ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
38.1 (June 2016): 89-107
ISSN 0210-6124

"But What's One More Murder?" Confronting the Holocaust in Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther Novels

Anthony Lake
Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
anthonylake1@yahoo.co.uk

Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther series of Nazi Germany-set historical crime novels use irony in the exploration of themes of complicity, guilt and redemption in relation to the Holocaust. The use of irony enables Kerr's protagonist Bernie Gunther to confront and describe the Holocaust and establish his sense of selfhood as an anti-Nazi. However, it does not empower him to resist the Nazis actively. Bernie seeks to confront the Holocaust and describe his experiences as an unwilling Holocaust perpetrator when he led an SS police battalion at Minsk in 1941. Later, his feelings of guilt at his complicity with the Nazis in the Holocaust haunt him, and he seeks redemption by pursuing justice to solve conventional murders. The redemption that Bernie Gunther pursues is called into question in the ninth novel in the series, *A Man Without Breath* (2013), when the possibility of active resistance to the Nazis is revealed to him when he witnesses the Rosenstrasse Protests in Berlin in 1943. This revelation raises the questions of agency and choice, and forces an ordinary German like Bernie Gunther to confront the possibility that he might have actively opposed the Nazis, rather than allow himself to become their accomplice.

Keywords: detective fiction; Holocaust; Philip Kerr; irony; guilt; redemption

. . .

"¿Qué supone un asesinato más?" Afrontando el Holocausto en las novelas de Philip Kerr sobre Bernie Gunther

En las novelas policiacas de Philip Kerr sobre Bernie Gunther, ambientadas en la Alemania Nazi, el autor recurre con frecuencia a la ironía para explorar temas como la complicidad, la culpa o la redención en relación con el Holocausto. El recurso a la ironía por parte de Kerr permite a su protagonista, Bernie Gunther, enfrentarse y describir el propio Holocausto y construir su propia identidad frente al nazismo. Sin embargo, la ironía no le otorga la

suficiente fortaleza para enfrentarse activamente a los Nazis. Bernie trata de afrontar el Holocausto describiendo sus experiencias a cargo de una compañía de las SS en la ciudad de Minsk en 1941. Posteriormente se ve perseguido por sentimientos de culpabilidad por su renuente complicidad en el genocidio y busca su propia redención resolviendo homicidios convencionales que le permiten aplicar justicia. Sin embargo, en la novena entrega de esta serie, *A Man Without Breath* (2013), se cuestiona el proceso de redención de Bernie Gunther, cuando le surge la posibilidad de enfrentarse de forma activa a los Nazis, como testigo de las protestas de Rosenstrasse en el Berlín de 1943. Esta revelación le hace plantearse cuestiones relacionadas con la voluntad y la capacidad de elección, a la vez que lleva a un alemán corriente, como él, a afrontar la posibilidad de actuar frente a los Nazis, en lugar de convertirse en su cómplice.

Palabras clave: novela policiaca; Holocausto; Philip Kerr; ironía; culpa; redención

The first of Philip Kerr's Bernie Gunther series of Nazi Germany-set detective novels appeared in 1989 and since then the series has grown to eleven titles, with the two most recent, *The Lady from Zagreb* published in 2015 and *The Other Side of Silence* published in 2016. The series has become a wide-ranging fictional exploration of Nazi Germany between the early 1930s and 1945 and beyond into the Cold War years of the 1950s. The Bernie Gunther novels offer an exploration of the possibilities of justice in the world the Nazis created. This was a world in which, under the laws of the Third Reich, crime and justice were entirely re-defined and it became legal to murder people by the thousand. A scene in the ninth title in the series, *A Man Without Breath* (2013) illustrates the point well. Bernie Gunther finds himself confronted with a situation in which a German soldier is prosecuted and hanged for the rape of a Russian woman in one village on the eastern front, whilst a short distance away, SS special police battalions are perpetrating genocide. This is the world in which Bernie Gunther solves everyday murders with only his dogged attachment to the pursuit of justice to insulate himself against the atrocities that surround him. As Brian Diemert remarks: "in this society, integrity and truth lie in the individual's personal code, his or her own ethical position" (2002, 336). However, even Bernie's personal code and his commitment to the job of solving murders and giving justice to their victims cannot protect him from becoming complicit with the Nazis in the perpetration of their crimes. As a detective with the Berlin *Kriminal Polizei* (*Kripo*) he had become an unwilling member of the SS after the police force was absorbed into the SS in 1936. Bernie's only defence against the regime and the role he must play in it is his critically ironic eye, which as narrator of the stories, he casts over the society the Nazis have created.

The Holocaust is a constant presence in the novels, hovering just behind the stories, showing itself now and then through indirect references and allusions. In two of the novels, however, as we will see below, it is brought into the foreground. An attempt to approach the Holocaust in a series of historical crime novels raises some searching questions. As Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander reminds us, "the question of the limits of representation of Nazism and its crimes has become a recurrent theme" (1992, 2). The already vast and ever-growing secondary literature on the Holocaust has come to be characterized by two opposing types of approach: one that asserts that the Holocaust is knowable and can thus be represented and eventually understood, and a second that asserts that it is unique and beyond representation. Michael Rothberg distinguishes between realist and anti-realist approaches to genocide in Holocaust studies (2000, 3-5). The realist tradition in the scholarship of the Holocaust insists that the Holocaust is knowable and Rothberg identifies historians most strongly with the realist approach. The anti-realist approach proposes that the Holocaust is not knowable, as Rothberg puts it, at least within "traditional representational schemata" (2000, 4). The anti-realist approach, he says, has "flourished in more popular discourses, in some survivor testimony and pronouncements, and in many literary, aesthetic and philosophical considerations of the 'uniqueness' of the Shoah" (4).

