

THE AMERICAN HOMEFRONT OF WORLD WAR II IN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN:  
AN EVALUATIVE COMPARISON OF SERIES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION

by  
Kathleen Britto

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Approved by:

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Advisor

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This study describes a content analysis of two types of literature for children with an American World War II Homefront setting: autobiographical fiction and the historical fiction series. The analysis was performed to gain an understanding of the stylistic, historical and ideological differences between the two types of fiction.

Eight historical fiction series books and five autobiographical books were studied. The range of intended reading audience of these books is approximately seven to eleven years old. All books were published between 1986 and 2001. Autobiographical works by Avi were found to include a high level of period slang and to provide extensive characterization through dialogue. The subject of anti-Japanese racism was examined by only three books. The *Dear America* series was found to include exciting events, as well as inappropriately modern language and contemporary political viewpoints. *The American Girls Collection* was found to avoid death and destruction and to enforce the authority of adults. Only one book, an autobiographical work by Hahn, included the death of a central character's immediate family member. Overall, the autobiographical works were found to provide a more complete understanding of the historical and emotional aspects of childhood in America during World War II.

Subjects:

Children's literature/Series

Children's literature/United States

Historical fiction/Evaluation

Children's literature/Evaluation

World War, 1939-1945

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## I. Introduction

In an article for *The Reading Teacher*, Roser and Keehn (2002) quote children's author Jean Fritz: "A great deal of history may have to be taught from the point of view of an outsider looking back, but I believe that children can find little meaning in history unless they are helped to attain the point of view of a participant; in other words, unless they are given the chance to climb inside history and look out. (Fritz, n.d.)" (p.419).

The school library media specialist is both librarian and teacher. We want students to find meaning in both literature and information. Historical fiction appeals almost irresistibly to both impulses: students develop reading skills while at the same time learning about history. And hopefully they enjoy the experience.

Roser and Keehn (2002) write "The terseness of some textbooks, coupled with their often cursory treatment of multiple topics means that some of the high drama and seductive detail that draw children into a historical period must be abbreviated or ignored" (p.419-420).

Historian Holsinger (1995) began his children's and young adult World War II bibliography out of concern for the deplorable state of young Americans' historical knowledge. "There is, however one potentially redeeming fact: no matter how much they shun the required history text, many of America's young people *do* read fiction" (*emphasis original*, p. vi).

During the course of my graduate work, I have spent time in two school library media centers. In both libraries, two series of historical fiction for children are extremely popular: Scholastic's *Dear America* series, and *The American Girls Collection* from the Pleasant Company. In one library, the *American Girl* books are shelved separately and in the other, the

*Dear America* books are shelved separately. In both cases, students will often head directly to the shelf and scan to see if there are any books they have not read. On one occasion, I touched the spine of a book and said to the student, “This one’s pretty good.” She replied, exasperated, “I know, I’ve read it three times!”

“Why are these books so popular?” I wondered. And my teacher/librarian impulses began to kick in: are they “good literature”? Do they provide “accurate information”? Because World War II is a relatively recent event, I thought it would make the most sense to examine the books that deal with this era. There is, of course, no truly satisfying way for me to contrast the experiences portrayed in the series books with the actual experiences of American children during World War II. I could attempt to compare them to historical accounts, but I am not a historian. As a future school librarian, with an eye toward reader’s advisory and supporting the curriculum, I thought it would be more fruitful to examine the way in which these books compare to other fiction written for children about this war. My original research question was, “In what ways are recent historical fiction books written for children about World War II alike and different from realistic war fiction for children written during or shortly after the war?” I changed the question almost as soon as I began interacting with the material.

At first I was overwhelmed by the number of books available. An imperfect search of the New Hanover County Public Library catalog yielded over forty titles and Holsinger’s 1994 bibliography of World War II titles for children and young adults lists 750 titles. I narrowed my focus, deciding that I was most interested in books about the American homefront (like the *Molly* books of *The American Girls Collection*) and in books for elementary school readers, aged approximately seven to eleven.

Next I was frustrated that I could not find a single example of American homefront fiction for children published during the war. The earliest book I was able to locate in the first few weeks of the project is the 1957 *Taffy of Torpedo Junction*, a book both set and published in North Carolina.

Historian Tuttle (1993) offers some explanation. Regarding fiction published during the war, he writes, “Considering the nation’s appetite for war related material, publishers released surprisingly few war titles for children” (p.156). He notes “Much of the credit for the ongoing innocence of children’s books was due to Edward Stratemeyer,” (founder of the syndicate famous for the *Bobbsey Twins*, *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*) and to the sports series author John R. Tunis (p.157). In printed material for children, the war was primarily the domain of comic books (p.158-159).

The wartime war fiction that was published is disappointing to the modern reader. Historian and children’s and young adult World War II bibliographer Holsinger writes of rereading the novels he devoured as homefront child, “Doing so was disconcerting. So many of the books that had seemed powerfully patriotic forty or fifty years ago, now appeared not only poorly written but exceedingly chauvinistic” (p.vii). It is not surprising that these books are not retained in libraries.

Another bibliographer of World War II literature for children, Taylor (1994) writes, “By this time [the 1960’s-80’s] the standard “gee whiz” formula plots and tales so characteristic of juvenile fiction from earlier years had declined substantially in numbers...There is less and less reluctance to tell about the tragic consequences of the war to fathers, brothers, mothers, sisters and other relatives who are killed...”(p.5).

Books of this variety are largely the kind I found in the New Hanover County and Chapel Hill public libraries, in the library at Carrboro Elementary School, and in the libraries of UNC Chapel Hill. Many of these books are described in either the author’s note or on the dust jacket as autobiographical; further investigation into reviews or materials like *Something about the Author* reveals that other titles are autobiographical as well.

The majority of American homefront literature for children in the libraries I visited falls into one of two categories: it is autobiographical, written by a person who was a child during the war; or it is part of a larger historical series—*Dear America*, or *The American Girls*. Considering this,

I formed a new research question: How does the depiction of World War II and life on the American homefront vary between autobiographical fiction for children and World War II titles in historical fiction series?

Holsinger's and Taylor's bibliographies predate the *Dear America* World War II titles, and Holsinger devotes no attention to the *Molly* books in his introductory material. Taylor writes "A more lighthearted story occasionally begins to appear by 1983...The *American Girls Collection* series published from 1986-1988 by Trip continues to capitalize on homefront life in these tales for young girls" (p.8). But does this indicate a new trend? According to Taylor, it does not: "Nonetheless, most of the juvenile literature continues the trend to educate children on the actual reality of wartime, whether back home, in resistance activities, in the military services and battle, or otherwise" (p.8). However, none of the works Taylor then cites as examples depict life on the American homefront.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **The Series Book**

Part of the popularity of *Dear America* and *The American Girls Collection* can be attributed to the popularity of series books in general. Vasilakis (1995) writes, "Like well worn-shoes, series books are appreciated by tentative readers for the easy comfort of the instantly recognizable characters and settings" (p.129).

Children appreciate series books despite the disdain of teachers, parents, librarians and critics. According to Sieruta (1995), in the series book, "Characterization and thematic concerns are usually sacrificed for formulaic, plot-driven adventures and surface insights." He criticizes the *American Girls* books as "part of a vast marketing empire," and concludes, "With prose that ranges from competent to downright awful, very few series books can be considered great

literature. But these light, escapist books are appealing to children who find comfort in reading story after story about their favorite, familiar characters” (p.588-589).

Daniels (1996) argues that it is the familiarity of series books that enables children to become critical readers: “I would argue that inexperienced readers are prepared to settle for a thinly layered text at this stage of their reading development. When they subconsciously feel more confident in scanning the words, they can then recognize the unsatisfying nature of the text” (p.50).

Daniels also notes that much of what makes series books appealing to children is appealing to adults as well:

Our instinct is to repeat the pleasure provided by the first encounter with a book which captures our imagination. A series encourages this; hence the popularity of the romance genre or the detective story. The books are produced to an agreed format and marketed under a distinctive cover... [Child readers] will go to extraordinary lengths to *find* a particular book... A series reader will be clued in by a distinctive cover design, often with a logo which simplifies the process and also gives it an adult feel. (p.51)

Regarding her interviews with children who enjoy series books, Daniels observes that they were all articulate about their motivation for making certain reading choices but that none of them had discussed their choices with teachers or friends: “Perhaps this silence results from an attitude which assumes that once the skill of reading is acquired, then readers must fend for themselves... Reading may well be an integral part of the school day, but curriculum demands result in an emphasis on information reading” (p.51).

The children Daniels interviewed read series books avidly and sometimes in secret. “All the children described patterns of reading which were *not* practiced in school. Their comments indicate only too clearly how, as teachers and parents, we fail to recognize how serious they are as readers” (p.52).

Of her interview subjects, Daniels concludes, “They were all serious readers, appreciating what the texts had to offer and actively seeking out material not readily available. Most



importantly, they registered and silently resented the heavy-handed and intrusive attitudes from adults (parents and teachers)” (p.54).

Daniels does not report discussing historical fiction series with the children she interviewed. Perhaps part of the success of *The American Girls Collection* and *Dear America* relates to the fact that, while they are series and appeal to children for all the reasons Daniels describes, they are also historical fiction. Adults may lower the intensity of their disapproval and even buy the books for children with the hope that the interest in the series will eventually develop into a wider interest in historical fiction.

### **Evaluating Historical Fiction**

In selecting historical fiction, Blos (1985) warns of three “certain characteristic flaws that often signal shortcomings in either concept or execution.” The first of these is “the overstuffed sentence”, with “intrusive clauses of historical explanation or information.” The second is the inclusion of information that the character would not find relevant. Writes Blos, “A good test for this sort of thing is to ask whether the equivalent detail would be reported by an equivalent character in a contemporary novel” (p.38). The third flaw is inappropriate word choice: “historical material and thought lack validity if expressed in modern phrases, idioms, or linguistic rhythms” (p.39).

Collins and Graham (2001) consider the way language usage can enhance historical fiction: “It is not only a sense of a past time that can be conveyed through different language rhythms, vocabulary and word order. As in all fiction the speech of characters conveys their age, class status, character, state of mind, county or country of origin and much else” (p.20).

MacLeod (1998) focuses on the interpretation of history in historical fiction. She begins:

I expect we can all agree that historical fiction should be good fiction and good history. If we leap over the first briar patch by calling good fiction an ‘interesting narrative with well-developed characters,’ we are still left with the question of what is good history. Alas, there are nearly as many thorns here as among the briars... Writers of history select, describe, and explain historical evidence—and thereby interpret. (p.1)

Comparing the “traditional, Whig view” of Esther Forbes’ *Johnny Tremain* (a book written during World War II) with books about the American Revolution written during the seventies, MacLeod notes, “Writing in a time of passionate division over a modern war, these authors looked back to the American Revolution and saw, not idealism, but the coercion, hypocrisy, cruelty and betrayal that are part of any war, in any country” (p.1).

MacLeod continues: “Revisionist history is still history, subject to normal standards of demonstrable historical evidence and sound reasoning. While the novels I’ve named approach the American Revolution from different points of view, they are firmly grounded in documented evidence... None ignores known historical realities to accommodate political ideology. A good many recent historical novels for children do” (p.1-2).

Even though many writers thoroughly research the time period of their books, MacLeod writes, “Many narratives play to modern sensibilities. Their protagonists experience their own societies as though they were time-travelers, noting racism, sexism and outmoded belief as outsiders, not as people of and in their cultures” (p.3-4).

