

4-2017

## Laurent Binet's HHHH: Historiographic Metafiction in Contemporary French Literature about World War II

Cailee S. Davis

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**LAURENT BINET'S *HHhH*: HISTORIOGRAPHIC  
METAFICTION IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH  
LITERATURE ABOUT WORLD WAR II**

**Cailee S. Davis**



LAURENT BINET'S *HHhH*: HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN  
CONTEMPORARY FRENCH LITERATURE ABOUT WORLD WAR II

By

Cailee S. Davis

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

HONORS COLLEGE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

A Thesis Submitted to the

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE HONORS IN THE DEGREE OF

HONORS COLLEGE

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Honors in the Degree of

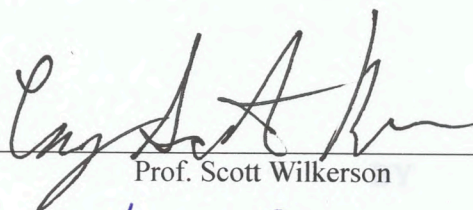
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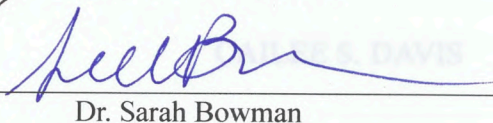
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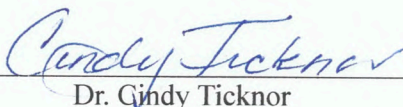
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## ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, a considerable number of contemporary French authors have employed a postmodern perspective made in which texts themselves purposefully aim attention to the fact that they are fictions when writing novels which attempt to grapple with historical events, namely World War II and the Holocaust. In attempting to understand this peculiar but controversial literary phenomenon—called historiographic metafiction—this article compares and contrasts Laurent Binet's *Hitler's Hymn to Joy* (2010), a contemporary French novel about the dissemination of real historical events, with two other contemporary French metafictional novels about World War II and the Holocaust—Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006) and Yannick Haenel's *The Absence of Memory* (2009)—to assert that Binet's text successfully maintains both historical truth and fictional embellishment, whereas Littell's and Haenel's texts are too fictionalized, and therefore not accurate enough historical accuracy to be considered historically true.

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**INDEX WORDS:** World War II, the Holocaust, Historiographic Metafiction, Laurent Binet, Jonathan Littell, Yannick Haenel, French Literature



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the last two decades, a considerable number of contemporary French authors have employed metafiction—a narrative mode in which texts themselves purposefully call attention to the fact that they are fiction—when writing novels which attempt to grapple with traumatic events, namely World War II and the Holocaust. In attempting to understand this popular, but controversial literary phenomenon—called historiographic metafiction—, this thesis contextually analyzes Laurent Binet's *Himmler's Hirn heisst Heydrich* (2010), a contemporary French novel about the assassination of real-life Nazi leader Reinhard Heydrich. This thesis also compares Binet's text to two other contemporary French historiographic metafictional novels about World War II and the Holocaust—Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006) and Yannick Haenel's *The Messenger* (2009)—to assert that Binet's text successfully maintains both historical truth and fictional embellishment, whereas Littell's and Haenel's texts are *too* fictionalized, and therefore fail to maintain enough historical accuracy to be considered historically true.

I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. [Name], for his wealth of knowledge regarding metafiction and for his genuine enthusiasm for this project. Lastly, I wish to thank Cindy Ticknor and the Honors College at Columbus State University for their unwavering support of an extraordinarily long thesis process.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Aaron Sanders for introducing me to what would become my favorite novel and the subject of this thesis: Laurent Binet's *HHhH*. I also want to thank my friends for indulging me and listening to long-winded rants about postmodernist literary theory, the nature of memory, contemporary French literature, and all things related to World War II and the Holocaust. I am especially indebted to Kelly Howard and Leah Vahjen, who spent countless hours proofreading this thesis, and to Michaela Ousanmer, who accompanied me to Prague to visit the church where resistance fighters Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš made their final stand against the Nazi Occupation of Czechoslovakia. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude toward my incredible thesis committee for their endless support and encouragement throughout this process—specifically, Sarah Bowman for her constant willingness to help in any capacity and for guiding my first foray into memory theory; Mariko Izumi for continuing that education and for her unending knowledge of postmemory, trauma theory, and the Holocaust; and Scott Wilkerson for his wealth of knowledge regarding metafiction and for his genuine enthusiasm for this project. Lastly, I wish to thank Cindy Ticknor and the Honors College at Columbus State University for their unwavering support of an extraordinarily long thesis process.



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## Introduction

Is there anything “more vulgar” than a fictional character (Binet *HHhH* 3)? This is the question Laurent Binet poses in the opening paragraph of his debut novel *HHhH*, or *Himmler's Hirn heisst Heydrich* (*Himmler's Brain is Called Heydrich*). *HHhH* (2010) is a contemporary French novel that follows the lives of three central figures in Prague during World War II: Reinhard Heydrich, also known as the man who designed the Final Solution, and Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš, the Czech and Slovak resistance fighters who parachuted into Prague in 1942 at the behest of the Czech government-in-exile to assassinate Heydrich. An international bestseller, Binet's novel was awarded the Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman (one of France's most prestigious literary awards) in 2010, and the English edition, translated by Sam Taylor in 2012, was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book that same year. *HHhH* was also adapted for the stage: the play debuted at the Festival d'Avignon in Aubervilliers, France, in 2012 (Tyrcus 27). Bret Easton Ellis, author of *American Psycho* and *Less Than Zero*—and Binet's favorite living author—, tweeted that the novel was a “masterpiece” and said that, “*HHhH* blew [him] away...it's one of the best historical novels [he has] ever come across” (qtd. in Binet *HHhH*; Binet “Most French Writers”).

Binet's “masterpiece” novel follows the notorious Nazi Reinhard Heydrich from his childhood, highlighting the key moments in his ascension to Hitler's inner circle and his appointment as head of both the Schutzstaffel (SS), the Nazi security police force, and the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police. As the “Protector” of Nazi-Occupied Bohemia and Moravia (the Czech Republic and Slovakia today), Heydrich's anti-Semitic (i.e. anti-Jewish) policies were so effective and efficient that Hermann Goering, Hitler's third in command, gave Heydrich the order to bring about the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” in July 1941 (“Goering's”). The Final



Solution, now known as the Holocaust, refers to the systematic murder of eleven million people—six million of whom were European Jews, and five million of whom were various other “undesirables” such as homosexuals, Sinti and Roma gypsies, asocials, communists and other political opponents, and the physically and mentally disabled—, all of whom were killed on the basis of the Nazi ideology of racial supremacy. The genocidal murders were carried out mostly through a series of mass executions and gassings at death camps in Eastern Europe. The gassings began a mere three months after Goering's authorization to Heydrich, which today remains the only existing physical proof of the Nazis' intentions to eradicate the Jews of Europe (“Goering's”). As Binet's novel asserts, for many in the east—Jewish and otherwise—, Heydrich became a feared and loathed presence, known as “the Hangman of Prague” (153).

Along with the story of Heydrich, *HHhH* also follows the lives of the parachutists Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš. Whereas Binet provides extensive background on Heydrich (perhaps in some attempt to explain how someone could grow to become “the Great Architect of the Holocaust”), he introduces Gabčík and Kubiš to readers when they are already grown men. The story more or less picks up with the men—then strangers to one another—in England, after their respective escapes from Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe. At this time, the head of the Czech government-in-exile President Edvard Beneš has been operating a Czech resistance movement in England with support from the allied British. It is in England that Gabčík and Kubiš begin training as parachutists and are selected for Operation Anthropoid (the codename for the covert mission to assassinate Heydrich), although Kubiš is only selected after Gabčík's first partner Anton Svoboda was injured in a training jump. Once Gabčík and Kubiš are dropped into Eastern Europe—“So, to cut a long story short, they jumped”—, the novel explores their work with the Czech Resistance throughout Prague and the thorough planning of Operation Anthropoid (Binet



*HHhH* 176). Then, at the novel's intense, suspenseful climax, readers are brought along for the execution of the men's (almost failed) assassination of Heydrich and their own heroic deaths in the basement of a Prague church mere days later.

In addition to these three historical actors, the novel also tells the story of a fourth man, the narrator, who happens to be the novel's author, Laurent Binet. Throughout *HHhH*, Binet includes an autobiographical thread, recounting for readers his personal experience with the tale of Heydrich's assassination by two daring parachutists and how it shaped both his life and the creation of the novel. This thread—which Binet has verified in several interviews as an honest representation of himself and *not* a fictional character of his namesake—is incorporated throughout the novel in a number of ways (Binet “Most French Writers” ; Binet “A Story to Conjure With: Author Interview” ; Binet “The Books Interview: Laurent Binet”). In some instances, Binet's interjections manifest as whole chapters themselves; in others, his commentary appears as a mere one or two sentences at the beginning or closing of a section:

1. “I don't remember exactly when my father first told me this story, but I can see him now, in my public-housing bedroom, pronouncing the words 'partisans,' 'Czechoslovaks,' perhaps 'operation,' certainly 'assassinate,' and then this date: '1942'” (4);
2. “My story is finished and my book should be, too, but I'm discovering that it's impossible to finish a story like this” (326);
3. “You'll have gathered by now that I am fascinated by this story. But at the same time I think it's getting to me” (47).

