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## Cats, Kinship, and Community in Recent Children's Books about the Holocaust

*The very fact that we want to tell children stories about the Holocaust suggests that there is a lesson to be taught. But what is the lesson we think they will learn?*

Adrienne Kertzer, *My Mother's Voice*

**Abstract:** Animals of all kinds “people” children’s literature. The picture-book genre is no exception especially in narratives premised on the Holocaust. Focused on the particular role and function of their respective feline characters, my essay compares three picture books and one graphic novel spanning the first decade of the 21st century – Patricia Polacco’s *The Butterfly* (2000), Karen Hesse’s *The Cats of Krasinski Square* (2004), Meg Wiviott’s *Benno and the Night of Broken Glass* (2010), and Manuela Santoni’s *La lettera perduta* (2023) – through what is a less-commonly utilized interpretive lens in Holocaust studies: indigenous cultural theories of human dependence on animals for psycho-social, spiritual, and existential survival. Through the key themes of shelter, bonding, nourishment, and interdependence, on both physical and metaphysical levels, I examine closely how these books broaden and complicate received notions of family and community. Often presented as points of disjunction or separation, in these books family and community emerge as deeply entwined socio-cultural networks. Rather than compete along an “either/or” axis, they stand out as “both/and” quantities, with cats serving as critical intermediaries.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, cats, family, community, interdependence, witnessing

Animals of all kinds “people” children’s literature. While creatures have informed our myths and folk tales for thousands of years, in Eurowestern cultural and literary traditions animal stories have largely left the sphere of adult concerns and have come to reside quite firmly in the ambit of children. In a world governed by adult humans, children are often perceived as inferior and/or

primitive, much as animals. Still making their way to adulthood, they are not yet regarded as fully human and, in some theorizations, they constitute a different, not-entirely-human, species altogether (Nodelman, 168). This sharp disjunction in evolutionary and ontological hierarchy functions as a vital point of conjunction in many Native American socio-cultural epistemologies, where human reliance on animals extends well beyond food to include not only psychological, spiritual, and medicinal dimensions, but also deep existential identification, in other words, kinship (Morrison 26–27). More specifically, Ojibwe interpretations of existence confer peoplehood to animals and ultimately hold everyone – humans and nonhumans, adults and children – accountable to and mutually responsible for one another (Justice, 151–152). Among the Ojibwe, which is one of the largest indigenous groups in the United States and Canada, it is a person's actions, not their size, status, or appearance, that inform their world view, a view in which ontological similarity, rather than difference, is assumed from the outset (Morrison 25–26).<sup>1</sup> It is such an understanding of social networks and relationships among “people” that informs the premise for Daniel Heath Justice's *Kinship Criticism*, where kinship is defined not as “something that *is* in itself so much as something we do – actively, thoughtfully, respectfully” (original italics, 148). The notion that humans walk among and not above animals informs many Native American stories for children in which the centrality of the human to nonhuman relationship is consistently fleshed out (Harde 231). I propose that this lens can also provide illuminating interpretive possibilities for some contemporary children's books about the Holocaust in which socio-emotional networks between animals and humans are a fundamental narrative concern. In addition, the use of this lens to study books about suffering, resilience, and survival allows us to engage with the role and significance of animals with greater sophistication and rigor.

Since the 1990s, picturebooks<sup>2</sup> about the Holocaust have been growing in number and, more recently, have included with greater frequency elements that were typically elided or excluded in the past, such as the portrayal of round-ups and physical violence (Haas and Haas, 123). So far, the new millennium has seen no shortage of armed conflict, including invasions and genocide, as well as intolerance, persecution, and extensive human displacement or forced migration. In light of this publication context, I read each of the picturebooks in my study through the thematic lens of community and kinship especially as these relate to both physical and metaphysical space. Cats, who play a key role in all the books I examine, exist as representative, unifying members of their living environments, both informing and enacting the kind of human to non-human interdependence that is central to the Ojibwe world view. These are not

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<sup>1</sup> The Ojibwe are also known as Ojibwa and Ojibway.

<sup>2</sup> I use Maria Nikolaeva's and Carole Scott's term “picturebook” which highlights the centrality of the genre's dual levels of communication: the verbal and pictorial (1–2).

simply heartwarming child-animal depictions that are, often condescendingly, considered to be standard fare in Eurowestern children's literature, but rather serious and meaningful existential relationships that come into full view when read through a cosmological lens that operates from the premise that animals "are relations and not resources" (Norton 2). Spanning twenty-two years, the stories included here look back at the Holocaust with an eye to the present as well as the future and target Generation Z and Alpha audiences that can benefit from learning about empathy, solidarity, and accountability, as well as the effects of their absence, at a time when different communities, identity groups, and kinship relationships may feel threatened.

Set in Nazi-occupied France, Patricia Polacco's *The Butterfly* is based on the experience of the author's great-grandmother, whose work in the resistance included offering safe haven to Jews in hiding. The story's title notwithstanding, it is Pinouff, an orange tabby, who functions consistently as a vector of kinship. Pinouff lives in the village of Choisy-le-Roi with the main protagonist, a girl called Monique (Polacco's aunt), and her mother, Marcelle, who, unbeknownst to her daughter, has been hiding a Jewish family in their basement. One night, Sevrine, the daughter of that very family, finds her way to Monique's bedroom and they soon become close friends. Because a neighbor happens to catch sight of Sevrine through the window one night, Monique's mother decides that the best course of action is to move the Jewish family right away, in case its presence is made known to the authorities, and to secure safe passage outside of France. When the two girls say their final goodbyes, Monique gives Sevrine Pinouff to accompany her on the journey.

As of the illustration on the first title page, the story's concern with Choisy-le-Roi as a physical place and community space is immediately evident: in the background, a neighbourly exchange through an open window is offset by the arrival of Nazi soldiers, the "Achtung Juden" sign, and the swastikas that increase in both size and impact.<sup>3</sup> The following page places the threat to the community – the two armed soldiers who have now walked all the way into town – in the foreground, as Monique and Marcelle prepare to leave this fraught public space and enter their home (figure 1).