According to MacLeod, this stems from a desire to encourage children to be critical of past stereotypes, but “bending historical narrative to modern models of social behavior, however, makes for bad history and the more specific the model, the harder it is to avoid distorting historical reality” (p.4). She criticizes the confident and literate slave characters of Sue Cummings’ 1977 *Hew against the Grain* as historically improbable. She writes “More important, however politically acceptable it is, this kind of idealization glosses over the real price slaves paid for slavery” (p.4).

### Autobiographical Fiction and War

Natov (1986) praises the autobiographical fiction books she discusses for their realism and their avoidance of idealization. “These stories reflect the postwar attempt in the best children’s books to toward honesty, to tell truth about what was tragic, in the hopes of revealing the truth about what it means to be heroic for ordinary people, about what is enduring, inspiring and creative in each of us that helps us to survive in the face of potential despair” (p.114). Of the authors whose work she profiles, Natov writes, “In their autobiographical novels, they reveal to children with the power of truth the key incidents that shaped their lives and helped determine who they became. They write from the child’s point of view to tell other children what it was like to live in a particular place at a particular time. If many of the events of their lives were horrible, why deny that?” (124).

One of the horrors children face in autobiographical fiction, historical fiction and real life is war. Of British children’s literature, Hunt (2001) writes:

In the nineteenth century, war was a natural part of the literature of empire. The eponymous character in Mrs. Ewing’s (1841-85) most famous book *Jackanapes* (1883) dies heroically rescuing a friend on a non-specific, but characteristic battlefield of the empire. G.A. Henty’s boy heroes fought current as well as historical wars. W.E. Johns flying hero Biggles (true heir of the Henty tradition) saw service in both the First and Second World Wars. But for all that the comics and dime novels fought, refought and refight the wars, the mainstream children’s novel took several generations to recover from the First World War. It is as if the horrors were too horrific, and the sense that the adults were not in control, nor shown to be admirable or responsible, to be treated with any sensitivity. (p.304).

Collins and Graham (2001) write, “The Second World War has been visited and revisited in books for children since the 1950’s...Mostly they strive for a more realistic and less flag-waving view of the conflict” (p.11). They note that many of the books have:

...focused on girls' experiences, including *The Little Riders* (Shemin 1963), *In Spite of All the Terror* (Burton 1968), *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* (Kerr 1971), *The Upstairs Room* (Reiss 1972) *Number the Stars* (Lowry 1989), *Stepping on the Cracks* (Hahn 1991) and *A Candle in the Dark* (Geras 1995). These titles speak variously of girls who have had to go into hiding, separate from their parents, maintain friendships with those forbidden to them, conceal secrets, bear the unwanted effects of war and meet challenges which would be unimaginable in peace-time. (p.16)

Many of these books fall outside the definition of historical fiction as wholly removed from the author's own life. Of *Number the Stars*, Holsinger (1995) writes, "All this is fiction, but, Lowry stresses it is based on stories of real events heard from a Danish friend as well as from research into the lives of many Danes who gave their lives for the cause of freedom" (p.218). Holsinger calls *The Little Riders* "loosely based" on the author's hometown (p.330), and Taylor (1994) describes Burton's work as "basically autobiographical" (p.92). Holsinger uses the word autobiographical to describe the work of Kerr (p.179) and Reiss (p.305).

Collins and Graham write "There has been a distinct growth in the numbers of books that detail women's experiences and this may be, in no small measure, because women are using personal and family memories" (p.18). *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, which is described by Collins and Graham as historical fiction, is discussed by Natov in her piece on autobiographical fiction (p.117).

Of the seven books listed by Collins and Graham, all but one is about the experiences of European children during World War II. Hahn's *Stepping on the Cracks* is told through the eyes of an eleven-year-old in 1944 Maryland. Its dust jacket quotes the author, "I was only seven years old when World War II ended, but I have a vivid recollection of the forties: the radio shows the blackouts, rationing, war stamps, troop trains and the atomic bomb. Perhaps my favorite uncle's heroic death in Belgium, my father's grief, and the stars in my grandmother's window explain the strength of my memories."

### III. Materials and Methods

#### Materials

I chose to limit the sample to books published within the last 20 years and books for elementary school students reading independently—books for students approximately between the ages of seven and eleven. To determine the intended audience, I relied primarily on the publisher's designation, supplementing this with information from booksellers, reviews and bibliographies when the publisher provided no, or incomplete, information.

For a book to be designated autobiographical, it had to be described as autobiographical in the book's postscript or on its dust jacket, or in a review or reference source, and the author had to be alive and of an age to remember events during the Second World War.

Two of the authors of the series books are known to have been born after the war's end. I was unable to locate a year of birth for *Dear America* author Barry Denenberg. He is not listed in *The World Biographical Index* or *The Biography and Genealogy Master Index*, and no authority file in *World Cat* indicates a birth year (as is standard). I was unable to locate this information on the World Wide Web, and when I emailed Scholastic customer service, they declined to provide it. Thus, I do not know whether Denenberg was a child during World War II. The postscript to *Early Sunday Morning*, reads "Praised for his meticulous research, Barry Denenberg has written books about diverse times in American history from the Civil War to Vietnam" (p.153-154). Because of this (and because the author is not the same gender as his protagonist), I have designated *Early Sunday Morning: The Pearl Harbor Diary of Amber Billows* as non-autobiographical.

I chose the *Dear America* and *American Girls* books because of their popularity with students I observed. Both series offer books in the same format depicting multiple periods of

American history. I would describe *The American Girls* books as advanced easy readers. The series offers one girl per historical period, with each of the books in a prescribed pattern: *Meet X*, *X Learns a Lesson*, *X's Surprise* etc. For middle-grade readers, the *Dear America* series is written in diary format. The inexpensive hardbacks are the size of a child's diary and include an attached ribbon bookmark. Both series include a few pages of photographs and historical explanation at the end of each book.

The following chart describes some characteristics of both the series and autobiographical titles:

Title	Author	Birth Year of Author	Story Year	Story Location	Age of Central Character	Interest/ Reading Level	Year Published
<b>Autobiographical</b>							
<i>The Cookcamp</i>	Gary Paulsen	1939	1944	Chicago and the Minnesota Wilderness	5	7-12	1991
<i>Don't You Know There's a War On?</i>	Avi	1937	1943	Brooklyn, New York	11	8-12	2001
<i>Lily's Crossing</i>	Patricia Reilly Giff	1935	1944-1945	St. Albans and Rockaway Beach, New York	10-11	8-12	1997
<i>Stepping on the Cracks</i>	Mary Downing Hahn	1937	1944-1945	College Hill, (College Park) Maryland	11	8-12	1991
<i>Who was that Masked Man, Anyway?</i>	Avi	1937	1945	Brooklyn, New York	12	10-12	1992
<b>Series</b>							
<i>Early Sunday Morning (Dear America)</i>	Barry Denenberg	No Data	1941	Washington, DC and Oahu, Hawaii	12	9-12	2001
<i>My Secret War (Dear America)</i>	Mary Pope Osborne	1949	1941-1942	Long Island, New York	13	9-12	2000
The Molly Series: <i>Meet Molly</i> <i>Molly Learns a Lesson</i> <i>Molly's Surprise</i> <i>Happy Birthday, Molly!</i> <i>Molly Saves the Day</i> <i>Changes for Molly</i> <i>(The American Girls Collection)</i>	Valerie Tripp	1951	1944	Unspecified	9	7-9	1986 1986 1986 1987 1988 1988

All of the books have central characters who are white, middle-class, and to varying degrees, Christian. Only one main character clearly practices a specific religion: Giff's Lily is Catholic. The grandmother in *The Cookcamp* is described as having been "married by a Lutheran circuit minister" (p.113). The mother in *Who was that Masked Man, Anyway?* attends church and Osborne's central character references church. The protagonist of *Don't You Know There's A War On?* references Easter, and the three main characters in the remaining books celebrate Christmas.

Books on the Japanese-American experience have been intentionally excluded from this analysis even though the US government's program of relocation camps is a homefront event of extreme importance. Both series and autobiographical books exist on the topic, but the issues of racism and the deprivation of civil liberties are so different from the main issues discussed in this set of books that a comparison of the two would be unwieldy. Although these titles are not discussed here, Hunt (2001) cites Ken Mozuchizuki's 1989 *Baseball Saved Us* (p.305) and Taylor (1994) indexes titles on Japanese-Americans in his bibliography, *The Juvenile Novels of World War II* (p.164). I recommend Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Bat 6* (2001) as a recent and noteworthy exploration of the internment and related issues.

## **Methods**

The criteria established to compare the books falls into three categories: style, plausibility and ideology. Many of these criteria were derived directly from the literature review. Using each book as a unit of analysis (or, in the case of *The American Girls Collection*, the entire *Molly* subseries), I identified text relevant to the criteria.

Regarding style, I looked at the historical information provided in the text, looking for material that was intrusive to the narrative or irrelevant to the story (Blos, p.38). I also

considered the authors' use of language, whether it seems inappropriate to the time period (Blos, p.39), or whether it enhances the reader's understanding of both time period and character (Collins and Graham, p.20).

The categories of plausibility and ideology are interrelated. The first consideration is relatively simple: are the events generally believable, given the characters' ages and the time period in which they live? I also considered whether the characters have thoughts and opinions that are arguably consistent with the social period in which they live, or if they view events "as though they were time-travelers, noting racism, sexism and outmoded belief as outsiders" (MacLeod, p.3-4). The effect of World War II on the lives of the books' characters was also considered. I looked for inclusion of "the tragic consequences of the war" (Taylor, p.5): do bad things happen, or are the characters implausibly lucky?

Much of the above hints at the authors' ideology and the ways in which they want readers to view the events of the war, but perhaps none so much as depiction of adults and their relationship to children. Are the adults wise, moral, and protective of children? Or are they annoying, foolish, and focused on their own desires? Do they consider the reasoning of children? Or are they rigidly dogmatic? This is a concern of plausibility and ideology in any piece of children's fiction, but especially in fiction about war. War is a time of chaos and terror. Authors' depictions of adults in such times suggest to child readers the confidence they may feel in the ability of adults to protect them and their futures.

#### **IV. Findings**

##### **Issues of Style**

##### **The Inclusion of Information**



Across the sample, the books vary in the amount of factual information they provide and the methods they use to provide it. Regarding the series books, the *American Girls Collection* provides information by focusing on the ongoing, less dramatic daily aspects of war time (scrap drives and knitting bees, Victory Gardens, the shortage of rubber), and the *Dear America* series focuses on more dramatic events by placing its characters in strategic locations or in contact with historically important people.

The *Dear America* diary format works reasonably well to provide historical background to the reader, especially news events. The reader does not expect to narrative to flow as cohesively as in a traditional novel; the character can just state to the reader anything she finds relevant.

In the autobiographical works, a similar approach is seen in Avi's *Don't You Know there's a War On?* The book is from the perspective of its protagonist, Howie, at sixteen, telling about events that took place when he was eleven. The writing evokes a conversational tone, as if a teenager is explaining to younger children a time in which they were not yet born, or a time of which they can't remember. When, in the story, air raid sirens sound, Howie tells the reader, "In case you don't know, I'll explain." At five pages, the description of the beginning of the day in a fifth-grade classroom seems a bit excessive (p.29-34), but overall this technique works well to include historical information that might otherwise seem intrusive to the narrative.