Ruth Franklin uses much the same opposition in her characterization of conflicting approaches to the Holocaust, but where Rothberg speaks of realist and anti-realist, Franklin opposes realist with the less neutral "mystical" (2011, 4-5). Franklin offers a detailed summary of the history of the scholarship and criticism of Holocaust writing and argues strongly for the view that the Holocaust is knowable and should be approached in fiction. In the same vein, the Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer goes so far as to assert that what is "totally unsatisfactory is an attempt to escape historical responsibility by arguing that this tragedy is something mysterious that cannot be explained. If this were true, then the criminals would become tragic victims of forces beyond human control. To say that the Holocaust is inexplicable, in the last resort, is to justify it" (2002, 38). If we accept Bauer's argument, attempting to explain and understand the Holocaust gains the weight of an ethical imperative. Bauer says elsewhere in the same essay that creative genres of writing can contribute to the understanding and explanation of the Holocaust (2002, 22-23).

Bauer and Franklin assert much the same position and these positions find further support in the work of other recent commentators on Holocaust literature. Katharina Hall, for example, in her discussion of Holocaust-set crime and detective fiction argues that the importance of memorialization and the need to disseminate knowledge about the Holocaust make popular genres of fiction an ideal vehicle to further each of these ends. Hall employs the novel approach of looking at reviews by readers on Amazon of novels like Joseph Kanon's *The Good German* (2001) to show how many of these readers express the view that reading novels like Kanon's has increased their knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust (2011, 60-61).[1] That *The Good German* has also been made into a Hollywood film—by Steven Sodenbergh in 2007—only strengthens the effect that Hall describes. Kerr's Bernie Gunther series enjoys the same bestseller status as *The Good German*, so the same argument may be applied. The theoretical questions of representation remain, but the need to continue to seek to promote knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust finds a valuable vehicle in popular genre fiction that reaches a wide readership.

A fruitful critical approach may be found in looking at the techniques and strategies that particular novels use to approach the Holocaust. With that in mind, it is not unreasonable to begin by asking, given the compromises forced upon Bernie Gunther and the paradox of a detective who solves homicides against a background of genocide: can crime and detective genre fiction, with their conventional formulas of unremarkable homicide, mystery, detection and solution approach so enormous a crime as the Holocaust? Diemert sees the attempt to write about the Holocaust through the medium of classic detective fiction as problematic because the genre has traditionally, he claims, been a historical, and the postmodern re-invention of it "self-consciously places itself

[1] Hall acknowledges that Amazon reviews have their limitations as a scholarly resource. However, as she also says, such reviews offer an "invaluable resource for researchers seeking to gain an insight into a variety of ordinary readers' reactions to the text" (2011, 65).

in a world apart that is the world of indeterminacy, language, and discourse" (2002, 332). Robert Eaglestone suggests that "holocaust fiction is highly intertextual and uses anterior sources much more self-consciously than other genres" and this is true of many of the Bernie Gunther novels (2004, 107). For example, the eighth book in the series, *Prague Fatale* (2011) is a locked room murder mystery which borrows key details of the "whodunit" element of its plot from Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), a piece of pastiche that supplies the novel's postmodern credentials. However, despite its relationship with classic detective fiction, Holocaust fiction and the textual idioms of the postmodern, the series is historically engaged and many incidents and events in the stories are weaved around real historical events, and real historical persons feature among the series' characters. Diemert goes on to ask, "can genre fiction, detective fiction or science fiction, bear the weight of the Holocaust?" (2002, 333). This article will argue that in the case of the Bernie Gunther series, detective fiction is indeed equal to the task. It will do so by discussing how Kerr makes use of irony, how he explores collective and personal guilt and considers the possibilities of redemption for the detective hero. The uses of irony in the series are linked with the theme of redemption through Bernie Gunther's personal code, which drives him always to solve one more murder, to ensure that some kind of justice is done.

However, the use of humour in representing the Holocaust raises further questions. The types of irony used by Bernie in the novel range from throwaway sarcasm, when he is making quips about the Nazis, to the much darker irony employed when he is forced to confront the Holocaust head on. Kerr's appropriation of Raymond Chandler's idiom of noir crime writing, laced as it is with sardonic irony works with powerful effect when Bernie is making fun of the Nazis, but it is tested to its limits in attempting to confront the Holocaust.This should not come as a surprise, for the use of humour to represent the Holocaust is a delicate and thorny matter, but there are numerous precedents for it. Mark Cory discusses various instances of its use. He suggests that Holocaust literature calls for an "expanded taxonomy (of humour) appropriate to an aesthetics of atrocity" and suggests that one function of such expansion is to "define the boundaries of our moral response to the Holocaust" (1995, 35). Kerr's use of different types of irony in the Bernie Gunther series can be taken as just such an expansion of the taxonomies of humour as Cory describes. Cory goes on to discuss Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003) and argues persuasively that the use of comic illustration creates a distancing effect. Bernie Gunther's use of irony functions in different ways to create similar defamilarizing effects.[2]

Kerr remarked in an interview for *The Daily Telegraph* that the idea for the Bernie Gunther character was born when he started to wonder what might have happened if Chandler had gone to Germany rather than the United States when he left England

[2] There are precedents for the use of humour in Holocaust Literature and three of the most notable are Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1992), Imre Kertesz's *Fatelessness* (2004) and Piotr Rawicz's *Blood from the Sky* (2003).

(Clements 2012, n.p.). The appropriation of the Marlowe persona and the use of the noir idioms that Chandler developed in his portrayal of the criminal underworld of the Los Angeles of the 1930s and 1940s enables Kerr to give Bernie Gunther Philip Marlowe's hard-boiled wise-cracking attitude and ironic eye, through which he views the Nazis and their crimes. In the Berlin Noir trilogy which opens the series, irony is a source of sardonic humour and a distancing mechanism, such as when Bernie quips in the sixth book, *If the Dead Rise not*, "a Nazi is someone who follows Hitler. To be anti-Nazi is to listen to what he says" (Kerr 2009, 73). The first part of this discussion will consider Bernie's uses of the ironic world view that his creator has appropriated from Chandler and its development from sardonic commentary on the Nazis into a tool of critique through which the series can confront the Holocaust directly. This will lead to a consideration of the questions of guilt and redemption that are raised at the end of *A German Requiem* (1991), the final novel of the Berlin Noir trilogy, and continues through the novels that follow it, right up to the most recently published titles. Bernie struggles with his conscience as he becomes increasingly troubled by the memory of the degree to which he became the unwilling accomplice of his Nazi masters. Finally, it will consider the implications for Bernie's search for redemption in *A Man Without Breath* (2013)—the ninth book—through the suggestion that active resistance against the Nazis might have been a stronger possibility than he has hitherto believed throughout the series.

