

Where's the narrative? I feel so overwhelmed by details that I don't get any sense of her characters as real characters. They feel very shadowy, but that's my own personal view. Her descriptive writing is wonderful." Coming back to the genre, Alison emphasises that historical fiction is "undergoing a renaissance. Publishers are racing to get historical novels." The genre has been influenced by the modern novel. "Sarah Dunant writes the most exquisite novels – she

As a historian, you have to restrict yourself to real facts, to what you can infer legitimately from what you're reading, so it's liberating to make that leap of the imagination and to be your character.

- Alison Weir

really brings a period to life. Although," Alison pointed out, "her second novel (*In the Company of the Courtesan*) was over-heavy with description. You find yourself thinking 'get on with the story'. But that's me – I like a narrative that moves along quite quickly. I don't have the patience to read a lot of description. However, it's a new take on the historical novel."

I am impressed by the work schedule that Alison Weir outlines for the coming months: she is currently writing a non-fiction book on Katherine Swynford, due to be published at Christmas. Thinking back to Anya Seton's famous novel, Alison said that she "is quite amazed at what the research has thrown up. It's very different from Anya Seton's interpretation, in some ways, but in others I'm amazed at how Seton arrived at her conclusions. She had extraordinary insight." Then, of course, there's another novel in the pipeline: this time the heroine will be Katherine Howard, and it's scheduled to be written in the early part of next year.

Having met Alison Weir and heard her talk about her writing with such passion and enthusiasm, I know the stories of both women are in safe hands.

Notes

1. See the review of *Innocent Traitor* by Alan Massie, *Scotsman*, April 1, 2006.

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Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR *analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts.*
In this issue, she profiles JENNIFER ROY.

"In 1939, the Germans invaded the town of Lodz, Poland. They forced all of the Jewish people to live in a small part of the city called a ghetto. They built a barbed-wire fence around it and posted Nazi guards to keep everyone inside it. Two hundred and seventy thousand people lived in the Lodz ghetto.

"In 1945, the war ended. The Germans surrendered, and the ghetto was liberated. Out of more than a quarter of a million people, only about 800 walked out of the ghetto. Of those who survived, only twelve were children.

"I was one of the twelve."

Excerpt from interview with Sylvia Perlmutter,
March 2003¹

Thus begins the prologue of Jennifer Roy's *Yellow Star*, a novel for young adults. As a child, Jennifer's aunt lived in Lodz, Poland. Situated approximately seventy-five miles southwest of Warsaw, Lodz was the second largest Jewish community in that country when the Nazis invaded on 1 September 1939. One week later, they seized control of this city. In February 1940, they erected a barbed-wire fence around a small section of the city and forced all Jews to live there. With an average of 3.5 persons crammed into a single room with no running water and no sewer system, living conditions were horrendous. Older children and adults labored in one of the many textile factories that supported the German war effort. They received meager food rations rather than money. More than 20 percent died under these circumstances. The deportations began in January 1942, and within a fortnight, the Nazis had shipped about ten thousand people to Chelmno, an extermination camp. After September and until June 1944, deportations became rare occurrences. The approach of the Soviet troops, however, prompted Heinrich Himmler to order the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto, the last remaining one in Poland. With the exception of a few hundred people retained to work, the remaining Jews were sent to Auschwitz by August 1944. When the Soviets liberated Lodz the following January, only 877 Jews were still alive.

My parents taught me to explore, to enrich my education, to learn what wasn't taught in school. Since the Holocaust wasn't touched on much when I was in high school, I explored on my own. When I became a school librarian, I understood why we must never forget and always added books on this tragedy to the collection so others could learn what happened. I visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum several times, alone and with students, but two moments remain indelibly engraved in my mind. After I entered the building, I rode an elevator to the top floor of the museum where the story begins. When the doors opened, I saw a photograph, enlarged to fit the entire wall, of dead bodies in one of the death camps. More than anything else, this image brought home the reality of the Holocaust. So did my visit to the museum at night when only members walked

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the halls. The silence was suffocating and the mood, somber. The walls of the railroad car that carried Jews to Auschwitz seemed to close in on me, and standing before the gates of the camp, I felt small and inconsequential as the imagined cries of separated families and barking dogs echoed in my head.