In the picturebook genre, the page-turn holds great narrative and formal significance as we can see in the illustration that follows (figure 2). On the left side of the double-spread, Monique and Marcelle's front door has brought us inside their home and to a cluster of open doors – symbols of discovery, escape, and transition – that leads to a garden, while an image of domestic love and nurture takes up most of the right side, effectively eclipsing, both in character and in its visual superimposition, the disturbing effect of the soldiers on the page before it. It is also in the double-spread above that we first meet

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<sup>3</sup> None of the picturebooks included in my study have page numbers.

Pinouff, her head illuminated by the sunlight as she lies almost at the threshold of the open door, foreshadowing her future role as a reverse psychopomp: Sevrine's guide not to the land of the dead, but of the living.

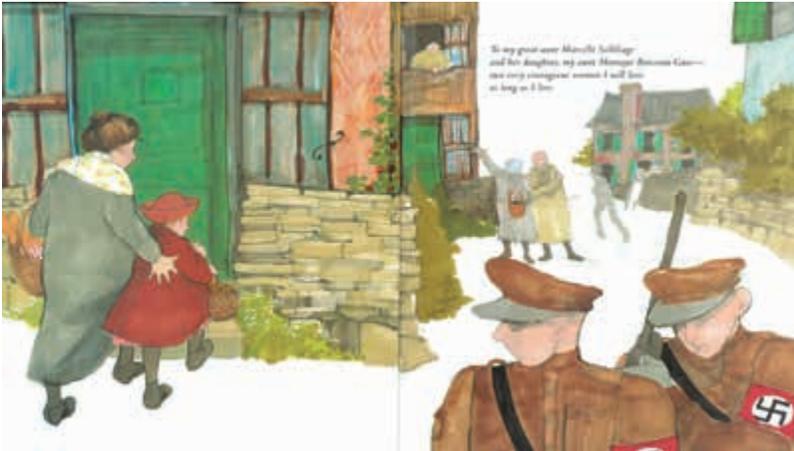


Figure 1

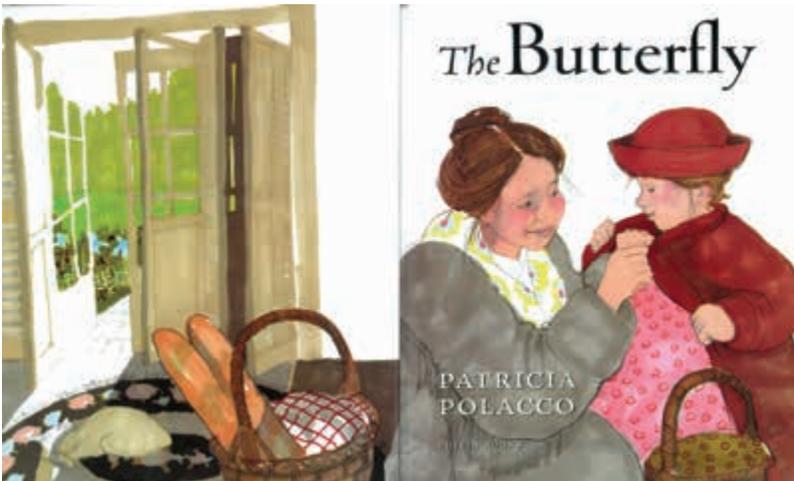


Figure 2

Cats are constant boundary-crossers, poised as they are between their domestic and feral natures, but also in their penchant for moving freely in and out of doors (Lewis, 5 and Jacques, 75). Pinouff's first, and deeply meaningful, act of crossing is along the length of Monique's bed when Sevrine makes her first clandestine visit outside the basement. Monique, who had fallen asleep with Pinouff beside her, awakens to see "a ghostly little figure sitting [...] on the end of her bed. A girl about her own age. She was petting Pinouff." Polacco's illustration offers at once an elaboration on and a counterpoint to the text, for here it is Pinouff who is the agent of affection and Sevrine its recipient. The cat, who

appears to be hugging the Jewish girl with the “sad eyes,” functions, from the outset, as a source of consolation and support for her. It is also Pinouff who physically traces the line of connection between Monique and Sevrine – they are both French girls, of the same age, living in the same house – by walking from one end of the bed to the other.

On the following morning, when Monique tells her mother about the “ghost” in her room, Marcelle, who does not want to involve her child in resistance work, maintains that “it was only a dream,” effectively reducing the actual fact of Sevrine’s existence to something illusory. A few pages later, it is the cat who confirms reality, as well as the girls’ ontological similarities, by allowing Monique to recognize her visitor as a fellow human; not “the little ghost” of the previous encounter, but a living being: “Monique thought, ‘This is no dream, I can hear Pinouff purring.’” The sound of the cat’s interactions with another being not only corroborates Sevrine’s physical presence, but also occasions critical visual acknowledgement from Monique herself: “I see you there,” she whispers to her visitor. Acts of looking and witnessing are a critical leitmotif in the picturebooks I examine and I will return to this in my discussion.

Pinouff’s physical presence also facilitates Sevrine’s recollection of her former life, before she was forced into her current fugitive nightmare. Holding Pinouff, she reminisces: ‘I once had a cat just like this one.’ Writing about social intercourse among the Ojibwe, Michael Pomedli remarks: “If we move beyond appearances, we notice continuities in the actions of humans and animals” (xx). In other words, human and nonhuman actions can inform and even motivate one another. Polacco’s subtle use of visual echoes makes this evident. In the illustrations below, Sevrine’s second visit (figure 3b) restages her first (figure 3a) and this reshuffled chain of active affection, where one being holds another, now portrays Monique, who has moved closer, as the main purveyor of comfort for Sevrine. These are the early bonds of human kinship as first modeled by a nonhuman.