The novels in the series to date can be divided into three phases, with the seventh, *Field Grey* (2010), providing a retrospective look over the whole of Bernie's progress through the Nazi years. The progress of the series mirrors its movement through types of irony to its search for redemption for its detective hero. The first three, which appeared between 1989 and 1991: *March Violets* (1989), *The Pale Criminal* (1990) and *A German Requiem* (1991)—the Berlin Noir trilogy—cover the years 1936 to 1947. *March Violets* is set in 1936, *The Pale Criminal* in 1938 and *A German Requiem* in 1946 and 1947. There the series ended until fifteen years later when in 2006 Kerr began to add more titles. The next three—*The One from the Other* (2006), *A Quiet Flame* (2008) and *If the Dead Rise not* (2009)—deal with the post-war years of 1949 to 1954. This middle group maintains the Chandleresque mode of the earlier three novels, but also adds the more introspective tone of redemption narrative. This middle group is followed by *Field Grey* (2010). This is also set after the war but pursues the redemption narrative back through time to the war years and the crimes for which Bernie seeks atonement. The four most recent titles break with historical chronology and return to the war years. *Prague Fatale* (2011) is set in 1941 and *A Man Without Breath* (2013) in 1943, while the tenth title in the series, *The Lady from Zagreb* (2015) is set in 1956, with long flashbacks to 1942 and 1943. *The Other Side of Silence* (2016) is set in 1956 with flashbacks to 1938 and 1944-5. In *Prague Fatale* and *A Man Without Breath* the redemption narrative remains, but irony returns to drive the stories. *The Lady from Zagreb* takes Bernie to the Balkans, where he witnesses scenes like those he had seen on the Eastern front, and these scenes

remind him of his guilt at what he did at Minsk. In these latest novels, the irony is of a darker and more critical type than that found in the opening Berlin Noir trilogy and it is used to confront the genocide directly.

The measure of historical fiction, for many readers, lies in the historical accuracy it achieves in its representation of the historical events around which it weaves its fictional stories. Detective fiction that seeks to approach Nazi Germany and the Holocaust needs to establish both historical authority through the accuracy of its representation of history, and credibility in the belief that the genre is equal to the task of writing about them. Like Diemert, Katharina Hall wonders if this is possible. She asks if detective fiction can make "credible the idea of a Nazi detective carrying out a murder investigation and upholding justice while working for a criminal state in which murder is ubiquitous and the law corrupt" (2013, 292). The Bernie Gunther novels show how detective fiction is indeed able to make this scenario credible in a number of ways, and the first is by positioning its detective hero as an outsider in Nazi Germany. Bernie knows as early as 1931 that he could never become a Nazi. This is illustrated in *Field Grey* (2010, 541-542) where Bernie explains that he attended the Eden Dance Palace Trial because he was interested in the defendants in relation to another murder. On November 22, 1930 a group of *Sturmabteilung* (SA) Brownshirts had attacked a leftist workers' meeting at the *Tanzpalast Eden* in Berlin. Their trial took place in May 1931, and the German Jewish lawyer Hans Achim Litten was acting for the prosecution on the case. In an attempt to force Adolf Hitler to admit under oath that his National Socialist Party sanctioned Brownshirt violence, Litten called him as a witness. The violence of the Brown shirts and Hitler's dishonest testimony turn Bernie against the Nazis.[3]

The establishing of its detective hero as an outsider in Nazi Germany is a quality that the Bernie Gunther series has in common with the work of other authors of Nazi Germany-set historical detective fiction. In Robert Harris's counter-historical novel *Fatherland* (1992), which imagines a 1960's Europe in which Nazi Germany had won the war, Xavier March, the detective protagonist, investigates the murder of a high-ranking Nazi official. His investigation leads him to uncover the great secret of the Reich: the Holocaust. John Russell in David Downing's John Russell and Effie Koenen series (2007-2013) is an Anglo-American journalist-turned-spy living in Berlin between 1938 and 1941, when America entered the war, and returning in 1945 when the war ends.In Rebecca Cantrell's Hannah Vogel series (2009-2012), Hannah is a crime reporter who is marginalized; in part because of her left wing political sympathies and her connections to the decadent underworld of Berlin Weimar culture, but most of all as an unmarried working woman in a society that insisted that women should be housewives and mothers. In Joseph Kanon's *The Good German*

[3] The Eden Palace Trial is also referred to in *If the Dead Rise not* (2009, 57). After the Nazis came to power, Litten was persecuted and imprisoned. He committed suicide in Dachau concentration camp in 1938 (Hett 2008).

(2001), Jake Geismar is an American war correspondent who worked in Berlin before the war, and goes back there in its immediate aftermath, turning amateur detective to solve the murder of an American army lieutenant. Finally, in Luke McCallin's Gregor Reinhardt series (2013-2016), Reinhardt is an *Abwehr* officer—the German Military Intelligence—and former *Kripo* detective, unsympathetic to the regime, who is connected with the German resistance, a group of high ranking *Wehrmacht* officers who seek to overthrow Hitler. The inside-outsider stance of these characters does not ensure that their lives are not shaped by Nazi policy, nor does it enable them to escape complicity with the regime, but it locates them at a remove from the society around them and enables them to cast an oppositional and critical eye over the worlds they inhabit.

