

THE MAIN ARTICLE

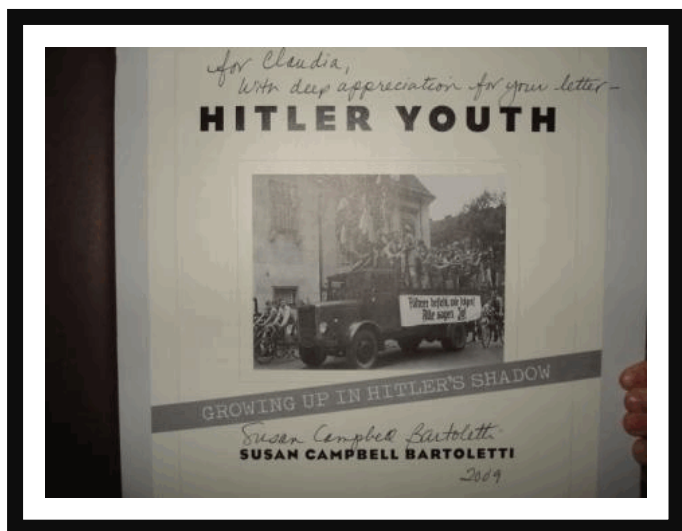
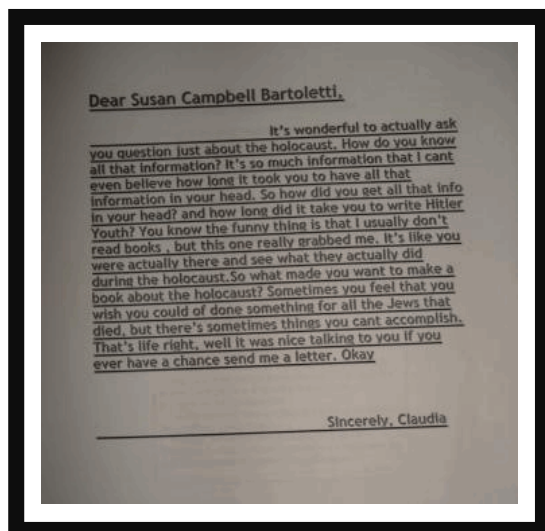
Using Holocaust Literature to Develop Critical and Visual Literacies

by Mrs. Bentheim, 6th Grade Reading/Accelerated Reading Teacher

Since the beginning of the second semester, my students have been involved in an in-depth study of the Holocaust through the examination of primary sources, the reading of personal accounts of survival and demise, independent research, class discussions and Socratic seminars, the creation of individual Holocaust learning pages on our class website that serve as compelling records of individual learning, the writing of original newspaper articles about the Holocaust that were assembled into class newspapers, the use of web 2.0 tools for literature response, the viewing of a related film and documentaries, and through examination of self-selected fiction and non-fiction books from the school library media center, among other things.

After we built a solid foundation of background knowledge about the Holocaust, we started reading our first class novel on this topic. I chose the young adult book, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, by John Boyne, to help enhance student understanding of such an incomprehensible part of history. The author captures innocence and naivety splendidly so we were able to see the Holocaust through the lens of a nine-year-old boy. Within a very short time, students were captivated by the story and were authentically using their speaking, reading, and writing skills to infer, question, summarize, respond, reflect, connect, and most important, to think critically.

Some students took a profound interest and grew particularly attached to this topic and related themes such as bullying, discrimination, conscious choices, and so on. One student, Claudia, fell in love with a self-selected book from our school library called *Hitler Youth* by Susan Campbell Bartoletti. When Claudia learned I was going to meet the author, she decided to write a letter to her. The letter was incredibly moving and demonstrated how children will rise to the occasion to read books of interest, no matter how difficult the text. I shared Claudia's letter with the author at our gathering at UNLV and she was touched by Claudia's enthusiasm and interest in reading. She was so excited, in fact, that she signed a copy of *Hitler Youth* for Claudia so that I could present it to her.



As the fourth quarter dawns, we're beginning our second novel that addresses a child's view of the Holocaust. The novel, *The Boy Who Dared*, also by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, is one of the most honest and accurate accounts written about the Hitler Youth movement and will undoubtedly help my students further understand the pressures of youth, the consequences of choices, and the overall environment during the reign of Hitler.

Our learning experiences during the past few months will culminate with a final project that requires students to select three literature response strategies where choices range from creating a digital scrapbook, to writing an instant message conversation between two characters, to creating a digital book talk/digital story about one of our books, to designing costumes for key characters, and so on. Each response strategy will then be followed up with a written reflection where the student tells why he or she chose that option, explains his or her design and content choices, and justifies his or her position with evidence from the novel.

Visit our class at www.MrsBentheim.com.

THE SIDEBAR (in a box or something)

Student Voices

The following comments have been pulled directly from student reflections about their Holocaust learning thus far:

"I feel really sad and disgusted with Bruno's father from *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. I'm sad because Bruno didn't know what he was getting himself into. Then I'm disgusted with Bruno's father because he couldn't tell Bruno the truth about the camps. I also feel like I should have done something to stop Bruno ..."

"Why do the Jews get punished for their looks and their religion? I feel so sad about all of those innocent people dying for no reason. Are there people still like Hitler in the world?"

"Before winter break started, Mrs. Bentheim told us to learn a little bit about the Holocaust. I didn't even know what it was! I looked it up on the internet and I thought oh, it's a war. BUT THEN...when we actually started talking about it and I started getting interested! In class, I picked a Holocaust fiction book about a girl who was given a doll, and everything changed for her when the Holocaust started. It got me THINKING how brave the kids were, to be able to go another country WITHOUT parents, not knowing if they were going to live through it (but really hoping they did). I don't know what I would have done without my parents."