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Representing the Holodomor in Children's Literature: Genocide, Memory, and Pedagogies of Historical Recovery in Katherine Marsh's *The Lost Year*

For many decades, Stalinist propaganda portrayed the victims of the Holodomor as perpetrators responsible for their own fate, foreclosing public commemoration and suppressing remembrance in Soviet Ukraine. The Holodomor, otherwise known as the Great Famine of 1932–1933, is now widely recognised as one of the greatest national tragedies of Ukraine and condemned as an act of ideologically motivated mass violence. As Mateusz Świetlicki observes, growing global awareness of Ukraine's history has led to an expanding corpus of Anglophone literary representations of the famine across genres and age categories (Świetlicki 2023a: 1).

This article examines Katherine Marsh's middle-grade novel *The Lost Year: A Survival Story of the Ukrainian Famine* (2023a) as a pedagogical and mnemonic intervention that translates the Holodomor into an accessible narrative for young readers. Marsh structures the novel around three interconnected timelines that gradually reveal the hidden history of one Ukrainian family across nearly a century. The contemporary narrative follows twelve-year-old Matthew during the COVID-19 pandemic, whose discovery of photographs, letters, and other family belongings prompts an investigation into the past of his hundred-year-old great-grandmother, GG (Nadiya). His search is interwoven with the stories of two girls living in 1932–1933: Mila, the privileged daughter of a Soviet official in Kyiv whose faith in Communist ideology is gradually undermined by the realities of the Holodomor, and Helen, a Ukrainian American girl in Brooklyn who attempts to expose the famine despite widespread denial in the Western press. Through these interconnected perspectives, the novel links lived experience, diasporic witnessing, and contemporary acts of remembrance, foregrounding the intergenerational transmission of suppressed historical knowledge.

I argue that the novel not only recovers suppressed histories but also intervenes in contemporary debates on memory, trauma, and media literacy. In a cultural moment increasingly shaped by digitally mediated conflict – often described as the “first TikTok war” – *The Lost Year* functions as a bridge between historical atrocity and contemporary regimes of information, demonstrating how children’s literature participates in the circulation and ethical framing of historical knowledge. The article first outlines the historical and political context of the Holodomor, then situates children’s literature within trauma and memory studies, before turning to postmemory and next-generation memory frameworks. The final sections offer a close reading of narrative structure, focalisation, and paratextual framing as mechanisms of memory transmission.

Framing The Holodomor: Genocide, Erasure and Memory Politics

The term *Holodomor*, first appearing in diasporic publications in the 1930s and later popularised in North America by Ivan Drach, has become central to naming the famine as a distinct historical and political event (Ulanowicz 2017; Malko 2021). Contemporary scholarship estimates that the famine resulted in approximately 3.9 million excess deaths and 0.6 million lost births, amounting to at least 4.5 million deaths, or roughly 13 percent of Ukraine’s population (Applebaum 2017; Świetlicki 2023a). These figures remain contested partly due to systematic Soviet falsification of demographic records, which obscured the scale of the catastrophe and contributed to its historical marginalisation (Bertelsen 2022; Applebaum 2017).

While the famine occurred alongside the broader Stalinist policies of dekulakization and forced collectivisation implemented during the First Five-Year Plan, it functioned as a distinct, artificially engineered weapon of mass destruction. As Norman Davies observes, it was not merely an economic transformation but a deliberate political strategy aimed at suppressing Ukrainian nationalism, dismantling the peasantry as a social class, and systematically erasing Ukrainian cultural memory and identity (Davies 2005: 207). Crucially, the famine operated as a targeted mechanism of ethno-demographic engineering; the resulting depopulation of Ukrainian territories was systematically followed by the state-sponsored resettlement of these regions with Russian populations, fundamentally altering the demographic fabric of the Ukrainian countryside.

Consequently, recent scholarship increasingly moves past generalised Soviet frameworks to emphasise the Holodomor as a specifically anti-Ukrainian project aimed at destroying the nation’s aspirations for independence through the targeted repression of its intellectual, cultural, and rural communities (Malko 2021). While its classification remains contested within international legal discourse shaped by narrower post-Nuremberg definitions that privilege industrialized mass extermination models, it is recognised as a genocide by Ukraine and an increasing number

of states (Applebaum 2017). Even if the entire population was not physically destroyed, these policies devastated the peasantry, accelerated aggressive processes of Russification, and inflicted a profound collective trauma (Yekelchuk 2020: 103).

The famine was also epistemically constructed through censorship, propaganda, and restricted access for foreign journalists. Early reportage by Gareth Jones, Rhea Clyman, and Malcolm Muggeridge was systematically marginalised, delaying international recognition. Most governments, preoccupied with the Great Depression, ignored the deaths of millions of Ukrainian civilians, including children (Applebaum 2017). This sustained silencing constitutes the historical condition that *The Lost Year* seeks to narratively recover.

