Truth thief: The failures of 'The Book Thief'

By **Orli Peter**

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It's not surprising that 20th Century Fox is launching an Oscar campaign for "The Book Thief," a hauntingly beautiful film based on Markus Susak's award-winning novel set in Nazi Germany. The New York Post has called the film "Oscar bait."

But I was disturbed by the film, and not for the right reasons. I wish it was because the film correctly represented the evil that ended more than 60 million lives, including 30 of my family, and psychologically damaged hundreds of millions more, some of whom became my patients. I wish I was disturbed because it highlighted the moral betrayal endured by righteous resistors of Nazism, some of whom were graduate students in a class I designed on the Psychology of the Holocaust.

Instead, I was disturbed by how the film put a warm, cozy glow on the terrors of the Third Reich; by how it underrepresented evil and misrepresented goodness. It was, as New York Times reviewer Stephen Holden wrote, "Holocaust kitsch," or better put by another reviewer, "unfiltered schmaltz."

This touching movie fails because it is a fairy tale pretending to be real. There was little in this story that matched the real-world experiences of the survivors and children of perpetrators I have known personally or helped professionally. In fact, the actions, postures and tones of its characters violated basic physiological responses to trauma. It is as if the studio spent millions for experts in film production but not a penny for an expert in psychological trauma.

Director Brian Percival explained that he chose this "positive" angle with the hope that the gentle portrayal of the German people will provide empathy for the German population who underwent Nazi rule. One way he elicited this empathy is by under-representing the rampant spread of anti-Semitism that infected all but the most robust Germans. In this fairy tale, people seem to join the Nazi Party solely for the better pay. Crowds appear neutral, hurling no invectives toward a Jew carried away by the Gestapo, or anyone trying to defend him. The Nazi

epidemic is marginalized to the fringes of the population. It's easier to have empathy for people in the middle of the bell curve.

But by under-representing badness, the film under-represented goodness and the quiet, revolutionary act it had to be. The few who could resist Nazism would have had to keep their humanity in constant focus, hidden under guard. They never would have risked piquing the interest of neighbors by hauling snow inside their home to build a snowman in the basement to please a Jew hiding there. They would have lived with constant terror, every move carefully calculated to protect their humanity. Because of this discipline, they would have displayed moments when bravery and kindness emerged vigorously, not whimsically and impulsively.

In this fantasy movie, people acted normally, with a little more pain from a slightly more painful situation. But our response to extreme situations not only elicits an increase in stress, it changes us. It doesn't just create a quantitative increase, it creates a qualitative shift. It's not just a stressor, it's an earthquake. It breaks us apart, and we reconstruct ourselves to either accommodate or resist the maliciousness.

Most humans who live under constant threat will end up accommodating the maliciousness. It's not because it's easier. We are physiologically hardwired to do whatever we must to survive. Our fight/flight system sends a cascade of chemicals through our nervous system, hijacking our brains to reallocate resources away from empathy and thoughtful decision making toward threat detection, violence and escape. Very few can override this necessary hardwiring, especially when it is driven by a widespread ideological virus, which the Nazi movement made sure to unleash and cultivate.

People who are referred to as "good" are able to override primitive fight and flight responses and keep enough resources for empathy and thoughtful decision making. Those are the real heroes. But this phenomenon is so unlikely that Yad Vashem made a memorial for people able to do this. Out of 70 million Germans alive in 1939, only 525 were recognized as "Righteous Among Nations" — fewer than eight in a million.

So, while the director reached his goal — the audience did seem to respond with empathy for the Germans — it was an empathy for a whitewashed reality that didn't and could never exist. Had the director not been driven by his own

predisposition, he could have sharpened our focus on how good people actually act in the midst of extreme threat, and he could have intensified our empathy for them. But by wanting to spread empathy across the German population, he evoked an indiscriminate empathy for the Germans without standards or merit. Many of the parts for a movie worthy of Oscar consideration were present in this production — except the truth.

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