Binet also describes for readers the trouble he faces when writing a historical novel—that is, a fictional novel about *real* people and *real* events, “History” with a capital H (5). Binet's struggle



often reaches a head particularly in those moments when there are gaps in the known information (i.e. historical evidence) and he is forced to improvise:

1. "My story has many holes in it as a novel. But in an ordinary novel, it is the novelist who decides where these holes should occur. Because I am a slave to my scruples, I'm incapable of making that decision" (293);

2. "That scene, like the one before it, is perfectly believable and totally made up. How imprudent of me to turn a man into a puppet—a man who's been dead for a long time, who cannot defend himself" (104);

3. "The people who took part in this story are not characters. And if they became characters because of me, I don't wish to treat them like that" (320).

Binet's confrontation between the historical and the fictional genres within the text itself, this act of constantly calling the audience's attention to the fact that the novel is, at least in part, fiction, is called metafiction. To quote Patricia Waugh, one of the pioneers of metafictional literary theory, metafiction pertains to those texts which

self-consciously and systematically draw attention to [their] status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, [but] they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (21)

Binet's public struggle within and critique of the fiction genre through the narrative of the novel (i.e. his continuous self-insertions), together with the novel's historical content, has caused critics to classify *HHhH* as a hybrid text, belonging to a dual genre which Linda Hutcheon, another premier scholar in the field of metafictional literary studies, first coined as "historiographic metafiction" (5). Hutcheon helped to define this hybrid genre to identify those experimental postmodernist "novels which were both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also [laid]



claim to historical events and personages" (5).

It is this novel's classification as a historiographic metafictional text that this essay will explore through an interdisciplinary approach which utilizes both historical theory and literary analysis. To analyze *HHhH* as a work existing within the dual genre of history and literature, this thesis addresses two questions. First, why metafiction? More specifically, why, when novelists write about World War II and the Holocaust, must they include a metafictional element? This essay will consider the above question through an examination of the historical and cultural circumstances under which Binet's novel was written, followed by a close reading of the text. Second, this paper will grapple with the question of how Binet's novel succeeds at maintaining what one could consider "historical truth" within a fictional narrative when many others within the historiographic metafictional genre have not. To answer this question, this thesis will examine *HHhH* in comparison to two other historiographic metafictional works within contemporary French literature about World War II: Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, or *Les Bienveillantes*, (2006) and Yannick Haenel's *The Messengers*, or *Jan Karski*, (2009). Of the three texts under consideration, this thesis refers to the respective English translations, not the original French, and any significant changes made in translation will be addressed as necessary.

## Part I:

### Metafiction in *HHhH*

#### The Influence of Remembering

Typically, authors employ metafiction in a novel, like "breaking the fourth wall" in theater and film, to suggest something about the process of fiction writing in order to question the relationship between reality and fiction. Often exercised in novels which confront traumatic and/or historical events such as war or genocide, this literary device is not limited to



contemporary French literature alone. Consider Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Philip Roth's *The Plot against America*, and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, all of which use metafiction to grapple with the horrors of the Vietnam War. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* and Lydie Salvayre's *La Compagnie des Spectres* both use metafiction, like the majority of the novels herein discussed, to explore the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust. Other forms of entertainment also utilize metafiction. For instance, the graphic novels *Maus I* and *II* by Art Speigleman and the film *Inglorious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino, both, again, deal with the awesome aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. To explain the popular phenomenon of using self-reflexivity to grapple with traumatic pasts, this thesis consults theories on the general nature of memory—and more specifically traumatic memory—to propose that the events of World War II—namely, in this case, the occupation of France by Nazi forces—and the Holocaust were so unique and pervasive that the trauma which occurred continues to be retroactively experienced by all subsequent generations, including the generation of contemporary French authors herein considered. This paper will first explore critical theory and discuss certain crucial events in France's history; then, this essay will illuminate how that history theoretically created a space for a generation of writers so concerned with World War II and the Holocaust that they were compelled to write historiographic metafictional novels contending with the narratives of that time.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs proposed that there exist two types of memory: first, individual memory—those memories which one has personally experienced—and second, collective memory—“impersonal remembrances” gained through belonging to a group (note that for Halbwachs “the group” often meant the nation) (51). Halbwachs explained that these two memories are intermingled. For individual memory, “in



order to...cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, [and] momentarily merges with the collective memory” (51). Collective memory, therefore, encompasses individual memory, yet it remains distinct and separate from those memories, evolving in accordance to the experiences of the collective (51):

[We] say '[we] remember,' events that [we] know about only from newspapers or the testimony of those directly involved. These events occupy a place in the memory of the nation, but [we ourselves] did not witness them. In recalling them, [we] must rely entirely upon the memory of others, a memory that comes, not as corroborator or completer of [our] own, but as the *very* source of what [we] wish to [remember]. (Halbwachs 51, my italics)

Learning of events which occurred outside of one's personal sphere through other mediums—newspaper, radio, witness accounts, etc.—is no different than learning through historical sources about events that occurred before a person was born. As Halbwachs explains, “[We] carry a baggage load of historical remembrances that [we] can increase through conversation and reading. But it remains a borrowed memory, not [our] own” (51). Thus, Binet could learn about a current debate in French politics through reading a contemporary newspaper, the same way that he could learn about the debates within French politics in the 1930s through reading an old newspaper. Although he did not experience either firsthand, he remains able to say he “knows” about or “remembers” the debates.

Halbwachs's theory of collective memory have been more recently expanded upon by contemporary theorists like Cathy Caruth, Bessel A. and Onno Van der Kolk, and Marianne Hirsch. Like Halbwachs, these scholars agree that the cultural memories of the past are transmitted through succeeding generations. Specifically, they analyze the nature of trauma and traumatic memory itself, arguing that, as “one of the signs of trauma is its delayed recognition,” trauma is then only diagnosable in its “aftereffects” (Van der Kolk & Van der Kolk 167; Hirsch 222). Consequently, Hirsch contends that



it is not surprising that [trauma] is transmitted across generations...in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions, and symptoms of the previous generation. (222)

Hirsch calls this generational inheritance of collective memory the theory of "postmemory."

Postmemory attempts to define the "relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents" (218). Echoing Halbwachs's theories, Hirsch asserts that the children of trauma survivors can "remember" the harrowing experiences suffered by their parents only as the specific narratives and images which were passed down, but that these inherited remembrances are "so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right" (218-219). So, the memory of the second and third generations consists not of recollected events, but rather of impressions transmitted by the previous generations. Postmemory, then, turns "familial inheritance" into the "transmission of cultural trauma" (220). However, like Halbwachs, Hirsch and others contend that this adoption of memories is not limited to the family, but also occurs on a larger scale.

Impressions of the collective past are everywhere. People experience the past not only in behaviors, attitudes, and memories inherited from grandparents, parents, teachers, friends, and others in family, social, and community circles, but they also experience the past through the media and the news; in memorials, statues, and commemorations; in holidays and festivals; in days of remembrance and anniversaries; in pop culture and politics; and so on. And, as the Van der Kolks and Hirsch assert, this inherited, collective memory only intensifies in the wake of a cultural trauma like the Holocaust. Therefore, the concept of postmemory characterizes the experiences of those like Laurent Binet who "have grown up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation [and] shaped by monumental events that resisted understanding and



integration” (Hirsch 211). Today, there are few better examples of the nature of postmemory as an influence on contemporary generations than the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust.

The global collective continues to engage with the memories of World War II and the Holocaust in a number of both localized and internationalized ways. The collective memories of the 1930s-40s are not only explored in literature and film—through metafiction, fiction, and non-fiction—, but those adopted memories also continue to be confronted through official civic recognition and acts of remembrance. Active remembering can be witnessed through commemoration ceremonies, such as the recognition of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial as a UNESCO World Heritage site; on the anniversaries of significant dates such as D-Day, the Liberation of Paris, VE Day, and the like; on Yom HaShoah, the annual day of Jewish remembrance; at war and Holocaust memorials like Pearl Harbor in Honolulu and the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin; at preserved sites like Auschwitz and the Wannsee Conference house; and at museums like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Schindler's Factory museum. Reports of this continued engagement are then echoed in newspaper articles, on radio and podcast shows, in televised news, and on social media. It is important to note that each group within the global collective—be that group defined as individual nations, religions, etc.—contends with the memories of World War II and the Holocaust in varying, though sometimes overlapping, ways, and that this engagement, as Halbwachs and Hirsch explained, has lasting impacts on each individual belonging to that group.

With regard to France and Frenchmen like Binet, the effect of collective memory (or postmemory) as an influence on personal memory (or personal identity) is enhanced due to the country's strong tradition of nationalism. While many historians acknowledge the influence of the American Revolution in the establishment of the ideology of nationhood, the contemporary



concept of nationalism did not fully emerge until the first French Revolution in 1789 (Kumar 589-590). In democratizing French society—establishing common rights and equality for all under the law—the French Revolution defined not only what constituted a nation-state, but also who deserved representation *within* that nation, giving rise to the “ideology of national citizenship” (591). In determining what a nation looked like and declaring who belonged to it, “natural rights” became “national rights” and the “Rights of Man” became the “Rights of the Nation” (592). This construct eventually came to embody a sort of contract that established the relationship between the nation-state and the self. The nation owed certain rights and respects to the citizen (i.e. legal recognition of rights, military protection, etc.) and, conversely, the citizen owed certain services and respects to the nation (i.e. adherence to the laws, military service, etc.). Thus, with the French Revolution of 1789 and the birth of nationalism, a resolute link between self-identity and nationhood was formed. While the concept of nationalism eventually spread throughout Europe—and later the world—the roots of nationalism nonetheless remain most evident in France today.

