

Approved for use in English IV – Holocaust Literature

Summary of the Work:

In her memoir *In My Hands*, Irena Gut Opdyke (co-authored with Jennifer Armstrong) is a seventeen-year-old nursing student when the Nazis invade Poland in 1939. Feeling patriotic and brave, she volunteers to accompany the Polish army, but upon their crushing defeat, she finds herself in the Ukrainian forest, scavenging for food with surviving Polish soldiers. Irena is caught and raped by Soviet soldiers and then forced to work in a Soviet hospital. After a daring escape, she returns to Poland and is forced to work in a German officers' mess. Here she witnesses the horrific treatment of the Jews. Irena makes the dangerous choice to become an activist by sliding food under the ghetto wall. Soon she begins hiding Jews in a villa basement where she serves as a housekeeper, and eventually, she joins the Polish partisans.

Rationale:

In My Hands shows the gradual process of a young woman's transformation from insecure teen to courageous resistance fighter. Students are introduced to the complexities of the military and political conditions of wartime Poland. The book presents the unique point of view of a Catholic woman witnessing the brutal Nazi treatment of the Jews as well as the Polish citizens. Opdyke's writing style includes the use of metaphor throughout to demonstrate Irene's insights and growth as well as to create theme-enhancing symbols.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Publisher's Weekly (1999)
School Library Journal (1999)
Booklist (1999)
Kirkus Reviews (1999)

"There are so many Holocaust books these days, each touching in its own way. Opdyke's is special, not only because of its unique perspective (and its focus on the years directly before and after the war when Irene spied against the Russians) but also because it speaks so personally to teenagers. Irene is one of them. The fear, horror, worry, and bravery she recounts so affectingly could have been theirs. The question becomes more than what would you do? it is also who will you be if you survive?" Ilene Cooper, *Booklist*, 1995

* Print resources are available from the library media center and libraries in the district. Contact any library media specialist to view the scholarly sources.

* Scholarly reviews are also available online through Books in Print and Gale. Contact the library media specialist to obtain username and password information to access the subscription database of full-text reviews.

Noted Distinction:

- *Book Sense* Top Ten Pick
- *Publisher's Weekly* Choice of the Year's Best Books

Readability:

- Lexile Score: 890L
- Readability Level: 6.0

Learning Resources Guidelines:

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: ([link](#))

Approval:

Submitted to Committee: 2005
 Approved for Adoption: 2005

Notes on the Text:

(The best way to evaluate and understand a novel is to personally read the book in its entirety.)

This is a straightforward testimony to the brutality of the Nazi ideologies. The narrator is forced to work in a hospital and an officers' mess, incarcerated and interrogated, and sexually assaulted by Soviet as well as German soldiers. In the process, she witnesses daily cruelty and mass killings. A teenager herself in the beginning, the narrator speaks to teenagers, showing fear, horror, joy, and courage. Her story shows the readers why one may feel the need to take risks, make quick decisions, and follow the moral obligation to help others.

Connection to the Curriculum:

In My Hands is an integral text in English IV: Holocaust Literature, allowing an historical and literary study of the topic.

Additional Connections:

(AP, Honors, Essential/Applied, Dramas, Films, etc.)

Film used with this book: *The Pianist*