I am not Jewish, nor do I have any relatives who witnessed the Holocaust. Or so I thought. One thing I learned in my studies was that many survivors prefer not to speak about what happened. This was true of Jennifer Roy's aunt, Sylvia Perlmutter. As she grew, Jennifer was aware of the Holocaust and knew family members, including her father, survived the ordeal, but they tended to change the subject rather than talk about their experiences. Only later, as Ms. Perlmutter grew older and her memories resurfaced, did she wish to share her experiences so people remember the Holocaust. I understood her reticence to talk about terrible horrors, for my father-in-law never spoke of them either. After he died in 1995, my husband gave me his father's papers to sort through. While reading about his military service during World War II, a word popped out from the records – *Dachau*.

Begun in March 1933 and in operation until about the time the Americans liberated it in 1945, Dachau was the first regular concentration camp the Nazis established. Its inmates (political dissidents, Jews, and other non-desirables) were forced to labor for long hours with little food in unsanitary conditions; some underwent torturous medical experimentation. The camp also served as a



Claire Morris

training ground for SS guards. A lieutenant with the United States Seventh Army Medical Section, my father-in-law worked from late May through July 1945 in Hospital Unit Number One at Dachau, ten miles northwest of Munich, Germany. The Americans had liberated the concentration camp on 26 April, and at that time they found more than thirty railroad cars of decomposing bodies. In spite of the aid provided to the survivors, nearly two thousand died from dehydration and dysentery. My father-in-law's memories of the horrors he saw will never be known. Unlike Ms. Perlmutter, he never spoke of them.

When I began reading *Yellow Star*, I expected to read a chapter or two before setting the book aside. Instead, I read the book from cover to cover. Jennifer Roy brought little Sylvia² to life. I felt what she felt,

saw what she saw, wondered what she wondered, feared what she feared. Jennifer managed this astounding feat through revisions until she found the right voice to tell her aunt's story, and although *Yellow Star* reads like nonfiction, it is a novel told in first person free verse. An odd choice, but had she written it in a vein similar to most novels, Sylvia's tale wouldn't have captured my attention as it did.

Jennifer's first dilemma was to find her character's voice and decide on which format rendered the most compelling story. She tried third person narrative, the point of view in which many novels are written.

Sylvia and her father ran and ran. "Over the wall," Papa said, as he lifted Sylvia over the brick wall that ran along the dirt road.

"Papa, no!" Sylvia cried. But she tumbled over, to the other side, into the graveyard. Oof! She landed on the hard ground. She was too afraid to open her eyes. To see the dead people . . .

"I felt that it was too dry and stiff. The words didn't convey the sheer drama of the moment," Jennifer says. This is due in part to the simple fact that third person narratives lack intimacy. This voice allows the author to share information with the reader beyond just a single character's point of view, but the narrator is simply a reporter of events.

Using first person provides the reader with greater intimacy because the narrator is a participant rather than just a witness. "[Y]our main character quite literally invites your readers into his or her head and shows them the world through his or her eyes."³ The drawback of using first person is that the author can only portray what the character knows and nothing else. Jennifer next tried first person narrative:

"Over the wall," Papa said. He lifted me up, and I tumbled to the other side. Into the graveyard.

"Papa, no!" I cried, as I landed on the hard ground. I was too afraid to open my eyes. To see the dead people . . .

Better, but still not what Jennifer wanted. "I wasn't enjoying writing it. It wasn't really flowing, I didn't feel attached to the story, to my words." She had taped all the interviews with her aunt, so she "listened again to my aunt's lilting, European-accented voice. Suddenly, the voices of all my Jewish relatives came flooding back to me. American English tinged with Yiddish and Polish, with anxiety and resilience . . . When my aunt recounted her childhood to me, she spoke as if looking through a child's eyes. She made her experiences feel real, immediate, and urgent."

Escape

Through the hallway,
down the staircase,
out the front door.

Hurry, hurry.

Quiet, quiet.

Across the street

to a tall brick wall
that separates our neighborhood
from an old cemetery.
*Up you go,
I'm right behind you.*

First Papa lifts me up
and over.
Thud! I land on my hands and knees on hard
dirt.
Papa climbs over
and jumps to the ground.

*This way, this way,
Hurry, hurry.*

Papa picks me up and takes my hand again,
and we start running.
It is nighttime,
but the moon is shining.
There is just enough light to see
the rows of light-colored gravestones.

