



Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays

By Lawrence L. Langer

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In the face of the Holocaust, writes Lawrence L. Langer, our age clings to the stable relics of faded eras, as if ideas like natural innocence, innate dignity, the inviolable spirit, and the triumph of art over reality were immured in some kind of immortal shrine, immune to the ravages of history and time. But these ideas have been ravaged, and in *Admitting the Holocaust*. Langer presents a series of essays that represent his effort, over nearly a decade, to wrestle with this rupture in human values--and to see the Holocaust as it really was. His vision is necessarily dark, but he does not see the Holocaust as a warrant for futility, or as a witness to the death of hope. It is a summons to reconsider our values and rethink what it means to be a human being.

These penetrating and often gripping essays cover a wide range of issues, from the Holocaust's relation to time and memory, to its portrayal in literature, to its use and abuse by culture, to its role in reshaping our sense of history's legacy. In many, Langer examines the ways in which accounts of the Holocaust--in history, literature, film, and theology--have extended, and sometimes limited, our insight into an event that is often said to defy understanding itself. He singles out Cynthia Ozick as one of the few American writers who can meet the challenge of imagining mass murder without flinching and who can distinguish between myth and truth. On the other hand, he finds Bernard Malamud's literary treatment of the Holocaust never entirely successful (it seems to have been a threat to Malamud's vision of man's basic dignity) and he argues that William Styron's portrayal of the commandant of Auschwitz in *Sophie's Choice* pushed Nazi violence to the periphery of the novel, where it disturbed neither the author nor his readers. He is especially acute in his discussion of the language used to describe the Holocaust, arguing that much of it is used to console rather than to confront. He notes that when we speak of the survivor instead of the victim, of martyrdom instead of murder, regard being gassed as dying with dignity, or evoke the redemptive rather than grievous power of memory, we draw on an arsenal of words that tends to build verbal fences between what we are mentally willing--or able--to face and the harrowing reality of the camps and ghettos. A respected Holocaust scholar and author of *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, winner of the 1991 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, Langer offers a view of this catastrophe that is candid and disturbing, and yet hopeful in its belief that the testimony of witnesses--in diaries, journals, memoirs, and on videotape--and the unflinching imagination of literary artists can still offer us access to one of the darkest episodes in the twentieth century.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The Holocaust cannot be recounted in terms of heroic dignity, moral courage or triumph of the human spirit; the Nazis' systematic murder of six million Jews, among millions of others, makes concepts such as resistance or moral growth largely inapplicable. This central theme pervades Langer's gripping, often profound essays, all of which have been published in scholarly journals in the last decade; the pieces scrutinize accounts of the Holocaust in survivors' and victims' testimonies, memoirs, fiction, films and plays. Langer, whose *Holocaust Testimonies* won a National Book Critics Circle award in 1991, praises Cynthia Ozick for her unflinching representation of the Nazi genocide, but he argues that Bernard Malamud's "conventional moral vision" insulated him to the enormity of Nazi evil. Langer also rips William Styron's portrayal, in *Sophie's Choice*, of Auschwitz commandor Rudolf Hoess, who, in Langer's reading, almost seems "a man otherwise decent and polite" when he wasn't killing Jews and Poles. He perceives a "language of consolation" in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*, and analyzes strategies of mitigation or frank confrontation in Primo Levi, D.M. Thomas, Peter Weiss, Aharon Appelfeld, Tadeusz Borowski, Viktor Frankl and others.

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From Library Journal

In this superb collection of essays, Langer (*Holocaust Testimonies*, Yale Univ. Pr., 1991) offers a penetrating analysis of how many Western intellectuals and writers have sought to come to terms with the Holocaust. He argues that they have created, in their novels, stories, and films, a morally manageable version of the Holocaust rather than an unadorned yet honest view of mass murder without historical parallel. His pieces cover a wide range of topics such as the relationship of the Holocaust to time and memory, its portrayal in popular culture, its dimensions in literature, and the ways in which the Holocaust has reshaped our sense of history. He is at his best in an essay on Cynthia Ozick, whom he regards as one of the few writers who has honestly sought to imagine in her work the genuine moral depths of the Holocaust. Also first-rate is his essay on the Americanization of the Holocaust on the stage and in films. For all collections.

Mark Weber, Kent State Univ. Lib., Ohio

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In a statement that boldly indicates his approach to the Holocaust, Langer says, "Despite its candid representation of the ordeal of Jews during World War II, even a blunt film like *Schindler's List* decides to leave us with memories of a healing wound rather than a throbbing scar." According to Langer, too many historical and cultural representations of the Nazis' murders try, by portraying the Jewish victims as dignified martyrs, to introduce the notion of spiritual redemption into accounts of atrocities that need to be confronted without moral oversimplification. In his assessments, Langer analyzes many of the novels about the death camps, tellingly criticizing William Styron and Bernard Malamud and praising Cynthia Ozick as well as Polish author Tadeusz Borowski for their depictions of the era. Describing historical studies of the Holocaust, Langer objects to the use of "abstract formulas like 'the murder of 6 million'" and says accounts of the destruction of European Jewry should be told in graphic detail to present and future generations. A horribly bleak, undeniably important book. *Aaron Cohen*

Users Review

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