Figure 3a



Figure 3b

Polacco does not shy away from depicting the horror and tragedy of the Holocaust as meted out to humans and nonhumans alike. Before she befriends Sevrine, Monique and her schoolmate, Denise, experience the brutal round-up of Monsieur Marks, the Jewish owner of the local candy store who “loved the children in the neighborhood and always had small bits of brightly wrapped candies for them in his apron pocket.” While other locals “froze and tried not to look at the soldiers,” and though both girls “wanted to run” from the scene, they deliberately remain and witness the ferocious attack of a fellow community member: “To their horror they saw Monsieur Marks being dragged from his shop by the Nazi soldiers” and “watched [them] kick him hard in the ribs with those tall black boots.” The text makes it clear that looking is, in itself, a dangerous activity – “Don’t look for too long, Monique!” Denise warned. ‘If we do, they’ll come for us next.’ – but the girls do not avert their eyes from what is taking place in their village. They see it, just as Monique saw Sevrine.

There are no illustrations of the violence being perpetrated against Monsieur Marks, but this changes in a subsequent scene, when Monique and Pinouff are out in their garden. As Pinouff gets ready to pounce on a butterfly, Monique manages to stop her from causing it any harm, but she is unable to protect that very same creature from a Nazi soldier who reaches in over the garden wall. In a striking close-up (figure 4) Monique watches a large hand trap the innocent butterfly as it goes about its business among the flowers: “*Joli, n'est-ce pas?*” He grinned [...] then squeezed his fist.”



Figure 4

Polacco's dramatic illustration is effective in various ways. For the second time, Monique is portrayed as an active witness to Nazi violence and her facial expression – a mixture of shock, sadness, and fear – recalls, now in stark visual terms, her response to the physical assault on Monsieur Marks. To be sure, these two events, which take place within a day of one another, are narratively and conceptually linked. Although Polacco adheres to the recent picturebook trend of including more explicit information, she has displaced the more graphic violence from a human to a nonhuman. This displacement and its accompanying visual cues serve to emphasize the kinship parallel: the black boots that had once kicked a community member so mercilessly are now transformed into the single black glove that doles out death to an unsuspecting butterfly moving about its natural habitat. Monique herself puts two and two together and asks her mother: “did they do to Monsieur Marks what they did to the butterfly?” Marcelle does not respond, but we are told that “Monique had her answer.” The fact of witnessing the cruelty and hate taking place around her reinforces for Monique what her goals and responsibilities must be: “Now she understood the sadness in Sevrine's eyes. The fear that was in the eyes of her neighbors and friends whenever the Nazi soldiers came close by. She knew she had to protect her friend. At all costs she had to keep the secret that lived in her basement.”

*The Butterfly* is not the first picturebook in which Polacco has probed how deep relatedness is born out of human-nonhuman relations. The conceit of *Mrs Katz and Tush* (1992) resonates with my discussion in significant ways: a grieving Polish-Jewish widow is visited by her neighbor's son, Larnel, with a kitten he finds in their basement. He tells Mrs Katz that nobody wants the creature because she's so ugly, to which Mrs Katz responds from a personal perspective: “My Myron [her husband] was ugly, too, when he was little, but he grew up to be such a person.” The elderly woman, whose last name already betokens an affinity with cats, agrees to adopt the kitten, whom she gives “a good Yiddish name,” Tush, but only if Larnel agrees to help. This he does diligently. Soon, Mrs. Katz, who cooks, knits, and reads to Tush, pronounces her to be “such a person.” Larnel, whose own connection to his neighbor deepens and extends easily across generational, ethnic, racial (he is black), and religious boundaries, is similarly anointed: “I know you're not Jewish,” Mrs Katz tells him, “but Myron would have liked you. You're such a person, Larnel!” Over glasses of milk and slices of Kugel, Mrs. Katz tells Larnel about her vacations in the Catskills (!) “borscht resorts,” which emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in response to a nationwide surge of anti-Semitism (Kanfer 7). Larnel's surprised “You mean Jews couldn't stay anywhere they wanted to?” kindles a memory in him: “My grandma told me about places she couldn't stay either.” Both of his grandmothers, biological and adoptive, have been victims of bias and intolerance: “Your people and mine are alike, you know.” Mrs. Katz

tells him.” Throughout the story, and just like Pinouff, Tush is a constant visual and narrative presence as well as a key facilitator of kinship despite presumed divisions.

The Yiddish word “Mensch” (“such a person”) describes someone who is not only honorable and principled, but also a true friend. That Mrs Katz recognizes humans and nonhumans as “persons” resonates evocatively with Ojibwe thinking around the broad and fundamental ways in which living creatures, who are all conferred personhood, occupy shared space and ineluctably depend on, and are accountable to, one another. By the story’s end, she, too, will be formally recognized as kin: “As the years passed, Mrs Katz, Tush, and her descendants became part of Larnel’s family. There were graduations, weddings, new babies and finally a kaddish. Larnel stood in front of the headstone [...] Then he, his wife, and their children read the inscription together. MRS. KATZ, OUR BUBEE [grandmother]...SUCH A PERSON.”

The final goodbye in the *The Butterfly* also describes an instance of mutual recognition. Since Sevrine’s parents have to escape from Choisy-le-roi separately, Monique bequeaths her beloved Pinouff, the living symbol of the girls’ personal bond, to accompany Sevrine on the dangerous journey to Switzerland: “Tears welled up in Sevrine’s eyes. She folded Pinouff into her sweater, then reached into her pocket and pulled out a fine gold chain on which hung a star of David.” In the instant that she takes Pinouff into herself, Sevrine reaches for something intimate and deeply personal with which to mark her feelings for Monique. It doesn’t matter that one girl is Jewish and the other is not; they recognize one another as profoundly connected. Soon after this farewell, Marcelle and Monique make their way through the train station to return home. It is heavily guarded by Nazi soldiers, so “Marcelle [takes] her daughter’s hand. In the other, Monique [clutches] the chain.” This detail subtly fleshes out the essence of the girls’ exchange: just as Monique is seen to rely on Sevrine’s gift as an immediate source of comfort in the face of danger at the train station, readers can imagine Sevrine appealing to Pinouff in the very same way on her own treacherous journey out of France. Throughout the narrative, Pinouff functions as the main artery for the girls’ experience and expression of their intimate bond, even though they may be miles apart. In the picturebook’s closing note, the author tells us: “Within two years of the liberation of France, Monique and Marcelle received a letter [...] Inside it said ‘Je vis! (I live!) Sevrine.’ Next to her signature was a paw print.”

