

## **WRITING OFF HORROR - FROM SENSATION AND PERCEPTION TO REFLECTION IN JODI PICOULT'S "THE STORYTELLER"**

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***Abstract:** The paper represents an attempt to analyse and understand the mechanisms by which a text – in this case, Jodi Picoult's 2013 novel *The Storyteller* – has succeeded in capturing its readers, while discussing a topic that, for many, has become obsolete: the Holocaust. With all the TV documentaries talking about it and showing explicit pictures or footage, one would think that nothing new may be said about the subject of the Jews that were killed during the Second World War. Actually, it is quite interesting to notice that, in *The Storyteller*, the novelist tells the reader a (hi)story with at least one moral twist: can one forgive a killer on behalf of the victim? Is it possible to perceive life/ survival as punishment for one's war crimes? Page by page, *The Storyteller* becomes a way of self-purification and reflection for the many narrators in the novel; hoping to find their own happy ending, the narrators/ characters try to understand many sensations and perceptions about the self and the world – and not all are pleasant or good. That is why, having to analyse and make sense of all those issues, the paper cannot end with a definite conclusion; instead, it suggests the possibility of accepting reflection and the gesture of writing stories as an imperfect, but viable solution to horror.*

***Keywords:** horror, sensation, reflection.*

### **Introduction**

In literature, sensation, perception and reflection are instruments that help writers construct a world that challenges reality for readers who, in their turn, will resort to those same instruments in an effort to decode and reconstruct that special fictional world. Page by page and word by word, the text will (ideally, if well-constructed), lead readers to a dénouement that will satisfy all their artistic needs: they will be able to perceive the sentences that form the story, understand the meaning hidden behind the words, and, eventually, reflect upon the messages conveyed by the narrator.

In Jodi Picoult's novel *The Storyteller*, the writer ticks all the boxes with regard to artistic needs: she enables her readers to sense (even taste, sometimes) the words on almost all pages, to vividly perceive both the stories told by the multiple narrators of the novel and the history that is presented at a personal level, and, on top of all that, to reflect upon the solutions to the characters' problems. Whether describing a piece of pastry or a rancid vegetables soup, Picoult's writing gift makes her readers taste exactly that which is presented in the words of the text. That is why *The Storyteller* is such a rewarding read: no readers are left without their due portion of sensation or reflection, once they have fully perceived the text.

With all that in mind, I will try to touch upon the main points suggested by such a generous theme as the one presented in *The Storyteller*, the Holocaust, and demonstrate, in my paper, that the combination of sensations and perceptions one gets at a certain point will lead to choices that, when reflected upon later, seem

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debatable or morally dubious. Baking, eating, writing, loving, punishing and killing people, dying – all these activities are as many reasons to make the narrator(s) and the readers ponder and wonder at humans' capacity to survive, love and hate.

### Story, history, narrative

The novel under scrutiny here is full of twists and turns, reminding readers that all things in life are multifaceted and debatable; although the main story-line seems simple enough for everybody to follow and understand, there are elements that contribute to *The Storyteller's* becoming a page-turner. In the analysis of the type of narrative, I have resorted to the theory proposed by Gerard Genette, whose definition takes into account the variables 'narrative level' and 'story'. He states that

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)

If we consider the types of the narrators' status in Picoult's novel, we will find *The Storyteller* very challenging, indeed; first of all, we have here a multitude of narrators who tell their own stories, in their own, particular ways and styles. Secondly, there are whole pages (or, sporadically, one page only) representing excerpts from a story written by one of the characters, and which is entirely fictional. All these texts are intertwined in the body of a narrative that pulsates with life and gives readers the impression of authentic feeling and drama. And, here, an introduction to the main story is in order.

In the small town of Westerbrook, 25-year-old Sage Singer works irregular, antisocial hours, for two reasons: she is a baker and she has a facial scar she is trying to hide. She goes to a grief group, in an effort to atone for her mortal sin: three years earlier, she had lost her mother<sup>1</sup> due to complications after a car accident that Sage herself had caused on the night of her graduation. That is the reason why she perceives her scar as "a map of where my life went wrong" (Picoult, 2013: 10), and why she tells everybody that her mother died of cancer. Another choice she feels was dictated by the scar and the guilt of having inadvertently killed her mother is that of her lover – a married man called Adam, whom she met at the funeral, in his capacity as the person in charge with burying her mother. Since she considers herself damaged goods, because of her scar and her life history, when she agrees to an affair with Adam, she keeps hearing the

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<sup>1</sup> Sage's father died when she was 19, leading to Sage's loss of interest in university studies; that is why Sage's mother moved in with her and helped her step by step, till she graduated, at 22.