With regard to World War II and the Holocaust, the Nazi Occupation of France caused a massive rupture for the collective, irrevocably altering the nation's identity. No longer was France a free and independent nation; now, the nation was under occupation from a foreign, hostile force. Because the individual Frenchmen's identity was so inextricably linked to the ideology of nationhood, as the national identity shifted, the French sense of personal identity also underwent a corresponding shift. The profound effects of the change in nation- and self-hood in France brought about by the occupation were only exacerbated when the Vichy Government betrayed the French people and collaborated with the Nazi regime. As Halbwachs asserts, there are some events in a nation's history that are so important as to greatly “alter the lives of all



citizens," and for the French, the Vichy Government's cooperation with the Nazi occupiers was one of those events (77). Being betrayed by the nation irreversibly shattered French national pride. This rupture in national and personal identity forced many French citizens to question what it meant to be French and what constituted the French nation and identity in the 1940s. Was France now embodied by Phillipe Pétain, the Chief of State for the Vichy Government, who willingly collaborated with the Nazi occupation of France, or was it represented instead by Charles de Gaulle, head of the French government-in-exile and leader of the Free French Forces resistance movement? Should the individual Frenchman resist as de Gaulle asserted, or should one comply with Nazi order as the new Vichy Government suggested? The occupation and betrayal of the Vichy Government upset not only the identity of the French nation and collective memory, but also the identity of the individual and personal memory, the lasting impact of which continued to be felt generations later—and, indeed, continues to be felt today by Frenchmen like Binet.

In the early 1980s and well into the mid-1990s, a resurgence of unresolved, French guilt over Vichy France's collaboration with the occupying Nazi forces and participation in the Holocaust began to consume the nation. This revival of French remorse was due, in part, to the emergence of postwar generations. The children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders, as well as the children and grandchildren of military and civilian war personnel (of both Allied and Axis forces), would have reached adulthood anywhere between the 1960s-80s. In accordance with Halbwachs's and Hirsch's theories on collective and postmemory, as these generations attempted to come to terms with what happened to their parents and grandparents, the French were consumed by what Henry Rousso diagnosed as Vichy Syndrome, a national obsession with Vichy complacency and French responsibility for the



atrocities of the 1940s (Golsan "What Does 'Vichy'" 129).

The development of Vichy Syndrome in the national French consciousness tellingly corresponded with a number of trials for crimes against humanity in France in the late-1980s and early-1990s. Klaus Barbie, the SS and Gestapo leader known as the "Butcher of Lyons," was tried in France in 1987 after being extradited from Bolivia. He was sentenced to life in prison and died in prison in 1991 (Riding "War Crimes"). René Bousquet was the Secretary General of the Vichy police, an icon for French complacency, hated namely for his compliance with the Nazis in ordering French police to conduct the infamous *Vel d'Hiv* roundups—the mass arrest and deportation of over 13,000 French Jews (Riding "Vichy Aide"). Bousquet was set to stand trial in 1993 for his crimes during the occupation along with Maurice Papon, the French Chief of Police in Bordeaux who also aided in the deportation of French Jews, but Bousquet was assassinated shortly before the trial. The following year, Paul Touvier, a French collaborator who ordered the execution of several Jews in Lyon, became the first French nationalist to be charged with crimes against humanity. Like Barbie, Touvier also died in prison only a few years after his trial (Riding "War Crimes"). Maurice Papon was not charged with crimes against humanity until much later, in 1998, but was released from prison in 2002 on the grounds of ill health. The resurgence of French guilt and the attempt to address that guilt (at least in part) by holding the responsible parties accountable through these war trials only intensified with a series of anniversaries—such as the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of D-Day (or Le Jour J) and the Liberation of Paris in 1994, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II in 1995, and later, the less widely remembered 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Heydrich assassination in 2007, which occurred while Binet was in the process of writing *HHhH*.

As Laurent Binet was born in July 1972 and came into adulthood alongside the rise of



Vichy Syndrome in France, he was undoubtedly influenced by the collective French memory (or postmemory) of World War II and the Holocaust. The impact that the events of the late-1980s and 1990s had on the construction of Binet's novel can be traced throughout the text in numerous, subtle ways. However, a more direct influence can be seen in a few chapters where the writer specifically acknowledges several of the aforementioned anniversaries, the assassination of Bousquet, and the trials of Papon, Barbie, and Touvier explicitly within the text itself (54, 236-239). Additionally, the influence of Vichy Syndrome—of Binet's inherited remembrances of the French betrayals World War II—was revealed both implicitly and explicitly through a series of interviews following the publication of *HHhH*.

In 2012, Binet did an interview with *The Guardian* shortly after his debut novel was first translated from French into English. When asked about his stance on the 2007 French elections, Binet linked the former President of France Nicolas Sarkozy to Phillipe Pétain, the aforementioned head of the Vichy Government (Binet “Most French Writers”). Today, a popular symptom of Vichy Syndrome “involves the use of 'Vichy' and 'Pétainism' as metaphors for political and moral evil, corruption, and radical decline or decadence” in contemporary French society (Golsan “What Does 'Vichy'” 129). In his interview, Binet likened Sarkozy's policies on poverty and immigration to Pétain's policies on the Jews of France, calling it “really disgusting” (“Most French Writers”). Furthermore, Binet stated in a later interview that Sarkozy—having read and enjoyed *HHhH*—invited Binet out to lunch to celebrate the success of the novel, but Binet declined because he did not “like [Sarkozy's] politics... [as] Sarkozy was too hard...on the weak,” another criticism shared with Pétain (Binet “The Books Interview”). In a more recent interview, Binet more explicitly equated the French present with the Vichy (and Nazi) past:

While I was writing *HHhH*, the 2007 presidential campaign in France happened, and the platform of future president Nicolas Sarkozy reminded me of the 1930s in



Germany. I made a digression in my book to compare Nicolas Sarkozy's social program with some things from the Nazis. For instance, I heard Sarkozy say that "working is freedom," which reminded me of "Arbeit macht frei" ("Working makes you free"), the phrase that appeared over the gates of concentration camps. ("I Enjoy Correcting Myself")

While this cutting allusion to the infamous slogan of notorious camps like Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen was later cut from the novel at the insistence of his editor, Binet's comparison between Sarkozy's socio-economic stance and the National Socialist policies of the 1930s is telling. Here, the influence of Vichy Syndrome on the narration of *HHhH* is quite obvious.

However, Binet's membership to the French national collective memory (and his consequential diagnosis of Vichy Syndrome) is not the writer's only channel for the transmitted traumas of World War II and the Holocaust. Binet's obsession with the 1940s was unquestionably impacted by his adopted collective memories and the French cultural phenomenon of Vichy Syndrome—all of which were essential in the production of his novel. Nonetheless, the explicit traces of his French nationalism in the text—while present—are not overwhelming (Binet 5, 48, 72). For Binet, this part of him is so ingrained in the fabric of the novel itself that it does not bear overstating explicitly in his meta-conversation with the reader. The very existence of the novel is a testimony to Binet's cultural roots as a betrayed Frenchman, full of bitter guilt over the deeds of Vichy France. This does not need to be reiterated. What *does*, however, is his postmemory alliance to Eastern Europe. Just as he criticizes Sarkozy in interviews, Binet also condemns Édouard Daladier and Neville Chamberlain—the French and English Prime Ministers in office at the onslaught of World War II—quite extensively throughout *HHhH* for their part in the fall of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis in 1939:

1. "Once, and once only, France and Britain said no to Hitler during the Czechoslovak crisis. And even then, the British 'no' was rather halfhearted" (69);



2. "Chamberlain makes sure that his diplomats do not promise more than is contained in this muddled phrase: 'In the event of a European conflict, it is impossible to know if Great Britain will take part.' Not the most decisive of statements...these weasel words" (69-70);
3. When quoting a Daladier speech in response to the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938, "I was deeply shocked that these elitist reactionaries, understanding so little the true nature of the situation, would use the Sudeten crisis to settle their scores with the Popular Front" (72);
4. "[M]y father reminded me that Daladier was a radical Socialist, and thus part of the Popular Front. I've just checked this, and staggeringly, it's true...I feel like I've been punched in the stomach. I can hardly bear to tell the story... At this level of political stupidity, betrayal becomes almost a work of art" (72).

Binet is a harsh critic of Daladier and Chamberlain because he "felt betrayed by them because they betrayed Czechoslovakia" with the Munich Agreement, the effective sanction for the Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia by the Allied Forces ("I Enjoy Correcting Myself"). Not only were Czechoslovakian governmental officials not invited to the Munich summit, but the military alliance the country shared with France and England was effectively useless in preventing the Nazi occupation. Binet spends thirty pages on the build-up to and fallout of the Munich Agreement in *HHhH*, and his obvious resentment of the Munich Agreement on behalf of Czechoslovakia arose because of his strong ties to and love of Prague.

