



THE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN THOMAS KENEALLY'S *SCHINDLER'S LIST*

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Abstract

Thomas Keneally's book was first published in Britain in 1982 under the title Schindler's Ark and released as Schindler's List in the United States the same year. When Schindler's Ark won Britain's Booker Prize in 1982, it stirred up controversy, with some critics complaining that the "documentary novel" did not deserve a prize normally reserved for fiction. Schindler's List recreates the true story of Oskar Schindler, the Czech-born southern German industrialist who risked his life to save over 1,100 of his Jewish factory workers from the death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland. Keneally's "documentary novel," based on the recollections of the Schindlerjuden (Schindler's Jews), Schindler himself, and other witnesses, is told in a series of snapshot stories. It is the story of Schindler's unlikely heroism and of one man's attempt to do good in the midst of outrageous evil. The book explores the complex nature of virtue, the importance of individual human life, the role of witnesses to the Holocaust, and the attention to rules and details that sustained the Nazi system of terror. This paper strives to consider the narrative strategies Keneally uses in his novel.

Keywords

Thomas Keneally, Schindler's List, Documentary Novel, Narrative, etc.

Full Article

Thomas Keneally's book was first published in Britain in 1982 under the title *Schindler's Ark*¹ and released as *Schindler's List* in the United States the same year. When *Schindler's Ark* won Britain's Booker Prize in 1982, it stirred up controversy, with some critics complaining that the "documentary novel" did not deserve a prize normally reserved for fiction. The debate among critics did not affect the book's enormous popularity with readers, however. It enjoyed renewed interest after its adaptation into a feature film by Steven Spielberg in 1993. In part because of the success of the film, *Schindler's List* ranks as one of the most popular books ever written about the Holocaust².

Schindler's List recreates the true story of Oskar Schindler, the Czech-born southern German industrialist who risked his life to save over 1,100 of his Jewish factory workers from the death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland. Thomas Keneally's "documentary novel," based on the recollections of the *Schindlerjuden* (Schindler's Jews), Schindler himself, and other witnesses, is told in a series of snapshot stories. It recounts the lives of the flamboyant profiteer and womanizer Schindler; Schindler's long-suffering wife, Emilie; the brutal SS (Nazi secret service) commandant Amon Goeth; Schindler's quietly courageous factory manager, Itzhak Stern; and dozens of other Jews who underwent the horrors of the Nazi machinery. At the center of the story, though, are the actions and ambitions of Schindler, who comes to Krakow, Poland, seeking his fortune and ends up outwitting the SS to protect his Jewish employees. It is the story of Schindler's unlikely heroism and of one man's attempt to do well in the midst of outrageous evil. The book explores the complex nature of virtue, the importance of individual human life, the role



of witnesses to the Holocaust, and the attention to rules and details that sustained the Nazi system of terror. Keneally writes “...this is the story of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil, a triumph in eminently measurable, statistical, unsubtle terms.”³

When it was published in Britain in 1982 as *Schindler's Ark*, Keneally's book was widely and prominently reviewed. It had been short-listed for the Booker McConnell Prize, and there had been some mention in pre-publication reviews that the documentary style of the book made it an unusual contender for a fiction prize. The day after its official publication, *Schindler's Ark* won the Booker Prize, and a storm of controversy erupted. A number of critics felt that its deficiency in the fictional aspect undermined its quality. As Michael Hulse explains in “Virtue and the Philosophic Innocent: The British Reception of *Schindler's List*” in *Critical Quarterly*, Steven Glover, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* compared it to a “tiresome television documentary”⁴ and D. J. Enright in the *Times Literary Supplement* found it to be on a par with second-rate adventure-style documentaries and “not a great literary novel.” Many reviewers spent a great deal of time wondering whether the book was a novel, although others praised Keneally's considerable literary skill. One reviewer, Marion Glastonbury of the *New Statesman*, objected to the portrayal of Schindler as a man of virtue⁵. Despite the controversy, however, *Schindler's Ark* was popular among British readers.