“quiet whisper in her head: *Beggars can't be choosers; take what you can get; who else would ever love someone like you?*” (*ibidem*: 27).

At the group therapy, Sage befriends a nonagenarian, Josef Weber, who also goes to the bakery to have coffee and a roll; on one of these occasions, he leaves his “little black book” (*ibidem*: 24) behind, so Sage runs out into the storm to give it back to him; Sage wonders if that is his ‘Great American Novel’, but Josef looks startled at the idea of having it published. Instead, he remarks that “this is just a place to keep my thoughts. They get away from me, otherwise.” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 24). Before getting on the bus, he “pats his pocket. “It’s important to remember,” he says” (*ibidem*: 25).

In a sense, we may say that *The Storyteller* is all about remembering and/ or letting go, punishment and/ or forgiveness, sin and/ or absolution, death and/ or survival. Mary DeAngelis, Sage’s employer and a former nun, describes Josef in warm colors, as “everyone’s adoptive, cuddly grandfather” (*ibidem*: 22), and “as close you can get to being canonized while you’re still alive” (*ibidem*: 22); still, she ironically adds a comment that will turn true in the end: “The worst he could do is talk you to death.” (*ibidem*: 22). And so it happens, shockingly, as Josef confesses something that will kill something in Sage – her innocence. Thus, readers find out soon enough that Josef is not what he seems, when he, all of a sudden, makes a strange request: that Sage help him die. After becoming fast friends and telling each other (as much as possible from) the stories of their lives, Sage and Josef come to this crucial point where he needs to persuade her to kill him, as he finds himself in the impossibility to die.

What is interesting is that Picoult thinks of a time and place that make that strange request even more challenging; thus, by accident, Sage bakes a loaf of bread that resembles Jesus, which brings the whole town and local television to Our Holy Bread, Mary’s bakery. Trying to find a quiet spot to avoid the crowd that marvel at the Jesus Loaf, Sage faces Josef on the stairs to the Monet garden, a place full of beautiful – and some poisonous – flowers. It is there that Josef makes his strange request while everyone is marveling about the Jesus Loaf: “I would like you to help me die” (*ibidem*: 50). Apparently, he cannot die – as if he were a vampire or a werewolf, or some other similar mythical creature, instead of a mere human being. He is trying to explain 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.” (*ibidem*: 50). When Sage wonders at the – apparently insane – wish to take his own life, Josef admits the truth, “I *should* be dead, Sage. It’s what I deserve.” (*ibidem*: 51). While confessing to his crimes, Josef presses a picture in Sage’s palm: “in the picture, I see a man with the same widow’s peak, the same hooked nose, a ghosting of his features. He is dressed in the uniform of an SS guard, and he is smiling.” (*ibidem*: 51). When Sage protests at the strange request, “I don’t go around committing murder” (*ibidem*: 51), Josef makes a comment, revealing the truth, “Perhaps not [...] But I did.” (*ibidem*: 51).

What comes after that confession is the actual story which, in a few words, goes like that: Sage is horrified by the idea of having befriended a Nazi, as well as by that of ever contributing to his death, so she calls the police and is referred to the office of Human Rights and Special Prosecutions, where she meets Leo Stein. With his help, she unravels the mystery, discovers Josef Weber’s true identity as Reiner Hartmann, gets his confession on tape, and reconnects with her grandmother Minka. All that happens because Josef wishes not only to be killed/

helped to die by Sage Singer, but also to be forgiven by her. The answer to the question “why her?” is that she is a Jew – and the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor. Picoult cannot resist the temptation to have Leo and Sage – both Jewish, by the way – fall in love with each other, while working the case against Josef. In the process of discovering the true story, both Josef and Minka, Sage’s grandmother, tell their versions of experiencing the war, and reflect on the way history influences people’s lives. Both war survivors die, in the end, and the dénouement is somewhat disappointing, with Sage fulfilling Josef’s wish, only to find out that she had killed the wrong Hartmann brother – Franz, not Reiner.

### **Families and their perceptions of life**

In the Acknowledgements to *The Storyteller*, 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” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: xi). In fact, many of Picoult’s books are about families and crises within them, about members of one’s family who come to terms and find ways to communicate, in spite of their differences of opinion.