Papa pulls me along,
weaving through the stones
until he stops.
So I stop.
We are next to a stone that is a bit
taller and wider
than most others I've seen.

Papa drops to his knees
and pulls something out
from behind the stone.
A shovel.

"Papa, where . . . how?"
I am out of breath from running.
Papa puts his finger up to his mouth
to say shush,
so I am quiet,
and I watch
Papa thrust the shovel into the soft ground.

The Hole

Dig. Dig. Dig.
Papa works quickly,
scooping and tossing,
until there is a shallow hole
surrounded by mounds of dirt.

Papa stops digging and looks at me.

"Syvia," he whispers, "get in and lie down."
"You will hide here tonight."

*Lie down in the hole?
Alone?*

I truly mean to obey my papa

and do it because
I always do what Papa says.
I am a good girl.
But I am in a cemetery
in the dark,
and all I can think of are scary things
like dead people and Nazis,
and instead of lying down in the hole,
I scream:
"No! No!"

"No! No"
I can't stop screaming.

"Syvia!" Papa rushes over to me
and pulls me into his arms.
My face is pushed into his chest
so my screams become muffled.
A button presses hard into my cheek,
and I can taste the old wool of his coat.
I stop yelling and close my mouth.

But my feelings can't be pushed down
inside of me anymore
after so many months of being brave.
I just can't keep quiet.

"I don't want to die, Papa," I sob.
"I don't want to die!"
Papa holds me for another minute,
And then he says,

"I will hide here with you."
He releases me and picks up the shovel again.
Dig. Toss. Dig. Toss.
I stop crying and watch
the hole grow longer.

Papa drops the shovel and steps into the hole.
Then he lies down in it.
"See?" he says.
"It's not so bad."

"It came out as free verse. And," Jennifer said, "after I wrote that vignette, I felt the story coming to life. It worked."

Her second dilemma was deciding where to begin Syvia's story. "I wrote first what I considered a 'climatic' moment – the escape to the cemetery. I thought the book would dive right in at this part to grab the reader's attention. But after I wrote the whole graveyard experience in verse, I tucked it away for later. I had gotten my *own* attention, pumped myself up to write the book. Then I turned to a fresh page (I write longhand on legal pads!) and began again – at the true beginning." It begins in the fall of 1939.

How It Begins

I am four and a half years old, going on five,
hiding in my special place behind the armchair in
the parlor,

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brushing my doll's hair,
listening.
The worry of grown-ups fills the air,
Mingling with the lemony smell of the just baked
cake cooling on the serving platter.
Clink, clink, Mother's teacup trembles on its
saucer.
"Must we go, Isaac?" she says to my father, who
has
come home from work
unexpectedly,
interrupting the weekly tea.
"We must leave Lodz right away," Papa says.
"This
city is unsafe for Jews."
Stroke, stroke, my hand keeps brushing
my doll's hair.
My mind freezes
on one word—
Jews.
Jews.
We are Jews.

I am Jewish.
We observe the Jewish holidays
and keep kosher,
but that is all I know.
What does it matter that we are Jews?
I whisper the question into my doll's ear.
She just stares back at me.

Having found the right voice and experimenting with telling the story in free verse, Jennifer turned what began as a dry recounting of her aunt's story into an intimate account of a child's introduction to war and what it really meant to be a Jew during World War II. "Writing a first draft is like groping one's way into a dark room, or overhearing a faint conversation, or telling a joke whose punchline you've forgotten. As someone said, one writes mainly to rewrite, for rewriting and revising are how one's mind comes to inhabit the material fully."⁴ In doing so, Jennifer discovered the "flow and sound" for which she searched.

You might think this was the end of her dilemmas, but you'd be wrong. She submitted the first half of the novel to a major publisher. "They loved it, but they wanted some changes. Big changes. They thought that it should be rewritten in 'regular' prose with poems sprinkled about to highlight critical events. They said 'verse is so constrictive.'" She discussed this with her family and other writers whom she knew. "They were all unanimous – keep the verse, politely decline the publisher! It was hard to turn down an offer, but I wanted the book in verse." Her decision not to alter the story paid off, for the "free verse is what has distinguished *Yellow Star* from others in its genre, according to starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist* and *School Library Journal*." The *PW* review was the one that first drew me to her book.

Yet, some changes this publisher suggested made sense, so Jennifer made certain that "Sylvia's voice and observations mature[d] as she



Jennifer Roy

was who and what happened to them." This necessitated additional phone conversations with her aunt.