Inspired by actual events, and written in free verse, *The Cats in Krasinski Square* (2004) also features a young girl as the main protagonist. She lives in Warsaw with her older sister, and together they help Jews by smuggling food across the Ghetto Wall. As in *The Butterfly*, we can see that space and place are foregrounded right from the book’s cover (figure 5), where Krasinski Square, once the buffer zone between the Jewish Ghetto and the rest of the city, is

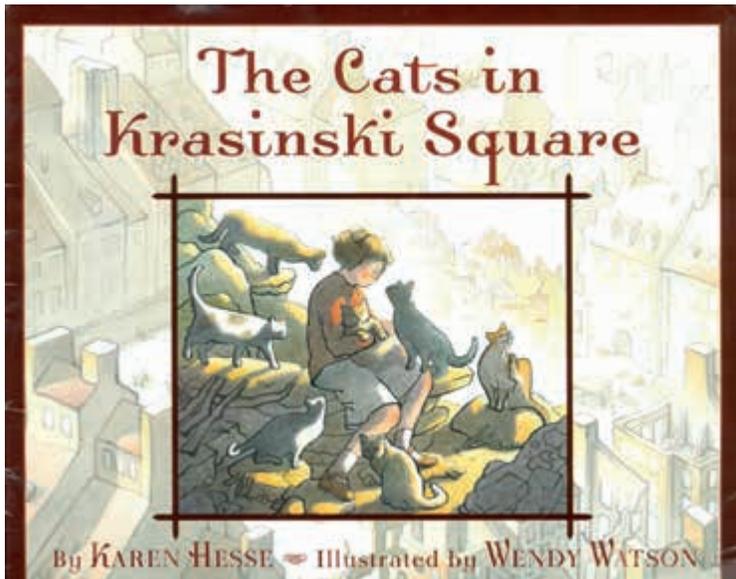


Figure 5

depicted as an area compromised by physical destruction and ideological occupation: rubble, crumbling buildings, and heavy military presence.<sup>4</sup>

It is into this square, as the nameless protagonist and first-person narrator tells us, that cats come “from the cracks in the Wall,/ the dark corners,/ the openings in the rubble.” Unlike the singular Pinouff, here we have a community of cats, each of whom “once belonged to someone/ [...] slept on sofa cushions/ and ate from crystal dishes.” The narrator’s description foregrounds the once rather human-inflected lifestyle of these nonhumans, for they benefitted from the same domestic comforts as their owners and, more importantly, enjoyed the affective intimacy of family members: “They purred,/ furrowed their chests,/ nuzzling the chins of their beloveds.” These cats cross through the Wall, from the Jewish side that now finds them orphaned and homeless, to the Polish side where they forage for food and affection. In the story’s opening illustration the book’s gutter, across which all but one cat have traversed, serves to highlight the rich and complex device of crossing that undergirds the story’s concern with issues of separation and connection. It is worth pausing on the sole cat that remains on the left of the binding, caught in an evocative limbo, both about to bridge a rift over the rubble and yet never quite doing so; physically on one side of the gap, but its paw already hovering in the space of its intended destination. How living beings inhabit and negotiate physical and metaphysical spaces constitutes a primary theme of the story and it is beautifully encapsulated in Wendy Watson’s illustration.

<sup>4</sup> Beyond the cover, I regret that I am unable to include any of this picturebook’s remarkable illustrations as I never received a response to my request for copyright.

As a group, these cats are both like and unlike the Jews in the Ghetto from which they stem: on the one hand, they are also victims of segregation and hunger, but, unlike their confined human counterparts, they are able to make their way through the wall – to transcend. This is a trait that they have in common with the main protagonist, who consorts happily with these feline migrants. She explains that while she may “look like any child/ playing with cats/ in the daylight” she has rid herself of her Jewish armband, “burned with the rags I wore/ when I escaped the Ghetto.” She, like the cats, moves “almost safe,/ almost invisible” through Krasinski Square, wearing, as she tells us “my Polish look,” and “[walking] my Polish walk.” But while the narrator finds herself physically on the Aryan side of the Wall, she is metaphysically – socially, emotionally, and vis-à-vis her identity – still tied to the Jewish community suffering in segregation, a tension that plays itself out variously by way of her interaction with the cats:

I whisper,  
 “I have no food to spare.”  
 The cats don’t care.  
 I can keep my fistful of bread,  
 my watery soup, my potato,  
 so much more  
 than my friend Michal gets behind the Wall of the Ghetto.  
 The cats don’t need me feeding them.  
 They get by nicely on mice.

It becomes clear that one group, the roving cats, serves as a vehicle through which the narrator can both express and work out her feelings of kinship for another group, the Jews beyond the wall, whom the cats in some ways double, especially in the carefully elaborated discussion around domestic comforts and access to food. Like most, if not all, of the Ghetto inhabitants, the narrator’s friend does not have enough to eat and, unlike the transient cats, they cannot find anything on which “to get by nicely” where they are. The narrator cannot cross in one direction, and Michal cannot cross in the other, but the cats manage to go back and forth and, in doing so, become conduits for and recipients of the narrator’s feelings of kinship. Like the cat that was detached from the others in its group in the book’s opening illustration, the narrator inhabits an existential limbo, for she both is and is not part of the Jewish community she was forced to leave behind. As we shall see, the cats’ ability to permeate the Wall simultaneously stokes and alleviates her feelings of helpless separation.