In 1996, Binet moved to Slovakia to work as a French professor at a military academy. While his affairs in Eastern Europe would turn out to be vital in his continued discovery of the details of Operation Anthropoid, the experiences also shaped Binet's cultural memories of Prague



and Czechoslovakia, consequently altering or adding to his postmemory of World War II:

1. "On arriving in Bratislava...one of the first things I asked the secretary to the military attaché at the embassy....concerned the story of the [Heydrich] assassination. I learned the first details of the affair from this man" (6);
2. "A little while after arriving in Slovakia, I met a very beautiful young Slovak woman with whom I fell madly in love and went on to have a passionate affair that lasted nearly five years. It was through her that I managed to obtain further information" (7);
3. "I had rented an apartment for Aurélia in the center of Prague...On Resslova Street—on the right hand side as you go down—there is a church...and [I] realized I had found the church where the parachutists took refuge after the assassination attempt" (7-8).

As one finds membership in new groups, one's collective memory is shifted or expanded. As Binet spent time in Slovakia as a teacher, in Prague as Aurélia's lover, and later as a researcher, the collective memories of the betrayal of Czechoslovakia were passed down to Binet from his experiences not as a Frenchman, but as a member of the Prague/Slovakian community, a membership that prompted Binet to declare Czechoslovakia the country he loved most in the world (HHhH 76). This love—informed by socio-cultural adopted impressions—would later manifested in his novel alongside his inherited memories of Vichy France. For example, near the close of the section dedicated to the betrayal of Czechoslovakia, Binet includes a telling excerpt from a poem by a Czechoslovakian poet, František Halas: "*It rings, it rings, the bell of betrayal. / Whose hands set it swinging? / Gentle France, faithful Albion, / And we loved them*" (78, italics in original). The insertion of Halas's poem to conclude the section of the novel that grapples with



the Munich Agreement seems to summarize Binet's feelings on the subject: his ancestors, whom the Czechoslovakians trusted and loved, betrayed the nation which he now finds himself most faithful to. And somehow in his novel, Binet must contend with that, not only because he is a national citizen of France, but also because he is a cultural citizen of Prague.

Explored in depth above, all of Binet's adopted, collective memories—of Vichy France, of World War II, of the Holocaust, of Prague, of the various anecdotes he learned about Nazi leader Heydrich and the brave parachutists Gabčík and Kubiš—were transmitted throughout the course of both his childhood and adult life and were so profound as to constitute a personal memory of his own. Given the intensity of this personal postmemory, and the fact that he continued to encounter the story of Operation Anthropoid—through his father, through films and books, through his girlfriend and other citizens of Prague—, Binet had no choice but to confront the collective memory of the assassination of Heydrich. Compelled to engage with the narrative and his own inescapable feelings about it, Binet could have taken several avenues to explore what occurred in Prague in 1942; so, why did he write a novel?

### **Creating a Historiographic Metafictional Novel**

In her essay on postmemory and the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch focuses on the use of photographs (more specifically, a few repeated, iconic images—i.e. the gate of Auschwitz I with its infamous “Abreit Macht Frei”) as a connection between the Holocaust generation and their children. She alludes briefly to the fact that many Holocaust survivors did not explicitly share their stories in the decades that followed the end of World War II and emphasizes the *silence* between these two generations, arguing that photographs filled the silence and allowed the second generation to make some sense of the horrors suffered by their forebears (220, 237).



However, recall Maurice Halbwachs's understanding that memories and impressions are not only passed down through direct conversations; collective memories are also transmitted through behaviors and attitudes, memorials and pop culture, etc. So, despite the initial silence of the Holocaust generation, non-verbal impressions were nonetheless inherited by their children. Nevertheless, this paper will expand on Hirsch's existing theory of postmemory transmission between the first and second generations—which she analyzes through the medium of photography—by considering the medium of storytelling as a way to connect with the third generation—the grandchildren of the Holocaust generation, Laurent Binet's generation. If photographs came to embody the bridge that closed the gap between the first and second generations, then *words*—spoken, written, transmitted through music and film, etc.—must be the bridge between the first and third generations (and any generation thereafter).

Many Holocaust survivors who initially maintained their silence after liberation began sharing their stories at the end of the twentieth century, often out of the explicit desire to create secondhand witnesses due to the realization that their generation would soon be gone and there would be no one left to tell their stories (Greenblat). The words of survivors (and of their second- and third-hand witnesses like Binet) keep the trauma fresh, forcing humanity to continue to engage with the horrific reality of World War II and the Holocaust. The firsthand stories—and the adopted ones that later follow—act as resistance against redemption, preventing subsequent generations from focusing on a narrative about liberation and forcing them to continue to grapple with the fact that humanity was capable of acts so horrific as the planned, systematic genocide of an entire population. Therefore, when the storytelling begins and the silence is broken, the words become absolutely essential, keeping the post-war generations from healing the “rupture” of the Holocaust. It is this silence and the forgetfulness of the collective that Binet and his



contemporaries attempt to fill with their historiographic metafictional novels.

Because of his strong inherited memory of World War II and the Holocaust, as he comes into adulthood, Binet is eager to learn all that he can about the daring parachutists who assassinated one of the most hated Nazi leaders of the 1940s. Only, as he learns more and more about the fantastic narrative—and as his collective memories of Prague increase—, Binet becomes a third-hand witness and is compelled to *do* something with his knowledge. His collective memory of and emotional response to this traumatic past manifests itself in a compulsion to *share* this story, which he feels so passionately, so intimately about. Binet seeks to tell this story to others in an attempt not only to process what happened (that is, to retroactively grapple with the trauma) but also to repair what happened (that is, to somehow find closure for himself, for his readers, and for the real-life resistance fighters whom he came to admire so much). This attempted repair is common among those who grapple with traumatic pasts, especially with events like the Holocaust. In her memoir *French Lessons*, Alice Kaplan writes of her first encounter with photographs of the Holocaust (images taken by a U.S. soldier at the liberation of one of the camps). Upon seeing the graphic images, Kaplan talks of a pain that she cannot heal: “They were only photographs...of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve” (19). And like Binet, she feels compelled to share them with others: “I wanted to take all of [the photographs], especially the upsetting ones... I believed my friends had no right to live without knowing about these pictures, how could they look so pleased when they were so ignorant...” (20). Just as Kaplan encountered these photographs when she was a child, a young Binet encountered the story of two Czechoslovakian parachutists. Both Binet and Kaplan, as second- and third-hand witnesses, grappled with the impulse to heal the suffering about which they had learned and to share the stories they encountered as children, the stories with which



they grew up.

One scholar describes this need to share one's story as catharsis—a way to recover one's life after trauma, a way to become once more “unimpeded by ghosts... [and] able to live one's life” again:

This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech*. (Laub 63, italics in original)

For Binet, his interaction with the story of Operation Anthropoid in Prague, 1942, and his attempt to share it, indeed, became obsessive and life-consuming. At several points in the novel, Binet openly admits as much to his readers:

1. “You'll have gathered by now that I am fascinated by this story. But at the same time I think it's getting to me” (47);
2. “The truth is that I don't want to finish this story” (314);
3. “I am coming to the end and I feel completely empty. Not just drained but empty. I could stop now, but that's not how it works” (320);
4. “My story is finished and my book should be, too, but I'm discovering that it's impossible to finish a story like this” (326).

However, Binet's imperative to tell this story is impeded by the impossibility of being able to tell it—not only because of the difficulties in the lack and condition of historical evidence, but also because of the confrontation with his own personal bias. When engaging with the traumatic past of the 1930s-40s, no witness could “maintain an integrity—a wholeness and a separateness—that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing” (Laub 66). Binet is compelled to write to keep the rupture fresh, to keep the wound from closing neatly, to keep the



collective in an active state of remembrance. However, Binet's adopted memories are so profound that it creates a personal bias that manifests itself throughout the novel as Binet examines the events leading up to and surrounding Heydrich's assassination. As the collective memory of World War II and the Holocaust was so ingrained in his own life story—so inextricably linked as examined above—, when Binet set out to write a novel about the Heydrich assassination, he was incapable of separating his life experiences from those of the historical actors in the “tale.” In attempting to share this story with others, he became too involved, and aware of this bias, wished to be upfront with his readers about his emotionally compromised state. This need to hold himself accountable is expressed through an open self-reflexivity throughout the novel via a meta-narrative, which he uses as a vehicle to confront his own personal responses in an attempt to maintain as much historical truth in the novel as possible.