In the novel, readers find many families who shape their children’s behavior according to their own standards and social realities, taking into account factors such as social and financial status, nationality, health, and character. I will introduce you, very briefly, to the main two families in the novel, and their ideas about life.

In the Hartmanns’ family, as well as in most German families at that time, the perception of life is that of unfairness: in spite of saving up for so long, inflation ruined them all. In Germans’ view, the Jews, who invested well, were to be blamed for everything – so Hitler’s anti-Semitic seeds fell on fertile soil and gave fruit. In her book about abjection, Julia Kristeva writes about the hatred against Jews:

Anti-Semitism, for which there thus exists an object as phantasmatic and ambivalent as the Jew, is a kind of parareligious formation; it is the sociological thrill, flush with history, that believers and nonbelievers alike seek in order to experience abjection. One may suppose, consequently, that anti-Semitism will be the more violent as the social and/or symbolic code is found wanting in the face of developing abjection. That, at any rate, is the situation in our contemporary world [...] (Kristeva, 1982: 180)

Brutality is needed in order to uproot evil, so the perception of violence as a viable solution to poverty grows stronger in Hitler’s Germany. At one of the Hitler-Jugend meetings, the two Hartmann brothers fight against each other; after beating his own brother to a bloody pulp, Reiner is seen as the embodiment of the German future: “this is the face of bravery. This is what the future of Germany looks like.” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 128). Reflecting upon the idea of brutality, Josef admits to have consciously signed a pact with the devil for the privileged position it offered: “I always knew what I was doing, and to whom I was doing it. I knew, very well. Because in those terrible, wonderful moments, I was the person everyone wanted to be.” (*ibidem*: 129)

The two German brothers seem to be very different from each other: Reiner is a brute, Franz an intellectual who helps his Jewish friend Arthur

Goldman with books, and carves a chess set with “pawns shaped like tiny unicorns, rooks fashioned into centaurs, a pair of Pegasus knights.” (*ibidem*: 41). When Sage sees the set, she notices that “the queen’s mermaid tail curls around its base; the head of the vampire king is tossed back, fangs bared.” (*ibidem*: 41); noticing her surprise, Josef (who, at the time, pretends to have been Reiner), chooses to remark, “My brother believed in all sorts of mythical creatures: pixies, dragons, werewolves, *honest men*.” (*ibidem*: 42). What is most interesting is that, because of Franz’s love of mythical creatures, Sage’s grandmother Minka, who writes a story about an *upior* (a Polish type of vampire) is saved by him from Auschwitz – “Anus Mundi – Asshole of the World” (*ibidem*: 179).

At this point, we need to learn about Minka’s family history and the connection she has with the Hartmanns. Pressured by Sage and Leo to tell her story, this Holocaust survivor introduces her audience to a world that senses and perceives reality in terms of food, love, hatred and blood – and hope. It is her words that help Sage imagine what it was like to be a Jew or a prisoner in the Second World War. Minka takes her audience back in time, in Poland, to her father’s bakery, where she spent her spare hours writing her story about an *upior* – a vampire that fed on parts of his victims – or daydreaming with Darija.

Because of her feelings for Her Bauer, a German native who taught at her school, she becomes proficient in German and, by the time she, her family and friends are relocated in the ghetto, cut from school and civilization, she is able to read, write and speak like a native. That is why she becomes a secretary for Herr Fassbinder, a German officer who, widowed and unable to have children of his own by the time of his wife’s death, called his young workers “*meine Kleiner*” – my little ones” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 269) and tried to hire and save as many mothers with children as possible, once he learned about authorities’ plans to kill them. The perception Minka gets is that of a man who sees the person behind their nationality or race:

As I left that night, I started to cry [...] because when we were locking up the factory office in the dark, where no one else could see us, Herr Fassbinder had held the door open for me, as if I was still a young lady, and not just a Jew. (*ibidem*: 273)

Minka’s father tells her once that her name is short for Wilhelmina, “chosen protection” (*ibidem*: 232), which seems, somehow, to help her survive. Even though soldiers who “smelled like hatred.” (*ibidem*: 225) beat everybody in the café Minka and her date have met, she manages to escape. The same happens when she works for Herr Fassbinder, or when she finally gets deported to Auschwitz – but, those times, she is saved by her ability to speak and write in German.

