

Anne Frank

With a diary kept in a secret attic, she braved the Nazis and lent a searing voice to the fight for human dignity

By ROGER ROSENBLATT

Along with everything else she came to represent, Anne Frank symbolized the power of a book. Because of the diary she kept between 1942 and 1944, in the secret upstairs annex of an Amsterdam warehouse where she and her family hid until the Nazis found them, she became the most memorable figure to emerge from World War II — besides Hitler, of course, who also proclaimed his life and his beliefs in a book. In a way, the Holocaust



Anne Frank and her family hid from the Nazis in Amsterdam, Netherlands, during World War I

began with one book and ended with another. Yet it was Anne's that finally prevailed — a beneficent and complicated work outlasting a simple and evil one — and that secured to the world's embrace the second most famous child in history.

So stirring has been the effect of the solemn-eyed, cheerful, moody, funny, self-critical, other-critical teenager on those who have read her story that it became a test of ethics to ask a journalist, If you had proof the diary was a fraud, would you expose it? The point was that there are some stories the world so needs to believe that it would be profane to impair their influence. All the same, the Book of Anne has inspired a panoply of responses — plays, movies, documentaries, biographies, a critical edition of the diary — all in the service of understanding or imagining the girl or, in some cases, of putting her down.

"Who Owns Anne Frank?" asked novelist Cynthia Ozick, in an article that holds up the diary as a sacred text and condemns any tamperers. The passions the book ignites suggest that everyone owns Anne Frank, that she has risen above the Holocaust, Judaism, girlhood and even goodness and become a totemic figure of the modern world — the moral individual mind beset by the machinery of destruction, insisting on the right to live and question and hope for the future of human beings.

As particular as was the Nazi method of answering "the Jewish question," it also, if incidentally, presented a form of the archetypal modern predicament. When the Nazis invaded Holland, the Frank family, like all Jewish residents, became victims of a systematically constricting universe. First came laws that forbade Jews to enter into business contracts. Then books by Jews were burned. Then there were the so-called Aryan laws, affecting intermarriage. Then Jews were barred from parks, beaches, movies, libraries. By 1942 they had to wear yellow stars stitched to their outer garments. Then phone service was denied them, then bicycles. Trapped at last in their homes, they were "disappeared."

At which point Otto and Edith Frank, their two daughters Margot and Anne and the Van Pels family decided to disappear themselves, and for the two years until they were betrayed, to lead a life reduced to hidden rooms. But Anne had an instrument of freedom in an autograph book she had received for her 13th birthday. She wrote in an early entry, "I hope that you will be a great support and comfort to me." She had no idea how widely that support and comfort would extend, though her awareness of the power in her hands seemed to grow as time passed. One year before her death from typhus in the Bergen-Belsen camp, she wrote, "I want to be useful or give pleasure to people around me who yet don't really know me. I want to go on living even after my death!"

The reason for her immortality was basically literary. She was an extraordinarily good writer, for any age, and the quality of her work seemed a direct result of a ruthlessly honest disposition. Millions were moved by the purified version of her diary originally published by her father, but the recent critical, unexpurgated edition has moved millions more by disorienting her solely as an emblem of innocence. Anne's deep effect on readers comes from her being a normal, if gifted, teenager. She was curious about sex, doubtful about religion, caustic about her parents, irritable especially to herself; she believed she had been fitted with two contradictory souls.

All of this has made her more "useful," in her terms, as a recognizable human being. She was not simply born blessed with generosity; she struggled toward it by way of self-doubt, impatience, rage, ennui — all things that test the value of a mind. Readers enjoy quoting the diary's sweetest line — "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are still truly good at heart" — but the passage that follows is more revealing: "I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness; I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too; I can feel the sufferings of millions; and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again ... I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

Here is no childish optimism but rather a declaration of principles, a way of dealing practically with a world bent on destroying her. It is the cry of the Jew in the attic, but it is also the cry of the 20th century mind, of the refugee forced to wander in deserts of someone else's manufacture, of the invisible man who asserts his visibility. And the telling thing about her statement of "I am" is that it bears no traces of self-indulgence. In a late entry, she wondered, "Is it really good to follow almost entirely my own conscience?" In our time of holy self-expression, the idea that truth lies outside one's own troubles comes close to heresy, yet most people acknowledge its deep validity and admire the girl for it.

Indeed, they love her, which is to say they love the book. In her diary she showed the world not only how fine a person she was, but also how necessary it is to come to terms with one's own moral being, even — perhaps especially — when the context is horror. The diary suggests that the story of oneself is all that we have, and that it is worth a life to get it right.

It was interesting that the Franks' secret annex was concealed by a bookcase that swung away from an opening where steps led up to a hidden door. For a while, Anne was protected by books, and then the Nazis pushed them aside to get at a young girl. First you kill the books; then you kill the children. What they could not know is that she had already escaped.

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