Binet's concern with historical clarity and desire to present an accurate representation of the narrative stems from his need to do justice to the story being told. That is, Binet is concerned about upholding his responsibilities not just to the reader, but also to the real-life figures in the novel: “The people who took part in this story are not characters. And if they became characters because of me, I don't wish to treat them like that” (320). Throughout the novel, Binet makes known his great respect for not only Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš (the main actors in the assassination plot on Reinhard Heydrich), but also all those involved in the resistance, in both Czechoslovakia and the rest of the European theater. Halfway through the novel, Binet includes a chapter in which he describes the Prague resistance as a “whole hotchpotch” of “infinite branch[es]” that he could not possibly know or name, much less give enough depth that his readers could come to know them through his book (179). He says he thinks of them all and laments that he cannot write them each their own books, which they so deserve, and asks, “How



many forgotten heroes sleep in history's great cemetery?" (179). Then, towards the end of the novel, Binet addresses the fates of every known historical actor involved in Operation Anthropoid and the Prague resistance. In that chapter, he makes it a point to once again acknowledge all those resisters whose names are not known, and speaks of his own guilt at not being able to acknowledge them and their bravery (323). This novel, he explains, is his attempt to remember and to pay homage to Gabčík, Kubiš, and the dozens of Czechoslovakians—known and unknown—who assisted them in assassinating Heydrich, the man responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Czechoslovakians and the creation of the Final Solution to the Jewish Question: "I wish to pay my respects to these men and women: that's what I'm trying to say, however clumsily. That's what I didn't want to forget to say, despite the inherent clumsiness of tributes and condolences" (323). In order to properly preserve their memories and honor their story, Binet must stick to the historical truth as much as possible, and he does so through the inclusion of a meta-discourse.

Additionally, throughout the novel, Binet includes several chapters that explore events of the Holocaust that are more or less unrelated to the tale of Operation Anthropoid. In one spot, he inserts a section about the infamous Babi Yar massacre—the most prolific mass murder of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen mobile killing squads (133-134). In another, he spends time describing the domestic life of the Moravcs—a family within the resistance that sheltered and aided the parachutists (212, 300-301, 303-304). Later on, he adds "an extraordinary story" about a football match between Nazi soldiers and a professional Ukrainian team. Apparently, during the game, it becomes obvious that the Nazis will lose, and the Ukrainian players are ordered to throw the match on pain of death. The Ukrainian team refuses, wins the match, and all but three players are promptly executed (135-137). Binet acknowledges that this story is not related to the main



narrative of his text and so expresses concern over possible errors (as it is not as thoroughly researched), but he stands firm on his decision to include the chapter in spite of this: "I didn't want to write about Kiev without mentioning this incredible story" (137). For Binet, it is imperative that he includes those stories which he believes are obscure, the ones which he feels his readers will be less likely to encounter elsewhere. This is as essential to the production of his novel as is the tale of Heydrich's assassination—because *HHhH* is Binet's attempt at repairing the rupture of the Holocaust not just for Gabčík and Kubiš, but for all those who suffered. And being able to explicitly declare his respect for the resisters and his sorrow over the countless lives lost to the Third Reich was only made possible through his meta-commentary as it allowed him a space to both declare his personal opinions and navigate through the historical record for readers.

When Binet attempted to confront this traumatic past—the story of the assassination, the monstrous deeds of one of the most powerful Nazi leaders of the Third Reich, the dangerous realities of wartime life and resistance work, the horrors of the extermination of the Jews of Europe and persecution of the other “undesirables”—, Binet's inherited memories created a bias that he felt responsible to account for in order to tell the “true” story, a truth which was necessary in order to do justice to Gabčík, Kubiš, and the other daring men and women in Prague, 1942. Employing a metafictional thread throughout his novel was the only way for Binet to actively confront his own inherited memories about the narratives he was sharing. Furthermore, when Binet reached gaps in the known historical record, incorporating bits of fiction allowed him to finish the narrative. In this way, fiction did not disrupt or distort history; rather, fiction completed history. By actively calling his readers' attention to this fact was Binet's only means to provide some sort of distinction between those sections in the novel which were fictionalized and those which were purely historical fact. And Binet is not alone in this practice.



Symptomatic among contemporary French authors, this thesis proposes that the traumas of World War II and the Holocaust continue to impress themselves upon the French people today. This inherited collective memory renders inescapable emotional responses and influences the way novelists like Binet remember and interpret, and correspondingly represent, that historical time period. This forces these writers to include a metafictional thread—be that through the use of self-insertions, footnotes, fictional characters, etc.—with which to navigate between historical truth, their own emotional reactions, and the existing holes in the historical record. The employment of metafiction within those works then causes the texts to exhibit a duality of genres (being both a historical text and a fictional novel) and lends critics to classify them as historiographic metafictional texts.

## Part II:

### Why Binet Succeeds When Others Do Not

If using metafiction to confront the emotional traumas of World War II and the Holocaust is such a popular and understandable trend in contemporary French literary tradition, why does Laurent Binet succeed at maintaining historical truth alongside fiction when so many others do not? That is, why can a reader accept the story of *HHhH* itself as historically true, when that same reader cannot accept other historiographic metafictional novels as accurate historical representations? To answer this question, this thesis considers *HHhH* alongside two other historiographic metafictional novels about World War II: Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, the “memoirs” of a fictional Nazi, and Yannick Haenel's *The Messenger*, a fictionalized biography of real-life resistance fighter Jan Karski. Both *The Kindly Ones* and *The Messenger*, though popular and award-winning, caused much controversy after publication. The many critics of historiographic metafiction often cite the author's failure to uphold his responsibilities both to the



reader and to the historical figures whose lives he is working with as the symptomatic problems of the genre—recall Binet's quote: "How imprudent of me to turn a man into a puppet—a man who's been dead for a long time, who cannot defend himself" (104). Historiographic metafiction, they claim, is a matter of ethics: the author must produce a "responsible representation of the past in an increasingly historically illiterate world" (Golsan "What Does 'Vichy'" 137). Such responsibilities become even more problematic in the case of Holocaust literature, both because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, and because there remain today many who continue to deny that the Holocaust ever took place. With regard to Littell's and Haenel's novels, many critics dismissed the works as historical texts, claiming that the authors failed to maintain such authorial responsibilities. In short, these critics maintained that the authors took too many artistic liberties, offering fictional novels under the guise of historical truth. While Binet's novel raised similar questions about historical integrity initially, *HHhH* received considerably less criticism upon publication and has since been generally accepted as both historically true and fictionally embellished, while Littell's and Haenel's novels have not. The following comparative analysis of the three novels argues that it is Binet's self-insertions—his consistent conversation with the reader—that is the key to his successful integration of both historical truth and fictional elaboration.

Binet first presents the scene as follows:

### *HHhH*

As discussed above, Laurent Binet's ongoing, honest conversation with the reader is key to the novel's success as a historiographic metafictional text. Not only does he constantly draw attention to the problems of his genre(s), but he also explicitly cites his sources throughout the novel—among which are letters, military documents, memoirs, Reich Minister of Propaganda



Joseph Goebbels's diary, etc.—both through the use of open dialogue with the reader and footnotes (for particularly obscure references). This repeated explanation of sources deftly

notifies readers of what information is historical truth and which is improvised. Binet's running commentary then becomes a mechanism for clarity: the reader receives context and can successfully navigate between those sections of text which are fact and those which are opinion.

As explained in an interview, Binet included these self-insertions because he sought

to be faithful to [the] character[s]...to resist the temptation to make things up. And so I felt it was an interesting problem and I decided to share all my thoughts about it. And you could see all my doubts, questions. Instead of erasing my mistakes, of erasing when I couldn't resist the temptation to make it up, [I] use it for a discussion with the reader... I just wanted that with my book, the reader wouldn't have to wonder; they would know that this was fact unless I mentioned that I made it up. ("A Story to Conjure")

And indeed, many sections in the novel are followed by Binet's self-insertions—either in a simple sentence or two, or as an entire chapter itself—alerting the reader to some form of deviation from the historical record. For example, in one section, Reinhard Heydrich visits Kitty's Salon, the SS operated brothel, which is equipped with listening devices and hidden cameras so that the Nazis can spy on their prestigious clientele. On the night that Heydrich visits the brothel, his subordinate Alfred Naujocks is supposed to disable the recording devices; only, he is unable to do so and is later confronted by a displeased Heydrich.

Binet first presents the scene as follows:

"How the devil could you decide to record my visit to Kitty's Salon last night?"

Even if he'd already guessed the reason for this morning's summons, Naujocks turns pale.

"Record?"

"Yes. Don't deny it!"

... "But I do deny it! I don't even know which room you were in! Nobody told me!"

There follows a long, unnerving silence.

"You're lying! Either that or you're getting careless." ... "You should have



known where I was. It's part of your job. It is also your duty to switch off microphones and tape recorders when I'm there. You didn't do that last night. If you think you can make a fool of me, Naujocks, you'd better think again. Leave.” (117)

Earlier in the novel, Binet asserts that he does not think dialogue in a historical novel serves any purpose except to present the reader with the author's invented version of how *he thinks* the conversation should have happened; so, he vows to use as little dialogue in *HHhH* as possible (21). In the chapter that follows the scene above, Binet explains that the dialogue between Naujocks and Heydrich was based off of Naujocks's own testimony, and adhering to this recorded dialogue is Binet's way of attempting to maintain as much historical truth as possible. Even this, however, is not accurate enough. Binet points to the fact that Naujocks's testimony was recorded several years after the fact, and thus was subject to misremembering and/or purposeful misrepresentation. Furthermore, Naujocks's account was not written by himself, but was dictated to another, and then rewritten once again by a translator—all of which leaves room for error and distortion. Painfully aware of the issue of reliable historical evidence, Binet is not satisfied with Naujocks's version of the conversation: “Heydrich, the most dangerous man in the Reich, saying, 'If you think you can make a fool of me...' ...well, it's a bit lame” (118). But, Binet asks readers, what value is a writer's opinion when compared to eyewitness testimony?