In the end, everybody she loves dies, but she survives to tell her stories – one which has turned into history, the story of her survival, and the other, which is the story she had been writing since her happier days, in her father’s bakery, and which arouses the interest of the Auschwitz *Hauptscharführer*, Franz Hartmann. He takes Minka as his secretary, and gives her a pen and a leather notebook where she is required to write ten pages of her story every night. Since “a disciplined body is the prerequisite of an efficient gesture” (Foucault, 1991: 152), at Auschwitz, prisoners are disciplined by people, according to their rank – the element that dominates all others:

In discipline, the elements are interchangeable, since each is defined by the place it occupies in a series, and by the gap that separates it from the others. The unit is, therefore, neither the territory (unit of domination), nor the place (unit of residence), but the *rank* [...]. Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. (*ibidem*, 1991: 145-6)

In that awful place, Franz Hartmann is outranked by his brother, Reiner, now a *Schutzhaftlagerführer* – which will lead to Darija’s death and Minka’s being sent to another prisoner camp, Gross-Rosen. When, in the absence of her boss, Minka takes Darija to the *Hauptscharführer*’s office to get warm, they bump into the *Schutzhaftlagerführer*, who was stealing money from the safe. Caught in the act, Reiner shoots and kills Darija, but Minka is saved by the lucky arrival at the scene of the crime of the good brother, Franz. Still, outranked, the latter has to give the girl a severe beating and, afterwards, sends her away, saving her life a second time<sup>1</sup>.

### **Hunger, horror and death in real life and fiction**

In *The Storyteller*, everything may be judged and valued in terms of hunger; at some point, grandma Minka remarks that “there was a time when I could see God in a single crumb.” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 71), then she tells her audience that, during the time spent in the ghetto, one boy who fancied her, Aron, once, gave Minka “a bit of his bread ration during lunch at school, which Darija said was virtually a proposal of marriage in these times.” (*ibidem*: 263). At one point in the history of her life, when she sees a piece of bread and jam on an officer’s plate, she touches it, sticks her finger in her mouth and starts thinking of all the things she and her family have loved and lost. More than that, she reflects on the meaning of the jam, which tops the sensorial and goes into the philosophical, “That jam tasted like a lazy summer day. Like freedom.” (*ibidem*: 267).

It is interesting to ponder on the choice of the names given to Minka’s granddaughters, since they are all names of spices: Pepper, Saffron, and Sage; in the latter’s case, her name proves to evoke both an herb that has medicinal powers and the idea of wisdom. Even though, understandably, during the war, people had a certain perception of life, in terms of the food they managed to get and eat, in Minka’s fiction, the *upior*’s hunger is a force that drives him mad. Still, as one of the characters says, “Hunger [...] has nothing to do with the belly and everything to do with the mind. (*ibidem*: 17); Minka reflects on the hunger theme herself, and comes to an amazing conclusion:

I had come to see, too, that all my characters and I were motivated by the same inspiration. Whether it was power they sought, or revenge, or love – well, those were all just different forms of hunger. The bigger the hole inside you, the more desperate you became to fill it. (*ibidem*: 248)

When describing horrors, the Holocaust survivor proves painfully aware of the fact that it is not the senses that are offended by the blood and gore perceived, but the heart and soul; thus, after seeing three people hanged from gallows for criticizing

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<sup>1</sup>The first time, hearing that secretaries and other privileged members of the personnel are to be removed and killed, Franz sends Minka to the hospital, though she is not ill, and takes her back after the danger has passed

Germans, she compares reality to the fiction she herself writes and declares herself defeated:

I thought of all the blood and guts in the horror story I was writing, of the upior eating the heart of a victim, and realized that none of it mattered. The shock value was not in the gore. It was the fact that a minute ago, this man was alive, and now, he wasn't. (*ibidem*: 236)

Actually, the French theorist Michel Foucault comes to the same conclusion in his study *Discipline and Punish*:

In the ceremonies of public execution, the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance. [...] The aim was to make an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offence was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person. (Foucault, *op. cit.*: 57-8)

The whole book – especially the part told by Minka – abounds in thoughts about horror and, death, guilt and survival. Coming to terms with horror is one of the prerequisites for survival, but the survivor knows from her own experience that “you could stop expecting the most awful thing to happen, because it already had.” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 283).

