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Frozen in Sorrow: *Winterijs* [Winter ice] by Peter Van Gestel

TEKSTY DRUGIE 2024, NR 1, S. 221–238

DOI: 10.18318/td.2024.en.1.13 | ORCID: 0000-0001-8060-5728

Studying Holocaust fiction for young readers means touching upon the core characteristics of children’s literature. Various critics have identified in children’s literature about the Holocaust a crucial dilemma:¹ on the one hand, authors and educators cherish the desire to inform readers in a way that does justice to the atrocities of the persecution and genocide of Jewish people and that raises awareness in the young that history must not be repeated. On the other hand, children’s literature has a tradition of providing mostly optimistic, or at least hopeful, narratives that often put young people’s agency and growth central. These two perspectives cause friction in Holocaust literature for children. What Geoffrey Hartman calls “the limits of representation” may weigh in on children’s books even

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1 See, for example, Adrienne Kertzer, *My Mother’s Voice: Children, Literature and the Holocaust* (Ontario: Broadview, 2002); Lydia Kokkola, *Representing the Holocaust in Children’s Literature* (London: Routledge, 2003); Joanne Pettitt, “On Blends and Abstractions: Children’s Literature and the Mechanisms of Holocaust Representation,” *International Research in Children’s Literature* 7 (2) (2014): 152–164.

more than on literature for adults,² argues Katrien Vloeberghs.³ This observation helps to explain why until the 1970s, relatively few titles addressed the Holocaust for a young readership in Dutch literature. Since then, children's literature has seen a wave of fiction and non-fiction about the Second World War and the Holocaust, in which authors have to strike a balance between presenting history faithfully and respecting the emotional needs and capacities of child readers.

In this article, I will present an analysis of the Dutch children's novel *Winterijs* [Winter ice], authored by Peter van Gestel and first published in 2001.⁴ The novel tells the story of two ten-year-old Dutch boys, the narrator Thomas, and his new friend Zwaan. They meet at school in the city of Amsterdam in 1946. During the autumn and winter of 1946–1947, an extraordinary friendship develops between them that is based on a strange combination of attraction and repulsion, sadness and humour, and joint memories of their earliest childhood, which they discover together. Thomas is raised by his father and mourns the death of his mother, who died of typhoid fever. Thomas and his father mostly try to deal with their loss by suppressing their memories and grief. Zwaan is a victim of the Holocaust. He has spent most of the war in hiding and is now living with his aunt and cousin Bet. Zwaan has started to give up hope that his parents and uncle will return home after they have been deported. When Thomas's father has to move to Germany to earn some money, Thomas is temporarily housed by his aunt. In this period, his friendship with Zwaan and Bet intensifies and he gradually starts to retrieve more of his memories and gets a better understanding of his friend's grief. Thomas realizes that he had already met Zwaan when they were toddlers, and that Zwaan's former home, where they met, has been claimed by Dutch people who are not prepared to give it up to its former owners. Through such scenes, as well as many others, *Winterijs* [Winter ice] addresses the fraught process of personal and collective memory. At the end of the book, Zwaan leaves Amsterdam for New York to live with his uncle, sending Thomas a long letter that provides some explanations about his past and pays tribute to their friendship.

2 Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow. In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 151–152.

3 Katrien Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust: Een ontmoeting tussen Werkelijkheid en Weergave," in *Uitgelezen jeugdliteratuur: Een ontmoeting met traditie en vernieuwing*, ed. Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2008), 176.

4 Peter Van Gestel, *Winterijs* (Baarn: De Fontein, 2001) (all English translations are made by the author of this paper).

Winter Ice has received great critical acclaim. It was published in a period in which the Holocaust became a prominent theme in Dutch-language children's literature, with works by authors such as Roger Vanhoeck, Guy Didelez and Katrien Seynaeve, as well as various translations and reprints of older works (e.g. by Ida Vos). Few of these titles, however, have reached the cultural status that *Winterijs* holds in Dutch children's literature. It is one of few books to have won the two most important awards for Dutch children's literature, the Gouden Griffel (Golden Slate) and the Woutertje Pieterse Prijs (in 2002); in addition, it also received the biennial Nienke van Hichtumprijs in 2003. *Winter Ice* has been translated into various European languages, including Ukrainian and Russian, as well as Chinese and Korean, though it is not yet available in English. The novel has been particularly praised for its style of narration, which literary critic Joke Linders calls "effectief en geestig" [effective and humorous], as well as observant and precise.⁵ In this article, I explore how *Winter Ice* and its evocation of the Holocaust can be contextualized in the functions of children's literature as a literary discourse and in three tensions that Katrien Vloeberghs has identified in children's literature about the Holocaust. Thomas's narrative voice will be central to that analysis.