A scene in book eight, *Prague Fatale* (2011), highlights Bernie's outsider status and his refusal to give in to the new justice of the Third Reich when he insists on solving the murder of an SS officer he knows is a mass murderer. *Prague Fatale* begins in Berlin with Bernie recently transferred out of his SS special police battalion that had been active at Minsk and contemplating suicide as a result of the mass murder of Jews he has witnessed there. However, it is precisely his knowledge of the genocide against the Jews of Eastern Europe that prevents him from going ahead and killing himself. The novel's setting moves to Prague when Bernie is summoned by Reinhardt Heydrich to investigate a murder at his headquarters there. Its action is played out in the autumn of 1941 during the early months of Heydrich's tenure as *Reichsprotektor* of Bohemia and Moravia.[4] In *Prague Fatale*, along with *A Man Without Breath* (2013) which follows it in the series, the ironic, outsider's voice is employed to confront the Nazis and the Holocaust more directly than had been the case in the earlier novels. In *Prague Fatale* the genocide is no longer merely rumour; it has come closer through Bernie's own involvement in it, and his irony can no longer place it at a distance. The dynamics of justice in conventional crime and detective fiction that drive Bernie are very different from the twisted forms of justice that characterized life under the Nazis. In an example of the kind of situation that Hall refers to when she asks if crime fiction can achieve credibility for a police detective working to solve murders for the murderous Nazi state, irony is put to the more serious purpose of speaking of the genocide. Half way through the novel, as he investigates the murder of SS *Kapitän* Albert Küttner, Bernie asks himself why he would investigate the murder of a young SS officer who has murdered hundreds, if not thousands of Latvian Jews, Gypsies and other so-called undesirables: "A mass murderer who'd been murdered. What was wrong with that? But how many had I killed myself? There were the forty

[4] Reinhardt Heydrich (1904-1942), was one of the main architects of the Holocaust. He was SS-*Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei* (Senior Group Leader and Chief of Police) and chief of the Reich Main Security Office—including the Gestapo, *Kripo* and SD. He was also *Stellvertretender Reichsprotektor* (Deputy/Acting Reich-Protector) of Bohemia and Moravia, making him the most senior Nazi in what was then occupied Czechoslovakia. Heydrich was assassinated by Czech partisans in the spring of 1942.

or fifty Russian POWs I knew about for sure—nearly all of them members of an NKVD death squad. I'd commanded the firing squad and delivered the coup de grace to at least ten of them as they lay groaning on the floor" (Kerr 2011, 209).

Bernie's use of irony here works by creating a juxtaposition that brings Küttner's role in the genocide and his murder together. In their juxtaposition, they pose a question about the nature of justice under the Nazis. The Holocaust comes yet closer when Bernie turns his critical eye back on himself and remembers his own role in the genocide at Minsk, suggesting that he sees Küttner as no guiltier than he feels himself to be. The questions Bernie asks here about the merits of solving Küttner's murder and about his own involvement in genocide go unanswered, as he abandons his line of thought and concludes that he has to investigate this murder because he has no choice. He has been ordered to do it by Heydrich and he must do his duty.

The moral conundrum of whether or not justice will be served by solving Küttner's murder returns in a later scene. Bernie's criminal assistant, Kurt Kahlo, asks him "but what's one more murder?" as they continue to work the case (2011, 275). Like Bernie, Kahlo knows that Küttner has recently been active in the Ukraine with an SS special police battalion murdering Jews in their thousands. Consequently, Kahlo sees no point in investigating his murder and suggests that they may as well just go through the motions of their police work, drag things out for as long as they can, and extend the period over which they can enjoy the comforts and privileges that their sojourn at Heydrich's castle affords them. Kahlo's belief that investigating Küttner's murder is futile seems wholly valid, and being murdered seems an appropriate fate for such a man. For Bernie, however, the question 'what's one more murder?' is not so easy to dismiss and his response to Kahlo is an ambiguous "maybe" (2011, 275). He says 'maybe' because he again remembers his own actions at Minsk where, like Küttner, he was also active with an SS special police battalion. However, it is what Bernie does, rather than what he says here, that discloses his true position. He does not find Kahlo's position morally acceptable. He goes ahead and investigates the murder properly, eventually revealing in a further ironic twist that Heydrich himself was the killer. Bernie's ruminations on the justice, the moral dimensions and the irony of solving the murder of a mass murderer bring the Holocaust close, but it is still only spoken of, and remains elsewhere and not present. It is not until the next book in the series, *A Man Without Breath* (2013), that Bernie is forced to turn his irony to face the Holocaust directly.

The events of *Prague Fatale* (2011) take place only a few months after Bernie had been at Minsk and it is in the light of his experiences there that he refuses to accept Kahlo's advice. Bernie's insistence on investigating this murder properly is his way of holding onto normality in the face of the Holocaust by continuing to pursue justice. It is also the beginning of his path towards the redemption he seeks. Here, Bernie's attempts to come to terms with his role in the Holocaust and the problem of representing the Holocaust in fiction become closely connected with each other. If

Bernie is to find redemption, he must confront what he has seen of the genocide and his role in it. To do this he needs to find a way of describing it. However, the possibility of representing the Holocaust is a vexed question, as has been noted above. This issue was already addressed in *March Violets* (1989), the first book in the series. Heydrich sends Bernie on an undercover mission to Dachau, where Bernie's task is to spy on a safe cracker imprisoned there. He begins his description of the place by asking "how do you describe the indescribable?" ([1989]1993, 229). Bauer, as we have already noted above, argues that if the Holocaust belongs to human history, it is imaginable, and thus it can be described (2002, 14-22). He also suggests that art, and therefore this novel, can play a role in explaining and understanding it (2002, 23). However, if the camps themselves are beyond Bernie Gunther's power of description, he must approach the Holocaust by other routes if he is to describe it. In an early scene in *A Man Without Breath* (2013), which begins in March 1943, Bernie's irony is confronted with an even more demanding challenge than in *Prague Fatale*, as Bernie investigates the murder of two German soldiers at Smolensk in Russia and the recently discovered mass graves of Polish Army officers massacred by the NKVD at nearby Katyn Forest.[5] Bernie is now working for the *Abwehr* as a war crimes investigator and again he speaks ironically when he remarks: "By the winter of 1943, you found your laughs where you could, and I don't know how else to describe a situation in which you can have an army corporal hanged for the rape and murder of a Russian peasant girl in one village that's only a few miles from another village where an SS special action group has just murdered twenty-five thousand men, women and children" (2013, 9).

