Food, Texts and Types of Hunger in Jodi Picoult's *The Storyteller*

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Abstract
In the media, the theme of the Holocaust has always been most powerfully illustrated visually, with images or videos depicting skeletal human beings on the verge of becoming two-dimensional, almost transparent. In the remaining footage of WWII horrors, one can see that those Jews who were kept in Nazi prisoner camps, and who were lucky enough not to be gassed on arrival, still had to cope with the scarcity – or even total lack – of food, which would eventually turn them into living skeletons. In literature, the theme of the Holocaust has been approached differently, with writers constantly striving to find the best words and phrases to appropriately describe the bodily sensations of those for whom food had almost become an intangible item. This paper intends to show how Jodi Picoult's novel The Storyteller (2013) *manages to make its readers mentally visualise the horrors of the Holocaust through the close interconnectedness of (at least) two types of hunger: the physical hunger for food that might enable prisoners to survive another day, and the hunger for texts and stories, which nourish the mind and soul. The pursuit of justice, as well as the need for absolution from guilt, are other types of hunger that this paper analyses, with a view towards a more applied approach within the scope of the study.*

Keywords: contemporary literature, stories of Holocaust horrors, types of hunger, perceptions of food, spiritual food

Introduction

Hunger, in its multifarious forms and degrees, has shaped civilisations and determined the rise or fall of empires. What people traditionally eat on certain holidays and what they avoid eating because they have grown up believing that a particular food is forbidden—either as a rule or only during certain time intervals—have been topics of interest to many authors. Some authors focus on cookbooks, whereas others—particularly fiction writers—have elevated the theme of hunger to a deeper, more complex level, where it has branched out into many different sub-themes such as (in)satiability, (un)healthy food, spiritual food, etc. Closely linked to religious and moral values, the consumption and preparation of certain foods have been rigorously regulated by specific norms such as, for example, the *kashrut* [1], since:

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> Religion and food go together like bagels and lox. Though this is certainly true of most religions, food and Judaism—with its richly textured laws and traditions of *kashrut*, a history of diaspora and displacement, and a this-worldly theology that encourages celebration and feast—seem to have a particularly strong bond. (Zeller 2015: 114)

In recent artistic productions, novelists and screenwriters have found hunger—whether in its literal or allegorical form—to be a rich source of inspiration. Examples can be seen in books like Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* and film series like *The Hunger Games*, which successfully explore and exploit this concept. Hunger, whether in the form of the struggle for nutritious food or the quest for knowledge that could help one survive the horrors of WWII or the brutal trials in *The Hunger Games*, has awakened the survival instinct in the characters, while also refining and reshaping their minds and bodies. As Mattes and Friedman observe, "the term 'hunger' has a variety of meanings, and numerous physiological mechanisms underlying the sensation have been proposed" (1993: 65). In artistic representations, particularly in fictionalised expressions, the sensation of hunger has taken on new meanings, straddling philosophical and psychological lines: "Hunger is an important psychological and physiological phenomenon that exerts a strong influence on behaviour. When better characterised, it should be more amenable to monitoring and manipulation for therapeutic purposes." (65)

Closely connected with the theme of hunger, the atrocities committed during and after WWII have provided ample material for generations of novelists. Among the most delicate and challenging topics is the Holocaust, which has pushed writers to find the most effective language to convey the physical sensations of those for whom food became almost intangible. This paper aims to explore how Jodi Picoult's novel *The Storyteller* (2013) enables readers to mentally visualise the horrors of the Holocaust by intertwining at least two forms of hunger. On one level, the novel addresses the literal hunger for food that might allow prisoners to survive another day, while on another, it delves into a hunger for stories and texts that nourish the mind and soul. Additionally, the novel presents the pursuit of justice and the need for absolution from guilt as other forms of hunger, which this paper will analyse in a more applied manner within its scope.

Readers' cravings for narratives

Jodi Picoult's *The Storyteller* (2013) came into print the same year as Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2013). It features a Jewish girl, Minka, who has a passion for books and the world of the imaginary, the same as Zusak's heroine, Liesel. Still, that is where the similitude between the two books ends. Indeed, Picoult's novel is a mixture of stories told by a multitude of narrators, combined with a

history lesson that is presented at a personal level, all linked together with food recipes, cravings, regrets and longings that invite readers to ponder upon the possible solutions to the characters' problems.