Three Functions, Three Domains of Tension

As Ann Rigney argues, creative arts have an important role in making past events "memorable," by "supplementing what has been documented with imaginative power and creatively using cultural forms to generate vibrant (if not always literally true) stories."⁶ Children's literature is such a cultural form that contributes to the commemoration of the Holocaust, while doing so within its own characteristics and conventions. All children's literature is marked by a combination of three different functions: didactic, recreative and aesthetic.⁷ The didactic function can take various forms: the books can impart knowledge, but also teach values, attitudes and desired behavior. Holocaust education fits into this didactic function on several levels, not just informing children about the facts of what happened in the 1930s and 1940s, but also provoking moral questions and fostering desired attitudes. Various children's

5 Joke Linders, "Ooit zal de sneeuw toch smelten: Winterijs van Peter van Gestel," *Literatuur zonder leeftijd* 16 (2002): 114–117; 115.

6 Ann Rigney, "Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic," *Memory Studies* 14 (1) (2021): 10–23; 12.

7 Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs, *Uitgelezen jeugdliteratuur: Een ontmoeting met traditie en vernieuwing* (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2008), 15–16.

books invite young readers to connect the persecution and murder of Jewish people in the past with prejudice, discrimination and genocide in the present, teaching them how to recognize xenophobia and spurring them to take action when they witness it.

In addition to this didactic impetus, children's literature also fulfils other functions which may seem at odds with accounts of the Shoah. As a field, children's literature emerged from John Locke's pedagogical principle of combining learning with play and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's admiration of childhood's innocent happiness.⁸ The notion of "play," which Katrien Vloeberghs and I catch under the broader term of the "recreative function" of children's literature, can also take various forms. It cannot be reduced to just "fun" but can be understood as a form of pleasure that is potentially evoked by various aspects of the story, such as humour, narrative tension and resolution, opportunities for identification and immersion in the narrative. Some of these kinds of pleasure are not incompatible with Holocaust fiction, even if it may feel paradoxical to derive "pleasure" from stories about this disturbing period in history. Finally, the aesthetic function of literature also applies to children's books about the Shoah. Their form – the language, style, narrative structure, but also the images – can elicit an experience of beauty or deep reflection and new insights in the reader.

In my analysis of *Winter Ice*, I will reflect on these three functions of children's literature in the context of three domains of tension that Katrien Vloeberghs has theorized specifically for children's books about the Holocaust. These tensions are structured around three parameters:

1. the epistemological level (knowing),
2. the psychological level (feeling),
3. the ethical level (acting).⁹

I will explain each of these parameters as I apply them to Van Gestel's novel. Interestingly, the book does not only contribute to the commemoration of the Holocaust, but also thematizes the (lack of) remembrance – an aspect of the novel that I will also address in my analysis.

Between Informing the Reader and Telling a Compelling Narrative

Vloeberghs explains that on an epistemological level, children's books face a tension between the need to pass on knowledge about the Holocaust on the

8 Karen Coats, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Children's and Young Adult Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 22–23.

9 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 177.

one hand and the need to provide a fictional narrative rather than the dry facts of a history book on the other.¹⁰ The didactic function may completely overrule the recreative function of children's literature if a book is overloaded with facts, or if those facts are shared in artificial dialogues that do not succeed in pulling in the reader. An additional risk arises from the tension between informing the reader on the one hand and producing an enticing narrative on the other. Some narratives, including books published for children, stage some of the horrific events in the Holocaust to raise the narrative tension, in a way that does not so much seem to serve the need to inform the reader as to produce a sensationalist narrative with spectacular moments of cruelty.¹¹