In the juxtaposition that Bernie makes between these highly incongruent events two very different forms of "normality" come into close proximity and highlight the problematic nature of the concept of normality itself. The first is the normality of peacetime, when rapists are prosecuted and punished. The second is the normality of life under the Nazis which, as Christopher Browning writes, "itself had become exceedingly abnormal" (2001, xvii). Diemert suggests that in historicizing Nazi atrocities, Kerr risks normalizing them and making them acceptable (2002, 347). However, to historicize them is not to normalize them, but to ensure that they are placed within human history, as Bauer insists they must be, so that they may be explained and understood. Normality, however, remains a highly fraught concept in the context of Nazi Germany. Hannah Arendt describes the problems that arise out of the attempt to define the word "normal" in the study of Nazi Germany when she says of the position of the prosecution at the trial of Adolf Eichmann that "their case rested on the assumption that the defendant, like all 'normal persons,' must have been aware of the criminal nature of his acts, and Eichmann was indeed normal insofar as he was 'no exception within the Nazi regime.' However, under the conditions of the Third Reich only 'exceptions' could be expected to react 'normally'" ([1963] 2006, 26-27).

[5] For a detailed account of the Katyn Massacre and its legacy, see Allen Paul (2010).

Thus, a person who remains 'normal' in Nazi Germany on Arendt's terms, is a person who resists the new abnormal norms of Nazi society. Bernie, in his opposition to the Nazis, is one of Arendt's exceptions, and his exceptional status as one who continues to try to act normally in the midst of extreme abnormality enables him to make sense of a place where normality and extreme abnormality sit side-by-side.

Franco Moretti says that "detective fiction, through the detective, celebrates the man who gives the world a meaning" (1988, 155). Bernie is the man who must give meaning to the world by finding a way to give meaning to the conviction of a rapist just a few miles from the scene of sanctioned mass murder. He must hold onto his personal code of pursuing justice regardless of the corruption, criminality and mass murder that surround him. Diemert suggests that there are places and circumstances, such as Minsk and Smolensk in the Bernie Gunther novels, where the search for a particular murderer is rendered "absurd" (2002, 334). Bernie's juxtaposition of the hanging of the German soldier for rape in one village and the mass murder of Jews a few miles away tests detective fiction to the limits of its power to describe the Holocaust. The use of irony to do this is a rhetorical move that asks a question, though the question is not a rhetorical one. It demands an answer and the answer to the question will determine whether or not the series is able to describe the Holocaust. Irony provides the only lens through which Bernie can make sense of this scenario. Without it, the scene would be as indescribable as Dachau was to him in *The Pale Criminal* ([1990] 1993). In the execution of the rapist, Bernie sees justice being done in the normal way, but it happens in the highly abnormal environment of genocide. Bernie's critically ironic eye enables him to establish the credibility of detective fiction as a means of writing about the Holocaust. His refusal to abandon his personal code and the pursuit of justice, even amidst the state-sanctioned mass murder of Jews, ensures that it is the genocide and not the conviction and execution of the rapist that is rendered absurd (and thus not normal) through their juxtaposition. Bernie's irony in this way helps him and the reader make sense of the scene, the normal and the highly abnormal are fused into a powerful image in which the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust becomes imaginable by presenting it as absurd. As narrator, Bernie Gunter has found a way of describing the Holocaust and made it imaginable, and thus in Bauer's terms, placed it within human history.

Bernie's irony in the novels, however, has not protected him from becoming not only complicit, but actively involved in the genocide, even if his involvement is brief and unwilling. The series is a fictional case study of how Nazi policy and political terror shaped the lives of all Germans; as Tom Lawson says, "the ordinary German population were in a very real sense both victims and perpetrators of a regime which did not confine its terrorism to Jews, as well as bystanders to anti-Jewish policy" (2010, 89-90). Bernie's feelings of guilt lead him to seek redemption and a redemption narrative cannot use irony, but requires a more serious and introspective tone. This new tone develops in the trio of novels that follows the Berlin Noir trilogy—books four to six

in the series, *The One from the Other* (2006), *A Quiet Flame* (2008) and *If the Dead Rise not* (2009)—and grows until it becomes the keynote of book seven *Field Grey* (2010). Bernie's haunting memory of the role he had to play in the genocide at Minsk pervades the novels, though the story of what he had to do there is revealed only in fragments through a number of the books. The telling of this story is complicated by the break with historical chronology in the series' two most recent titles. Eaglestone identifies complex time structures as characteristic of writing about the Holocaust (2004, 57). The decisive details are revealed in *Field Grey*, which in order of publication precedes *Prague Fatale* (2011) and *A Man Without Breath* (2013) in the series, even though in historical time it comes later, being set in 1954, thirteen years later than *Prague Fatale* and eleven after *A Man Without Breath*. It is the most reflective of the novels and it contains flashback sequences to various moments in the 1930s and 1940s, as it traces the story of Bernie's involvement in the genocide. The discussion here will follow historical chronology rather than order of publication, to show how what happened at Minsk becomes the defining experience of Bernie's life and contributes to the development of his character in the years that follow. The story unfolds slowly, first in brief references and later in greater and greater detail. Bernie's transfer from the SS special police battalion that he commanded is mentioned at the beginning of *Prague Fatale*, and more details are added at the beginning of *A Man Without Breath*, as these novels return to the war years and write between the lines of the original Berlin Noir trilogy, adding more detail to Bernie's story and filling gaps in his history. The events that led to his request for a transfer are narrated in fragments in books three, four and six, respectively: *A German Requiem* (1991), *The One from the Other* (2006) and *If the Dead Rise not* (2009), each adding more detail until the full story is finally revealed in *Field Grey* (2010), where Bernie is interrogated by American Military Intelligence at Landsberg Prison in Bavaria as a suspected war criminal. It is here that Bernie tells the story of his war experiences and makes his confession, giving his statement to two American military lawyers. Bernie is fully exonerated by the Americans on all charges. However, even though the Americans are satisfied that Bernie is not a war criminal, Bernie himself is not so sure.