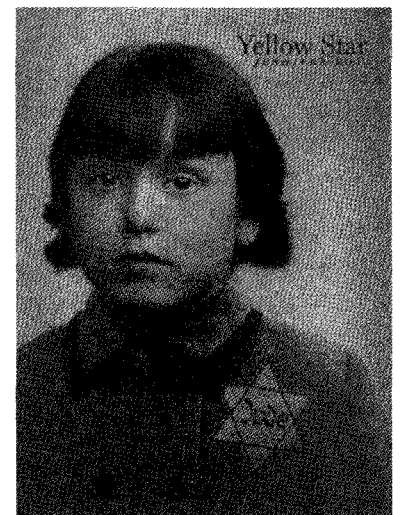
Another suggestion from her editor was the inclusion of prefaces before each section of the story, which is subdivided into time periods. These prefaces orient the reader with what's happening outside of the ghetto and what plans the Allies and Germany were instigating that Sylvia's family wouldn't have known about. Adding these elements required additional research, which also allowed Jennifer to include a timeline of important dates during the war at the end of the book.

Something most authors never get to do outside of speaking engagements and interviews is to explain how the book evolved. Since this is a historical novel that reads more like nonfiction, and to prevent readers from becoming confused as to whose story was being told, Jennifer added an introduction. "We were all concerned about a little girl telling such a detailed story, when in truth it was my grown aunt telling me history fifty years after it happened. I didn't want readers confused about how I had 'become' Sylvia. So I wrote the Introduction, describing how this book, and my part in it[,] came about. I added *my* truth to my aunt's truth. And, finally, I wrote an ending – telling what happened after the war and updating the reader on where the characters are today, and how they got there." Both add to the poignancy of the story.

The last revision is minor compared to all the other changes her story went through, but it was no less important. What should the title of this book be? Jennifer had two working titles, *Growing Up in the Lodz Ghetto* and *Sylvia's Story: A Childhood in the Lodz Ghetto*. While both provide a hint as to what the story is about, neither title grabs your attention. If you saw the book on the shelf with either of these titles, you'd most likely skip over it. Margery Cuyler realized this and "red penciled" both. She then called

did." She also agreed that Papa played "too prominent" a role as the story progressed. In the final version, she focused "on Sylvia and who she was – not just what she reported." When the editor from this first publisher saw the reviews for *Yellow Star*, she wrote, "[S]ometimes it just takes the right house – congratulations on your success!"

The right publisher was Marshall Cavendish. Her editor, Margery Cuyler, provided some insights that allowed Jennifer to revise once more to fine-tune the story. First, Sylvia's minor relatives popped in and out of the story. She had to clarify for the reader "who



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Jennifer and asked, "What do you think of the title *Yellow Star*?"⁵
Jennifer's response? "Perfect."

Jennifer is a former teacher of gifted-and-talented students and children with special needs. She has written more than thirty books for children and young adults, but *Yellow Star*, a 2006 Boston Globe-Horn Book⁶ honor book, is her first historical novel. Currently, she resides in upper New York with her husband and son. She enjoys reading, playing piano, and scrapbooking. You can learn more about Jennifer and her books by visiting her website: www.jenniferroy.com.

Notes

1. Jennifer Roy, *Yellow Star* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2006), page not numbered.
2. Sylvia Perlmutter was called Sylvia as a child. Jennifer chose this nickname for her character.
3. Reni Browne and Dave King, *Self-editing for Fiction Writers*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 30.

4. Michael Seidman, *Fiction: The Art and Craft of Writing and Getting Published* (Los Angeles: Pomegranate Press, 1999), 169.

5. For those readers who aren't familiar with the yellow star, the Christian Church first instituted its use in the 13th century to identify and isolate Jews. The Nazis first required Jews to wear an arm band with the Star of David in December 1939. This later was changed to the yellow star with *Jude*, the German word for Jew, inscribed on it. Jews, however, weren't the only group of people the Nazis singled out in this way. Political dissidents wore red; common criminals, green; Jehovah's Witnesses, purple; immigrants, blue; Roma (gypsies), brown; lesbians and "anti-socials," black; and homosexuals, pink.

6. The Boston Globe-Horn Book Award is presented annually in three categories for excellence in children's literature.

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