In the light of this careful and ethically complicated choice between informing the reader about disturbing historical facts and telling a compelling story, *Winter Ice* strikes a careful balance. It enlightens the reader about parts of the Holocaust that are essential to capture the characters' pain, while not going into so much detail that the storyline is obstructed or that the Holocaust is exploited for a sensationalist narrative. Peter Van Gestel's novel productively uses the "multiple addressee" of children's literature as well as a naïve narrator to achieve this balance. With the concept of the multiple addressee, I refine the concept of the double addressee that critics like Zohar Shavit and Barbara Wall have identified in children's literature.¹² It refers to the idea that children's books are not just read by children, but also by adults, and that the stories often provide layers that address the adult reader, sometimes along with, and sometimes also over the head of the child. Fiction about the Holocaust, such as *Winter Ice*, compels us to further refine this notion of the double addressee. Here it takes shape not necessarily in the distinction between a child and an adult; for a discussion of this fiction, it makes more sense to distinguish between a readership that has already been educated about the Holocaust, and those who know little or nothing about it.

The narrator of the book, ten-year-old Thomas, is in the latter position. His unreliability manifests itself in two aspects. First, he has little knowledge about the world around him and his country's very recent past. This ignorance can be attributed to his father's lack of communication skills, his aunt's discomfort to inform him, and the taboo on the Second World War in his school.

10 Ibid., 177.

11 Ibid., 184.

12 Zohar Shavit, *Poetics of Children's Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986/2009); Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

Van Gestel's novel offers an instance of what Anna Laura Stoler, with reference to colonialism, calls "disabled history," which results in aphasia.¹³ Stoler prefers these terms over "historical amnesia" because they draw attention to "both loss of access and active dissociation."¹⁴ Drawing on Stoler, Rigney describes the idea of "disabled history" as "a mnemonic pathology whereby people collectively fail to make sense of the evidence before their eyes and link it to what they already know about the past."¹⁵ This is exactly what happens in *Winter Ice*, where Van Gestel further complicates the idea of remembrance because his protagonists are children.

Thomas himself has developed a habit of downplaying what is important to him, especially when it comes to difficult memories. Understatements are his stylistic hallmark. His narrative opens as follows:

I'll just start with something. Over a year and a half ago my mother died.¹⁶

The casual tone that Thomas adopts when he talks about the death of his mother belies the pervasive way that this loss has turned his and his father's life upside down. He then describes how his father wanders around at night, thinking that Thomas is asleep, while the boy lies awake in his bed. While he catches his father talking to a frozen tap, the man seems unable to address his son – no proper conversation unfolds between the two of them. Instead, the frozen tap gives readers a first indication of the metaphor of frozen water that is also evoked in the title *Winter Ice*, and that can be interpreted as representing their inability to access their memories and emotions. This idea recalls Stoler's concept of aphasia:

In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken.¹⁷

13 Anna Laura Stoler. "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France," *Public Culture* 23 (1) (2011): 121–156.

14 *Ibid.*, 124–125.

15 Rigney, "Remaking Memory," 12.

16 Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 11. All translations from *Winterijs* are my own.

17 Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia," 125.

Thomas's and his father's failure to talk about the profound loss of a loved one is indicative of the general absence of direct communication in the book when it comes to addressing painful memories. Moreover, as we soon learn, Thomas is also forgetful, a trait he shares with his father, and often gets things wrong:

I always forget where I've put up my coat. When it's three o'clock, I often think: it must be four o'clock already.¹⁸

Such statements further serve to establish Thomas as an unreliable narrator, but also as a character who is modest and, given his grief and evasive father, whose ignorance and forgetfulness can be excused.

As the friendship between Thomas, Zwaan and Zwaan's cousin Bet develops, the young narrator's ignorance and forgetfulness serve a triple narrative purpose. First of all, until well into the novel, readers are left in the dark about what happened to the main characters and their family members during the Second World War. Any reader would expect Zwaan to have a mother and father and may wonder why he does not live with them; their curiosity may motivate them to read on. About a third into the book, Thomas starts wondering about Zwaan's family members himself – if readers hadn't asked themselves the same questions, they are invited to do so at that point. The question of what happened to Zwaan's parents and uncle creates narrative tension, which can yield a form of reading pleasure, even if the resolution of that tension is tragic.