In the same book, Avi's description of the censored letter from a serviceman does stand out as a force-fed history lesson. It is as if Howie's father wrote the letter specifically to give the censor an opportunity to cut. It seems improbable that a serviceman wouldn't know he should not include his location, details of his crossing, and his expected return date.

Also in *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, Denny and Howie's scrap drive—a bit of historical information—fits nicely into the background of the story, providing an excuse for them to drop in on their school superintendent (p.61-62). Discussing children's contributions to

the war effort is pretty much the entire purpose of *Molly Learns a Lesson*. Historical information seems to be not the backdrop of the *Molly* series, but its focus. A child of the 1940s would likely find an entire chapter on the eating of turnips from the victory garden (*Meet Molly*, p. 1-16) unacceptably dull. It seems reasonable to suppose that a modern reader would also be more interested in children who devise schemes to manipulate school officials, while also living with the difficulties of wartime.

An inventive device Avi uses to provide historical context is the use of actual radio broadcasts and newspaper headlines. In the book first published, *Who was that Masked Man, Anyway?*, Frankie is addicted to radio adventure stories. In the second book, *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, it is established in the narrative that Howie and Denny read the newspaper headlines everyday on the way to school. Some headlines appear in the narrative, but most are reprinted in large type on pages devoted to them. War events flow into the narrative in Hahn's *Stepping on the Cracks*; Margaret's family follows the news because her brother is fighting in the war. In both *Don't You Know There's a War On?* and *Stepping on the Cracks*, as well as in the *Molly* books, information is provided when the characters study the war at school.

*Lily's Crossing* takes place in the summer, so Lily doesn't get her information at school. Many details are reported to the reader when Lily sees the liberation of Paris in a newsreel (p.166-167), but most of the information about the war in the book emerges because it is directly relevant to the characters' actions.

Paulsen provides relatively little factual information about the war in *The Cookcamp* because the book is told from the perspective of a five-year-old boy. At one point, in order to provide needed cultural context, he has to stretch believability. After the boy mentions his mother's live-in boyfriend to his grandmother, he wakes up to find his grandmother writing a letter:

And while she wrote she talked, spoke down to the paper.  
 “Damn war,” she said. “Damn the war and damn the men and damn the cities that take the girls.”  
 And here her voice changed and became lilting and high and made the boy think of his mother.  
 “Remember who you are,” his grandmother said, the little pencil squiggling. “And how it was before the war when the men were different. You mustn’t be this way...” (p.75-76).

While it is believable that a person writing an emotional letter would exclaim some thoughts aloud, it is less believable that she would exclaim such complete thoughts.

### **The Use of Language**

The books yield a few examples of strange and apt language choices, some more remarkable than others. Most of the time the language the authors use is neutral; it does not strike the reader as being too contemporary, nor is it particularly evocative. Avi is an exception to this. He stands out as an author who usages language to depict the place, time and personality of his characters.

#### ***Evoking the Forties***

In most of the books, at least some characters occasionally use a forties expression, such as “Hubba hubba” or “Gee!” Osborne uses them more often than most, with entries like “Holy smokes, Bill! He may be no bigger than a minute, but he’s got the heart of the hero” (p.93).

The use of slang is nearly relentless in Avi’s *Don’t You Know There’s A War On?* A colorful example appears approximately once every three pages. For example: “I got me a *bingo-whacko* on the old bean” (p.17), “Miss Gossim was what we called a dilly, a dish, an angel-cake package with tutti-frutti icing on top” (p.21) “Jeepers creepers!” (p.29) and “What’s your story morning glory?” (p.38). The narrator/protagonist comments on the quantity of slang: “Denny and me, we talked slang a ton. ‘Dressing up with words,’ my mom called it” (p.13).

Along with slang, Avi uses rhythm, usage and word choice to give his characters unique Brooklyn voices. Howie, the central character of *Don't You Know There's A War On?*, tells the reader: "So, see, if Denny and me could have found one spy, just one! Jiminy! It would have been the bestest thing in the whole world" (p.10). Even minor characters in the book have a distinctive speech patterns, such as this coal delivery man: "Hey, Rediger! Door's Open. Chute's Set. Let the coal rip" (p.29).

Howie's mother uses different rhythms than Howie and the coal man, but her speech also sounds of an era not our own: "Howard Bellington Crispers, you get one more failing grade, you can forget about going to the Saturday kid movies" (p.11). The mother of Frankie (*Who was that Masked Man Anyway?*) has her own, but still motherly, unique rhythms and favorite clichés:

"Do you think money grows on trees? If Mr. Swerdlow moved out, do you think it would be just nothing to get someone respectable like that to take that room for ten dollars a week?"

"It's Tom's room."

"Your mouth is too fresh!"

"Ma..."

"It's all that radio! You don't know what's in your head and what's coming out of that box. One of these days they'll put you in a crazy house. But I'll tell you another thing, Mr. Adventures, this time, no radio for a week!" (p.21)

### ***Individual Children, Individual Speech***

Slang does appear in *Who Was That Masked Man, Anyway?* but nowhere near as perpetually as it does in *Don't You Know There's A War On?*. *Who Was That Masked Man, Anyway?* is told entirely in sections of unattributed dialogue, with scripts of actual radio dramas and commercials interspersed. Radio dominates Frankie's imaginative play, even though he has to feed the lines to his best friend Mario. And he incorporates its phrases into his everyday speech. When Frankie's mother says about Tom, his brother, "I wish I knew what was eating that boy up," Frankie tells her, "It's that music he listens to. It's so dopey. If he listened to adventures, he'd have a lot more energy to be wide awake and husky" (p.73).

In *The Cookcamp*, the boy experiments with language after crying about missing his mother: “The crying grew worse and he wanted to swear at himself for crying in front of the men because it embarrassed him, but he didn’t yet know how the words worked for swearing. ‘Dirty damn,’ he said but it just made the feeling worse, and he grew sadder and cried harder until he was gulping with it” (p.99-100).

### ***Speech with Foreign Influences***

The grandmother in *The Cookcamp* is originally from Norway. Her speech pattern often reverses what is typical. When the boy asks her to move to Chicago, she replies, “No. There is a time for living apart and your mother has come to that time. She must have her own life (p.105). When he asks about playing cards, she says to one of the men, “Gustaf—the boy knows nothing of whist. Show him will you?” (p.54).

The word choice of Gustaf’s reply illustrates his character: “Come sit on my lap, boy, and help me whip these buggers” (p.54). Later in the book, Gustaf’s speech indicates his Swedish upbringing: “‘We must eat now,’ Gustaf said, turning the cat engine off. ‘Then there is more work, yah?’” (p.64).

Giff does not attempt to suggest her Hungarian character’s accent with spelling. Instead she suggests the strangeness of his speech by having him never use contractions. For example, when Lily appears late and then announces, “Cats hate the water,” Albert says, “This one does not. I thought you would not come.” Lily tells him she fell asleep, and Albert replies, “It is hard to stay awake sometimes” (p.94).

In *Happy Birthday, Molly!*, Emily, an English refugee stays with Molly’s family. Molly and her friends laugh at Emily for calling sneakers plimsolls (p.20), and Emily has to explain: “jumpers—you call them sweaters (p.45).” Tripp sometimes evokes a British accent with Emily’s word choice and phrasing: “Of course the princesses are *practically grown up ladies*

now” (*emphasis mine*, p.29) and “I *rather expected* you to look like Shirley Temple, *the film star*” (*emphasis mine*, p.31).

### ***Written Language***

Giff describes two of her characters by describing the language and appearance of their letters:

She looked at them both, Margaret’s as filthy as the first one she had sent. But this time it was in ink that was blotted and watery as if drops had been splattered on it.

Her father’s writing was much neater, much cleaner, and his beautiful clear writing said “Miss Elizabeth Mary Mollahan.”

Lily slid her fingernail under the flap and slid out the tissue-paper letter. “Lily,” it began. “My dearest daughter.” (p.99)

Next Lily reads Margaret’s letter: “It started out in the strangest way. No opening, the way Sister Eileen had taught Lily in school. No ‘Dear Lily.’” What follows is Margaret’s request to Lily that she get her brother Eddie’s picture from her family’s house and mail it to her in Michigan. Eddie is missing in France, and Margaret can’t remember what he looked like (p.101). The messiness describes Margaret’s character; the splotches and lack of a salutation foreshadow her state of mind.

### ***Language Out of Period***

In some cases, a character’s use indicates not her time, place, and character, but perhaps the background of the author. In *Early Sunday Morning* Denenberg’s Amber writes “Dad’s kind of a positive thinker” (p.4). A person in 1941 probably would not have said this. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* indicates the phrase “positive thinking” originated with N. V. Peale and his 1953 book *The Power of Positive Thinking*. The first non-Peale related usage the OED lists is in 1974.

Osborne’s Madeline writes in her diary about her interaction with a boy: “Neither one of us mentioned the valentines, though. We just leaped into a discussion about the K3F club. What

a relief to have the club to talk about. It would have been embarrassing to talk about ‘us’” (p.68). The expression “talk about ‘us’” has a rather modern ring to it that pulls the reader out of the story.

The *Dear America* authors are not the only ones to do this. Paulsen writes, “...and mice came out and ran around the floors and the boy and his grandmother chased them with brooms and a flyswatter and they screamed and the boy laughed until he nearly peed in his pants” (p.106). The OED indicates that while “pee” was in use in 1944, this particular hyperbolic usage does not appear in print until 1946. While it is possible the boy used this expression, it seems likely the word “pee”, if not the idea of the phrase, was considered far more vulgar than it is today. It stands out as inappropriate in an otherwise highly believable description of the boy’s perceptions.

## **Realism and Ideology**

### **General Plausibility**

The following are events in the books that struck me, at least initially, as implausible. In *My Secret War*, Madeline has an encounter at night on the beach with men who claim to be the Coast Guard (p.117-119). A man in a dark suit appears to be monitoring her activities (p.119-121). On another occasion a stranger with a foreign accent approaches her while she is sitting on the porch, and says, “A person wouldn’t want to be arrested for treason on a night like this, would they?” (p.122-123). A black car comes dangerously close and causes Maddie to fall from her bike (p.125). On the beach she and a friend find a wood box half-buried in the sand. It contains “a bunch of glass tubes and a sack of white powder” as well as clothing including “*three caps with Nazi swastikas*” (p.133). They determine that the men on the beach were really “a band of Nazi saboteurs who had come ashore from a German U-boat” (p.134), and that “it was Nazi

sympathizers who've been spying on me, who nearly hit me with the black car, and who warned me to be quiet!" (p.135). The two make a call to the FBI (p.137-138). Two weeks later the paper reports that Nazi saboteurs have been captured; "officials revealed that a call from an anonymous tipster helped lead them to the scene of the Nazi landing" (p.147).

Many of these scenes are reminiscent of scenes in the one older World War II children's book I was able to collect when I first began gathering materials for this project, the important-in-North Carolina *Taffy of Torpedo Junction* (Wechter, 1957). *Taffy* is based on history—teenagers did interact with Nazis who came ashore on Cape Hatteras, and it is plausible that a teenager would interact with the Nazis who came ashore on Long Island. I still consider the half-buried bomb works and hats with swastikas a bit too convenient.

In the other *Dear America* book, in her entry for October 24, 1941, Amber reports that her mother is expecting a baby in May (Denenberg, p.21). The home pregnancy test was not available until 1977 (Hutchcraft, 1996, p.1). Lewis (2001) writes, "A generation ago, when [a woman] suspected she was pregnant, confirming her suspicions wasn't as easy. After two missed menstrual periods, the doctor sent a sample of her urine to a lab, where it was injected into a female rabbit. The rabbit was killed, and its ovaries examined" (p.1). Considering the state of pregnancy detection technology in 1941, it seems doubtful Amber's mother would be certain of her pregnancy herself. Considering the taboo surrounding sex sixty years ago, it seems even more unlikely that she would tell an eleven-year-old child about it.