Rejecting a dichotomist view of life where concepts like good and bad are clearly defined and understood, and one's problems get solved with the best solutions possible, *The Storyteller* proposes, in turn, a narrative that is full of twists and turns, and reminds readers that many things in life may be multifaceted and, therefore, complex and morally debatable. To the reader who craves postmodernist plots, the main storyline of Picoult's 2013 novel may seem rather simple. Still, by analysing the type of the narrative more closely, readers may encounter elements that contribute to *The Storyteller*'s attempt at becoming a page-turner. In that respect, the theory proposed by Gerard Genette (1983), which takes into account the variables the narratologist called 'narrative level' and 'story', may help boost the literary value of the narrative under scrutiny:

> If in every narrative we define the narrator's status both by its narrative level (extra- or intradiegetic) and by its relationship to the story (hetero- or intradiegetic), we can represent the four basic types of narrator's status as follows: (1) extradiegetic – heterodiegetic – paradigm: Homer, a narrator in the first degree who tells a story he is absent from; (2) extradiegetic – homodiegetic paradigm: Gil Blas, a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story; (3) intradiegetic – heterodiegetic – paradigm: Scheherazade, a narrator in the second degree who tells stories she is on the whole absent from; (4) intradiegetic – homodiegetic paradigm: Ulysses in Books IX-XII, a narrator in the second degree who tells his own story. (Genette 1983: 248)

With that categorisation in mind, readers who hunger for textual diversity may find *The Storyteller* a challenging read, especially if one takes into consideration the multitude and types of narrators in Picoult's novel. For starters, readers have the opportunity to listen to a multitude of narrators who tell their own stories, all in their own, particular ways and styles. What is more, the novel includes whole pages that prove to be excerpts from an entirely fictional story written by one of the main characters, Minka, and which represent the very reason that imaginative Jewish girl was protected in the Nazi prisoners camp and finally saved. All those texts, with their different writers and prospective readers, are intertwined in the body of a narrative that pulsates with life and gives 21st-century readers the impression of authentic feeling and drama.

In order to get a full picture of the narrative web woven by Jodi Picoult's multiple narrators, an introduction to the main story might prove helpful. Thus, the reader learns that, in the small town of Westbrook, 25-year-old Sage Singer works irregular, antisocial hours, because, on the one hand, her job requires it—she is a baker—and, on the other hand, she has a facial scar she

tries very hard to hide. Sage goes to a grief group, sharing next to nothing, but trying to atone for her mortal sin: on the night of her graduation, three years back, Sage had caused a car accident which resulted in the death of her mother, sometime after that, due to some complications. Consumed by guilt, Sage tells everybody that her mother died of cancer; what is more, she sees her scar the same way it was after the accident, and uses food-related metaphors to explain her view:

> In this, I suppose I'm like a girl with an eating disorder, who weighs ninety-eight pounds but sees a fat person staring back at her from the mirror. It isn't even a scar to me, really. It's a map of where my life went wrong. (Picoult 2013: 10)

Sage's story focuses on the idea that she may not afford to have a choice in life, that her scar and her guilt of having inadvertently killed her mother dictate her whole destiny. Similar to all the life narratives that *The Storyteller* encompasses in its textual fabric, Sage's story emphasises the close relationship between life and death; thus, her lover is a married man called Adam, whom she met at her mother's funeral, in his capacity as the mortician in charge with taking care of her mother. Her extremely low self-esteem determined her to begin an affair with Adam, because she considers herself damaged goods, with her scar and her life history, and she keeps hearing the "quiet whisper in her head: beggars can't be choosers; take what you can get; who else would ever love someone like you?" (27).

As the main story goes, at the group therapy, Sage befriends a nonagenarian, called Josef Weber, who usually goes to the bakery where she works to have coffee and a roll that he shares with his dog Eva. As it happens, once, he leaves his "little black book" (24) behind, so Sage runs out into the storm to give it back to him, wondering jokingly whether that is his 'Great American Novel', only to see Josef looking startled at the idea of having it published. Somewhat secretly, he remarks that "this is just a place to keep my thoughts. They get away from me, otherwise" (24) and, before getting on the bus, he "pats his pocket. 'It's important to remember,' he says" (25).

Readers in need of typologies and in-depth thinking may quickly recognise in Jodi Picoult's *The Storyteller* subjects and themes that pose questions related to the dilemmas most people who survive horrific encounters or incidents are faced with: remembering and letting go, punishment and forgiveness, hunger and abundance, sin and absolution, death and survival. One character, Mary DeAngelis, is cast in the role of Sage's employer and a former nun, with a life story that is, again, related to food – in its two-fold sense of the body and soul alike. A reformed nun, to whom Jesus appeared in a vision telling her "there were many souls to feed" (13), Mary opens Our Daily Bread, a shrine and a bakery that will cater for both types of hunger her visitors might experience, material and spiritual. For baking the actual bread and a diverse

range of specialities, Mary DeAngelis employs Sage, who, in her turn, unravels her story as one ruled by recipes and hunger. Readers learn that the death of her parents played a paramount part in Sage's becoming a baker, who works nights, shying away from the rest of the world, who prefers daylight activities. Thus, after her father's death, 19-year-old Sage finds her interest in life and studies waning, giving way to an insatiable passion for baking. Miraculously, much like Mary DeAngelis's experience, Sage feels driven by an overwhelming urge, as if possessed by a spirit, compelling her to feed others:

> I woke up in my dorm room and smelled flour […] It reminded me of Sunday mornings as a kid, when I would awaken to the scent of fresh bagels and bialys, crafted by my father. He'd always tried to teach my sisters and me, but mostly we were too busy […]. Or so I thought until I started to sneak into the residential college dining hall kitchen and bake bread every night. (14)

Paralysed by grief at the loss of her father, and unable to turn in papers or persuade her brain to pay attention to lectures or books, Sage experiences what might be labelled as a compulsive baking disorder, as if that was the only action she has been genetically programmed to perform:

> I left the loaves like abandoned babies on the thresholds of the offices of professors I admired, of the dorm rooms of boys with smiles so beautiful that they stunned me into awkward silence. I left a finial row of sourdough rolls on a lectern podium and slipped a boule into the oversize purse of the cafeteria lady who pressed plates of pancakes and bacon at me, telling me I was too skinny. On the day my academic adviser told me that I was failing three of my four classes, I had nothing to say in my defence, but I gave her a honey baguette seeded with anise, the bitter and the sweet. (14)

Saved by her mother from a sense of despair that she alone could not shake off, Sage eventually graduates but causes a car accident that puts her mother into a 6-month battle for life – which she finally loses. Again, stress and guilt combined urge Sage to resort to her own, personalised therapy – compulsive baking: "I brought artisan loaves to her doctors. I made pretzels for the nurses. For my mother, I baked her favourite—cinnamon rolls, thick with icing. I made them daily, but she never managed a bite" (14). After her mother's death and her life going downhill, Sage takes her therapist's advice and finds a job at Mary DeAngelis's bakery. In part, she does that because, for her own reasons, she identifies with a piece of dough that needs time alone in order to get in the best shape possible:

> That's the point where you have to leave the dough alone. It's silly to anthropomorphize bread, but I love the fact that it needs to sit quietly, to retreat

> from touch and noise and drama, in order to evolve. I have to admit, I often feel that way myself. (17)

In the unfolding of the story, Mary DeAngelis plays a decisive and delicate role as a catalyst: she helps things happen, as if by divine intervention. For once, she describes Josef in warm colours, as "everyone's adoptive, cuddly grandfather", or "as close you can get to being canonised while you're still alive" (22). Despite that, her ironic comment to Sage— "the worst he could do is talk you to death" (22)—will eventually turn true when Josef confesses to something that will put an end to Sage's trust in him. The readers' hunger for the sensational is satisfied at this point: Josef is not the innocent retired old man Mary DeAngelis imagines, as he, all of a sudden, makes a strange request: that Sage help him die.

Readers may remark on Jodi Picoult's strategy of imagining the perfect time and place to make Josef's strange request sound even more challenging. Thus, one crazy night, after checking on Josef, who was taken ill, entirely by accident, Sage bakes a loaf of bread that resembles Jesus; the unlikely event brings the whole town and local television to Mary's bakery Our Holy Bread, which becomes famous. Making her escape in an attempt to find a quiet spot unoccupied by the crowd that marvels at the Jesus Loaf, Sage finds Josef on the stairs to the Monet Garden, Mary DeAngelis's place full of beautiful flowers, some of which are poisonous. Dramatically enough, that is the place where, out of the blue, Josef makes his strange request while everyone is marvelling about the Jesus Loaf: "I would like you to help me die." (50) Seemingly, Josef shares some mythical creature's genes that prevent him from dying, and he is trying to explain to Sage the difficulty he finds in dying: "This is God's joke on me. He makes me so strong that I cannot die even when I want to." (50) With the girl wondering at his apparently insane wish to end his life, Josef confesses to the truth that, according to his own judgement: "I should be dead, Sage. It's what I deserve." (51) While confessing to his crimes, Josef presses a picture in Sage's palm, where she sees a young man dressed in the uniform of an SS guard, smiling, who is supposed to be Josef.

The story following that confession adds layers upon layers of narratives, and readers are presented with many texts that, knit together, form the fabric of *The Storyteller*. We, readers, will learn not only Josef's story but also his former prisoner Minka's—Sage's grandmother—as well as read fragments from Minka's fiction about a vampire who feasts on human hearts. The main thread of the novel, though, goes smoothly: Sage, in a state of shock at the idea of having befriended a Nazi, who, on top of everything, wants her to kill him, goes to the police, who refer her to the office of Human Rights and Special Prosecutions. There, she meets Leo Stein, who helps her unravel the mystery and discover Josef Weber's true identity as Reiner Hartmann, get his confession on tape, and reconnect with her grandmother, Minka [2]. In their concerted

effort to build a case against Josef, Leo and Sage, two young Americans of Jewish origin, fall in love with each other, and find a common goal.