As a second consequence of Thomas's ignorance, readers who have not been taught the facts of the Holocaust, learn about some of them as Thomas is being educated himself; and in fact, those who do know about the persecution of Jewish people by the Nazis, may still learn new things about how the German occupiers operated in collaboration with the Dutch. In this sense, *Winter Ice* may serve the didactic function of conveying knowledge. As Zwaan's cousin Bet explains to Thomas, her father was arrested, not by Germans, but by the Dutch police:

They put him on a transport to Poland, there they killed him, just like they killed uncle David and aunt Minnie and all the aunts and cousins and I don't know who else they have all killed.¹⁹

As Joanne Pettitt notes, trains often function metonymically in children's literature about the Holocaust: by evoking the journey eastwards, trains "allow the text to represent, without actually showing, the true horror of the

¹⁸ Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

atrocities and, by extension, they facilitate the necessary juxtaposition of appropriateness and didacticism.”²⁰ Bet here evokes the train, but also adds that the transport led her family to their deaths, without providing further details.

Gradually, the main characters are more informed about what happened to the Jewish people who were deported from Amsterdam and did not return: first Zwaan, who then tells Thomas, and with Thomas, also the reader. At the end of *Winter Ice*, after Zwaan has moved to live with his only surviving uncle in Brooklyn, New York, he shares more details with Thomas in a letter. In New York, he has met two Polish women who survived the concentration camps. While Zwaan never learns what happened to his parents specifically, he now realizes how many Jewish people were killed:

They told me about the corpses and the gas chambers in the camps with German names. Then uncle Aaron started crying. I didn't. I was glad I had finally heard something.²¹

Some readers might share the sentiment that Zwaan expresses, because it is only in the final pages that they finally learn more facts about the Holocaust.

Third, readers who have been educated about the Holocaust before reading *Winter Ice* will have inferred much sooner what happened to Jacob, David and Minnie Zwaan. Their Jewish names, their absence, and the silent grief of the older adults are all important clues that are distributed in the first chapters and that indicate that they have perished in the concentration camps. Once readers have made these connections, several conversations between Thomas and Zwaan produce a dramatic irony that may have a profound literary and emotional effect. At one point, for example, the two boys arrive at the Amsterdam train station. Thomas loves the atmosphere of the train platform and he enjoys imagining departing on a train; he does not understand why Zwaan does not share in his delight:

At a counter, I bought two platform tickets. Zwaan was standing behind me and kept grumbling, I couldn't hear a word he was saying.
I turned around and asked: 'What are you all nagging about?'
"Why am I doing this?" said Zwaan.
Still he went along with me to one of the platforms, as he kept shaking his head,
no no no.²²

²⁰ Pettitt, "On Blends and Abstractions," 158.

²¹ Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 234.

²² *Ibid.*, 119.

The informed reader will understand that Zwaan is not just grumbling and nagging, but that he is imagining the fate of the Jewish people – including his parents – deported from the station. Moreover, Zwaan may be recalling his own grief when he visited the station in the early days after the war, in the vain hope of his parents' return. He does not find the words to make clear to Thomas, however, that he does not want to enter the station, and as a consequence is dragged to a place and a set of memories he is trying to forget.

Even when Zwaan tries to explain his trauma to Thomas, he does not succeed in bringing across the facts of his family's deportation to his friend:

Zwaan looked very worried and resembled a little old man who has forgotten what errands he needs to run.

Zwaan pointed.

"There is the east," he said.

"What's with the east?"

"There is Central Europe. A year ago I came here with Bet every day. Then we would wait for the trains."

"Why?"

"You never knew. The Red Cross had said: some people come back."

"O," I said.

"You can say that again," said Zwaan.²³

In the passage that follows, Van Gestel privileges an aesthetic effect over a chance to share the facts about the Jewish transports with his readers. Thomas is observant but evasive, and fails to understand the situation because he cannot look beyond his own perspective. Zwaan decides to leave it at that for the moment:

"What's with Central Europe?"

"Nothing," said Zwaan.

He looked at me and winked the way only he can.

"I will make sure to tell you one day, Tommie."

I just left it at that – I felt it wasn't the right time to tell him my name is actually Thomas.²⁴

As a result of his ignorance, Thomas leads Zwaan into spaces and conversations that are extremely painful for the Jewish boy who has had his parents deported and murdered. The informed reader is invited to sympathize with

²³ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

Zwaan, and to admire the strength that he displays in reassuring Thomas – a strength that is put in a humorous contrast with Thomas’s pedantic thought about getting his name right.