Nevertheless, Binet cannot help himself. In the face of Naujocks's somewhat lackluster account, Binet rewrites the dialogue as he believes it would have happened—a version of the scene that offers a more threatening Heydrich and more sniveling Naujocks. After the new dialogue is presented, Binet continues his conversation with the reader to clarify why he made the informed revisions that he did. He draws on Heydrich's well-known temper and tendency to be a little foulmouthed to provide a version of the SS leader “[t]hat would, [he] think[s], be a bit livelier and more realistic, and probably closer to the truth” (119). However, he eventually



acknowledges that the exact conversation between Heydrich and Naujocks is impossible to reproduce and so concedes to Naujocks's dialogue. This sort of self-conscious writing and editing is apparent and repeated throughout the novel, and becomes essential to Binet's success at maneuvering between fact and fiction within the text, leading the novel to be generally accepted and well-received by historians and literary critics alike.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that Binet's novel caused less consternation than Littell's or Haenel's, the text is not without critics. Some scholars argue that Binet clarifies historical information too often and that he does so in a way that is both "tedious and patronizing" (Rau 110). Other critics argue that to include a meta-conversation that is so constant throughout the novel removes the book from the historical genre entirely, making it simply a postmodernist, fictional novel. However, as Linda Hutcheon—the aforementioned premier scholar in metafictional studies—explains, meta-texts embody "a logic of 'both/and,' not one of 'either/or'" (49). As previously established, Binet's running commentary does not detract from the narratives of Heydrich or Gabčík and Kubiš, but rather acts as a separate narrative entirely—one that is intrinsic to the novel's ability to call itself a historical text. As explained above, without the metafictional thread, too much of the novel's historical framework would be fractured by the gaps of history and vulnerable to manipulation by the influence of Binet's postmemory, which would impress itself upon the text in other ways when denied the outlet of the meta-commentary.

This thesis asserts, then, that Binet's novel can perhaps be considered the quintessential historiographic metafictional novel in that it can successfully exist in both the historical and fictional genres alone. That is, because of Binet's open, meta-conversation with the reader, the novel can be read as an admittedly somewhat quirky historical text written by a specialist on the Heydrich assassination, and it can also be taken as a well-researched, postmodernist novel



written by a university professor with an acute interest in Heydrich, Prague, and the resistance of 1942. Because Binet's text is, indeed, both. Thus, the debut, award-winning, somewhat controversial novel belongs to two genres, and therefore must also belong to the third genre of historiographic metafiction—a genre whose very basis is rooted in duality.

### *The Kindly Ones*

In Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones*, the narrator, Maximilien Aue, is a sort of “Nazi Forrest Gump,” who is directly involved in everything from the notorious Babi Yar massacre to Hitler's suicide in the bunker (Golsan “The Poetics” 60). A bestseller in France and well-praised in England, the novel received the two most prestigious French literary awards—*Le Prix Goncourt* and *Le Prix du roman de l'Académie française*—and was short-listed for six other French literary honors (Rau 93). One of the major reasons for the novel's success has been its extensive attention to detail. Littell has been applauded for the sheer historical accuracy of names, places, and period-details, such as the inclusion of the names Pretzsch and Düben—towns in the Eastern German Province of Saxony where the Einsatzgruppen trained in May 1941—which might have otherwise simply been omitted by another writer (Carrard 184). Claude Lanzmann, Holocaust scholar and director of the documentary film *Shoah*, famously declared that *The Kindly Ones* was so thoroughly well-researched that only he and Raul Hilberg (another eminent Holocaust historian) could understand and appreciate all of Littell's included details (Carrard 183 ; Hilberg). However, despite Lanzmann's praise and the novel's success in France, a wealth of criticism arose when the novel was published in Germany and the United States.

A novel about the Holocaust written from the perspective of a ruthless, remorseless perpetrator, *The Kindly Ones* was denounced as being “pornographic and exploitative” and for an



egregious lack of sensitivity to Holocaust victims (Rau 93). The ethical issues raised by Aue's narration were taken up by several scholars, notably Susan Suleiman, Liran Razinski, and Samuel Moyn (Carrard 183). In addition to the ethical implications of Aue's narration, *The Kindly Ones* can be immediately disregarded as historically true—and therefore unsuccessful as a historiographic metafictional novel—in that the protagonist is a fictional character, and an over-the-top, implausible one at that. Beyond his aforementioned over-involvement in the major events of World War II and the Holocaust (one can almost say that it would have been impossible for Aue to have participated in every event at which Littell has placed him), Aue is also too outlandish a character to be either reliable or relatable to readers. One historian compares Littell's Max Aue to Quentin Tarantino's SS Colonel Hanz Landa in *Inglorious Basterds* as a “composite character, made up from templates of screen Nazis” that came before him (Rau 181). In making Aue the emblematic Nazi, Littell turned his protagonist into a stereotype, a caricature of evil. Not only is he an unrepentant participant in genocide, but he also casually murders his own mother and stepfather, has incestuous relations with his sister, and engages in obscene and unusual sexual acts with both men and women throughout the novel (such as rolling around in excrement). Moreover, at no point in the novel does Aue declare his fervent belief in the National Socialist doctrine, leading one to question his motives for his active participation in the Holocaust and his propensity for murder—for without motivations, Aue becomes merely an “evil monster” and not a human being who has done evil things. Aue's narration is subject to further interrogation when one considers the fact that he is telling his story several years after the fact as an elderly man who has survived being shot in the head. This causes scholars to question what Susan Suleiman calls the “memory hole” in the novel: How is Aue able to remember in specific detail every event and aspect of his involvement in World War II and the Holocaust (qtd. in



Golsan "Poetics" 60)?

The over-the-top, questionable narrator of *The Kindly Ones* engages in an informal meta-conversation with the reader, similarly to Binet's novel, via an internal monologue—for over nine hundred pages. The novel opens with Aue stating, "Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened" (3), and the introductory chapter concludes in much the same fashion, with Aue exclaiming, "I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you!" (24). Littell then continues this meta-discourse by having his narrator comment on the purpose of writing his "memoirs":

1. "If after all these years I've made up my mind to write, it's to set the record straight for myself, not for you" (3);
2. "[I]f I have finally decided to write, it really is probably just to pass the time, and also, possibly, to clear up one or two obscure points, for you perhaps and for myself" (5);
3. "I could just as easily not write. It's not as if it's an obligation" (4);
4. "[T]hank God I have never been driven, unlike some of my former colleagues, to write my memoirs for the purpose of self-justification, since I have nothing to justify, or to earn a living" (4).

The last two remarks allude to the infamous memoirs of Rudolf Höss, SS Kommandant of Auschwitz extermination camp. Höss was forced to write his memoirs while on trial at Nuremburg, and like Goering's aforementioned authorization to Heydrich, his memoirs are widely considered one of the most valuable documents regarding the Holocaust today as they remain the only source of their type (i.e. written testimonies given by a high-ranking SS official that attest to the knowledge of and complicity in the planned extermination of the Jews of Europe). Littell's novel mirrors Höss's memoirs in many ways; yet, unlike Höss, Littell does not



and *cannot* provide any insight into the psyche of a Nazi or any understanding of the motivations of the perpetrators of the Holocaust—not only because Aue appears to be without obvious motivations, but also because the only psyche the reader is able to explore in the text is Littell's (Hallberg ; Binet "The Books"). Littell confirmed that his protagonist represented a more contemporary figure than the novel would have readers believe when he suggested that Aue is what "he himself could have become...had he been born in Germany" in the early twentieth-century, later revealing that Aue is, in fact, "his own alter ego: 'Max Aue, c'est moi'" (qtd. in Golsan "Poetics" 61). Littell argues that as he read perpetrators' testimonies, he realized the texts were "empty" and was forced to walk in the perpetrators' shoes himself ("Interview"). Indeed, as many critics have noted, because the narrator is effectively a reflection of the author himself, "in his most fundamental attitudes and eccentricities, Aue is a more contemporary misanthrope than one from the period in which he is portrayed" (Golsan "What Does 'Vichy'" 140). Thus, not only is Aue an implausible human being, but he is also an implausible representation of that time period, and overall offers little by way of insight into the realities of Nazi perpetrators of the 1930s-40s.

Another common criticism of *The Kindly Ones* is that Littell—along with making his invented protagonist a mouthpiece for contemporary society—also speaks for actual historical figures. Or rather, he has *them* speak for *him*. Whereas most writers who deal with historical fiction often invent the protagonists and "middlemen," leaving important historical persons largely in the background, Littell brings History's Most Wanted to the foreground (Carrard 183). A high-ranking SS official, Littell's Aue interacts with a number of the Nazi elite throughout the novel, including the head of the SS Heinrich Himmler; the aforementioned Kommandant Rudolf Höss, and even the Führer, Adolf Hitler himself. Furthermore, Littell includes "lesser known"



historical figures—that is, real men such as Streckenbach, the Nazi official who “cleansed” the Polish government upon the invasion of Poland in 1939—as “middlemen,” a role that in less metafictional works act as intermediaries “between [the] front fictional characters and the background historical figures” (183). Extensive analysis of the novel “will reveal that such names as Bierkamp, Blechel, Blobel, Blonke, Oberländer, Ohlendorf...refer to real individuals who, though less infamous than” other men like Höss and Himmler, “all played a role during the war, occupying mostly mid-level functions in the Nazi regime” (184). The abundance of historical actors raises not only ethical implications—recall Binet's struggle of turning real men into puppets—but also problems of reception. As previously mentioned, the text has been praised for its historical accuracy. Between this obsessive attention to detail and the sheer number of real-life historical figures that appear throughout the text, a less informed reader might read the text as historical truth and not as Littell's creation.