When the narrator and her sister devise a plan to smuggle food inside the Ghetto, it is the cats’ regular crisscrossing that provides the narrator with a way forward: “I know the openings in the Wall./ The cats have taught me.” The feline trajectories out of the Ghetto will now serve as the pathways for food

distribution within it. Although the cats, and the openings they have uncovered in the Wall, cannot help the Jews escape, they do point out an avenue through which to extend their survival. In a real way, by enabling the feeding and nurturing of those humans who once fed and nurtured them, these nonhuman felines enact the Ojibwe notion of mutual behavioral responsibility among all living beings or "persons" (Morrison 27).

On the day that the contraband food is scheduled to arrive at the train station, the Gestapo, accompanied by teams of dogs, is poised to intercept its delivery. Once again, the cats impart the narrator with a means to remedy the situation. Moving through Krasinski Square "singing a nonsense song," the narrator sees the cats coming "from the cracks in the Wall,/ the dark corners, the openings in the rubble" and is immediately inspired: "I know what we must do." While it may be "nonsense" to others, the cats recognize the narrator's voice; to them her song signifies. After all they have a relationship; they are familiars, erstwhile members of the same community, who are either drifting or displaced. The next step, the narrator explains is to: "gather the cats,/ one by one [...] / we gather the cats into baskets," as though they were picking flowers or mushrooms. Then, the narrator continues, she and her fellow resistance workers head to the train station "where we spread out,/ [...] behind the Gestapo and their straining,/ snarling dogs." Earlier in my discussion, I paused on the food-cat association and now, at the story's climax, the importance of this linkage is made directly apparent, for these basketfuls of harvested kitties will serve to distract the Gestapo and its dogs from the actual food arriving in Warsaw in similar bags and baskets. The "strong scent of bread, groats, and sugar" immediately attract the dogs, but before they "can reach their prey," the cats are (literally) let out of their containers to confuse the visual and olfactory plane: "The station explodes into chaos/ as frenzied dogs turn their wild hunger on the cats," who elude their pursuers by "slipping through the cracks,/ into dark corners,/ between openings." Whether in a concrete or abstract sense, the Wall erected to control, restrain, and divide, cannot withstand the enduring power of kinship as afforded, and enacted, by the boundary-crossing cats. Throughout the story, this oppressive brick-and mortar barrier has been undermined by its multiple cracks and fissures on which the narrator regularly insists and through which the cats travel back and forth, a fact that is underscored verbally and pictorially as the book comes to an end: "The smuggled food/ vanishes [...] through the Wall, over the Wall, under the Wall,/ into the Ghetto." The accompanying illustration of the Wall puts into relief its compromised structure, with its holes and breachable barbed wire, and, given the visible pathways that the cats delineate as they approach its apertures, Watson's illustration also underscores the critical importance of human and nonhuman collaboration in the Wall's ultimate subversion.

Kenneth M. Morrison writes that for many North American indigenous groups "community is the constitutive measurement of selfhood," and we know

that for the Ojibwe, among others, it is a measurement that relies on humans and nonhumans alike (Morrison 26). By contrast, the Nazi project depended on the erasure of kinship bonds, not only among the Jews, but also other groups. The orphaned, homeless cats – themselves victims of the Nazi occupation – who seek out the narrator, her “gentle hand” and “tender voice,” and provide the picturebook with its title, are specifically “in” Krasinski Square, but not “of” it, just like her. They perform physically what she can only imagine: a return to her kin on the other side of the Wall. Thus, in addition to practical routes for the delivery of smuggled food, the cats provide alternative, meta-physical, routes for intimate connections to endure despite the physical and political limitations.

While *The Butterfly* and *Krasinski Square* offer little insight as to historical setting or possible violence in their titles, *Benno and the Night of Broken Glass* (2010) is more direct and far less rosy. The book tells the story of a community split apart by the events around *Kristallnacht* (“The Night of Broken Glass”) and begins to tell this tale as of its front cover. On it readers can see Benno, the cat and main protagonist, exhibit the effects of *Kristallnacht* on his body, which is riven by a shaft of light that also illuminates a burning street reflected on a shattered storefront window. Space and place are again presented as a central concern in the book’s front matter, but exclusively from a cat’s street-level perspective as he moves comfortably among the humans on his Berlin street, rubbing up against their legs congenially (figure 6). By the story’s end, however, the back matter presents an austere mirror image of how Benno experiences the very same space: it is cramped and beset by the presence of Stormtroopers with their unwelcoming boots, standing, immovable, in the way of daily life as he once knew it (figure 7).



Figure 6



Figure 7

Described on the book's back cover as "the neighborhood's favorite cat," Benno actually embodies his neighborhood's spirit and social disposition shaped by the manner in which its inhabitants, human and nonhuman, attend to and care for one another. Benno lives "at number 5 Rosenstrasse, just a few blocks away from the Neue Synagogue. He [has] a warm bed near the furnace" thanks to Hans, the Hausmeister, who also leaves him fresh milk every night. Benno regularly visits the Adler family in apartment 3B, where Sophie, the daughter, feeds him scraps of chicken after Shabbat dinner, and he also stops in to see the Schmidts who live on the very same floor in 3A, where little Inge sneaks him bits of Schnitzel on Sundays after church. Before *Kristallnacht*, the girls were friends: "On weekday mornings, Benno watched Herr Adler and Herr Schmidt leave for work. He waited as Inge came out of her apartment and knocked on Sophie's door. Benno purred when the girls knelt to wish him *Guten Morgen*. Then he followed them to school." The men's free movements and the girls' friendship constitute the organizing principle of Benno's daily life and this illuminating existential detail extends to describe the impact of his community on his existence overall: "During the day, Benno strolled around the neighborhood. Sometimes Moshe the butcher fed him scraps and Frau Gerber, the grocer's wife, scratched his ears." Throughout his forays, Benno, whose name holds both German and Hebrew roots, "is welcomed by all."<sup>5</sup> In a give-and-take of mutual regard and good will, Benno is narratively fleshed out by how his community members interact with one another and with him. "At night, Benno returned to his bed beside the furnace in the basement of number 5 Rosenstrasse. He drank his milk and fell asleep listening to the comforting

<sup>5</sup> Benno is short for both the Hebrew Binyamin (Benjamin) and for Germanic names beginning with the root "bern" (bear), such as Bernhard.

sounds of people above.” In the image that accompanies the verbal narrative, the fundamental spirit of amity is tellingly extended to cats’ presumed, and time-honored, enemy: a mouse poking its head around a wall.