As Alice Curry points out,

Novels can control the reader’s knowledge of, and access to, key events by adopting inherently naïve, ignorant or prejudiced focalizing or narrating voices. In doing so, they can manipulate the margins of the visible and the non-visible, creating a looming textual blind space through which the reader can explore the consequences of literal and ideological blindness.²⁵

Indeed, Thomas’s ignorance raises questions about his education and by extension, the “ideological blindness” affecting the Dutch after the Second World War. To what extent can he be considered complicit in “disabling” history? The ironic distance that separates informed readers from Thomas is not stretched to the point that they are likely to lose sympathy for the ignorant boy, however. Van Gestel can rely on the trope of childhood innocence here – a quality in children that is often admired and cherished, and for which Thomas seems to bear no blame. After all, what child could imagine the horrors of Auschwitz on its own?

At the same time, the passage shows that childhood innocence is a privilege that is only allowed to some children, and it illustrates the other side of the coin of adults who try to maintain childhood innocence. Since the adults who care for Thomas have not educated him, that burden lands on the shoulders of Zwaan. Zwaan is the same age as Thomas – ten years old – but he is “adultified” in this passage, that is, he is forced to take an adult role. This is first signaled by the comparison with a confused old man, and then by the knowing wink and reassuring message that Zwaan gives to Thomas. He is safeguarding Thomas’s innocence, while also putting him at ease at a moment when Zwaan himself is hurting. The diminutive “Tommie” signals that adultification as well. That Thomas rejects this sign of endearment shows his desire to be taken seriously, while it also underlines his inability to read the situation beyond his own perspective and to provide comfort to his traumatized friend. At the same time, however, Thomas’s more naïve take on life also allows Zwaan to experience some more carefree moments when they are together, for example when Thomas is making up stories for Zwaan or when they are fantasizing about girls they might fall in love with.

25 Alice Curry, “The ‘Blind Space’ That Lies Beyond the Frame: Anne Provoost’s *Falling* (1997) and John Boyne’s *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006),” *International Research in Children’s Literature* 31 (2010): 61–74; 62. See also Pettitt, “On Blends and Abstractions,” 160.

A Psychological Tension

The conversation between Thomas and Zwaan at the train station exemplifies a second tension that Katrien Vloeberghs identifies in children's literature about the Holocaust, one that can be situated on the psychological level and relates to the emotional impact that the stories aim for. This tension revolves around the need and the reticence to describe the horrors of the genocide faithfully, and the emotional impact that reading about the Holocaust may have on the reader.

In the words of pedagogue Chaim Schatzker: "The problem is how to present the truth without causing dangerous mental consequences – how to impress without traumatizing."²⁶ Vloeberghs identifies so-called "circles of Holocaust representation," with few children's books entering into its darkest center, the concentration camps and gas chambers, as the Jewish victims experienced them.²⁷ Instead, she lists recurrent motifs that appear in children's books, such as the infringement of Jewish characters' lives by the Nürenberg laws, the razzes on Jewish people, life in Jewish ghettos or people hiding in attics, secret rooms and farms.²⁸ The mass murder is sometimes addressed through metaphors, such as "the endless night" or as we have seen above, with metonymies, such as the departing trains.²⁹ Second and third-generation traumas are also a recurrent trend in recent children's literature.

Winter Ice uses an array of techniques to create distance and mitigate the potential emotional impact of the gruesome events of the Holocaust on young readers. First of all, by situating the main events in the years after the war, the novel reassures the reader from the start that the main young characters have survived. This takes away the – sometimes unbearable – tension of following Jewish characters as they are being persecuted and killed, as is the case in Gudrun Pausewangs' *Reise im August* [The final journey, 1998] and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006). When Thomas and Zwaan become friends, the war has ended and Zwaan has already given up hope that his parents will return. The story puts his acceptance, commemoration and grieving central. Moreover, all of the characters who have perished in the novel are adults, not children with whom young readers may identify more easily and directly.

26 Schatzker, cited in Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 180.

27 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 182–183.