Pregnancy is also a factor of the possible implausibility of events in *Don't You Know There's a War On?* Howie spies on his principal and learns his teacher, Miss Gossim, is to be fired. He visits his teacher at her apartment, and she tells him why: she is pregnant. Howie breaks his promise not to tell anyone, and circulates a petition. After he and a gaggle of his classmates visit to the superintendent at her home, it is decided Miss Gossim will be allowed to finish the school year.



How Howie learns of his teacher's firing and learns the reason why is somewhat implausible. That he decides to circulate a petition, and his classmates support him, is not at all implausible. Children often perceive and are affected by injustice more sharply than adults. The success of their action seems highly unlikely at first glance. However, in the story, the principal tells the superintendent that he is unable to disclose why he is asking that Miss Gossim must be fired; he only assures her that it must be done. The superintendent accepts this and honors his request (p.25-26). When the children come to her apartment, it is apparently the first she has heard of the reason. She interviews the children about Miss Gossim's teaching ability and then says:

“I want to thank you for coming. I will surely think about what you've told me.”  
 “Can Miss Gossim stay?” I asked.  
 “We shall have to see,” Mrs. Wolch said. “There are rules. And regulations.”  
 “Mrs. Wolch”, my sister suddenly blurted out, “don't you know there's a war on?”  
 “I think I do,” she said quietly. “I had a son. He was in the Philippines...”  
 I looked toward her star flag on her wall. That's when I took in that it was a gold one. Her son had been killed. (p.173)

When you consider the wartime labor shortage, and the possibility that allowances might be made for someone married to a soldier, Miss Gossim's reinstatement (just for the rest of the year) seems less implausible.

The success of Frankie's scheme in *Who was that Masked Man, Anyway?* remains implausible even after consideration. Frankie's parents have a board staying in his brother Tom's room, so when Tom returns home, wounded, Frankie has to move to the basement. Frankie decides the solution is for his brother to marry his teacher, Miss Gomez. When Miss Gomez arrives for a home visit, Frankie's parents are gone. She insists on speaking to Tom. Tom tries to escape through the window to the neighbor's house. To span the distance between the windows, he uses a board Frankie had stored under the bed for the purpose when the room was his. The board breaks, Tom clings to the window sill, Miss Gomez and Frankie haul him

back through the window, Tom's depression lifts, the fire department arrives, Miss Gomez and Tom fall in love and are married six months later—Frankie gets his room back.

Events in *Stepping on the Cracks* are more serious, but their plausibility still warrants consideration. When the bully Gordy dismantles Margaret's and Elizabeth's tree house and steals the lumber, they follow him deep into the woods. They discover he is hiding his brother Stuart, an Army deserter, in a shack. Eventually, Stuart explains his story: "When I didn't come back from furlough last summer, they came to the house looking for me, but Gordy hid me down here. Nobody knows where I am. They think I'm hundreds of miles away by now" (p.98-99).

## **Wartime Change and Tragedy**

### *Unique Homefront Experiences*

In *Early Sunday Morning*, Amber Billows is recently arrived on the island of Oahu, Hawaii on the morning of December 7, 1941. Writing for *Dear America*, Denenberg provides a vivid account of the attack on Pearl Harbor and of life in Hawaii in the days following (p.82-129).

Amber accompanies her mother, a former nurse, to the hospital to care for the wounded (p.92-104). (It seems highly improbable, but not entirely impossible, that an eleven-year old nurse's daughter would be allowed to help in a hospital during a time of crisis and confusion.) In the hospital Amber has a front row seat to the chaos and horror of mass injury. Denenberg provides lots of gory detail: "Some of the men were burned so badly, their flesh had turned black. It's a smell I don't think I will ever forget" (p.97). Donated blood is stored in sterilized Coke bottles (p.98). There's no time to change sheets between oozing patients (p.98-99). Amber watches a man die (p.99) and then recognizes a delirious and screaming amputee as the Lieutenant her family had to dinner recently (p.100-102).

During a drill, tear gas leaks into Amber's mask. Of the government mandated gas masks, Amber writes, "I think there's as good a chance of suffocating to death from putting the gas mask on wrong as there is dying from a Japanese poison-gas attack" (p.115).

Amber also experiences some of the unintended consequences of war. When her father goes to visit a family friend, he finds his home gone. The man died in a fire started by a misfired American anti-aircraft shell (p.117).

Paulsen's protagonist, the boy, finds himself in a far less famous homefront setting. He is sent to live with his grandmother in the forests of Minnesota. She works as a cook for a work crew. One of the workmen explains their project to the boy: "Making a road up into Canada. Something to do with the war. We're too old to be soldiers, but we can build roads. In case the Germans {he said 'Chermans'} come over here. We might have to move north. In a hurry" (p.19).

This is a part of the war effort far from military action, but the men are not free from danger: "'Clear a table!' one of the men yelled to the boy. 'A tree fell on Harvey and crushed his arm. He's out cold.' The boy stood frozen, looking at the man hanging between the other two, and he wondered if the man was dead. He looked white, as white as the milk from the cans, and his eyes were open and showed white as well" (p.89).

*The Cookcamp* and *Early Sunday Morning* describe homefront experiences that were limited to a fairly small number of people. Many more Americans sent loved ones overseas and worried about them when as they served, cared for the wounded who returned, and mourned the dead who did not. The rest of the books describe these experiences.

### ***Families of Men Serving Abroad***

In *The Cookcamp*, the boy's father is away at war, but the events of the cookcamp are far more immediate to the boy and to the reader. Paulsen doesn't explicitly describe anyone worrying about the boy's father, only that his mother "did not want to spend endless days sitting

in the apartment listening to the radio and drinking coffee and waiting” (p.2). At the end of the book it is mentioned that one of the boy’s uncles, one of his mother’s brothers, “was taken into the army, trained briefly, and then blown to pieces on an island in the Pacific by a defective artillery round he was trying to load” (p.114) but the boy is not aware of this event at the time.

Giff writes that after the Allied invasion of France, Lily’s father goes to Europe to serve as a civil engineer (p.33). She misses him, she worries about him, and she thinks of him traveling by troop ship when watching a movie with a scene of an exploding warship: “Lily watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she didn’t watch anymore” (p.82).

The family of Lily’s friend Margaret moves temporarily to Detroit so her father can work in an airplane factory. When Margaret’s mother calls a friend to tell her Margaret’s brother Eddie has been reported missing in action the news spreads quickly through the town. Gram comes home and tells Lily to change her clothes: ‘We’re on our way to church...a special Mass, and we’re going to pray as hard...’ She took a breath. ‘We’re all praying, I guess, the whole world, that this will be over soon.’ She blinked back tears. ‘And right now, we’re going to pray for Eddie, and your father and Albert’s family, and everyone who—’ She broke off” (p.102). We learn at the end of *Lily’s Crossing* that Eddie is never recovered (p.174).

In *Don’t You Know There’s A War On?* Howie’s father is part of the merchant marine, and Denny, his best friend has a father in the army. At night, Howie says, “I’d get to thinking about Denny’s dad, or how hard Mom works in the Navy Yard, or like I said, my math. Or most of all, I’d worry about Pop sailing by Nazi wolf packs loaded with torpedoes just waiting to ambush him” (p.23). Howie’s father survives, but near the end of the book, Denny’s mother gets a telegram. His father has been killed (p.184).

In *My Secret War*, Madeline receives a telegram that her father has been “critically wounded.” She begins “shaking and sobbing uncontrollably” (p.100-101). She and her mother don’t know anything more about his condition, whether he is likely to live or die. They don’t hear anything for six weeks and forty pages, and Madeline’s depression and anxiety remain

evident in the narrative. Finally, Madeline and her mother receive a letter from a nurse who is caring for her father: “She said he was recuperating from his injuries. She said he wanted us to know that his wounds were healing, and he did not want us to worry... We don’t know why he didn’t write the letter himself” (p.141). Later, another nurse writes that his hands have been badly burned and that a head injury is clouding his thinking: “But he can understand all our letters, she wrote, and when she and others read them to him, he lights up like a candle. Mom broke down when she read those touching words—‘He lights up like a candle.’ And she sobbed over Dad’s injuries. When I tried to comfort her, she kept sobbing. She said Dad must be suffering so much. ‘Burns are so painful!’ she cried” (p.152).

In the other series, *The American Girls Collection*, anxiety over Molly’s father’s absence is present in all the books, but the only real suspense regarding his safety comes in *Molly’s Surprise*, when his Christmas package fails to arrive. Her sister says: “If nothing comes, it means Dad may be hurt, or sick, or lost. It means maybe he *couldn’t* send any presents” (p.28).

“Maybe he *couldn’t* send any presents” has a very different ring to it than “critically wounded,” and this is the closest Molly comes, in the entire series, to considering that her father could be dead. It seems likely that Tripp placed Molly’s father in an English hospital to provide the separation that so many families endured, while sparing the reader from the fear Molly would have felt had her father been in combat.

This is not to suggest that death and injury are completely skirted in the *Molly* series. Molly’s father’s presence at a hospital reminds the reader that people are, in fact, being injured. Molly’s suggestion that her class knit a blanket for that hospital (*Molly Learns a Lesson*, p.53) suggests the deprivation wounded soldiers experienced there once they reached its relative safety.

Tripp waits until the last book for Molly to directly consider the wounded and the dead. In a conversation with her two best friends it is revealed that the father of classmate will never walk again, and that the fiancée of her former teacher was killed in action (*Changes for Molly*, p.20-22). Tripp mediates for the reader, this time not by placing characters close to Molly far

from danger, but by visiting danger upon characters far from Molly. It is here that Molly is able to muse, “I think I would be more sad than proud if my dad got killed,” (p.21) but this is only after the family has received word that he is on his way home. It is also in *Changes for Molly* that Molly prepares to perform in a variety show for wounded soldiers. Molly gets the flu and doesn’t actually perform. While this is a disappointment for Molly and for the reader, it means that both are spared the sight of the wounded audience.

Early in *Who Was That Masked Man, Anyway?*, we learn that Frankie’s brother has been wounded (p.4), and that his best friend’s father has been killed (p.17). Frankie is staying in after school when his teacher gets a telegram that her fiancée has been killed (p.33-34). When Frankie’s brother arrives home, he appears unable to walk (p.55) and he is severely depressed.

Frankie pesters his brother to tell him about the glory of war, and Tom refuses until page 155:

“Okay, kid, you’re asking for it. I’m going to tell you what it was like—but I don’t intend to say it again. *Ever!* You hear me? Do you?”

“Yeah...” (p.155)

“Frankie, when we hit that beach, we were scared...;So scared people were pissing in their pants...But we hit that beach because that’s what we had to do...People yelling, trying to be brave, trying to do what we were told. But screaming. Trying to move. Trying to use our rifles. But see, the Japanese were ready for us...And the next thing, blood and bodies all over. People screaming. But a different kind of screaming and crying, Frankie. A kind I hope you never hear. Then I got hit...*Wham! Wham!* I got knocked down. People running over me. Stepping on me. I was sure I was dead. And I was crying for Ma and Pop, even you Frankie, damn it, wishing, praying to god I was home...I’m lucky to be alive! Lucky to be here. You know how many buddies of mine got it? A lot. So that’s what it’s like to be a hero like me. It stinks. Because I don’t want to be told about being no hero. Load of crap! Now get the hell out of here and don’t you talk to me about heroes again. You understand? Never!” (p.155-156)

At the beginning of *Stepping on the Cracks*, Margaret’s brother is fighting in Europe.

