



BOOK REVIEW:

*Imagining the Unimaginable: Speculative
Fiction and the Holocaust*

Graham Minenor-Matheson

Morgan, Glyn. *Imagining the Unimaginable: Speculative Fiction and the Holocaust*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. ISBN 978-1501350542.

It's said that ignorance is bliss, but an ignorance of history has the potential to reap untold misery as the wheel of history turns to repeat cycles of violence. A recent study of Holocaust knowledge among Millennials and Gen Z in the United States found that 63% of respondents "did not know that six millions Jews were murdered", while 36% thought the number was lower; 48% couldn't name a single concentration camp (Taylor) despite images of the Holocaust being abundant across Western cultural output. This is why Glyn Morgan's book *Imagining the Unimaginable* is both timely and important as it investigates "key works" of SF that "try to represent the Holocaust and attempt to say something meaningful about the pre-eminent genocide in human history" (3). As the collective memory of this tragedy fades, either through the distance of time or the deaths of witnesses and victims, Morgan's book serves as a reminder that fiction can shock us into remembrance.

Imagining the Unimaginable has been written in what Morgan argues is a "new phase in our relationship with the Holocaust", a post-survivor age where we must relearn the "horrors of war and genocide" (3). SF is a useful tool with which the field of Holocaust studies can examine its central event because, as Morgan argues, without "survivors to offer fresh insights and reinvigorate debates with personal insight" (9), other ways of transmitting such experience need to be sought. *Imagining the Unimaginable* is the first academic book to focus on representations of the Holocaust within SF and, as such, is important for SF studies. Morgan's analytical focus is on novels from the "alternate history

and the dystopia” fields, with a special focus on Anglo-American works because US and UK experiences of the Second World War were different from those of the nations in Europe, as they “experienced neither occupation or collaboration” (3). He separates the book into four themed chapters bookended by an introduction and epilogue. The first chapter describes the plot of Katherine Burdekin’s (writing as Murray Constantine) *Swastika Night* before discussing other works of speculative fiction that imagine Nazi Germany as victorious in WWII. Chapter Two analyses texts that problematise history by forcing the reader to ask questions of historical narratives: not their truth claims but rather their methods of being told. Following this, Chapter Three analyses texts that focus on retributive justice and the possibility of saving some victims of the Holocaust; the final chapter of the book presents novels that have a more contemporary feel, as they relate stories of fascism slowly rising in America.

A reading of Morgan’s book reveals two overarching themes. The first is silence; the second, darkness. Despite the seeming ubiquity of texts (novels, films, etc.) about the Holocaust that pervade popular culture, speaking about it has approached the level of myth. This myth suggests that the Holocaust is an event so unimaginable that silence is the only appropriate response. However, as Morgan shows, despite the “requirement of silence” being championed by survivors (4), a considerable number of stories were written in the immediate aftermath of the war. The second theme in *Imagining the Unimaginable*, darkness, makes for uncomfortable reading because of *how* dark that subject matter can be, but coming to terms with atrocity requires staring into its disturbing depths. The inevitable experience of reading darkness is a necessary product of doing the work of remembering.

In the introduction, Morgan introduces us to silence as a key theoretical tool, which he argues is a common method to discuss the Holocaust (4-5). Intriguingly, Morgan calls upon two intellectual scholars, Elie Wiesel and the historian Saul Friedländer, to show how silence has been invoked in different ways to – paradoxically – *explain* the Holocaust. For Wiesel, silence is how he came to start writing, while Friedländer targets the silence of the international community to Hitler’s starkly antisemitic speeches and the prevailing antisemitism “across Europe” (5). Silence also reduces the powers of language to explain the horrors of the Holocaust, but it is through language that silence has its greatest power, because this is where we create meaning. Quoting the poet Paul Celan, Morgan informs us that language is incapable of providing – or rather *overlaying* – meaning to the Holocaust (6). This silence helps to explain why survivors such as Wiesel are able to process their experience for us, yet at the same time such explanations are insufficient because it would take an “infinite number of works of literature to represent the vast multiplicity of voices and experiences that constitute the Holocaust” (5).