28 Ibid., 181–182.

29 Ibid., 183.

Moreover, while Bet does tell Thomas that “they killed an infinite number of people, an infinite number of children and baby’s too,” those numbers remain vague and the murdered children remain anonymous.³⁰ Instead of confronting readers with unbearable tension or gruesome scenes, *Winter Ice* relies on what Alice Curry calls “blind space” and what Wolfgang Iser calls “gaps” in the narrative to elicit an emotional response in the reader. The conversation at Amsterdam train station is one instance of such a blind space. As Zwaan and Thomas listen to Al Jolson’s *Sonny Boy*, another gap appears. Zwaan explains how during the German occupation, he was moved to Deventer, where he spent most of the war in hiding:

“[...] He [Al Jolson – V. S.]’s singing about the angels who are feeling lonely and therefore want Sonny Boy back in heaven, very pitiful and very beautiful, oh well. My father said, he said: Sonny, the angels aren’t getting you, what are they thinking – tomorrow we are going to Deventer, by bike.”
 “By bike all the way to another city?”
 “Yes, he didn’t find the train very pleasant and he insisted that he wanted it to be a pleasant day.”³¹

The emotional impact of this passage lies in what is not said rather than in what is said, and it takes readers who have mastered theory and mind and feel empathy to fill these gaps and grasp the full emotional load of the scene. They might infer that Zwaan’s father was lying about his reasons for going by bike, as the two Jewish characters might have faced a greater risk of being checked on the train. To phrase this risk in terms of pleasant and unpleasant (“gezellig” in Dutch) is a serious understatement, though his desire to have a pleasant day with his son can nevertheless still be true. After all, from what we later learn about David (Zwaan’s father), he was highly aware that he and his wife would probably be deported if they stayed in Amsterdam. This means that David also realized that the bike ride to Deventer was possibly the last day he got to spend with his son. Rather than filling it with sadness, he wanted it to be a day of joy, both on his own behalf as for the child. From the way Zwaan describes it, David has succeeded in imprinting that last day as a good memory on his son. The emotional impact is not achieved through shocking the reader, but rather through the appeal to slow reading and empathy – otherwise a significant passage like the one just quoted can easily be missed.

³⁰ Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 152.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

Human Agency

It is through empathy that the book also revolves the third tension that Katrien Vloeberghs identifies, namely the ethical level, on which she situates questions of meaningful human agency:

That dimension relates to the message that authors want to convey to their target audience of children and adolescents when it comes to human nature, the way people behave towards each other, which factors lead to certain behavior, and so forth. Probably the negotiation on the level of the description of human behavior is also the most impactful, that on which the fewest answers are found.³²

Children's literature has a tradition of showing children as beings with agency despite adult control and it typically displays strong faith in human progress and future hope. Vloeberghs confronts this tradition with the fundamental questions that the Holocaust has raised about humanist worldviews, as phrased by the author Primo Levi and the philosopher Jürgen Habermas.³³ How can children's books still offer faith in humanity in the light of a historical event that shook this belief to its core?

Winter Ice can only succeed in this by largely ignoring the perspective of the perpetrators, pushing the crimes of the Holocaust to the margins, and focusing instead on the trauma of the survivors and the power of empathy to foster human connections and give meaning to life. As mentioned above, the events described in *Winter Ice* mostly take place after the war. The main characters are victims, children, or conscientious objectors (like Thomas's father). Readers are not directly confronted with any perpetrators of crimes against humanity. That being said, the novel does evoke a feeling of frustration that no one is held accountable. Not all forms of forgetfulness in the novel can be excused. After the war, Zwaan moved in with his aunt and cousin, but together with Thomas, he visits the house in Amsterdam where he grew up with his parents. The Dutch couple that lives there gets angry when Thomas and Zwaan stare through their windows. The house has been robbed and taken over, and this situation is not amended or wreaked after the war. Moreover, some Dutch people, including the boys' teacher and some of their classmates, still express antisemitic feelings. Even a tragedy like the Holocaust has not cured them of those kinds of prejudices, and they are not penalized for it. Zwaan and his family are still met with disdain, in addition to pity.

³² Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 187–188 (all English translations are mine).

³³ *Ibid.*, 188.