For the true story to be finally pieced together from the fragments collected from both Josef and Minka, Sage and Leo need patience, because, like a piece of dough, the process takes time, and the two WWII survivors tell their own versions of experiencing the war, and reflect on the way hunger, imagination and history may influence people's lives. Jodi Picoult has both war survivors die, in the end, and the dénouement proves partly disappointing, with Sage finally fulfilling Josef's wish, only to find out that she had killed the wrong Hartmann brother – Franz, not Reiner.

Food, families, survival

Family, nationality and food are key concepts in Jodi Picoult's narrative, and issues like life and death, punishment and atonement are deeply related to those three concepts. The two families whose life principles are presented in *The Storyteller* are representative of their respective nationalities and food habits. Trying to understand Josef's reasoning when she gets that shocking invitation to kill him, Sage learns that she has been chosen because she is a Jew and the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor.

In the "Acknowledgements" to *The Storyteller* (2013), Jodi Picoult thanks her Jewish parents for their help with the book, especially her mother, who found some Holocaust survivors within a day, and thus "paved the way for this book" (xi). Like Sage, the author admits to finding herself in an awkward position, with a heritage that demands she take a stand. On her website, Picoult argues for the viability of her project as a means to safeguard against criminals and injustices:

> A lot of people will ask me why, after all the Holocaust literature that has been written, I wanted to tackle this subject. I am agnostic, but I was raised by Jewish parents and so, like Sage, I find myself in the odd situation of being a spokesperson for a religious group I do not personally affiliate with anymore. And yet, someone has to be that spokesperson. (online)

Food is the element that determines the way one raises one's family, as it provides not only the proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals one needs to survive but also a whole philosophy of life. That is why, in the novel, readers find that families shape their children's behaviour according to their own standards and social realities, taking into account factors such as social and financial status, nationality, health, and character – all of which being reflected in the food they eat. Whether describing a piece of pastry or a rancid vegetable soup, Picoult's writing makes readers imagine the precise taste of the respective food; when, in turn, she chooses to tell a story about generosity and kindness, she touches

their souls; that is what happens when Sage chooses to speak about the difference between Heaven and Hell during a group therapy session:

> "When my mother was in the hospital," I say, "her rabbi told her a story. In Heaven and Hell, people sit at banquet tables filled with amazing food, but no one can bend their elbows. In Hell, everyone starves because they can't feed themselves. In Heaven, everyone's stuffed, because they don't have to bend their arms to feed each other." (38)

Kindness and selflessness are the keys to Heaven, that would be the Jewish lesson, taught in a food parable. Talking about food, thinking about food and sharing food is how people get to know one another or the standard by which they get to be measured. When Sage announces, "I baked a loaf of bread that had Jesus's face in it," her grandmother Minka introduces her granddaughter to a tiny fragment of her own past, confessing that, "There was a time when I could see God in a single crumb." (61) That proves to be the beginning of the story of Minka's battle for survival during the WWII Holocaust, a story about the food that many were denied, and dreamed about in the Nazi prison camps. Reminiscing about prisoners' collective dreams, Minka tells Sage that the primordial, basic need Auschwitz residents painfully felt was for food:

> You know, that was what we missed most. Not our beds, not our homes, not even our mothers. We would talk about food. Roast potatoes and briskets, pierogi, babka. What I would have given my life for back then was some of my father's challah, fresh from the oven. (61)

In Jodi Picoult's novel, female characters—at all narrative levels—have fathers who bake and show their affection by presenting their loved ones with their favourite pastry, baguette, challah, or boule. Having experienced both a happy childhood of plenty and a horrific wartime of hunger and terror, 80-year-old Minka bakes four times the amount of bread she can eat every week, only to share it with the needy, as Sage discovers that: "she wants to have the luxury of giving the rest away to those who are still hungry" (61).

Conversely, the German family where Josef was born and raised had another perception of life, dictated by hunger and hatred. The Hartmanns, as well as most German families at that time, resented the fact that inflation had ruined them all, despite their efforts to save up for a long time. What is worse, in most Germans' view, it was the Jews who, as shrewd investors, were to be blamed for the Germans' misfortunes. Discussing the hatred against Jews that Hitler constantly fed in his anti-Semitic propaganda, Julia Kristeva writes about it in terms of "developing abjection" (Kristeva 1982: 180). However, recent research has examined the relationship between food, nutrients, and behaviour, revealing that the quality of the food consumed can influence