Chapter One expands on silence through a lengthy discussion of Burdekin’s novel, *Swastika Night*, a text that Morgan argues is startling because it was actually written before the start of the WWII yet “closely foreshadows the historical treatment of Holocaust victims” (22); the novel is important for Morgan given how “closely it mirrors many of the dehumanizing tactics employed in the Holocaust” (23). This chapter is further enriched through Morgan’s discussion of obscure and unpublished novels in the decade after the end of the Second World War. These stories, on the whole, dispel the idea that discussing the Holocaust and Nazism was a taboo subject during the

war's immediate aftermath. At the same time, Morgan argues that the public was also unwilling to be reminded of the trauma, as can be attested by Noel Coward's unsuccessful play *Peace In Our Time*, which speaks of "liquidation" and was described by friends of the playwright as being "too horrible to put England in such a position" (28). What would have been useful here, though, is a discussion of Stanislaw Lem, who had a complex relationship with the Holocaust, and his work is arguably reflected in Morgan's argument of the myth of silence. A Lemian perspective of the Holocaust can show that distance (whether of time or of physical, ethnic, or political distance) permits a greater freedom with which to be critical of and reflect on one of the most difficult and barbaric events in history. Lem's experience of the Holocaust and the political environment of censorship in which he lived and wrote had dramatic effects on what he could, and wanted, to say about the Holocaust. Although Lem refused to discuss his Holocaust experience, his writing reveals a great deal, scattered through metaphor, across his output. This is a good example of the kind of silence that Morgan talks about in Chapter One because, in Lem's fiction, the brutal conditions and experience are reflected through vivid descriptions that never directly name the Holocaust nor identify its victims as Jews (Middleton-Kaplan 2020). Yet, ultimately, this neglect of Lem is only a mild critique of Morgan's chapter.

Chapter Two, "Problematizing History", analyses three alternative history novels from three very different writers: *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, *Fatherland* by Robert Harris, and *Making History* by Stephen Fry. Although these alternative histories all imagine the Nazis as victorious, they do not immediately stand out as being related, but Morgan informs us that each asks questions about history and the nature of evil. While not providing any answers, they see history as something that should be used to ask bigger questions about morality. These three novels question the Holocaust-as-Evil-Absolute idea by imagining something worse, and, as such, they challenge the "Holocaust's status as the incomparable and exceptional ultimate evil" (68). One way this is done, for example in *The Man in the High Castle*, is through imagining an African genocide but one that is obliquely referred to, hinting yet again at a new dimension of silence. What is particularly good about this chapter is Morgan's interweaving of other similar texts, such as Guy Saville's *The Afrika Reich*, which Morgan uses as a comparative to highlight the horror in Dick's imagery.

The third chapter, "The Damned and the Saved", takes a more "positive" (72) theme by dealing with texts that envision escaped Nazis being hunted down and brought to justice (Hitler-on-trial novels) or victims being saved from the Holocaust. The positive tone of this chapter is laced with a darkness differently barbaric and traumatic to the previous chapters, as many of the novels present a "different dystopia" (99) or "the denial of the happy ending" (100). Discussing *The Boys from Brazil* by Ira Levin, Morgan opens by reporting on evidence that Simon Wiesenthal found of minor SS officials receiving enormous deposits of Reichsmarks into hidden accounts for the "building of a Fourth Reich" (73), describing a sophisticated infrastructure to enable their escape. After the war, collaborators with the Nazis also escaped justice. Recent academic studies by Per Anders Rudling have found that veterans of the Ukrainian chapter of the Nazi Waffen-SS were granted asylum in Canada, and these studies argue that this unit was responsible for war crimes in Poland, massacring a village called

Huta Pieniacka, despite having numerous monuments dedicated to its “heroism” in the West (Rudling). While the focus, both in real life and in fiction, has been on capturing Nazis in hiding around the world, collaborators like those attached to the Waffen-SS not only evade justice but live free from the stain of collaboration. If one reason alone were needed for the timeliness of Morgan’s book, then the knowledge that such groups exist in Western society should be enough to remind us that, yes, it could happen here.