Various children's books on the Holocaust cast child protagonists who ask critical questions when adults dare not do so, Vloeberghs finds, and thus the children exemplify a humanist spirit of goodness combined with rational and ethical thinking.³⁴ That is not the case for Thomas and Zwaan, whose communication is fraught, as I have already shown. While Thomas sometimes asks pertinent questions, he is also often evasive and does not push through when his inquisitive spirit is discouraged. Zwaan and Thomas do manage to stand up to the antisemitic bully in their classroom, but they are still highly at the mercy of adult decisions, for example when Thomas has to live with his aunt or when Zwaan moves to Brooklyn. The children's agency lies in their potential for empathy, in the distraction they can provide for each other, and in the fact that they cannot only discuss, but also create memories together, thus providing a powerful counterpart to the sadness in Zwaan's life. *Winter Ice* thus bears witness to an important aspect of artistic works that address traumatic events of the past that Rigney highlights. In her discussion of narratives about colonialism, she remarks:

It bears highlighting, however, given the emphasis in memory studies on traumatic experiences, that creativity is being used here not just to build empathic bridges to the *sufferings* of others but also to their desires and pleasures. [...] artists can also use their medium creatively to open perspectives beyond trauma. By staging moments of joy, excitement and the hope of happiness on the part of willful subjects who are also interesting personalities, artists make it easier to keep company with strangers. This provides different, more positive, and potentially more durable grounds for memorability than an abstract imperative to remember the lives of "others."³⁵

After Zwaan has left the Netherlands for Brooklyn to live with his only surviving uncle, Thomas is left feeling lonely and disoriented. Zwaan writes a long letter to offer an explanation and comfort:

Do you know what it is, Thomas. I had no memories in the Netherlands. Deventer was nothing more than a memory of a few minutes, you see? I didn't know anyone from before. I knew nothing about nurseries and the like, nothing about playing in the streets. Now, here in America I do have memories. I remember that stroll we took through the city with Bet. I remember that nice movie.³⁶

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁵ Rigney, "Remaking Memory," 17.

³⁶ Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 232.

The end of the novel suggests that Thomas and Zwaan's agency lies in their potential to create meaningful memories and use these as a basis for friendship and personal resilience. *Winter Ice* fits into a preoccupation that various critics, including Britta Jung, have identified in recent fiction about the Holocaust.³⁷ The books do not just present memories, but thematize the act of remembrance. At the same time, in *Winter Ice*, the capacity to remember is presented as complex, capricious, and fraught. Previous passages from the novel destabilize the hope that Zwaan offers in his letter about the memories he will cherish. Earlier in the book, it is discussed how quickly such memories can fade. Neither boy can really remember his deceased mother well, for example. Zwaan explains that he can still remember his father's hat and coat,

"But my mother," he continued after a while, "jeez, that was hard, I had so many aunts after all, I got confused when I thought about her, well when I wanted to think about her [...]. Do I not want to remember or am I unable to remember?"³⁸

One might think that this lack of memories is due to Zwaan's young age the last time he saw his mother – probably at the age of five or six. However, even a year after Thomas's mother has passed away and despite his older age, he has the same problem:

"[...] What did your mother look like?"
 "I wasn't paying attention to that," I said.
 "If you squeeze your eyes shut, can you see her then?"
 I squeezed my eyes shut. I did so out of kindness, because I wasn't expecting too much. Thinking is different from seeing. [...]
 "My mother always had wet hands," I said.
 "How do you know?"
 "She would pinch my nose a whole damn lot."³⁹

The memories of the boys are patchy and unsentimental, and what is remembered is not necessarily what one wants to recall. This makes it questionable what will remain of the memories they created together.

There is some hope, however, that their friendship will not be forgotten despite the fact that they may never meet again. A first sign of hope lies in

37 Britta Jung, "Een nieuwe lust in het vertellen: Het 'Derde Rijk' in de hedendaagse Duitse jeugdliteratuur," *Literatuur zonder Leeftijd* 25 (2011): 64–86.