Throughout the book, she thinks about her brother, misses him, and worries about him:

I didn't want to think about the war, but I couldn't keep my eyes from the newspaper Daddy had left on the table. "Heavy casualties," it said. "High death toll for Allies."

Poking at the meat on my plate, I remembered the day Jimmy left for the war, tall and thin and freckled like me, but suddenly grown up, a stranger in his uniform, hugging us all, swinging me off the ground. (p.127).

Margaret comes home one afternoon to find her parents sitting on the couch, her father clutching a telegram:

They were both crying...I didn't want to hear what they were going to say. Everybody knew what a telegram meant.

"It's Jimmy," Mother said at last.

I started at her paralyzed. The clock on the mantel chimed four-thirty... On one side of the clock, Jimmy's face smiled at me from a silver frame, young and handsome in his uniform.

"He's been killed in action," Mother went on in a flat voice...

Mother hid her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook with sobs. Daddy touched her arm. Without saying anything, he left the room. In a couple of seconds, the back door opened, then slammed shut behind him.

Mother and I started at each other. Then she held out her arms, and I ran into them like a little child. Neither of us spoke. We just clung to each other and cried. (p.180-181)

Hahn (1991) has not doctored her depiction of Margaret's father with '90's expectations of the emotionally responsible husband and father. In addition to walking out on his wife's expression of grief, he uses what a member of our current society might call "an ineffective coping strategy." Hahn writes, "When Daddy came home several hours later, he told Mother he'd gone for a walk, but he smelled like beer and cigarette smoke. Silently, I watched him stumble into the bedroom and shut the door. In a few minutes, I heard him snoring" (p.181). This entire experience is unique in the sample. Margaret is the only central character of the books included in this study to lose a member of her immediate family to the war.

*Working Mothers and New Kinds of Caregivers*

The captions of the photo gallery at the beginning of each *Molly* book signal the expanded roles of women: “Mom, Molly’s mother, who holds the family together while Dad is away,” and “Mrs. Gilford, the housekeeper, who rules the roost when Mom is at work.” There is still a hierarchy in place, but each woman has more responsibility and more authority than she did before the war began.

In *Changes for Molly*, Trip provides a concrete example of Mom’s wartime growth: “[Molly] was very proud of her mother. Dad would be proud, and surprised, too. Before the war, Mom would have been too shy to make a speech. Now she thought nothing of it” (p.46). Molly’s mother works for the Red Cross, helping people affected by the war. In a way, this can be seen as extending her husband’s efforts as a doctor. In the other books, many of the women take jobs to contribute directly to the war effort and indirectly to their husbands’ safe return home.

In *Don’t You Know There’s a War On?* Howie’s has just come home from work:

When I got back home—maybe six-thirty—Mom was there. She looked beat, the way she usually did when she got home from the Navy Yard. Her job was to put in rivets in armor plate on ship repairs. She said it was hard, dull work. But she was forever saying she had to do it right. What if the work was done bad? Think of the lives that could be lost! It could even be Pop. (p.78)

Howie is responsible for his nine-year-old sister, a job he deeply resents and doesn’t perform very conscientiously. Gloria, the sister, however, seems pretty self-sufficient, and usually their mother is home in time to eat dinner with her children. In *My Secret War*, Madeline misses her mother who works second shift in a factory, but at thirteen, she is even more able than Gloria to look after herself. Madeline’s mother takes her job after reading an article in the newspaper about how the nation’s shortage of ships “is making it very hard for the United States to deliver arms and munitions overseas” (p.90). Because they live in a boardinghouse, Madeline’s



meals are provided, and Madeline's mother is able to ask other adult women to "keep an eye on" Madeline (p.90).

At the beginning of *The Cookcamp*, the boy, at the tender age of five, is nowhere near as lucky. His mother gets a job in a factory. She claims it is because they need money, but the narrative explains that they have enough. She gets it because she is bored staying home with the boy (p.1-2). Unlike in the other books, absolutely no mention is made of contributing to the war effort. The boy's mother hires a baby sitter, "a crazy woman who sat and drank red wine and listened to and talked to the radio soap operas all day and didn't bathe and smelled bad" (p.2). The babysitter feeds him shredded wheat with hot tap water "only in the afternoon when he was hungry and whined" (p.3). The babysitter also gets drunk and tries to teach the boy how to build a house out of cards. When he can't do it, she first laughs at him and then gets angry and throws the cards in the garbage (p.53).

In no other book is a caregiver so deeply flawed. In the *American Girls Collection*, Molly, at nine, is cared for by her family's housekeeper, Mrs. Gilford. Mrs. Gilford is one of the few adult women Molly knows who is not always calm, wise, and, judging from the illustrations, extremely well-coiffed. Even at Mrs. Gilford, Tripp pokes only the most gentle fun, for example, by giving her "what Dad called the Gladys Gilford Glacial Glare" (*Meet Molly*, p.3). More often, Mrs. Gilford is doing things like experimenting with bread recipes to cope with war-related shortages and asking Molly and her friends to rate the home-baked results (*Molly Learns a Lesson*, p.21-25).

In *The Cookcamp*, the boy is eventually sent to live with his grandmother, but it is not because his mother is aware of the babysitter's substandard care. One night she brings home a man and introduces him to the boy as Uncle Casey. "But of course he was not an uncle at all and that first night the boy came out of the bedroom in their small apartment and saw his mother with Casey on the couch making sounds he did not understand but did not like—sounds he did not understand but that made him want to not like Casey forever and ever" (p.4).

When he arrives at the cookcamp the boy is well loved and cared for by his grandmother, as well as the workmen. After dinner one of the men puts him on his lap, and "...the boy thought about how safe it was to be in his lap. Like being in his grandmother's lap or his mother's lap" (p.55).

There are no other children for the boy to play with at the camp. When his grandmother notices how lonely he is, she asks the men to take him to work on the road with them. They oblige and seem happy to do so: "'Gustav doesn't get you all the time. I need help driving the dump truck this afternoon.' The boy looked at Gustav who nodded. 'We must share you—good men are hard to find.' And the boy knew he was joking, but it still sounded nice" (p.67). On a trip to a general store, the boy's grandmother buys him an engineer's cap and overalls, just like the men wear, and one of the men buys him a pocketknife (p.82-83).

The boy's grandmother has to leave the cookcamp for a few days after one of the men is badly hurt. While she is away, the men work together to care for the boy. He sleeps in their trailer. They comfort him when he cries and cries over missing his mother: "Then he sniffled and sipped some warm milk one of the men made for him, warm milk with sugar in it, and it didn't feel so bad. He still missed his mother and felt sad, but something came from all the men, all the big and dirty and smelly men—something warm and soft—and he finally fell asleep in Gustaf's arms again" (p.100).

After this event, it is clear that Paulsen has not infused his characters with more modern attitudes about women and work. When the men think he's sleeping, the boy overhears them:

"Poor little guy," one of them said.

"It's this damn war," another said. "Women out working in the cities. Who ever heard of such a thing?"

He should be with his mother—and never mind this other business.

"Poor little guy." (p.101)

I am not suggesting the view that mothers' obligations to their children are paramount is a view no longer held today. What I am suggesting is that if Paulsen had made his characters contemplate the boy's mother's right to work, for example, or the vital role women factory workers were playing in the Allied victory, this would have been inconsistent with the views middle-aged men in 1944 would have been likely to hold.

### *Refugees*

In three cases, the book's central character comes to know a refugee from a European country. In all three of the books, the refugee prompts the central character to decide she has overestimated the degree of hardship in her life.

In *Happy Birthday, Molly!*, Molly's family and their English guest Emily are in basement for a practice blackout. Emily begins to cry. "I hate this...I hate sitting in the dark, waiting. In England, back during the Blitz, almost every night we had to do this. You'd hear an awful noise, then one split second of silence, and then the explosion...If we were on the street when the siren went off, we'd have to make a dash for the tube station—the subway you call it...We sometimes had to sleep there with all the other people, all crowded together...But it was almost worse...coming out again. A house you'd walked past every day would be nothing but a pile of stones. Sometimes the flowers would still be growing along a path, and the path would lead to nothing" (p. 23-26). This causes Molly to reevaluate her opinion of Emily, and to better appreciate her relative safety.

*My Secret War*'s Madeline is curious about one the past of a mother and daughter living with her in the boarding house. She learns they are Jews from Germany. Another resident tells their story, "He said that four years ago Nazi storm troopers had broken into their house. They beat Clara's father to death right in front of her eyes" (p.110). Maddie's commitment to the war effort, which had flagged after her father's injury, is revived by Clara's story.

Lily develops a friendship with Albert, a refugee from Hungary. His parents were murdered for publishing an anti-Nazi newspaper. Albert's grandmother, Nagymamma, had Albert and his sister smuggled out of the country. The sister fell ill with the measles and was declared unfit for travel. Albert had to leave her behind in France (p.88-91).

### **Children's Perceptions of Adults and Their Authority**

#### ***School Life***

The *Dear America* authors write very little about their character's interactions with teachers. *Molly Learns a Lesson* begins "Molly McIntire loved to look at her teacher, Miss Campbell" (p.1). Tripp writes, "Molly watched Miss Campbell write 'Things to Do Today' on the blackboard. When some teachers wrote that, it looked like a scold or the heading to a long list of tiresome tasks. But when Miss Campbell wrote it, in round even letters, it looked like a challenge. Wake Up! Sharpen your Pencils!" (p.2-3).

Both Miss Campbell and Dr. Lomister, the principal in *Don't You Know There's A War On?*, use the war to motivate (or manipulate) students. Of Miss Campbell, Tripp writes, "She often said, 'School is your war duty. Being a good student is as important as being a good soldier'" (p.3)

Avi's character Howie makes this observation of his principal: "Lomister was always giving these boring speeches that 'this war is to protect our country. Because our country is run by rules not men.' And that we had to follow the rules for 'our boys over there.' You know, bunch of Patriotic flak" (p.14).

In both of the Avi books in this study there is a good-hearted grade-school teacher whose looks are compared to Veronica Lake: Miss Rolanda Gossim (*Don't You Know There's A War On?*, p.21) and Miss Esmeralda Gomez (*Who was that Masked Man Anyway?*, p.6). About Miss

Gossim, Howie tells us, “Course she could be strict...Least her rules made sense, not like Lomister’s”(p.22).

When Miss Gossim is fired from her job because she is expecting a baby, the children perceive the injustice of this. When spying on the school superintendent and his principal, Dr, Lomister, Howie hears:

“Gilbert, didn’t you tell me that this Gossim woman was one of your best teachers?”

“Teachers”, Lomister said, like he was the local Mussolini or something, “must follow rules too.” (p.25)

Howie springs into action, wring a petition and asking his classmates to sign it. He approaches his classmate Gladiola, who makes a rather unflattering supposition:

I told her everything.

The more I said, the more serious Gladiola looked.

“You saying she’s getting fired because she’s having a baby?” she said when I was done.

“Yeah.”

“Who’s the father?”

“Her husband. Name is Smitty. He’s in the air force. Only she doesn’t know where.”

“She really marry him?”