The only remedy that Littell offers to the extensive historiographic subject matter and the often specialized vocabulary he utilizes throughout the text is the inclusion of a brief glossary that defines some of the untranslated German words/phrases and military abbreviations/titles. He also includes a succinct table that illustrates the structure of the various branches of the Nazi military and party organizations. It is interesting to note that after the publication of *The Kindly Ones*, publishers in Germany and France issued companion volumes that explain and index some of the novel's sources (Rau 111). These companion texts have the potential to act in a similar vein to Binet's footnotes and meta-commentary; however, as the explanatory volumes exist separately from the body of the novel itself, they seem to fall flat as a historical disclaimer. Not only are the companions not available in all of the languages and countries in which *The Kindly Ones* is in print, but it can also be assumed that not a wide range of readers know that the



supplemental texts are available—and for those who do know, not all will take the time to seek out and read the novel's scholarly companion. Consequently, Littell's novel remains dangerous in that it employs a wealth of facts and information about World War II and the Holocaust, features an ensemble of well- and lesser-known historical figures, and provides no textual guidelines within the novel itself to help readers gauge which facts are known, which are simply plausible, and which are utterly invented.

Consider the novel's title. *The Kindly Ones* alludes to the *Oresteia*, a Greek trilogy, whose main themes are justice, vengeance, and ethics (Louar 139). Given this reference and Littell's opening remark—"Oh my human brothers"—, the author immediately establishes his novel's thesis: the ethics of human evil. Littell intends for his novel to offer insight into how ordinary men became Nazis and carried out some of the greatest atrocities of the modern era. Yet, as this paper has already established, Littell's narration is problematic and improbable at best, and therefore cannot offer any sort of understanding of the mentalities of the twentieth-century's most famous genocidal killers. In an interview shortly after the publication of his novel, Littell responded to such criticisms. He agreed that Aue is unrealistic and unbelievable as a human being, but claimed that a "credible Nazi could never have expressed himself as [his] narrator does, would never have been able to shine a spotlight on the men surrounding him in the same way... [including] those who really existed, such as Eichmann and Himmler" (Littell "Interview"). So, Aue is not meant to reveal anything about the nature of Nazism or evil *himself*, but rather in his observations and interactions with the real-life figures surrounding him. But, in the words of Binet, "inventing a character in order to understand historical facts is like fabricating evidence"—the author is free to draw whatever conclusions he chooses (HHhH 227). Nonetheless, Littell asserts that historians "have hit a brick wall" in trying to determine the



motivations of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and Littell attempted to break through that wall using literary invention in the hopes that he could reveal a “novelistic truth” about the nature of evil (Littell “Interview”). But novelistic truth—i.e. generalizations about humanity and human nature reached through an author's singular observations—and historical truth—i.e. accepted facts about the past founded on historical evidence—are different, and Littell is attempting to let his work stand for both. Hence, the novel has come to embody the greatest fear of critics of historiographic metafiction, like Lanzmann: that uninformed readers will only access the history of World War II and the Holocaust through mediums like Littell's misleading novel, which are presented in such a manner as to appear historically true.

An award-winning, bestselling novel, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* is today one of the most controversial texts published about World War II and the Holocaust. Despite the novel's exhaustive attention to detail and the historical accuracy of the persons, places, and events, and regardless of the novel's other problems of presentation considered briefly above, the text “lost all credibility as a reflection on history from the moment its author chose to use a fictional protagonist” (Hallberg). A text which offers no sort of disclaimer to readers other than the inclusion of the word “novel” in the front matter, *The Kindly Ones* represents the most problematic type of historiographic metafictional novel—obviously false but plausible enough to be believable to unsuspecting, uninformed audiences. This thesis asserts that the text fails to maintain historical truth alongside fictional embellishment, and therefore, while this novel is capable of laying claim to both the historical and fictional genres, the text could not exist in the historical genre alone.

### *The Messenger*



Similarly to Littell's projection of himself in his character Aue, Yannick Haenel's problem in his 2009 Interallié-winning novel *The Messenger* lies in that he lends his own voice to a historical figure—and he gets it wrong. Haenel's novel functions as a biography of sorts for the real-life resistance leader, Jan Karski. Karski was a member of the Polish underground who, upon witnessing the horrors in Eastern Europe and the conditions of Poland's ghettos, was sent abroad to brief the Allied forces about the reality of the Nazi Occupation and to request Allied assistance to stop the mass murders of Europe's Jews. The body of Haenel's text about Karski's life is preceded by a disclaimer of sorts—a “note” which informs readers that the first section is a retelling of Karski's interviews with director Claude Lanzmann for his documentary film *Shoah* (also about Karski's life), that the second section is a summary of Karski's own autobiography *Story of a Secret State*, and that the third section “is fictional...based on certain aspects of Jan Karski's life...but the situations, words and thoughts that [Haenel] attribute[s] to Jan Karski are pure inventions” (Haenel x). While Haenel's personal bias (that is, his emotional, collective memory) is present in the first two sections of the text as readers are given *his* interpretation and projection of first the film and then the biography, it is in the final section that the meta-element of the novel is most evident—and questionable.

Throughout the text, Haenel provides several facts in his novel about the life of Karski that are historically inaccurate, yet portrayed as fact, blatantly rewriting history and offering it as truth. For example, in the final portion of the novel, Haenel's Karski condemns the Allied governments, claiming that they were not only ambivalent towards, but also benefited from the Holocaust:

1. “The Jews were left to be exterminated. No one tried to stop the massacre. No one *wanted* to stop it... There were no victors in 1945, there were just accomplices and liars” (105, italics in original);



2. "The ambassador and I would at last hear the viewpoint of the USA about saving the Jews of Europe—but nothing came" (115);
3. "I had confronted Nazi violence, I had suffered from Soviet violence, and now, completely unexpectedly, I was being introduced to the insidious violence of the Americans. A cosy violence, made up of couches, tureens and yawns" (117);
4. "It was definitely in no one's interest to save the Jews of Europe, and so no one did. Even worse: the Anglo-American consensus masked a shared interest *against* the Jews... Neither the British nor the Americans wanted to help the Jews of Europe" (118, italics in original).

However, in his autobiography, real-life Karski's recollections of his conversations with Allied leaders portray a genuine concern and eagerness to help from both the British and the Americans:

1. "Like England, [America] soon became a place where I relived my experiences in an endless series of conferences, conversations, speeches, introductions, and meetings. Again I heard the same questions from the most prominent men in the country: What can we do for you? What do you expect from us? How can we help?" (386);
2. "Again I satisfied the desire in scores of leading men who wanted to know about my country—men from widely varied spheres—politics, religion, business, the arts. The War Department had to be satisfied....as did the Englishmen in the War Office...I gave information to the State Department...to Catholic circles...to the Jewish circles... I realized then to what an extent the entire world is unified" (387).

Throughout his book, Karski describes at length the exhaustive conversations he had with both British and American governmental and secular forces who wished to aid Occupied Europe in the fight against the Third Reich. Along these lines, the image of Allied concern that real-life Karski paints is a far cry from Haenel's "insidious" American violence.

In addition to the obvious distortion of the historical record, critics condemn Haenel, like Littell, for lending his voice to not only Karski, but also to other major historical players such as



American President Franklin D. Roosevelt—and in doing so further contradicting existing historical evidence. The most famously critiqued scene of Haenel's novel comes in its representation of Karski's interview with President Roosevelt, an interview which Haenel has novel-Karski tellingly liken to an interrogation by the Gestapo: "In front of Roosevelt, in his office in the White House, I asked myself the same question as I had in the Gestapo office, while being tortured by the SS: how can I get out of here?" (117). In the novel, Roosevelt appears overcome by an almost Chaplin-esque fit of disinterested yawns while Karski reports on the horrors of the Nazis' extermination plans to eradicate the Jewish populations of Europe:

1. "[E]ach time I spoke of some macabre detail that was likely to move him, he glanced round at the woman in the white blouse, took the opportunity to stare at her legs, and then opened his mouth, twisting his lips to the left. As he yawned, the words emerged: 'I understand.' Were the words just there to camouflage the yawns? It seemed to me that, for Roosevelt, words were so close to a yawn that speaking was like yawning. In the end, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressed himself by yawning*" (115, italics in original);
2. "[W]hen I repeated in front of him the message from the two men in the Warsaw ghetto, when I relayed their demands about the bombing of German cities, Roosevelt slowly opened his mouth. I thought that his reaction was going to be terrible, but it was not. He said something; his mouth remained a little twisted, then he stifled a yawn. The more I went into the expectations of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto, and thus of all the ghettos in Europe, and of all the Jews who were being exterminated, the more Roosevelt had to stifle his yawns" (115).