In the face of real horror, Minka begins to unravel her own vampire story, as a means to help prisoners focus on something better than the world they perceive through their five senses; somehow, playing Scheherazade for the block becomes a reason to stick around for everyone. Fiction is worth surviving, the fictional storyteller believes, for the simple fact that, “sometimes all you need to live one more day is a reason to stick around” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 330). Telling the story of the undying monster that falls in love with a mortal – and writing the mandatory ten pages a night for the *Hauptscharführer* – makes Minka a storyteller in her own right – that, and her own admission, “When I wrote, I felt untethered, impossibly free.” (*ibidem*: 324). Even if hope was slim, the girl who faced death in Auschwitz confesses to have believed in survival, in spite of the horror movie around her:

I was delusional enough to convince myself that as long as my story continued, so would my life. Yet even Scheherazade had run out of stories, after 1001 nights. [...] I only wanted the Allies to show up before I ran out of plot twists. (*ibidem*: 362)

There is a sentence that goes through all Minka's stories – real and fictional – as a mantra, gluing both (hi)stories, “My father trusted me with the details of his death, but in the end, I couldn't manage a single one.” (*ibidem*: 136). That turns true in both cases: Ania, the female character in Minka's fiction, is not able to prevent the *upior* from killing her father, no more than Minka can change the order that her father go left (to the gas chambers) instead of right (to work) when they arrive at Auschwitz.

Writing about the terrible wounds inflicted by mythical beasts, Minka tries to write off horror; mythical beasts<sup>1</sup> may take their toll, as long as humans

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<sup>1</sup> Minka calls Franz Hartmann) “Herr Dybbuk”, which is a mythical beast, as well. That is “a human man too weak to force out the evil that had taken residence in him.” (*ibidem*: 312)

may hope for a good ending – survival. A writer herself, A. S. Byatt reflects on the secret that lies behind the power of a myth, and states that “A myth derives its force from its endless repeatability.” (Byatt, 2001: 132).

The former Nazi, Josef Weber/ Franz Hartmann, who pretends to be his brother, Reiner, persuades Sage to kill him, in the end, but not to forgive him, as well; maybe, due to her feelings for her own grandmother, recently deceased, Sage cannot tell the difference between them until it is too late. In Byatt’s words, we may find an excuse for Sage, as

We cannot know the past, we are told – what we think we know is only our own projection of our own needs and preoccupations onto what we read and reconstruct. Ideology blinds. All interpretations are provisional, therefore any interpretation is as good as any other – truth is a meaningless concept, and all narratives select and distort. (*ibidem*: 10-11)

Before eating the perfect roll filled with chopped monkshood (food being the baker’s weapon of choice), Josef confesses to Sage his only crime: he did not help his brother, while he was choking on sour cherries. Actually, ironically, after killing Josef, Sage comes to realize she had killed the wrong brother: it was not Reiner who had told her the story of his murderous past, but Franz, who had lived with the guilt of not giving his brother the Heimlich maneuver.

With his dying breath, Josef asks Sage, “how does it end?” – thus betraying his identity as Franz, the *Hauptscharführer*, instead of Reiner, the *Schutzhaftlagerführer*. Sage comes to an understanding of Josef’s actions at last, but too late for her to remedy anything: interpreting facts depends on how and what Sage chooses to read her grandmother’s fiction:

Now I realize he lied twice to me yesterday: he knew who my grandmother was. Maybe he had hoped I’d lead him to her. Not to kill her, as Leo has suspected, but for closure. The monster and the girl who could rescue him: obviously, he was reading his life story in her fiction. It was why he had saved her years ago; it was why, now, he needed to know if he would be redeemed or condemned.” (Picoult, *op. cit.*: 506-7)

Minka was never able to forgive either brothers for their crimes; in Jews’ views, a person may be forgiven only by the one he has wronged – so Reiner could only be forgiven by Darija, who was dead. As for Franz, he could not be forgiven by Sage, as she was not the one he had wronged. Minka, in whom Franz had killed the capacity to trust people, never finished her story for poetic and philosophical reasons; her granddaughter gives us a very credible and beautiful explanation to that, inviting all of us to reflect on the role of fiction and art, and where the readers may fit in the writer’s/ storyteller’s equation:

She had left it blank on purpose, like a postmodern canvas. If you end your story, it’s a static work of art, a finite circle. But if you don’t, it belongs to anyone’s imagination. It stays alive forever.” (*ibidem*: 507)

In fact, that is the role of fiction, especially if it is about life and death issues, imagined and shaped by a tragedy survivor: to invite to reflection and to give hope for the generations to come, that they will also find their voice and

strength to tell their own stories, to make their own decisions. What better ending to a paper on the power of words than those of its own storyteller:

I know how powerful a story can be. It can change the course of history. It can save a life. But it can also be a sinkhole, a quicksand in which you become stuck, unable to write yourself free. (*ibidem*: 395)

The question is: which one do we choose?

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