Ian Kershaw distinguishes three distinct reactions to Nazi antisemitism among ordinary Germans: latent antisemitism, passive complicity and indifference (2008, 4-7). Bernie's role in the genocide at Minsk takes his involvement far beyond Kershaw's passive complicity and into active involvement. The first reference to Minsk appears in *A German Requiem* (1991). Bernie is at the Central Cemetery in Vienna and the military salute at a funeral he is attending reminds him of how he "had been summoned by the sound of gunshots [. . .] and had seen six men and women kneeling at the edge of a mass grave already filled with innumerable bodies" ([1991] 1993, 612-613). Then, twenty or so pages later, there is a brief reference to his request for a transfer to the front (634). Later, there is a very brief account of how he ended up in the SS, and he explains that "having no stomach for the murder of women and children," he asked again for

a transfer to the front (698). In *The One from the Other* (2006) the spectre of Minsk is raised once more in Bernie's consciousness. While he is working on a case involving a missing war criminal, he recounts his Minsk experiences to a Catholic priest, Father Gotovino, who is involved with helping fugitive Nazis escape from Germany (2006, 131-135). His thoughts return to Minsk again in *If the Dead Rise not* (2009) when Bernie is in Cuba in 1954 and recalls how he was framed for the murders of two women in Vienna in 1949. He says to himself: "not that I had murdered them [. . .] I haven't ever murdered a woman. Not unless you counted the Soviet woman I'd shot during the long, hot summer of 1941—one of an NKVD death squad who'd just murdered several thousand unarmed prisoners in their cells. I expect the Russians would have counted that as murder" (2009, 294).

A little later, when stopped at a military checkpoint outside Havana, Bernie sees the bodies of two men shot by security forces, and he has another flashback to Minsk in 1941, and this becomes the most detailed account so far. It is the first in which Bernie focuses explicitly on his own guilt about the Holocaust. He and his men executed all thirty members of an NKVD death squad that had just burned a prison full of white Ukrainian prisoners, killing all of them. The squad consisted of twenty-eight men and two women, most of whom were Jews and war criminals themselves. Bernie himself delivered the *coup de grace*, as he put it, to two of them, including one of the women (2009, 320). He then goes through the means he had of justifying it. It was war, the relatives of the prisoners had begged them to do it, and shooting them was less cruel than the burning to death to which they had subjected the prisoners, but to Bernie "it still felt like murder" (2009, 320).

Field Grey (2010), besides being the account of Bernie's war experiences, also includes the story of his association with Erich Mielke, the head of the East German *Stasi*.[6] The story of this association further underlines for Bernie the degree to which the Nazis have shaped his life. He is used, initially unwittingly, by the Americans in an attempt to capture Mielke. Bernie and Mielke have a long history and an ambiguous relationship, in the course of which Bernie has saved Mielke's life three times. The third of these rescues comes near the end of the novel when Bernie double-crosses the Americans so that Mielke can evade capture. Bernie states that he has nothing left from before the war but a broken chess piece, the head of a black knight. The reference to this black knight develops into an extended metaphor for the role Bernie has had to play under the Nazis. He says "the way I'd been played over the years I sometimes think a black pawn would have been more appropriate" (2010, 522). When Erich Mielke asks him why he has helped him to escape from the Americans, Bernie says "for twenty years I have been obliged to work for people I didn't like,"

[6] Erich Mielke (1907-2000) was a German secret police official who worked for the Soviet Union and East Germany. He was one of two German communists who shot and killed two Berlin police officers in 1931. He escaped capture and prosecution by fleeing to the Soviet Union where he was recruited by the NKVD. He was head of the East German *Stasi* from 1957 to 1989.

and that now he simply wants to "read the newspaper and play chess" (2010, 561). Playing chess, Bernie will continue to be a black pawn, and Mielke a black knight.

The full irony of Bernie's situation is finally disclosed in this novel when the identity of the saviour who got him out of Minsk is revealed during his interrogation by the Americans. Bernie had been appalled at what he found himself involved in there, and desperate to escape further involvement, he made use of his friendship with his former commander and old friend from his *Kripo* days, the historical SS *Gruppenführer* and head of *Kripo* Arthur Nebe.[7] Bernie asked Nebe for a transfer to the front, where he expected to be killed. The transfer was granted, but instead of ending up at the front, Bernie is sent back to Berlin to work for the Wehrmacht War Crimes Bureau, where his job is to investigate both Russian and German atrocities. Bernie learns that his transfer was not simply a favour from his friend Arthur Nebe, for Nebe was in fact acting under orders from Reinhard Heydrich. Thus Bernie finds himself in the spectacularly ironic position of having been saved from having to participate any further in the worst of Nazi atrocities by one of the very worst of the Nazis and the chief architect of the Final Solution. More than once, Bernie refers to Heydrich as Mephistopheles, and this pact with the Devil on Bernie's behalf makes him Heydrich's favourite detective, sometime bodyguard and errand boy. Irony has turned full circle and ensnared its own master.

