Learning Network* developed a [lesson](#) comparing passages from *The Book Thief* with an article on the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum at the former Auschwitz death camp. Their lesson package contains a number of excellent questions, but they are questions I doubt whether students can answer based on their reading of *The Book Thief*.

What do you think Piotr Cywinski, the director of the museum, means when he says, "But there is another level of education, a level of awareness about the meaning of those facts. It's not enough to cry. Empathy is noble, but it's not enough."

Similarly, text complexity, when choosing books for students on topics such as the European Holocaust may be an important consideration, BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH.

In one soliloquy, Death tells readers "the sky was the color of Jews." That sky included the ashes of my family members. I do not know what color they made the sky. I cannot tell from the passage. And in the end, I am not really interested. I am just offended.