

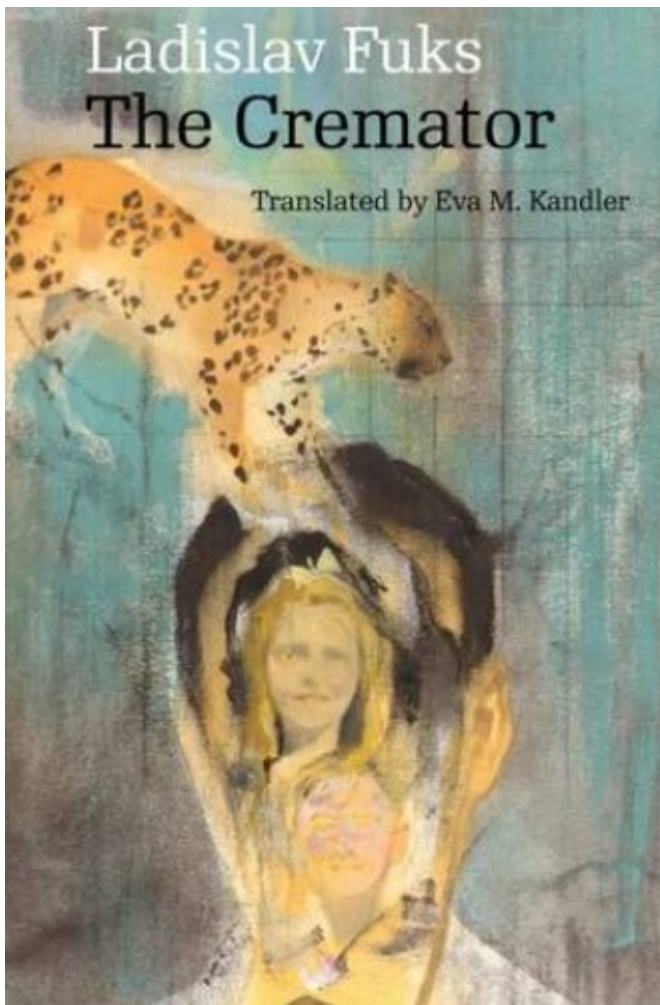
To name or not to name

The Holocaust was perpetrated against specific groups of people. Is this fact a crucial part of every retelling?