Surprised, I said, “You saying she didn’t?”

Gladiola shook her hand like it had been burned. “Ooooo, man,” she said. “That Miss Gossim is into some big troubles” (p.125).

Miss Gossim catches the students passing the petition in class (p.126). Evidently not perceiving the irony, she tells the students: “Class, to tell you the truth, I don’t think this petition would be very helpful. In the world there are many rules—good ones as well as ones we don’t like. But in a civilized country we must follow them or try to change them democratically. That’s the way our nation works. I know you all want to help. And I truly thank you. But it’s not possible” (p.129).

After school, she tells Howie that giving the petition to the principal will only make things worse for her: “He promised to write nice things about me so I can get another job...Howie, I can’t afford to anger him” (p.133). Denny sees the hypocrisy in a nation that asks its citizens to make great sacrifices for the cause of freedom denying one of its citizens her civil rights: “‘That stinks,’ he said. ‘My old man is in North Africa, but she can’t have a kid’” (p.135). With the help of his sister, Howie hatches a plan to obey the letter of Miss Gossim’s request, organizing his classmates to lobby the superintendent (p.142-144).

After the visit, on what is to be Miss Gossim’s last day, the superintendent and principal visit the classroom. The superintendent announces that the school district will allow Miss Gossim to finish the end of the school year.

Howie tells us:

I swear, the whole class began to cheer. I mean, loud.

As for me, what I felt was relieved, and crazy happy. It was as if we had just won the war.

And Miss Gossim was smiling, and laughing, and pushing her tears away, and a whole lot of other junk too. And then Dr. Lomister said something. But it was pretty stupid, and everybody knew it was stupid, not that anyone said it was stupid. See, stupid guys like that, you have to let them talk stupid. You just don’t have to listen to them stupid.” (p.184).

In no other book in the study is a member of the school personnel directly called stupid. In both Avi books, the protagonists react negatively to the banality of their basal readers (*Who was that Masked Man Anyway?*, p.102, and *Don’t You Know There’s a War On?*, p.45). In the earlier work, *Who was that Masked Man Anyway?*, however, Frankie doesn’t actually call the basal reader stupid, as Howie does, nor does he use the word to describe an adult at school.

In *Lily’s Crossing*, Lily thinks plenty of unkind thoughts about recently escaped-from teacher Sister Eileen. Some of them imply she might be stupid; for example, “Sister Eileen was much more interested in whether the class had rosaries and clean handkerchiefs in their pockets

than in who was going to win the war” (p.3). Lily thinks more fondly of her next, sixth-grade teacher, Sister Benedicta, who encourages the writing she does in her journal (p.169).

Margaret (*Stepping on the Cracks*) describes a uniquely grotesque and fear-inspired series of events on the first day with her sixth grade teacher:

“I keep those who misbehave after school,” she said. Her eyes lingered on Gordy, before moving around to the rest of the class “It is not a pleasant experience.”

Then, clearing her throat loudly, Mrs. Wagner plunged her hand into the billowy bosom of her dress, rummaged around, and pulled forth a frilly handkerchief. She then blew her nose so I expected an elephant to stampede through the classroom.

No one giggled. (p.43-44)

### ***Home Life***

In *Lily’s Crossing*, Lily’s mother has died when Lily was young. Her father’s mother is helping to raise her. Giff depicts their sometimes mutual animosity openly. The grandmother is first mentioned as “Gram, who didn’t have one bit of patience” (p.2). When Lily’s father ships off to Europe, Lily is bitter about being left alone with Gram:

She could see Gram’s name, fourth on her problem list. It came after *First: Lies; Second: Daydreaming* and *Third: Friends, need*. And now maybe she’d cross the whole thing out and move Gram up to number one. It would serve her right.

Gram probably wouldn’t care even if she knew. She wasn’t talking much to Lily either, mumbling once, “...terrible that you didn’t come back to say good-bye to your father.”

Lily knew it was terrible, she didn’t need Gram to tell her that. (p.42)

Lily gets a letter from her father. Missing him and thinking about the danger he’s in makes her cry. At the end of the letter he writes, “Hug Gram too. She loves you, Lily, more than you know.” The next line of the text reads, “Lily wiped her eyes. It was a good thing she had Margaret’s letter to think about next, and not having to give Gram a hug” (p.100).

When Lily needs money to send her friend Margaret her brother Eddie's picture, she asks Gram, without telling her what the money is for. Gram is upset when Lily tells her that she lost all of her own money, and when Gram asks, "How much?" Lily assumes she is asking how much money she lost. She answers, "I don't remember" and shuts herself in the bathroom. Gram continues to talk, but Lily tunes her out (p.128). Later, we learn that Gram was asking Lily how much money she needed (p.134).

Lily is also surprised that her grandmother has sent Margaret a condolence letter after Eddie is reported missing. Gram tells her, "I knew how she felt. Suppose it was Poppy?" and Lily realizes, "She'd never thought about Gram missing Poppy, not once in all these weeks" (p.136). Gram does not always make it easy for Lily to remember that she has human feelings. In the same scene, they remember funny moments with Lily's father. Gram begins to cry:

Lily couldn't believe it. She had never seen Gram cry. Lily's mouth was suddenly dry. "Why..."

Gram shook her head, her mouth trembling, trying to smile. "I guess I miss your father."

Lily stood up, about to go to her, to put her arms around her.

"By the time he comes home," Gram said, "you'll be playing the piano for him." (p.136-138)

Lily hates practicing, and is not good at playing, the piano. Instead of going to her grandmother, she goes to the sink and then leaves the house (p.138).

When a family's father is not sent to war, this brings a different kind of strain to the family. In one of Avi's books and in Hahn's book the fathers are too old, and their sons are sent instead. Hahn's Margaret (*Stepping on the Cracks*) is the only character to direct anger at Hitler as an individual person, and this may be because she attributes the decline of her personal, family relationships to the war. She is on the sidewalk with her best friend, Elizabeth:



“Step on a crack,” she yelled, “break Hitler’s back!”

Despite the heat, I stamped along behind Elizabeth. Under my bare feet, I saw Hitler’s face on the cement—his beady eyes, his moustache, his mean little slit of a mouth. I shouted and pounded him into the pavement, and every time I said his name it was like swearing. It was Hitler’s fault my brother Jimmy was in the army, Hitler’s fault my Mother cried when she thought I wouldn’t hear, Hitler’s fault Daddy never laughed or told jokes, Hitler’s fault, Hitler’s fault, Hitler’s most horrible fault. (p.2)

Margaret calls her father Daddy, but the two are not close. He has grown distant during the war, and grows even more so throughout the course of the book. Both Margaret and her mother seem to expect little from him and focus on the relationship between the two of them. Margaret’s mother is presented as a bit unreasonable. Her response to Margaret’s jumping on the pavement is, “You won’t be happy till you ruin your insides, will you?” (p.2). Later in the book she scolds Margaret for the grass stains on her shorts. Margaret tells the reader, “Sometime I couldn’t please my mother no matter what I said or did. It seemed to me she’d been in a bad mood since Jimmy was drafted” (p.12).

Margaret’s family problems recede in her mind when she learns more about the home life of Gordy and his bother, the deserter, Stuart. When Stuart is sick with pneumonia, Gordy spends the night in the hut to keep him warm and alive. He is walking down the street with Elizabeth and Margaret when his father’s car pulls up to the curb:

Mrs. Smith and the three or four little kids peered out the windows as the man grabbed Gordy.

“You dumb kid, where the hell have you been?” Mr. Smith yelled, shaking Gordy. “You think I got nothing better to do than waste gas looking for you? You had your mother worried to death.”

While Elizabeth and I watched, Mr. Smith punched Gordy hard enough to knock him down. With blood spouting from his nose, Gordy scrambled to his feet only to be knocked down again. (p.144).

In Margaret’s family, Hahn captures how sometimes parents can be so worried about one child they don’t notice the struggles of the other. At this point in the story, in addition to worrying about her brother, Margaret has wrestled with her conscience about helping a deserter

and then worried Stuart would die, seen Gordy's father assault him on the street, and shared in the grief of a very young widow and mother:

“Don't you think I'm worried about Jimmy, too? I looked up at Mother, blinking hard to keep from crying.

“Of course you are.” She pulled me closer and kissed my forehead. “But your father sees you outside with Elizabeth, laughing and playing, and he thinks you don't have a care in the world.”

“Well, he's wrong,” I told her. “I have more cares than he can ever know about.”

“Oh, honey, don't be silly.” (p.156)

Margaret and her mother share a happy moment at Christmas, a moment which also illustrates the changing nature of their relationship:

Mother gave me a Sonja Henjie Doll. Dressed in a white skating costume trimmed with real fur, she smiled with parted lips to show her tiny teeth. As I examined her ice skates, Mother said it was hard to admit I was getting to old for dolls.

“You don't have to play with her,” she said. “She's just so pretty I couldn't resist her.”

I laid the doll carefully back in her box. “She's beautiful,” I said, “and I love her.”

...I decided to put Sonja in safe place on top of my bureau...she would stay just the way she was now, as perfect as the day she was made. (p.168-169)

The war also strains the family in *Who was that Masked Man Anyway?* Frankie's father is described as “always tired and upset” (p.4). When Frankie's brother returns home wounded, he is listless and uncommunicative.

Frankie's best friend Mario's father was killed in action. More devastating than any of Frankie's family's problems is this admission from Mario:

“Okay...Sometimes...sometimes I'm glad my father isn't coming back.”

“What do you mean? How come?”

“See, he used to make my mother cry a lot.” (p.158).

Overall, families struggle less in the series books. Molly's mother is collected and competent, managing her job, sibling-rivalry disputes (*Meet Molly*, p.50) and clothing shortages

(*Molly Learns a Lesson*, p.40-41) with grace and good humor. Madeline (*My Secret War*) wishes her mother would talk with her more about the war (p.112) but idolizes her father: “I danced the beat I’d ever danced...Dad’s smile was the wind making me whirl” (p.113).

In *Early Sunday Morning*, Amber does criticize her parents. They don’t have major flaws, but she depicts them in a less than flattering light. Her father tortures the family with a guessing game about where they’re moving next (p.3-6). Both parents are “about equal on the corny expression meter” (p.8) and her mother is pretty cynical: “She says that everyone in Washington spends every waking minute thinking up what to lie about next” (p.12).

Amber bluntly describes the way her parents manipulate people with food, conversation, and especially alcohol to gather quotes for her father’s newspaper articles (p.23-28). The mom has a bit of a mean streak: “If Mom doesn’t like someone she makes sure their bowl of soup is about a billion degrees Fahrenheit” (p.28). Amber implies that her father is a bit of a hypocrite: “Dad’s a big believer in privacy...which is odd for someone whose job it is to spy on other people, but I’ve never said that to him” (p.35).

After the family moves to Hawaii, Amber makes two minor criticisms of her parents. Her father is “the type who can kill you with kindness” (p.54) and her mother tells her if she doesn’t reply to her friend Allison’s letter, “she’s going to strangle me. She said she had no intention of raising an inconsiderate daughter, which I thought was unnecessary” (p.65).

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Amber’s criticism of her parents stops. She describes her father’s struggles to build a bomb shelter, but the criticism of it she reports—“it would be best if we were hit by a very, very small bomb” (p.114)—is her mother’s, not her own.