This lullaby moment ends with a turn of the page : “Then things began to change. Moshe the butcher had no scraps for Benno. Frau Gerber, the grocer’s wife, had no time to scratch his ears. And Mitzi yelled, ‘Scat!’ when Benno tried to nap in the window.” In the visual portrayal of this moment, a precursor to *Kristallnacht*, the sudden, fiery color palette is accompanied by images of tightly closed windows. For the first time, Benno experiences negligence and hostility from his community. And even though it is not exclusively directed at him, as the feline embodiment of the neighborhood spirit, Benno feels the effects of its dissolution actualy, when he witnesses new, disconcerting behavior: “Benno watched Inge leave for school without knocking on Sophie’s door. He waited a long time before Sophie came out and walked to school alone. Neither girl wished him *Guten Morgen*.” When he returns home later that same day, the door to the Adlers’ apartment is locked. Benno immediately notices, not differences in his neighbors themselves, but in their treatment: “In apartment 3B, the mob was breaking the Adlers’ furniture and throwing books out the window [...] The Schmidts’ apartment was untouched.” Prior to this targeted violence, Benno and the social kinship he represented had been whole. Now some constitutive parts of that unit have either been destroyed or gone missing, as is evident in the illustration below bearing the cat’s pale and incomplete reflection on the shattered storefront window (figure 8): “Benno could not find Moshe the butcher. He never saw Professor Goldfarb or Sophie and her family again.”



Figure 8

Following the precursor to *Kristallnacht*, life on Rosenstrasse continues, but “people were no longer friendly” and “the neighbors and shopkeepers went

quietly about their business, their eyes lowered.” We lower our gaze or look away for various reasons, for example out of fear of being targeted, as we saw in *The Butterfly*. In the given context, it can also be read as an unwillingness to bear witness to what is taking place. Community and kinship, however, require attention; to exist at all, let alone flourish, they must be attended to. In the case of *The Butterfly* and *The Cats in Krasinski Square*, humans and non-humans make it through because they actively persevere in their mutually affecting relationships; they look and, therefore, see. Benno, who has long served as a dedicated eye-witness to daily life in his neighborhood, does not, and can no longer, channel the unity in “community” because the latter no longer exists as such. It is a grim reduction of what it once was, as the image on the right (figure 9b) – a foil to an earlier illustration on the left (figure 9a) – confirms.



Figure 9a

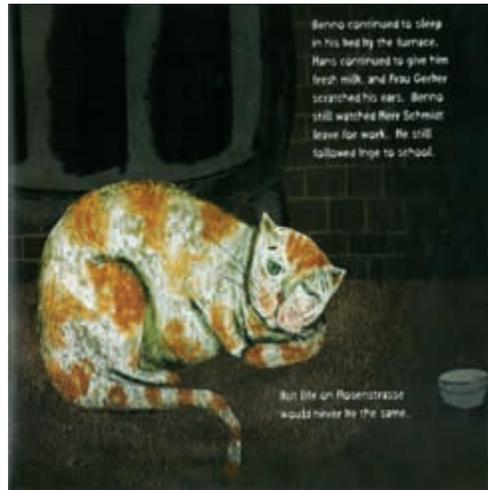


Figure 9b

Notwithstanding what the text on the right states, Benno no longer has a visible bed; he finds himself in a dark basement with a furnace that does not provide the light and warmth it once did, and the mouse who had shared his space has disappeared. While Benno's right eye is open, the left one invites multiple interpretations. On the one hand, and since an earlier illustration shows Benno's broken basement window, it might be injured and swollen shut; intolerance, hate, and violence, after all, affect the neighborhood as a whole and not just their intended targets, as we saw in previous picturebooks. At the same time, Benno's closed eye evokes the willfull blindness enacted by some members of his community.

To be animate, according to the Ojibwe, is to have intentionality, which comes with critical behavioral implications (Morrison, 26). In the picturebook's afterword, which provides historical background and photographs of the real-life events behind Benno's fictionalized experience, the closing paragraph

underscores both the importance of action in the face of injustice and the tragic results of its absence: “Only a few nations spoke out against the events of Kristallnacht, showing the Nazis that the world would tolerate the persecution of Jews on a mass scale.” Following Ojibwe thinking, it’s all about how groups and individuals, human and nonhuman, behave toward one another, a notion that has become paramount in the new millennium as world events – some of which hearken back disturbingly to the kind of thinking that led to the Holocaust – require constant attention and action. Perhaps this is why Benno’s vigilant, open eye is directed so intently on us readers; it is a reminder, and maybe even a challenge, to act decisively so as to keep social networks strong and uncompromised, not just within themselves, but with the rest of creation.

In the picturebooks discussed so far, the feline protagonists are instrumental when it comes to both practical issues (safety, food) and attitudinal ones (cooperation, friendship). This is also the case in Manuela Santoni’s *La Lettera Perduta* (*The Lost Letter*), a children’s graphic novel published in 2022 that brings together a number of, by now, familiar elements. Set in the 1990s, the book combines the personal story of Emma, a nine-year-old girl who has relocated with her mother to the town of Montequadrato and leads a self-imposed, isolated existence, with the story of Pietro (or more accurately his ghost), who suffers from amnesia and who had once enlisted in the Italian pro-Nazi army only to desert and join the resistance. The first memory he recovers, with Emma’s help, is that during the war he had hidden Tina, a beautiful Jewish woman, and spared her from arrest and certain death. Forced to part, they had promised to write one another, but Pietro dies heroically before being able to send his letter to her. Tina, who survives the war, spends her life believing that Pietro abandoned her. When we first encounter her, she has become an embittered and socially disenfranchised elderly woman who attends to a group of homeless cats.