American reviewers of *Schindler's List* also noted the book's documentary style but were less concerned with whether its nonfictional status meant it was or was not a novel. Paul Zweig in the *New York Times* declared that Keneally “has chosen a subject that art can contain,”⁶ and numerous other writers found the work to be “remarkable.” *Schindler's List* was soon an international bestseller, and the book cemented Keneally's status as a major writer and Australia's most prominent author.

Universal Pictures obtained rights for Steven Spielberg to turn Keneally's book into a film soon after it was published, but it did not reach development for about ten years. Before the release of the film, Keneally's book continued to have modest success and sales. There was some interest in the work among academics, and a handful of articles appeared that discussed its status as fiction and the character of Schindler. However, after the release of the film version of *Schindler's List* in 1993 and particularly after it earned seven Academy Awards, the book enjoyed renewed popularity. Articles on the work appeared, many of them comparing Keneally's treatment of the story with that by director Steven Spielberg. But the phenomenal success of the movie has also overshadowed Keneally's accomplishment, and there are certainly more discussions in print on Spielberg's *Schindler* than on the work by the Booker Prize-winner. No volume of criticism has been devoted to Keneally's prose version of the work, for example, but there have been several books and countless articles analyzing the film, including the 1997 collection *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on “Schindler's List,”* edited by Yosefa Loshitzky.

Before we turn our attention to the narrative strategies in *Schindler's List*, it is necessary to discuss how Keneally's handling of “documentary novel” in the book. *Schindler's List* is a “documentary novel,” a novel that recreates events that actually took place in real life. The events described in the book are based on interviews with fifty Schindler survivors and enriched by extensive research as well as by the author's visits to Krakow, Plaszow, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Keneally goes to great lengths to describe characters as they were in real life and to create a sense of realism. But he uses the texture and devices of the novel—a form normally used for fictional accounts – to tell the *true* story of Oskar Schindler because, he says, “the novel's techniques seem suited for a character of such ambiguity and magnitude as Oskar.” (Keneally, 10) Keneally stresses, though, that he attempts to avoid fiction in his work because “fiction would debase the record.” (Keneally, 10) He says that, although he has recreated some of the conversations, all events are based on detailed recollections of witnesses to the acts described. The result is a work



that moves back and forth between simply telling a story and embellishing or commenting upon that story by examining how the author came to know the facts, how the facts may be disputed, or how the witnesses feel about certain events. For example, the author sometimes intrudes into a story to mention that another witness has a different account of those events, how a particular survivor says he or she felt about Schindler, and so on. The effect of this authorial intrusion is always to return the reader to reality, to make it plain that the events described are not merely a novelistic fantasy but a true account that impacted people's lives in ways that can barely be imagined.

The story of Oskar Schindler and the rescue of the "Schindler Jews" unfolds through a series of stories about dozens of characters. The narratives are pieced together by the author so that they are interesting anecdotes or character sketches on their own, but they also weave into the larger story about Schindler. The effect of this technique is that what become of most importance in the book is people, the minute details of their lives, the ideas they held and intimate moments they cherished. Unlike the film version of *Schindler's List*, Keneally's novel is memorable not so much for the backdrop of the labor camps and atrocities of war but for the realistic description of people and the personal sufferings or victories they experienced. There is, for example, the story of the courtship and marriage of Josef and Rebecca Bau in the barracks of the Plaszow camp, that of Henry Rosner playing the fiddle so magically that an SS officer kills himself, that of the young man who escapes Belzec by hiding for three days in the pit of the latrines, and that of young Janka Feigenbaum dying of cancer. That the novel is constructed in this way conveys a sense that the story of the Holocaust is made up of stories of individuals, each one a human life.