The final chapter, “Reimagining Horror”, continues the underlying theme of darkness by examining four novels: *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth, *Farthing* by Jo Walton, *A Man Lies Dreaming* by Lavie Tidhar, and *J* by Howard Jacobson. All four focus on political currents recognizable in our contemporary moment rather than on alternative histories involving Hitler and a victorious Nazi Germany. This chapter takes the “it couldn’t happen here” principle and showcases writers who portray Fascism slowly creeping to become the dominant political ideology in America and Britain. This is particularly evident in Roth’s *The Plot Against America*, which depicts the rise of homegrown fascism through famous historical figures like Charles Lindbergh taking power through democratic processes – a scenario that brings to mind Michael Rosen’s dictum that “Fascism arrives as your friend/It will restore your honour/make you feel proud” (2014). Scholars of fascism and the radical right in America have traced how such extremist movements have gained political legitimacy through the mainstreaming of extremist discourses via organisations like the John Birch Society, Willis Carto, and operations like *Reason* magazine that co-opt leftist rhetoric (Kettler 198-99). Written in 2004, Roth’s novel is of contemporary relevance through its emphasis on the “feelings of existential dread that authoritarianism provokes” (107), and it is precisely the societal upheavals and the “growing climate of fear” that Morgan argues is an important factor in shaping the “dangers of such trends” continuing (144).

Whilst Morgan limits his object of study to novels, many of his texts have nonetheless been adapted into either movies or television series, expanding both audience and medium. It would have been interesting to see what comparisons or differences between adaptations Morgan might have identified. For instance, the recent adaptation of Roth’s *The Plot Against America* could have been used to show how television and novels operationalise feelings of dread. However, this is a minor criticism of what is a thorough and well-written work of scholarship that turns the myth of silence into a resounding yell and should be a core text for courses that teach SF. By examining texts that imagine the unimaginable, Morgan reveals the necessity of being reminded of atrocities through the medium of fiction: the “incomprehensibility of atrocity” (56) will become comprehensible unless we are presented with the shocking truth. Alternative fiction is an ideal means to explore the horrific and the unimaginable precisely because the power of narrative to shape reality has real-world consequences, as shown all too clearly by conservative media ecology, conspiracy theories, and Trump rallies. If the Holocaust is impossible to understand except through direct experience, Morgan’s book is a timely intervention to remind us that, not only *should* it be understood in this post-survivor age, but we have a readily available library of texts to set us on the proper path.

Biography: Graham Minenor-Matheson holds a degree in International Relations from Birkbeck College and a Master’s in Global Media Studies from

Stockholm University. He is currently pursuing a Master's in Media, Communication and Cultural Analysis from Södertörn University. His Master's thesis examined the growing influence of think tanks in broadcast television news. He cites his main research interests as being the work of Ursula K. Le Guin and Philip K. Dick.

Works Cited

- Kettler, Andrew. "Against the Fascist Creep." Review of *Against the Fascist Creep*, by Alexander Reid Ross. *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2017, pp. 197–200.
- Middleton-Kaplan, Richard. "Refractions of Holocaust Memory in Stanisław Lem's Science Fiction." *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*, edited by Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998, pp. 287-304.
- Rosen, Michael. "Fascism: I sometimes fear..." 18 May 2014, <http://michaelrosenblog.blogspot.com/2014/05/fascism-i-sometimes-fear.html>. Accessed 8 Nov. 2020.
- Rudling, Per Anders. "'They Defended Ukraine': The 14. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (Galizische Nr. 1) Revisited." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2012, pp. 329–68.
- Taylor, Gideon. "First-ever 50-state Survey on Holocaust Knowledge of American Millennials and Gen Z Reveals Shocking Results." *Claims Conference: Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany*, 16 Sept. 2020, www.claimscon.org/millennial-study/. Accessed 27 Oct. 2020.