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

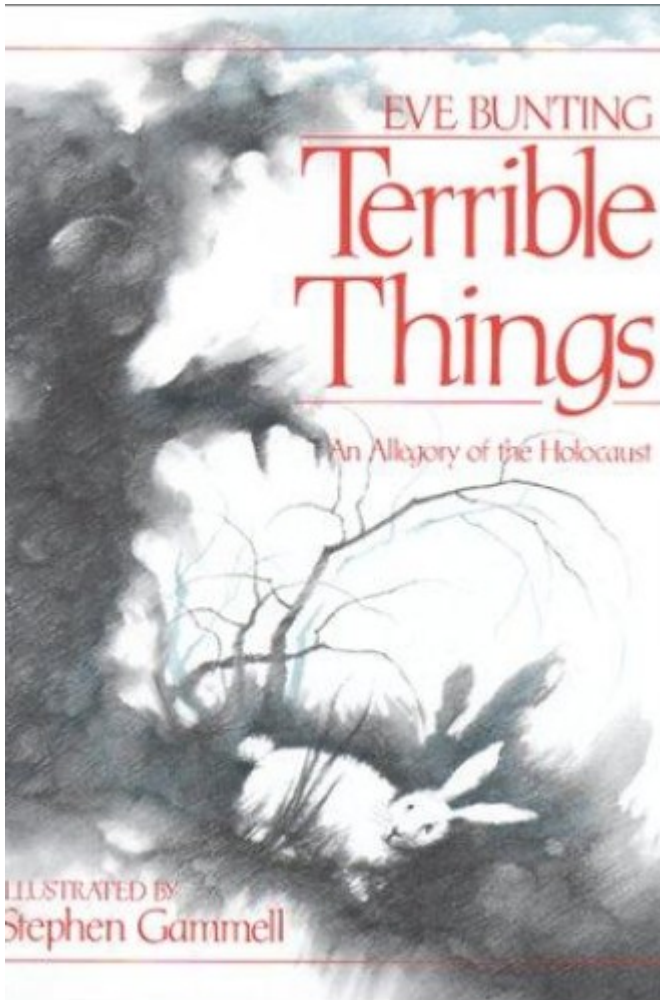
February 8, 2017

In Review



The Cremator

by Ladislav Fuks, translated by Eva M. Kandler
Karolinum Press



Terrible Things

An Allegory of the Holocaust

by Eve Bunting, illustrated by Stephen Gammell
Jewish Publication Society

The controversy that erupted after President Trump gave an International Holocaust Remembrance Day speech that [failed to mention Jews](#) was overshadowed by furor over the executive order he issued the same day. While the order—which suspended entry into the U.S. by people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—didn't name Muslims as the targeted group, it was clearly aimed at

Muslims. Whether it is officially judged as [discriminatory against Muslims](#) is now in the hands of the court system.

The lesson in both cases seems to be this: it's easier to get away with discriminating against people if you don't name the group against which you're discriminating. When we remember acts of systemic violence or genocide from the past, the value of naming the people who were targeted isn't just sentimental or symbolic. It's confessional. Articulating the details of past sins forces us to turn inward and examine our own complicity rather than blame only others. It's also performative. Saying the names of targeted groups aloud is an act of resistance against the evil that resides within our history and still churns under the surface threatening to re-emerge.

Ladislav Fuks' novel *The Cremator*, published in 1967 and first translated into English in 1984, also demonstrates this point. The protagonist, Karel Kopfrkingl, lives in Prague with his family and works at a crematorium as Hitler's troops invade Czechoslovakia. Kopfrkingl is a bit entitled, as well as naïve and morally flimsy. But initially he resists his friend Willi Reinke's harsh language about who is the real enemy in the war. Willi speaks about "inferior weaklings," "parasites and insects," "those who are responsible for our poverty," and "a wretched people who don't understand anything."

But Willi avoids using the term "Jew" until much later in the story, and then he uses it sparingly. The effect of this linguistic evasiveness seems to be to intensify the anti-Semitism's power over Kopfrkingl when it does take hold. Willi's strategy is to create a frightening archetype of a looming enemy before filling it in with specific people. In contrast, Kopfrkingl, who at the beginning of the story is generous toward his Jewish neighbors and employees and speaks openly about their religious identity, evolves into a grotesque caricature of vague hatred against an entire race of people.

Part of the horror of the story is in the fact that it's impossible to pin down when and how Kopfrkingl's evolution occurs. There appears to be some truth in Willi's seductive claim that his friend is predestined to join the Nazis. "We're upholders of a luminous civilization," Willi explains. "We are going to establish a superior, universal morality, a new world order. You're one of us. You're an honorable man, sensitive, a man of responsibility, and most of all strong and brave. A pure Germanic soul. Nobody can take it from you, mein lieber Karl."

It's not clear whether these words sway Kopfrkingl or simply name a deeper reality to which the cremator is already beholden. As the novel ends, that deeper reality manifests itself in acts of horror that are at once so banal and so hyperbolic that they stretch credibility. But the Holocaust stretched credibility too. Yet, it happened. And it happened to specific people, most of whom were Jews. *The Cremator* demonstrates just how important it is to name that reality.

Martin Niemöller's famous post-Holocaust [poem reminds us](#) that when a political regime's actions seem too incredible to be true, it's easy to shift our gaze from the suffering of others and turn self-protectively inward. So does Eve Bunting's 1980 children's book *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*. It's an illustrated fable about forest animals and the "Terrible Things" who come and carry them away, group by group—first the things with feathers, then the bushy-tailed creatures, then those who swim, and so on. Although an author's note on the dedication page spells out that "the Nazis killed millions of Jews and others," the story itself doesn't contain the words *Jew* or *Holocaust*. It's simply a story about animals. A terrifying one.

The lack of specificity in Bunting's retelling is pedagogically effective because it collapses the narrative distance between the reader and the Holocaust. It's easier for a child to identify with "Little Rabbit" (or the squirrels or the frogs in a fictional forest) than with people who were killed in Europe 75 years ago. That's the beauty—and the challenge—of allegory. It's abstract enough that we can easily imagine ourselves as characters in it. And once we imagine ourselves in a story, it's not so easy to ignore it.