When *Schindler's List* (under the title *Schindler's Ark*) won the Booker Prize in 1982, many critics objected to the fact that this work of nonfiction could win a major literary prize that had traditionally been awarded to the year's best book of fiction. Other critics complained that not only was the work not fiction, it was not good literature, mainly because of its documentary style. *Schindler's List* is an unusual novel, to be sure, because it moves back and forth between telling a story and reporting the facts of history – and people's very personal accounts of that history. It perhaps does not read like a literary novel because, in some sense, things are told too plainly. There are dozens of characters in the novel, but with the exception of Schindler and a few of his close associates, those characters are not "developed"; their complexities do not unfold in such a way that the reader begins to know them from their actions. Rather, the author explicitly tells their stories, narrates the events of their lives, reports what they are like, notes their characteristics, and offers a few key details about what they went through during the war and afterward. Also, because it is a true story, there is a certain lack of tension in the plot; from the beginning, the author makes clear exactly what will happen – that Schindler will rescue over a thousand Jews from the death camps through his own brand of ingenuity and charm. There are, then, few surprises in the sense that one usually expects from a novel; even in the thick of the main action of the story, Keneally offers information about who survives the war, how a particular character ultimately meets his or her end, and so on. However, while the narrative style of *Schindler's List* is different from traditional novels, it is far more than mere reportage and has characteristics not merely of a "good read" but of good literature. This is because of the techniques Keneally uses to suggest questions, present ambiguities, and offer layers of meaning even as he tells a straightforward, true story. Keneally uses devices found in more traditional works of fiction that make his documentary novel rise to the level of "literature," but at the same time his particular narrative technique has its own strengths for recounting the type of story he tells in *Schindler's List*.

In his author's note, Keneally says explicitly that his book is *not* fiction, because fiction would "debase the record" of the Holocaust. The stories he tells of the victims, survivors, and oppressors in *Schindler's List* are all based on eyewitness accounts, historical documents, and



visits to the sites described in the novel. Thus, it can be assumed that Keneally does not embellish stories or infuse characters with his own authorial imagination, making them “stand for” or represent certain ideas he is trying to communicate to his reader. What Keneally does do is offer certain ideas and images throughout the novel that make the reader think about the significance of events or characters in a deeper way than might be suggested from only a strict reporting of the facts. Keneally offers surprisingly little in the way of commentary about the events that take place during the Holocaust, but he invites readers in other ways to think deeply about the meaning of what occurs.

One of the techniques Keneally uses is to repeat certain ideas and images over and over again. The most obvious one, of course, is that of the list. Nowhere does the author point out explicitly that the German war machine seems to run according to systematic directives and official lists, reducing its Jewish victims to subhuman status by cataloguing them – and their belongings – in order to dominate them. But as he describes repeatedly the German obsession with lists of various kinds, Keneally suggests that it is this type of impersonal, petty bureaucracy that enables the German military, from NCOs to SS authorities, to visit their terror upon the Jews, all the while retaining some notion of German “civilization.” The members of the Jewish police, the OD, also use lists to pass information on to the SS, and they too seem to hide behind them in order to be able to betray their fellow ghetto dwellers. That Schindler finally rescues “his Jews” by drawing up a list of names of people to take to the relocated factory camp at Brinnlitz shows that he works within the confines of and by the rules of the German system, all the while undermining it. Throughout the novel, there is some sense that people can be judged by the way they use lists. Marcel Goldberg, the personnel clerk, keeps the Jews “in the dark” about the list of those to be sent to Schindler’s factory; Raimund Tisch strains to remember names (he thinks of people as individuals) to add to the list and curses himself for not remembering more. The attitude toward the list thus also reflects characters’ attitudes towards people as human beings. The list functions on various levels, including making readers think of these attitudes and of how people can hide behind bureaucracy and order to avoid recognizing the evil they may be engaged in.

Other ideas and images that recur in the novel are those of gods and kings. At the beginning of the novel, Keneally says that his book is about “virtue” and its unconventional representation in Oskar Schindler. In the rest of the book, the author offers no easy solutions about how to understand goodness – or, for that matter, evil. But he does explore the ideas in his descriptions of Schindler, his “dark brother” Amon Goeth, and others. Schindler, it is made clear, is far from virtuous in the traditional sense: he has mistresses, drinks heavily, and his ambition is to become a tycoon. Yet Schindler is repeatedly likened to a god. He is a “minor god of deliverance, double-faced – in the Greek manner – as any small god; endowed with all the human vices; many-handed; subtly powerful; capable of bringing gratuitous but secure salvation” (Keneally, 232) a god like Bacchus, and he offers the “godlike promise” that his workers will survive the war if they stay at his factory. The image of Schindler as god suggests to the reader the complexity of this man who holds so much power and is, ultimately, a symbol of good despite the mystery that often shrouds his legend. Schindler’s godlike qualities are often presented in contrast to Goeth’s, who is often portrayed as a power-hungry king or emperor. Symche Spira, the Jewish policeman, is also referred to as a “Napoleon” and a “tsar.” Both these men, with their king-complexes, do not understand the concept of mercy or goodness, but are corrupted by a misguided sense of power. Again, these ideas and images – and they recur in the novel – explore the complexity and ambiguity of good, evil, and power, not by explicitly discussing them but by making readers think about them in their own terms.