The exploration of Bernie's guilt in the books dealing with the post-war years, and the revelation of how he escaped from Minsk in *Field Grey* (2010), is followed in *Prague Fatale* (2011) and *A Man Without Breath* (2013) with a return to the war years as Bernie continues to rake over his past in search of redemption. Anna Richardson discusses the relationship between detective narrative and Holocaust narrative and argues that unlike mystery fiction, which offers the restoration of the social order through the solving of the mystery, the "reader of the detective story is instead offered consolation through the redemption of the detective" (2010, 169). It was argued above that his adherence to his personal code of pursuing justice even in the midst of genocide enabled Bernie to use irony to describe the Holocaust. A scene in *Field Grey* (2010) describes how his refusal to abandon the pursuit of justice, the solving of one more murder, offers Bernie the possibility of a path towards personal redemption. Bernie remembers a fellow prisoner at a prisoner-of-war camp in Ukraine, who was sentenced to twenty years hard labour and correction for calling Stalin a "wicked, Godless bastard" (2010, 330). Bernie wonders if the man is alive or dead, assumes that he is dead and decides he must get some sort of justice for him, for "that's the debt we owe the dead. To give them justice if we can. And a kind of justice if we can't" (331). If he can solve one more murder and give the dead justice in a world of mass murder and genocide, Bernie can

[7] Arthur Nebe (1894-1945) was head of the Berlin *Kriminal Polizei* and a member of the SS, having joined the Nazi party in 1931. He led *Einstatzgruppe* B, which perpetrated mass murder in Ukraine and Russia. In 1944 Nebe was involved in the 20 July plot to assassinate Hitler. He was captured and executed in Berlin at *Plötzensee* Prison on 21 March 1945. In the Bernie Gunther series, Nebe survives the war and, living under an assumed name, is a member of the Org, a secret organization of ex-SS members.

retain his hope of redemption. However, he will never be able to solve enough murders to achieve redemption because no amount of murders solved can be sufficient penance for his guilt about the mass murder he was involved in. This guilt is augmented when a further twist is added to his story which questions the degree of agency that Bernie might have had to take greater control over his own fate. This last twist in the tale asks the reader to question the possibility of the redemption that Bernie seeks.

Throughout the series, Bernie is presented as a man who has had little choice. *A Man Without Breath* (2013) introduces the possibility that Bernie might have done something more than remain silent beyond his wisecracks and the casting of his ironic gaze over the Nazis. A scene at the novel's beginning confronts Bernie with the possibility that resistance might have been possible. It suggests to him that he, and ordinary Germans like him, might have had greater agency than he thought to stand up to the Nazis. The scene is based on the historical Rosenstrasse Protests that took place in Berlin in February and March 1943. It is another example, like the Eden Place Trial, where Bernie realizes he could never be a Nazi, of Kerr's use of a real historical event at a key moment in his character's story. A group of Jewish men married to German women were interned under the terms of the *Fabrikaktion* that came into force on 27 February 1943.[8] Among them is a friend of Bernie's called Franz Meyer. The men are released following protests outside the prison by their families, and those who had already been deported to the east were brought back to Berlin. The deportation of the privileged Jews broke the law and the success of the Rosenstrasse Protests saw real justice and a rare act of goodness being done. Bernie asks,

> What was happening here? What was in the minds of the government? Was it possible that after the huge defeat at Stalingrad the Nazis were losing their grip? Or had they really listened to the protests of a thousand determined German women? It was hard to tell, but it seemed the only possible conclusion [. . .] But if the protest really had worked, it begged the question, what might have been achieved if mass protests had taken place before? It was a sobering thought that the first organized opposition to the Nazis in ten years had probably succeeded. (2013, 28-29)

There had been no mass protests before this episode, but this incident, and the notion that resistance might have been possible in earlier times, exacerbates Bernie's feelings of guilt. And the redemption that Bernie sought through solving one more murder is questioned. It asks readers to look back and think again about the whole series and

[8] The *Fabrikaktion* (Factory Action) is the term for the roundup of the last Jews for deportation. 1,800 of the 6,000 men arrested and interned prior to deportation were so-called *Stoltzfus* or privileged Jews, a category exempt from deportation and other anti-Jewish measures through being married to German spouses hitherto employed as officials of the *Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland*, the Jewish organization officially recognized by the German government for the purpose of controlling the Jewish population. For a full account see Stoltzfus (2001).

question the degree to which its protagonist and narrator might have resisted rather than become not only complicit with, but actively involved in the Holocaust. In this light, the possibility of consolation for the reader through the detective's redemption that Richardson describes is called into question.

Another scene, a little later in the novel, appears to offer an explanation of why Bernie did not resist with more than a critically ironic eye. It concludes the sequence of the novel that began with the Rosenstrasse Protests, and like that scene, it throws further doubt on the possibility of reader consolation through the redemption of the detective. Early in the novel, Bernie is at the Jewish Hospital, where his friend Franz Meyer lies gravely injured after a bomb has hit his house during the party his family threw to celebrate his release from imprisonment after the Rosenstrasse Protests. Bernie thinks to himself that it is simply luck that it is Franz and not he himself who is lying in the hospital bed. He smiles at this, and the Gestapo officer standing next to him asks, '"what is amusing?' Bernie says 'I was just thinking that the important thing in life—the really important thing after all is said and done—is just to stay alive. Dobberke, the Gestapo officer asks, 'is that one of the answers?,' and Bernie replies, 'I think perhaps it's the most important answer of all'" (2013, 37). Just to stay alive is a motive that makes perfect sense, but as an answer it elides all of the moral questions the novels have explored. Those questions, in place since the end of the original Berlin Noir trilogy, however, remain.

If the desire to survive is the most important thing, it is a desire that focuses on personal motivation, and Bernie reflects on the relationship between personal and collective guilt. It is only such reflection that might offer an alternative explanation to the desire to survive. It will also be an explanation that does not sidestep the problem of guilt. Bernie must rise to this final challenge. Diemert sees Bernie Gunther's search for redemption in terms of a "potential sacrifice of self as a necessary step towards atonement for his own sin of silence" (2002, 245). Diemert's suggestion throws light on Bernie's seeking of death on the eastern front and his thoughts of suicide after his transfer from Minsk. However, it is not through death, but through insistence on understanding guilt as personal rather than collective that Bernie continues to pursue his hope of redemption. Moretti addresses this same distinction when he claims that "detective fiction [. . .] exists expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social" (1988, 135). Bernie speaks of this opposition when he meditates on Germany's guilt and his own, at the end of the third book, *A German Requiem* (1991), when he says: "but it is certain that a nation cannot feel collective guilt, that each man must encounter it personally. Only now did I realize the nature of my own guilt—and perhaps it was really not much different from that of many others: it was that I had not said anything, that I had not lifted my hand against the Nazis" ([1991] 1993, 733-734).