38 Van Gestel, *Winterijs*, 133.

39 *Ibid.*, 133.

the book's structure: it is told retrospectively, a few months after the friends have been abruptly separated and Zwaan has left for New York. The ice has melted, and the suffocating heat makes it difficult to recall the cold winter that Thomas and Zwaan spent together, but when Thomas gets a long letter from Zwaan, that triggers him to tell the story of their friendship in all its details. Second, if we tread outside of the limits of the book, Van Gestel also claimed the novel was based on his own memories from childhood, supplemented with elements from a diary that his mother kept.⁴⁰ Only after the war did he discover that his own father was half Jewish. While Van Gestel's own father survived, one of his uncles was killed in the Holocaust. In secondary school, Van Gestel befriended a Jewish boy, but they did not talk much about the war. Moreover, as Joke Linders has noted, "the book is dedicated to Daniel K, a friend of Van Gestel's five-year older brother, who died in Auschwitz."⁴¹ This autobiographical link once again makes clear the tension between the Holocaust faithfully and respecting the conventions of children's literature: while the real child Daniel (Danny) did not survive Auschwitz, his fictional counterpart Zwaan was able to go into hiding and live. Just as Zwaan and Thomas first encountered each other at a birthday party when they were toddlers, Peter van Gestel met the Jewish boy Daniel at a young age, and he still had very vague memories of that party.⁴² This shows that some memories can make such a strong impression that they do not only stay with you for a lifetime, but that they can compel you to write. His memory of Daniel was one of those, and one can expect that within the fictional realm of the novel, the friendship between Thomas and Zwaan will have made a similar strong impression, that may change over time, but cannot be washed away.

Conclusion

When Thomas is in Zwaan's house, he thinks at one point: "Nee, dacht ik, ik ga er geen mooi verhaal van maken" [No, I won't turn this into a beautiful story], a thought that echoes reservations about the desirability and

40 Joukje Akveld, "'Het zijn de schrijvers die tellen, niet de genres': Een interview met Peter van Gestel over het autobiografische gehalte van *Winterijs*," *Literatuur zonder leeftijd* 15 (2003): 89–94; 89.

41 Joke Linders, "Peter van Gestel," *Lexicon van de jeugdliteratuur* (2007): 1–10; 8, accessed May 30, 2023, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/coiloo1lexio1_01/lvdj00353.php.

42 Joke Linders, "'Het zijn de schrijvers die tellen, niet de genres': Een interview met Peter van Gestel over het autobiografische gehalte van *Winterijs*," *Literatuur zonder leeftijd* 17 (2003): 89–94; 92.

possibility of representing the suffering of Holocaust victims and survivors through art.⁴³ While Van Gestel puts limits to the facts of the Shoah that he chooses to represent in his book (for example by opting out of evoking the real Daniel K.'s life more faithfully), a beautiful story is exactly what he tells in the end, through Thomas's narrative voice. *Winter Ice* turns the aesthetic function of children's literature into a form of reading pleasure by relying on a narrator who is naïve and uneducated, but also witty, well-meaning and gradually more understanding of Zwaan's pain. The novel's aesthetic appeal does not lie in a polished or sentimental plot, but in its frictions and gaps. It privileges the aesthetic over its didactic function, and relies on readers' capacities to read between the lines. In *Winter Ice*, Van Gestel seems to have struck a careful balance in all three fields of tension that Vloeberghs identifies in children's fiction about the Holocaust: by informing his readers about the genocide of the Jewish people without overburdening the plot (what Vloeberghs calls the epistemological level of tension), by respecting the emotional vulnerability of some his readership (the psychological tension) and by acknowledging some people's oblivion to Jewish people's suffering, while showing that human connections are possible and that they can offer comfort and hope in meaningful ways (the ethical level). In striking this delicate balance, Van Gestel has produced one of the most widely lauded novels on the Holocaust written in Dutch – one that remains relevant over 20 years since its first publication.

43 Vloeberghs, "Kinder- en jeugdliteratuur over de Holocaust," 175–176.

Abstract

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Frozen in Sorrow: Winterijs [Winter ice] by Peter Van Gestel

Peter Van Gestel's *Winterijs* [Winter ice] from 2001 is one of the most lauded Dutch children's books. This article contextualizes its evocation of the Holocaust in the didactic, recreational and aesthetic functions of children's literature, and in the epistemological, psychological and ethical tensions that Katrien Vloeberghe identifies in children's literature about the Holocaust. *Winter Ice* informs readers about the Shoah without overburdening the plot and by respecting readers' emotional vulnerability. Its naïve, witty narrator is central to this process. While acknowledging malice, indifference and memory's fallibility, *Winter Ice* suggests that human connections are possible and offer comfort and hope in meaningful ways.

Keywords

children's literature, Dutch literature, Holocaust, memory, aesthetics