### ***Other People’s Business***

In *Stepping on the Cracks*, Margaret grows more critical of her mother as the book proceeds. When she tells her mother that Gordy is being beaten by his father, her mother responds: “‘Mr. Smith is Gordy’s father,’ she said, ‘He knows was best for his son...What people

do in their homes is their own business. It's not for us to interfere'" (p.101). The mother's attitude reflects the time in which the story is set, not the time in which the book was written. When Margaret and her mother encounter a badly beaten Gordy and his little sister June (also badly beaten), she decides she does need to intervene. Without taking any time to consider what to do, she takes all three children to the Smith house (p.159-163). Mrs. Smith makes the standard clumsy family excuses, and tries to take June into the house:

"Come on honey," she said, "let's get you inside." Gordy took you outside without near enough clothes on."

But June buried her face in Mother's shoulder and refused to look at Mrs. Smith. "No," she cried. "No. Daddy hurt me, he hurt me."

Mrs. Smith's face turned red and she tried to laugh. "Now isn't that silly, you bad girl, talking about your daddy like that. Gordy, I swear, you must be filling this child's head with craziness..."

"Mrs. Smith," Mother said, "you can get help. You don't have to live like this."

Mrs. Smith glared at Mother then. "There's nothing wrong with the way I live. Just because some don't have as much money as others doesn't mean we have anything to be ashamed of..." (p.163-164)

After some more conversation, Mr. Smith appears:

As Mrs. Smith babbled on and on about our social call, Mr. Smith continued to stare at Mother. His eyes were rimmed with red, and his cheeks bristled with gray whiskers. Mother looked at him as if she'd been turned to stone.

"Get out of here, Mr. Smith mumbled. "Go on, we don't need nothing from you."

Mother backed away...she grabbed my hand and led me down the steps. (p.164)

At this point, Margaret still believes that her mother will take some action: "Now that she knew the truth about Gordy, I was sure she'd fix his life the way she always fixed everything" (p.165). She asks her mother what she plans to do. "'It's a very unfortunate situation,' Mother said. 'But honestly, Margaret, there's nothing you or I can do'" (p.167).

### *Racism*

In Hawaii, Denenberg's Amber encounters a racist and struggles with hints of anti-Japanese feeling herself. Before the bombing, an arrogant Navy lieutenant comes to dinner at her house. He is confident the nation of Japan would never dare directly attack the United States, but worries about sabotage efforts of the "Buddha-heads" living in Hawaii (p.72-76). Amber is not comfortable with his assertions. After the bombing, she records rumors about Hawaiian Japanese involvement in the attack in the diary, and it's not clear if she believes them (p.103). After helping with a blood drive, Amber writes "Many of the people in line were Japanese, which surprised me. I know it shouldn't have but it did" (p.98).

Amber's mother asks her if she wants to go visit her Japanese-American friend Kame. Amber doesn't answer right away, and "Of course Mom sensed immediately what was going through my mind. In her let's-get-to-the-point tone of voice she said, 'It's not Kame's fault'" (p.108). Kame tells Amber and her mother about her father being arrested and her family's shame and fear "Mom said that she should remember that she is an American just like us, not the enemy" (p.112).

Of the internment of the Japanese, Osborne's Madeline writes in her diary: "Mom said she couldn't believe that all those people were spies. She said little children aren't spies! She thinks it's a tragedy, and someday everyone will see it that way" (p. 75).

In both these books the mothers seem to function as mouthpieces from the future. Denenberg explores some of the harm racism cases by describing its effects on Kame's family, but this is only possible because Amber's mother takes her to visit her.

The racist lieutenant who ate dinner at Amber house appears to be punished by fate. He is delirious and has lost both legs when Amber encounters him in the hospital, after the attack. The diary's epilogue reads, "Lieutenant Lockhart and his wife divorced in 1943. A year later, by then addicted to painkillers and alcohol, he committed suicide" (p.131).

The only book in which characters refer to the Japanese as Japs is *Stepping on the Cracks*. Even Stuart, with his unconventional views, uses the term: “Killing’s wrong. Wrong of them, wrong of us. I know it is... The Germans and the Japs and the Italians are all people, right? Just like us” (p.80-81).

### ***Developing an Ethic of War***

As discussed in the section on school, the children in *Don’t You Know There’s a War On?* connect their teacher’s right to work while pregnant with the liberty for which their fathers and brothers are overseas fighting, and the children, arguably, see their civil action as protecting freedom at home. They do not question the government or individual participation in the war itself. Few books have characters who think philosophically about the morality of war, or question what the obligations of good people are in a world at war. The two exceptions to this are *Stepping on the Cracks* and *Lily’s Crossing*.

In *Stepping on the Cracks*, when Margaret and Elizabeth first realize that Stuart has deserted, they are shocked. Both of them have brothers Stuart’s age, brothers who were friends with Stuart, brothers who are now at war. Margaret had never questioned her brother’s decision to answer the draft, had never considered that it *was* a decision (p.81) but here, because of Stuart, she does:

“Do you think our brothers wanted to go to war?” I asked Elizabeth.  
 “Of course,” she said. “They’re not cowards like Stuart.”  
 “But what he said about killing. Do you think he’s right?”  
 “Don’t be stupid Margaret...If everybody acted like Stuart, Hitler would be in the White House right now. Is that what you want?”  
 “No, I hate Hitler just as much as you do.”  
 Elizabeth stared at me. “Well, then forget what Stuart said. He’s a sissy, that’s all. Sometimes you have to fight, you just can’t let bad things happen.” (p.85)

Initially, Margaret is far more willing to consider Stuart's rationale for refusing to go to war. Elizabeth contemplates turning him in, but then decides they should help him, partly out of pity because he is sick and mostly for the thrill of having a secret (p.100). They get to know him better, and Stuart tells the girls he had been considering becoming a conscientious objector when he was drafted. "...Then I thought maybe I should be in the army like everybody else. I never hated anything so much in my whole life" (p.111). While Stuart was at home on furlough, he got a letter from his tough older brother Donald:

"It was different from the ones he sent the old man. He told me his outfit shot down three or four English planes by mistake, and then fired on one of our own divisions. They were always making mistakes, shelling towns, killing civilians, families."

Stuart coughed, long and hard. When he stopped, he reached under his cot and pulled out a metal box. In it was a letter written on familiar V-mail stationery, creased, and re-creased from being read over and over again. Stuart smoothed it out and read, "Don't believe that patriotic stuff about dying for your country. All me and my buddies want to do is get out of this mess alive. War is nothing but killing people before they kill you, and it's more awful then you can imagine."

"*Donald* wrote that?" Elizabeth stared at Stuart. (p.111-112)

It is here that both girls begin to believe that Stuart has a right to choose not to fight. They start to care about him and worry that he is getting sicker. When they realize he is delirious with fever, they approach Barbara, a classmate of Stuart's and their brothers'. She agrees to help, driving him to a doctor (p.134-140) and then moving him into her parents' home (p.141).

They go to see Stuart at Barbara's parents', and then visit with Barbara in her room. The room contains a mixture of artifacts from different periods in her life: her dolls, her wedding pictures, her cheerleading megaphone, her son's crib and changing table. Barbara tells the girls she hasn't told her parents that Stuart is a deserter, but she doubts they would turn him in (p.149-151). The three play with her baby for a moment, and then:

Running her hand over Brent's hair, Barbara smiled at him. Suddenly she leaned down and scooped him up in her arms. Giving him a fierce hug, she cuddled him on her lap.

"How can mothers let their sons go to war?" she asked Elizabeth and me. "If there's a war when Brent grows up, I'll tell him to hide somewhere like Stu."

"But Butch went," Elizabeth said. We all looked at his picture hanging over the bed. "He was a hero."

Barbara frowned. "I wish he'd stayed in that foxhole and let someone else throw that grenade. Then maybe he'd still be alive, maybe he'd be coming home to Brent and me when the war's over." (p.151)

Margaret's mother has an entirely different perspective. After Stuart has come out of hiding, Margaret tells her mother how she helped him:

"He was sick, and we brought him food and medicine. We probably saved his life..."

"You went down there in those woods where you are absolutely forbidden to go and helped a *deserter*? When your own brother was overseas fighting for his country?"

"Yes...And I'm glad of it. Just because Stuart doesn't want to go to war and kill people doesn't mean he's bad."

"He's a coward," Mother said, her voice full of ice. "And I'm ashamed of you!" . . . Hadn't she said she liked him, that he was her favorite paperboy? Now she was behaving as if he weren't even human.

Ignoring my tears, Mother said, "How do you think Jimmy would feel if he knew his own sister was helping a deserter while he lay dying in Belgium?"

"It wasn't like that!" I said, stung by the unfairness of her question. "Stuart was sick, he needed me! I wish Jimmy had been down there in those woods, too! Then he'd be alive, not dead!"

Mother slapped me then, as hard as she could, right in the face. "Never say anything like that again!" she cried, "Never! Your brother died for his country, he paid the price so we could live in a better world when this war is over. Go to your room! And stay there!" (p.203-204)

Later, Margaret's mother comes to her room to apologize for striking her, and to talk further:



“Desertion is wrong, Margaret, and if anyone finds out what you did, you could get into a lot of trouble.”

I shrugged. “Even if I go to jail, I’ll still be glad I helped Stuart.”

Mother sighed. “You’re just a child, Margaret,” she said. “If you were older, you’d understand how serious this war is.”

I didn’t argue, but in my heart I was sure Mother was wrong. My feelings didn’t have anything to do with being a child except I couldn’t put them into words...

“People like Stuart are different, I finally told Mother. You can’t judge him the way you judge other people. Jimmy called him the little poet. He would’ve wanted me to help Stuart, I *know* he would have.”

“Don’t bring Jimmy into this,” Mother said.

“Why not?” I stared at her. “Jimmy liked Stuart. He took up for him when the other boys teased him. He knew Stuart couldn’t defend himself.”

“...Jimmy felt sorry for Stuart...Stuart’s had a hard life,” Mother went on slowly as if she were finding excuses against her will. “He wasn’t rough and tough like his brothers. I still remember him crying over a squirrel Donald shot with an air rifle.”

“That’s what I mean,” I said. “Stuart can’t stand to see anything hurt. Not a squirrel, not a person.”

“Neither could Jimmy,” Mother reminded me. “But he went to war, he did what he had to do even though it killed him.”

I sighed. We’d gone in a circle, and now we were right back where we started from. There was no answer, no firm ground to stand on. (p.206)

Here Margaret seems older than her eleven years. But it is not that the author has aged her artificially. Margaret’s interactions with Stuart and her mother, as well as the tragedy of her brother’s death, have taught her that the world is a terrible place with much ambiguity. She learns that in such a world, no adult has absolute moral authority—opposite positions can be equally right.

Unlike Margaret’s brother, who answered the draft and who was required to do so to comply with the laws of his country, parents in *Lily’s Crossing* engage in dangerous activities the government does not require. Albert’s parents broke laws, putting themselves and their children in danger by publishing an anti-Hitler newspaper in occupied Hungary. He tells Lily about leaving his house with Nagymamma, his grandmother, and his sister Ruth as the Nazis were on their way to arrest his parents:

“And there was no time, not one minute. We did not say good-bye, my mother was running in the kitchen trying to burn small pieces of paper at the stove, and then she looked over her shoulder and told us, “*Szeretlek*,” and then she looked back because the stove was hot and she was almost burning her fingers.”

“It means ‘I love you,’” he said before she could ask. “But if they loved us, they would not have done that, they would not have bothered with newspapers. And we do not even know what happened to them. Nagymamma just got a postcard from the police saying they were dead.”