From the outset, the fictional town of Montequadrato is presented as the story’s main stage, placing community and shared space at the forefront once again. The account begins on an early summer morning with opening panels that provide a birds-eye view of the town as an indistinct, light-blue shape hovers above it (3). We eventually find out that this blue apparition is the ghost of Pietro, whose trajectory ends at the church bells. The accompanying illustration suggests that the ghost itself causes them to ring loudly, rousing the whole community, including Emma. However, it is not her physical but metaphysical awakening that the opening pages announce to the reader above all: an awakening into a deeper understanding of herself, her community, and its past.

The next series of panels continues to follow the ghost into the town park where a group of stray cats is being fed by the now elderly Tina. Only Malpelo, the novel’s feline protagonist and Emma’s sole friend in town, catches sight of Pietro’s ghost and interrupts his meal to follow it all the way to its destination, setting the novel’s narrative mechanism in motion. Without Malpelo, none of the

fundamental plot connections can take place. By noticing and tracking down the ghost, he ensures Emma's and Pietro's acquaintance and allows for their individual stories, as well as their respective personal projects, to become entwined. Thus, this supernaturally attuned tabby will not only facilitate Emma's developmental process, but also her engagement with the surrounding community and its history. That a nonhuman is made to serve as intermediary is, by now, hardly new, but Malpelo's liaising activity is peculiar in that it extends over space *and time*, allowing the past and its significance to inform the present.

Pietro's ghost admits that his partial amnesia may be the result of "perhaps [not wanting] to remember certain things" (50)<sup>6</sup>. This is an impulse he has in common with the elderly Tina, who, on the one hand, wears her mother's fur coat "in order not to forget..." (118) but, on the other, tears up a love-letter she once wrote to Pietro saying "this piece of paper holds everything I don't want to remember anymore" (152). Whether, and what, one chooses to engage with, especially if it's something painful or exacting, is a decision that constantly hovers over Emma's life as well. Indeed, she is guilty of similar acts of conscious oblivion and repression, not vis-à-vis the past or the Holocaust, but rather what she perceives as a threatening present: fearful of her swimming lessons, she prefers to hide out at home to watch TV; she resists the friendly advances of her human classmate, Caterina, in favor of her secretive games in the park with Malpelo.

The act of "witnessing" that emerged as a critical concern in *The Butterfly* and *Benno*, resurfaces in *La Lettera Perduta* but now in auditory, rather than visual, terms. Emma, who spends much time alone in her room, also isolates herself when she's out in public by listening to the Spice Girls on her earphones. This makes important exchanges inaudible.



Figure 10

<sup>6</sup> All translations from Italian are my own.

In the illustrations above, only the English song lyrics in red provide constant input from one frame to the next; Caterina's chatter, which (as we find out later) includes a party invitation in the form of a question, is shut out and effectively becomes nonsense. Ironically, Emma does attend and listen to a talking cat, Malpelo, who admonishes her, after they flee from that same classmate: "Great, we escaped from a 9-year-old girl. Who am I to tell you, but... you should find some HU-MAN friends" (80). Malpelo is well aware that Emma's reduced human existence is not good for her and tells her as much as he walks away in a huff. Kinship relations do not consist exclusively of positive interactions (Justice 2018, 97). Indeed, conflict may be essential for the benefits of kinship to emerge. Here, the fact that it is a nonhuman who sets Emma's human experience back on course is a defining element of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

When Emma finally visits Caterina, her classmate pulls out a photograph of her grandmother, as a little girl, standing beside her teacher. Caterina recounts how much her grandmother had loved that teacher who had simply disappeared one day. Heartbroken, Caterina's grandmother had made inquiries, but, after being beaten in response, had let the matter drop. This imposed silence resulted in local doubts "that [the school teacher] had ever existed at all," an enforced, community-wide amnesia (102). Unbeknownst to Emma, Malpelo and Pietro's ghost had followed her to Caterina's house and, when Pietro sees the picture in Caterina's hand he is hit by a crucial, painful memory: before joining the resistance, he had actively participated in the arrest and deportation of Tina's mother, the school teacher in Caterina's photograph. When the girls hear about this, their direct accusations, "Why is being Jewish a crime? [...] Where's the sense in that? [...] Why did you do it?" (105), reduce Pietro's ghost to tears. Attempting to defend his actions, he says "There were many of them... [...] I was obeying orders [...] I was forced!...I didn't want to!" (105). But Emma is not persuaded and screams: "'This is why you're all alone! Because you've hurt people!'" Sometimes, 'not doing' as one is told is the necessary course of action.

In fact, Emma comes to this very realization in the episode that immediately follows. Set, by no means coincidentally, at the "Community Pool," a terrified Emma is being cheered on by many, including her mother, to dive in the pool and perform with her team: "Jump in!" "It's up to you! It's your turn!" (107–108). A series of panels depicts a paralyzed girl, poised to jump and meet expectations, yet unable to follow through. Then a single image with swirling

<sup>7</sup> Santoni named her own orange tabby Malpelo, likely after the title character of Giovanni Verga's story "Rosso Malpelo" (1878), about the miserable and ill-fated life of a redhead toiling in a sand mine. His name, which translates to "Evil Redhead," reflects deep-seated superstitions of nastiness, devilry, and misfortune associated with that hair color and Santoni counters them directly in her novel by way of a feline Malpelo who is the linchpin in all positive narrative outcomes.

pieces of paper, interrupts the loud, insistent chorus of voices and brings about Emma's categorical refusal to do as she is bidden. "No!" she yells decisively, "I don't want to do it" (108–109). The visual and narrative intrusion by the spinning papers, which readily evoke Pietro's and Tina's letters traveling through space and time, is an echo from Pietro's story thread and, most immediately, of the preceding episode in which he submitted to others' orders. The effect of the intruding image is clear: it is an intervention from the past in the immediate present that brings about Emma's ultimate resistance to the unrelenting social pressure around her. This is a critical moment in the novel and Santoni has been building up to it steadily: the furious and pained refusal that Emma launches at her mother (figure 11) is a reprise of the enraged confrontation of Pietro a few pages earlier (figure 12):



Figure 11



Figure 12

From Emma's physical orientation facing left, to the opening of her mouth with its pointy tongue, to the throbbing heart beat and visceral reactions by both Emma's mother and Pietro, Santoni draws an unmistakable parallel that will culminate in a full-page illustration. Sitting by the pool with her mother, who has come to check in with her, Emma states: "I'm a big girl. I don't want to do things that I don't want to do...Just to make you happy...So, no more pool...I don't know whether I want to keep going" (112, figure 13).