Keneally thus uses these (and other) recurring images in *Schindler’s List* to explore difficult ground, not to offer overt explanations but to allow readers to come to their own conclusions



about people and events. Exploring ideas in this manner is a technique that is generally associated with works of fiction and imaginative literature, not of reportage. The author, by using these devices, adds a layer of complexity to his story, taking it out of the realm merely of history telling to the realm of storytelling. He engages the reader in such a way that the reader must ‘fill in the blanks’ and try to understand what certain types of behavior mean, why a character might be motivated in a certain way, and so on. The author takes readers to the heart of characters and events but then offers images as clues that the reader must interpret for him or herself in trying to “understand” the story in a deeper way.

But while Keneally uses these “novelistic” methods and devices in *Schindler’s List*, he also uses some devices that are not found in traditional novels. For example, as mentioned, many of the characters described in the book are undeveloped or “flat”; their characteristics are told to the reader by the author, but the reader does not get to “know” them from what they do or from an understanding of their psychologies or even their behavior. Rather, their characters emerge purely from a recounting of their stories, their histories. Also, throughout, Keneally “gives away” the ending of the story by flashing forward and explaining what happens after the war to certain characters, Schindler included. Keneally seems to do these things for a reason, however. It could be argued that what he is doing is presenting in the foreground the story of Oskar Schindler, a mysterious figure whose motivations and virtue are ambiguous. In contrast to Schindler is Goeth, a clear embodiment of evil and the worst of human nature. Schindler and Goeth thus represent good and evil, although not in altogether clear-cut terms. Schindler’s story is the main thread of the novel, and Goeth’s is told alongside it, his figure serving sometimes as a foil and sometimes as a mirror to that of Schindler. The rest of the novel is made up of the stories of the dozens of other characters, most of them Holocaust victims and survivors. Their stories and discussions of their personalities are told plainly, perhaps to emphasize the fact that it is ultimately *history* that is being recounted. By emphasizing the details of their lives and the facts of their personalities, Keneally stresses the fact that in this complex struggle between good and evil what was at stake were dozens of individuals, each with distinct histories that were changed forever.

Keneally, then, uses two different sets of techniques in *Schindler’s List*. He uses novelistic techniques of “story telling” that involve using layers of meaning that his readers must uncover. He also uses techniques of “history telling” to hit home to the reader in no uncertain terms that the events described in his book took place and that the people described are flesh and blood. The two techniques complement each other and also leave readers with a sense that it is only through the use of the imagination, through trying to understand the deeper significances of events and people’s behavior that history comes alive, and the horrors that people experienced become real.

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- “Schindler’s Ark.” *Booker Prize Foundation*, 1982. (Original British publication title.) (*Schindler’s List* first appeared in Britain as *Schindler’s Ark*. The word “ark” in the original title is in reference to the ark built by the biblical Noah, on God’s instruction, to rescue people and animals from the Great Flood. Thus Schindler, simply from the original title of the work, is cast as a rescuer of (Jewish) people.)



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(The mass murder of European Jews and others under Nazi rule during World War II has come to be known simply as the Holocaust. “Holocaust” literally means “massive destruction or slaughter.” It is thought that eleven million people were killed by the Nazis. These included political opponents (particularly Communists), Slavs, gypsies, mentally and/or physically disabled, homosexuals, and other “undesirables.” An estimated six million men, women, and children were killed merely because they were Jews. The destruction of the Jews in Europe stands as the archetype of genocide in human history.)
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