This assertion is a direct challenge to the more commonly held view on Holocaust guilt and remembrance, which is expressed by, among others, Bernhard Schlink, when

he says: "when we speak of guilt about the past, we are not thinking of individuals, or even organizations, but rather a guilt that infects the entire generation that lives through an era—and in a sense the era itself" (2010, 1).

Bernie's challenge to the belief in collective guilt and his assertion that guilt must be encountered personally does not mean that there is no such thing as generational or national guilt. Rather, it means that within the guilt that is attributed to and belongs to the Nazi generation, there can only be the possibility of collective redemption if guilt and culpability are faced personally by each member of that generation. The Bernie Gunther novels explore this question through their uses of irony in the attempt to describe the Holocaust. When that irony reaches the limits of its representational power, the series turns its attention to its protagonist's guilt about his role in the Holocaust. The series then introduces a redemption narrative that explores the possibility of achieving personal redemption after the Holocaust in a society in which no individual was able to escape the taint of the Nazis and everyone became complicit with the crimes they perpetrated. In the aftermath of that, Bernie Gunther is the detective who wished to oppose the Nazis, but ended up their accomplice. If he is to achieve the personal redemption he seeks, he must redeem the criminal and murderer the Nazis have turned him into, and become again the detective who solves murders and restores justice. His insistence that each man must encounter his guilt personally and his identification of his guilt as his failure to lift a finger against the Nazis means that he will always have to solve one more murder, because only one more will never be enough. Through its exploration of the uses of irony the Bernie Gunther series offers an example of how crime fiction can confront the Holocaust. However, the very irony that enables that confrontation also calls into question the possibility of the protagonist's redemption.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. (1963) 2006. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. With an introduction by Amos Elon. London: Penguin.

Bauer, Yehuda. 2002. *Rethinking the Holocaust*. New Haven: Yale UP.

Borowski, Tadeusz. 1992. *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. London: Penguin.

Browning, C. R. 2001. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. London: Penguin.

Christie, Agatha. (1926) 2011. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.* New York: William Morrow Paperbacks.

Clements, Toby. 2012. "Philip Kerr: Interview," *Daily Telegraph*, January 23. [Accessed online on October 12, 2015].

Cory, Mark. 1995. "Comedic Distance in Holocaust Literature." *Journal of American Culture* 18 (1): 35-40.

Diemert, Brian. 2002. "How Do You Describe the Indescribable? Representing History in Detective Fiction: The Case of Philip Kerr's Berlin Noir Trilogy." *Genre* 35 (2): 331-353.

Eaglestone, Robert. 2004. *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
Franklin, R. 2011. *A Thousand Darknesses: Truth and Lies in Holocaust Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
Friedlander, Saul. 1992. *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution."* Cambridge MA: Harvard UP.
Hall, Katharina. 2011. "The Crime Writer as Historian: Representations of National Socialism and its Post-War Legacies in Joseph Kanon's *The Good German* and Pierre Frei's *Berlin*." *Journal of European Studies* 42 (1): 50-67.
—. 2013. "The 'Nazi Detective' as Provider of Justice in Post-1990 British and German Crime Fiction: Philip Kerr's *The Pale Criminal*, Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, and Richard Birkefeld and Goran Hachmeister's *Werübrigbleibt, hat recht*." *Comparative Literature Studies* 50 (2): 288-313.
Harris, Robert. (1992) 2012. *Fatherland*. London: Arrow Books.
Hett, Benjamin Carter. 2008. *Crossing Hitler: The Man Who Put the Nazis on the Witness Stand*. New York: Oxford UP.
Kanon, Joseph. (2001) 2008. *The Good German.* London: Sphere.
Kerr, Philip. (1989) 1993. *March Violets. In Berlin Noir*. London: Penguin.
—. (1990) 1993. *The Pale Criminal. In Berlin Noir*. London: Penguin.
—. (1991) 1993. *A German Requiem*. *In Berlin Noir*. London: Penguin.
—. 2006. *The One from the Other*. London: Quercus.
—. 2008. *A Quiet Flame.* London: Quercus.
—. 2009. *If the Dead Rise not*. London: Quercus.
—. 2010. *Field Grey*. London: Quercus.
—. 2011. *Prague Fatale*. London: Quercus.
—. 2013. *A Man Without Breath*. London: Quercus.
—. 2015. *The Lady from Zagreb*. London: Quercus.
—. 2016. *The Other Side of Silence*. London: Quercus.
Kershaw, Ian. 2008. *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*. New Haven: Yale UP.
Kertesz, Imre. 2004. *Fatelessness*. New York: Vintage.
Lawson, Tom. 2010. *Debates on the Holocaust*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
Moretti, Franco. 1988. *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. London: Verso.
Paul, Allen. 2010. *Stalin's Massacre and the Triumph of Truth*. DeKalb, ILL: Northern Illinois UP.
Rawicz, Piotr. 2003. *Blood from the Sky*. New Haven: Yale UP.
Richardson, Anna. 2010. "In Search of the Final Solution: Crime Narrative as a Paradigm for Exploring Responses to the Holocaust." *European Journal of English Studies* 14 (2): 159-171.
Rothberg, Michael. 2000. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP.
Schlink, Bernhard. 2010. *Guilt About The Past*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

SPIEGELMAN, Art. 2003. *The Complete Maus*. London: Penguin.
STOLTZFUS, Nathan. 2001. *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*. Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers UP.

Received 13 March 2015 Revised version accepted 15 October 2015

Dr. Anthony Lake is Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE. He gained his DPhil in English Literature at the University of Sussex in 1997. He has taught at universities in the UK, Turkey, Jordan and the UAE. His current research is concerned with the representation of the Holocaust in contemporary historical crime fiction. His publications include articles on Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron and E. M. Forster.

Address: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. Khalifa University. PO Box 127778. Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Tel.: +971 50 716 8753.