“Oh, Albert,” Lily said, thinking how angry he looked, thinking she was angry too. Poppy should have stayed home. (p.89)

Lily’s father has volunteered to serve as a civil engineer in the reconstruction of Europe. When Albert tells Lily his parents are dead her first thought is “Both” (p.88). Lily’s mother is already dead, and this, this fear of being an orphan, may be the chief cause of the resentment she feels toward her father because of his decision to go to Europe.

Near the end of the book, Albert goes out in a rowboat and gets caught in a storm. Lily manages to rescue him but they both nearly drown. When the two are drying out in Gram’s kitchen, Albert explains:

“When I started, it was not even raining. I just row so slowly...,” he said. “I would not have gone without you.” He shook his head. “And now I have lost the boat.”

“And we might have lost you both.” Gram scraped back her chair. “Don’t you know this is what it’s all about? Nagymamma sending you and Ruth away from her so you’d be safe? And your parents publishing a newspaper, helping to win the war, so you’d have a good life?”

“For me? My mother and father?” Albert was nodding. I have never thought about that. I have just never thought...”

Gram turned to Lily. “And Poppy, who could have stayed right here... He went for you Lily, and I had to let him go. My son.” She turned her head a little. “It was so hard.”

Gram didn’t say anything else for a moment. She looked like herself, stern, frowning a little. But then she put her hand on Lily’s cheek. “But worth it. Worth the price to keep you safe.” (p.158)

Gram then leaves the room and returns with a secondhand violin for Albert. Perhaps she has decided her responsibility in the war is to carry out the intentions of grandmothers the war has separated from their grandchildren:

“I know about Nagymamma,” Gram said. “I know she’d want this for you.”  
 But by this time the violin was under Albert’s chin. For a moment he tightened the strings, his head turned to one side. Then the kitchen was filled with the sound of a Hungarian song, fast, sharp, and beautiful.

And Gram was nodding. “See, Lily,” she said, “if you’d only practice...”

And at that moment, Lily remembered Poppy’s letter. *Give Gram a hug. She loves you more than you know.* (p.159)

## V. Conclusions

Of all the books in the study, *Lily’s Crossing* is my favorite. It depicts the real evil of the spread of Nazism, as well as the terrible price of standing against it. Both children and adults in this book are fully human—selfish, foolhardy, cranky—and yet capable of great love. The book allows us to experience the grief and fear of its characters, and at the same time offers hope in their ability to grow and heal in the experience of friendship, and as Albert does, to find strength in the love of a grandmother not his own.

World War II is a critical period for American children to understand. Since it ended, much of American and world history has occurred because of, or in reaction to, its consequences. It could be argued that, because of, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we are still living in its aftermath.

It is my conclusion that the autobiographical fiction works are more likely than the series books to help children attain that understanding. The autobiographical books provide a more realistic, more complex, and more emotionally challenging picture of life during World War II.

Of the *Dear America* series books, *My Secret War* is far stronger. While Maddie’s mother’s denunciation of the internment of the Japanese strikes the reader as an imposition of the values we hold today, the story’s location means it does not pervade the entire narrative. Madeline’s development from being “in love with the excitement of war” (p.93) to, after her father’s injury, realizing that “war is about terrible sadness, pain and fear” (p.153) is believable.

While the episode with the Nazi saboteurs is a bit implausible (and quite possibly, derivative of Wechter's work), Osborne avoids egregious errors such as those Denenberg makes with the use of the phrase "positive thinker" and the early reporting of Amber's mother's pregnancy.

Even the *Molly* books, although they are all written by Valerie Tripp, vary somewhat across the series. In *Happy Birthday, Molly!*, the introduction of Emily, the English refugee, allows Tripp to explore the suffering involved with war, as well to provide a different perspective on the American contribution to the Allied efforts. Unfortunately, Emily does not appear in any other book in the series, and, despite a few mentions of death and destruction, the *Molly* books focus more on coping with shortages and contributing to the war effort than on dealing with terror and loss.

Like the other central characters of the *American Girls Collection*, Molly is both privileged and lucky. The fact that her father is a doctor keeps him off the front lines, and her family's ability to employ a fulltime housekeeper spares Molly from the inadequate supervision experienced by characters in Paulsen's and Avi's works.

I don't think the books of the *American Girls Collection* can be considered without considering the other products offered by their publisher, The Pleasant Company. In the American Girl Holiday 2002 catalog, a Molly doll costs \$84. To get her with all the accessories pictured is additional \$20. Doll outfits, which match Molly's clothes in the books' illustrations, range from \$20-\$22. There is also her dog for \$16, her radio for \$20, and a shiny, blue, doll-sized bicycle for \$54. I suspect Pleasant has little interest in cultivating readers who would identify characters who have little pocket money, and even less interest in depicting an overall picture of history that is not, well, *pleasant*. With their focus on scrap drives and knitting bees, war recipes and tap dance shows, the *Molly* books provide an unacceptably rosy picture of life during World War II. Some may feel that this is appropriate because the books are aimed at younger children, but I believe war should not be repackaged for a G-rating. The first thing a child should learn about World War II is that many people had to die, not that many people had to eat turnips.

An unhappy subject avoided by many of the autobiographical works (including *Lily's Crossing*) as well as the *Molly* books is the subject of anti-Japanese racism. The exceptions are both of the *Dear America* books, in which the central characters' mothers condemn racism, and *Stepping on the Cracks*. In *Stepping on the Cracks*, the subject is not deeply explored but the characters express racism by referring to Japs. With the exception of *Early Sunday Morning*, all the characters in these books are far more preoccupied with the Nazis than with the Japanese. I found it odd that the Japanese are so rarely mentioned, and, with the exception of Hahn, always as the Japanese.

I suspect this is because today we are far more comfortable with our nation's wartime hatred of the Nazis than we are of its hatred of "the Japs." My use of quotation marks in the last sentence suggests why. The Nazis are a political party; "Japs" is racial epithet. Since World War II, we have learned to denounce people with the names they give themselves, for example: Nazi, communist, Islamic fundamentalist. I maintain that ethnic hatred is often infused into the utterance of these apparently neutral words, but during the Second World War, people, in their choice of words, were less careful to distinguish affiliation from ethnicity.

To investigate my suspicion that Hahn's inclusion of the slur was more historically accurate, I consulted the work of Tuttle. He writes:

The people most despised in the wartime America were the Japanese... [Children] heard the epithets shouted by their fathers and mothers: "The little slant-eyed bastards," growled one father. "Dirty Japs," "dirty yellow Japs" and "Little Yellow Bastards" were other denunciations...

Several homefront children recalled seeing films about "chattering monkeylike Kamikaze pilots," in which the pilots made suicide crashes on the decks of American naval vessels. Such images caused a homefront girl to question what motivated this fanatical self-sacrifice. Such "alien" behavior reinforced her belief that the Japanese enemy posed a horrifying threat...

Although Hitler and Mussolini were powerful symbols of the enemy, the common people of Italy and Germany usually were not. The war against the Japanese was different. It “became kind of a racist fight,” a homefront boy remembered, “whites against the yellow race...In Europe it was a little different. You felt the Europeans were good people. They just followed the wrong leaders.” Another perceived distinction, explained a homefront girl, was that while the German soldiers were “fathers/sons/brothers,” the Japanese had “sprung into being family-less” and, as a result, were “unspeakably evil, vicious & sub-human.” Thus, all the Japanese were enemies, no matter whether they were leaders like Hirohito or Tojo, kamikaze pilots, jungle soldiers or even United States citizens of Japanese ancestry.” (p.171-172).

This is a painful and difficult subject. Perhaps some of the authors avoid any mention of the Japanese because they fear that to depict the racism their characters most likely would have felt might somehow suggest that this racism was acceptable. The omission distorts history. In the *Dear America* books, the mothers’ easy condemnation of racism may undermine the reader’s ability to understand its complexity. While not every American during World War II was racist, racism in America was not limited to obvious bigots like Denenberg’s Lieutenant Lockhart, condemned by their ignorance to suffer horrible fates. It is important for readers to consider that good people have been racist, to examine and to understand how anger, ignorance and fear have led our nation to actions that are both shocking and sad.

A book I did not include in the study is *Bat 6* by Virginia Euwer Wolff. I suspect it is autobiographical—the author was born in 1937 and raised in the area in which the book takes place—but its 1949 setting and multiple voices make it very different from the autobiographical books I did include. The story is told through the first-person voices of many sixth grade characters, including the daughters of veterans, the daughter of a conscientious-objector, the daughter of a sailor killed at Pearl Harbor, and a Japanese-American girl recently returned from years of internment and exile from her small, predominately white community. *Bat 6* explores the role of grief, anger and the human tendency to identify a scapegoat for personal failures in the development of racism, as well as the consequences to its victims.

In my further exploration of World War II literature for children, I will look for more depictions of the experience of Americans of Japanese ancestry and more depictions of American racism. I will also look for books depicting children outside the white, middle-class, Christian background depicted in all the books I studied. It is standard to declare in a paper of this type, “More research needs to be done,” but in the case of World War II homefront literature for children, it is more important to say more books need to be written. Writers of autobiographical fiction can provide historical and emotional realism it is difficult for historical fiction writers to match.

When I went to my parents’ house for spring break this semester, I brought with me two cartons of books for this project. My mother rifled through them, and picked one up. “I don’t know if I’ve already told you this,” she said, “and if I have, don’t mind me, but I’m in this book.” She hadn’t already told me. The book was *“Daddy’s Gone to War”*: *The Second World War in the Lives of America’s Children*. This is what it says about my mother:

In assessing the impact of the Second World War on America’s homefront children, it is clear that the most devastating event was the death of a loved one. Without exception, homefront girls and boys who experienced such losses have stated that the war fundamentally altered their lives. The war “totally changed my life,” wrote Kay Britto, “—it took away two brothers I never got to know, brought *great* grief to my parents and changed our whole family structure.” (Tuttle, 1993, p.47)

That night I wrote in my journal, “This is really not such a coincidence. My mother’s experiences, the fact that they were important enough for her to answer an ad in a magazine asking for letters about growing up during the war—this had to play a role in my interest in this topic. I just never expected to find her quite so literally in the pages of a book.”

Now I realize it was her I was looking for all along.

In 1944, my mother was almost exactly the same age as the character Molly McGuire. In her childhood pictures, she sports the same brown braids and Peter Pan collars. I mentioned this in a children’s literature class, how odd it is that the back of the books describe them as being

about an American girl “who lived long ago.” One of my classmates smiled. Her eyes lit up. “Your mom is Molly!” she said. “No, my mom is not Molly,” I said, startling myself with the anger and the sadness in my voice. “She never was.”

World War II was a time of tremendous individual heroism and national unity. When teaching children about that time in history, it is easy to exclude that for both those things—the heroism and the unity—individuals and the nation paid a terrible price. Our country learned from that from that war, learned about complacency, bigotry and the error of retributive justice. These are not lessons we want to repeat. When we gloss over the death and suffering of World War II, we not only dishonor those who died and the families that miss them, we put ourselves and our children in danger of reliving its horror, of having to repeat those lessons.

At the end of each *Dear America* book there is an essay summarizing and interpreting the historical events described in the narrative. The final sentence of the essay included in *Early Sunday Morning* (2001) reads, “No country has tried to invade America’s shores since.” This sentence is still technically accurate, no country has invaded, but the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, once again shattered our sense of smug security. Now is a time of anthrax scares, not of blackout drills, but I sense the fear is very similar. I believe the experiences of children who lived through the Second World War can help today’s children face the difficult times ahead.



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