Haenel's depiction of a single, uneventful meeting between Roosevelt and Karski is inaccurate for several reasons. In reality, Karski and Roosevelt met several times upon Karski's arrival in the states, and—while Haenel's Roosevelt is depicted as being more concerned with his young secretary's legs than he is in Karski's testimony—at no point in Roosevelt's and Karski's



interactions was a secretary ever present (Golsan "What Does 'Vichy'" 129). Furthermore, by all historical accounts—including Karski's own—, Roosevelt was much more concerned with the fate of Europe's Jews than Haenel implies. Indeed, Karski's description of Roosevelt in his autobiography seems in direct contrast to Haenel's representation: "President Roosevelt seemed to have plenty of time and *to be incapable of fatigue*" (Karski 387, italics mine). Karski also describes the president's genuine concern for the Jews of Europe and his active engagement throughout their meetings, once again conflicting with Haenel's projection of an impartial Roosevelt:

1. "He was amazingly well-informed about Poland and wanted still more information. His questions were minute, detailed, and directed squarely at important points. He inquired about our methods of education and our attempts to safeguard the children. He inquired about the organization of the Underground and the losses the Polish nation suffered... He asked me to verify the stories told about the German practices against the Jews. He was anxious to learn the techniques for sabotage, diversion, and partisan activity" (387-388);
2. "He impressed me as a man of genuinely broad scope. Like Sikorski, his interests embraced not merely his own country but all humanity" (388).

Indeed, Karski even described feeling relieved after his dealings with Roosevelt concluded, satisfied that he had completed his task in relaying the horrors of Europe to the Allied forces and confident that he had inspired the Allies to take action against the Holocaust (388). It is the numerous, obvious conflicts, such as those explored above, between Karski's own testimonies—and other historical records—and Haenel's misrepresentation that critics of the novel find most unsettling.

One of Haenel's most vocal critics is the aforementioned director Claude Lanzmann. Firstly, Lanzmann asserts that Haenel did not request permission to transcribe scenes from



*Shoah*, and consequently, *The Messenger* could be considered plagiarism (Wieder). Secondly, and more importantly, Lanzmann regards the text on a whole as “a falsification of history” that “slandered both Karski and Roosevelt,” due to the aforementioned differences between the novel and existing historical records, including the interviews with real-life Karski that Lanzmann conducted himself (Wieder ; Golsan “What Does 'Vichy'” 139 ; Carrard 187). For Holocaust historian Annette Wieviroka, the major themes of the novel—including the Allies' supposed complicity in the Holocaust—“testify to an 'ignorance' of the researchers' work” (qtd. in Wieder). Wieviroka acknowledges that novelists have often confronted history as Haenel has done, but that Haenel falls short where others succeed because he fails to “reveal...a truth that escapes the historian” (qtd. in Wieder). Haenel's novel does not reveal escaped truths from the past, but rather provides an insight into his own opinions about the present—opinions that were presented on the basis of historical truth.

In his revision of Karski's life, Haenel—like Littell above—is charged with projecting contemporary views onto historical figures of the past. Despite the historical premise of the novel, in *The Messenger* the fictionalized Karski exercises an anti-Americanism that is less a reflection of Polish (or even European) sentiment during World War II and more an echo of contemporary French cultural politics. While Haenel was in the process of writing his novel, a growing anti-American stance exploded in France following American President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, a sentiment that obviously carried over into the expressions of his novel (Golsan “Poetics” 64 ; Golsan “What Does Vichy Mean?” 139). Indeed, Haenel published an essay in 2011 in which he “acknowledged a strong link and an almost *shared identity* between the novelist and his creation,” stating that, in order to understand the fictional character, one must first understand the novelist himself (Golsan “Poetics” 64, italics in original). However, whereas



other contemporary French authors have exercised a similar anti-Americanism in their respective works, it is clear to the reader that the opinions expressed in those texts are those of the author. Haenel fails to make any such distinction. Instead, he becomes “a ventriloquist, using Karski, whose views he distorts, to condemn America not only in the present but through its heroes of the past” (Golsan “What Does Vichy Mean?” 139). It is this ventriloquism that causes Wieviroka to accuse Haenel of writing a “false testimony.” She claims that Haenel created his portrayal of Karski—and Roosevelt—with “no respect for the witness, whose testimony he has misappropriated to substitute his own 'truths', treating history in the most offhanded manner” (qtd. in Carrard 194-195). For Wieviroka, Lanzmann, and many of Haenel's other critics, “these distortions of the historical record [are] indefensible,” forcing the work to be considered less a historical novel and more a revisionist text (Carrard 188).

It is this revision of the past that many critics fear to be perhaps the greatest danger posed by historiographic metafiction. As with Littell's text, Haenel's novel has just enough basis—just enough plausibility—as a historical text to appear as wholly historically true. For the average reader, Haenel's “Note” at the beginning of the novel, which signals which sections of the text are fiction and which are mere summaries of existing works, does *not* act as a disclaimer. Rather, it implies that Haenel has drawn from, and therefore presumably adhered to, the original sources. Not only could this allow his audience to read the text as historically accurate, but it could also dissuade readers from further investigating those sources on which Haenel's novel was based—sources like real-life Karski's autobiography which could, when read, illuminate the areas of history that Haenel knowingly manipulated. With regard to the historiographic metafictional genre, Haenel's novel is both historically based and fictionally expanded. However, while Haenel's novel can exist as a text which belongs to both the historical and fictional genres, it



cannot—like Littell's novel—stand in the historical genre alone given its blatant misrepresentation of history.

### Concluding “The Game”

In May 1933, the Nazi German Student Association gathered in the square across from Humboldt University in Berlin and burned over 25,000 books. This book burning corresponded with torch-lit marches and thirty-four other burnings at universities across Germany, and was followed by a second wave of burnings in June. Concerned about the instructional power of books, the Nazi party and its enthusiastic student supporters wanted to cleanse the literary world of those texts which the Nazi party deemed “un-German,” such as works written by Karl Marx, Ernest Hemingway, Bertolt Brecht, and Helen Keller, among others (“Book Burning”). The details of this infamous event are briefly included here to illustrate the power—and dangers—of the written word. As books are able to both educate and inspire, to persuade and inform, authors have undeniable responsibilities to both their readership and their subjects—and this responsibility is only increased when that subject matter is historical.

In his essay “Historiographic Metafiction, French Style”—which also compares the three major novels herein discussed—, historian Philippe Carrard suggests that historiographic metafictional novels play a “game” with their readers. He cites the blurbs on back covers of *The Kindly Ones*—“it is both a family tragedy and a historical novel”—and *HHhH*—“the war between novelist fiction and historical truth”—as acting warning signs of sorts (193). He also asserts that Haenel's “Note” included at the beginning of *The Messenger* does the same. Carrard argues that these brief inclusions “establish...a specific reading contract” with the reader (193). The back blurbs and short introductions “set the rules by which the game will be played”—the



game being the duality of the texts themselves as belonging to both history and fiction, of belonging to the historiographic metafictional genre (193). If this is the remedy that Carrard proposes for such critics as Lanzmann who worry that the fictional elements within these texts will masquerade as historical truth, the question then becomes: are these brief distinctions enough?

With regard to *HHhH*, it is clear that numerous other distinctions between truth and embellishment are made continuously throughout the text itself, allowing one to conclude that for this novel, *yes, it is enough*. However, as discussed above, Littell and Haenel make little-to-no other effort to mark the divergence from archival evidence to the authors' invention. Once again, this thesis must ask if audiences—especially those who are less historically informed (which, recalling the immense, international popularity of both novels, do bear mentioning)—require *more* clarification? Additionally, it is imperative to reiterate the sensitive subject matter with which these novels grapple. Given the highly charged—ethically, personally, culturally—subject matter of the texts, is a brief one-or-two-line blurb or a single-page introduction sufficient warning for readers that what they are about to read plays with and, in some cases, plainly distorts what many consider the most traumatic event of the modern age? Considering the wealth of negative criticism incited by the publication of the aforementioned texts, this paper would argue that—at least in the case of *The Kindly Ones* and *The Messenger*—*no, it is not enough*.

With a largely historically illiterate readership and with the trauma having occurred in the still relatively recent past, it would seem that perhaps “not all readers are ready to engage in the games played in texts” like Littell's and Haenel's (Carrard 196). For many readers, such representations that directly contradict (Haenel) or exaggerate to the point of absurdity (Littell) the accepted history of World War II and the Holocaust can be considered morally reprehensible



and ethically irresponsible. Therefore, authors who seek to explore the past through fiction should uphold more self-reflexivity in their writing process. Recall Patricia Waugh's definition that historiographic metafictional texts self-consciously draw attention to their own status as a literary artifact (21). Writers who wish to engage in the narratives of World War II and the Holocaust, while also employing fictional devices should, like Binet, be more conscious of and open with readers regarding the decisions they make within their texts—be that through a meta-commentary, footnotes, more extensive introductions/disclaimers, etc.—until such a time when readers can more capable of traversing between the dual genres of historiographic metafiction themselves.

An extremely problematic genre, historiographic metafiction—when well-executed—allows writers to engage with the past through fiction without compromising the historical integrity of the text. Popular in the contemporary French literary tradition, the genre provides a way for French novelists to confront the realities of Vichy France, of World War II, of the Holocaust, and their emotional responses to their collective memories of that past—all the while remaining true to history. Some, like Laurent Binet, simply do it better than others.

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