Figure 13

By adopting a clear stance against Pietro's treatment of Tina's mother, Emma sets in motion her own ability to stand up for herself. Santoni's insistence on the confluence of Pietro's and Emma's experiences is also evident pictorially in the tell-tale aura surrounding Emma, which replicates the frequently amorphous shape and color of Pietro's manifestation as a ghost.

Emma's coming into her own takes place about halfway through the novel, at which point key plot elements begin to fall into place efficiently thanks to various feline interventions. When she hears a cat's miau behind a bush, Emma finds, not Malpelo, but his band of brothers. It is thanks to them that she meets their human protector, Tina, who arrives to feed them, and it doesn't take Emma long to figure out her identity as the addressee of Pietro's letters. Tina, who, like Emma, has curated an isolated existence with only cats for friends, does not want to be found and quickly disappears into the city streets. But the newly emboldened Emma, who had recently held Pietro's ghost to account alongside Caterina, takes another step out of her reduced social existence and reaches out to her classmate for help: "I need you" she pleads with Caterina, "girlfriends help one another!" (123). Together, the girls find Tina at the park and hand her one of the letters she had once written to Pietro, and that he had kept. As soon as Tina touches the letter, the story's orientation shifts to

a historical perspective narrated in news-reel fashion and with distinctly less cartoonish illustrations. This time, it is historical fact that interrupts the course of a fictional present in order to confirm, and highlight, the novel's foundation in reality: "There have been dark moments in our history...But they are part of us. The idea that there was such a thing as a superior Arian race...arrived in Italy during the war from Germany... affecting above all the Jewish population...with roundups all over the country" (135–136). The wording deliberately includes "us," a community of contemporary readers, in a tragic and shared historical moment. The army truck in the final news-reel panel becomes Pietro's vehicle in the opening illustration of the episode that immediately follows, in which he is ordered to find and arrest Tina. As we already know, Pietro's instincts prevail on this occasion for, instead of arresting Tina, he saves her life.

Santoni's graphic novel continues to unfold in largely predictable ways: Tina finally reads Pietro's letter and understands that he did not abandon her; Pietro tells her about his resistance work and how it led to his death. Now at peace, Pietro ceases to haunt his hometown, and Tina, who comes to realize that she has isolated herself for too long promises Emma: "no more hiding" (176), a decision that Emma also made for herself by letting a human friend, Caterina, into her life. And what about Malpelo, the feline intermediary who set in motion each of these personal and community projects? Much like Pietro, who ceases to be a ghost, Malpelo sheds his supernatural abilities. The novel's closing sequence restages its opening with Emma fast asleep on a Sunday morning. Now that her personal awakening and community mission have been accomplished, it is not the church bells that rouse her out of bed, but a loudly mewling Malpelo. No longer homeless, Malpelo has found permanent lodging in Emma's room and, more importantly, has stopped communicating with her in Italian. But they still understand one another. In response to his wake-up meows, she says: "You're right! I have to go to the pool!" (178). Now more closely resembling the non-verbal kinship relationships of *The Butterfly*, *Krasinski Square*, and *Benno*, Malpelo's duties as cosmic intermediary are over, but his profound influence, and their continuing kinship relationship, are confirmed in a final visual echo. Back at the community pool, the stage for Emma's pivotal act of individuation, we watch her jump fearlessly in the water. Instead of the earlier light-blue, ghostly aura around her head, a smiling Malpelo is depicted on her swimming cap – not physically there but symbolically present – taking the plunge right along with her.

Throughout *La Lettera Perduta*, individuals and community, the past and present, fact and fiction, are in constant conversation. In fundamental ways, this has been true of all the books discussed here and always under the auspices of nonhuman intermediaries. The insistence on the documented, historical underpinnings of these stories invests them not only with a certain *gravitas*, but also underscores the importance of memory, the notion that these events must

not be forgotten. Generally, when it comes to literature about the Holocaust, discourse centers on how trauma and atrocity are to be represented; on how we ought to write about “the unspeakable” (Shikhmanter, 2). These questions become more pedagogically and developmentally driven in the genre of picturebooks: should they convey hope or even happy endings so as not traumatize or overwhelm their readers? But then what does it mean to impart a positive meaning to any narrative of the Holocaust? Does it minimize and distort profound historical events (Lezzi 35–36)? Such questions, albeit important and germane, have a polarizing effect that can lead precisely to what the books included here seek to counter: silence and ensuing oblivion. With the exception of *La Lettera Perduta*, which ends on a largely upbeat note, *The Butterfly*, *Krasinski Square* and *Benno* do not secure the child at the expense of necessary complexity.

To varying degrees, these stories end on a mixture of resolution and uncertainty, for humans and nonhumans alike, and the ensuing tension might serve as an approach to Kertzer’s question in this essay’s epigraph. Writing about kinship and animals in indigenous children’s literature, Roxanne Harde remarks: “there is something terribly wrong in forgetting who your relations are” (237), in other words, in neglecting to nurture and maintain ties across communities and shared space. This is what might have happened in *The Butterfly* and *Krasinski Square*, and precisely what does happen for Benno and his neighborhood, where people looked down and away from threats to the community. Kinship, Daniel Heath Justice insists, is fostered and contextual: “[it] isn’t a static thing; it’s dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun” (Justice 150). Feline protagonists may soften, both visually and affectively, the impact of this difficult material on young audiences, but, above all, they underscore relationships and relatedness, no matter the “people” involved, as values worthy of investment, sustainment, and protection.

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