Historical Recovery and the Transmission of Silenced Memory

To understand how such texts transmit experiences beyond readers' lifetimes, it is necessary to move from trauma-centred approaches toward memory-based theories that foreground intergenerational transmission. As Anastasia Ulanowicz notes, children's literature increasingly positions itself as a medium through which "the unruly ghosts of the historical past might be channeled" (Ulanowicz 2017: 3). However, such traumatic histories are often suppressed or rendered unrepresentable within public discourse, only becoming narratable across greater generational distance (Kamińska-Maciąg 2023: 72). This is particularly evident in post-Soviet contexts, where cultural memory has long been shaped by selective state narratives. Only over time, the widening gap between lived experience and inherited knowledge has allowed for new perspectives on previously silenced histories.

Within this framework, the Holodomor emerges as a particularly significant case of belated cultural articulation. While earlier representations of Stalinist atrocities were rare or ideologically constrained, contemporary fiction increasingly revisits these suppressed histories. This shift reflects broader transformations in cultural memory, where formerly marginalised narratives are reintroduced into public discourse (Kamińska-Maciąg 2023: 74; Assmann 2011). In anglophone children's and young adult literature, the Holodomor has been addressed through a growing body of historical fiction that seeks to mediate trauma and recovery for younger audiences, including Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch's *Enough* (2000) and *Winterkill: A Novel* (2022), as well as Adrian Lysenko and Ivanka Theodosia Galadza's *Five Stalks of Grain* (2022). Across these texts, the Holodomor is reimaged through differing narrative strategies, ranging from testimonial realism to hybrid forms combining historical reconstruction with affective engagement.

However, this anglophone corpus represents only one strand of a much broader literary field. A more sustained and locally grounded engagement with the Holodomor can be observed in Ukrainian children's and young adult literature, where authors have long played a central role in reconstructing the famine as a culturally

embedded and historically specific trauma. Contemporary examples include Zoriana Zhyvka's *Anhel na im'ia Hrushka* (2023) and Mariia Pravda's *Tam, de teche Yatran* (2023), alongside YA narratives such as Kuriata's *Dzvinka. Ukrainka, narodzhena v SRSR* (2023). These texts foreground not only survival and childhood experience, but also the reconstruction of historical truth as part of a broader project of cultural remembrance. Scholarly work by Tetiana Kachak and Larysa Krul (2024) further demonstrates the pedagogical and mnemonic significance of such narratives, while Lidiia Kovalets (2026) traces the longer genealogy of Holodomor representation in Ukrainian children's literature, extending back to interwar period publications.

Compared to these works, which primarily situate the famine within nationally embedded frameworks of memory, *The Lost Year* extends the representational frame through its dual-timeline structure and transnational perspective, linking Soviet-era Ukraine with contemporary diasporic memory in the United States. In doing so, it participates in a broader literary movement concerned with the reclamation of silenced histories, while also foregrounding intergenerational transmission and the long afterlives of historical trauma. Ultimately, *The Lost Year* contributes to this evolving corpus by shaping new forms of intergenerational remembrance.

Mediating Trauma: Pedagogy and in Narrative in *The Lost Year*

Inspired by the author's family history, Katherine Marsh's novel introduces readers with little or no prior knowledge of Ukrainian history to the Holodomor through a multi-layered narrative structure. The text employs three alternating timelines – set during the Holodomor, the Great Depression, and the COVID-19 pandemic – thereby making historically distant events more immediate and relatable for contemporary readers (Świetlicki 2023a: 12; cf. Świetlicki 2026).

The narrative follows thirteen-year-old Matthew during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when confinement at home leads him into an unexpected intergenerational encounter with his hundred-year-old great-grandmother, GG. As he helps her sort through stored belongings, the process gradually opens a fragmented family archive of letters, articles, and music, triggering both painful and joyful memories and revealing the intertwined stories of family members: Mila, Nadiya, and Helen. The novel shifts between past and present, gradually unfolding its historical narrative while also situating it within the uncertainties of the pandemic. Through Matthew's developing relationship with GG, the text explores processes of memory recovery, trust, and emotional negotiation, while also drawing parallels between historical crises and contemporary global instability.

The novel introduces young readers to Ukraine and encourages them to connect historical events with contemporary developments. Marsh herself frames the novel as a text concerned with both historical recovery and media literacy, describing it as a resource through which students can examine propaganda, storytelling,

and contemporary misinformation (Marsh 2023b). Additionally, the novel addresses the emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, guiding readers from experiences of loss and grief toward resilience and underscoring the role of narrative in processing difficult emotions. Thus, the pedagogical potential of *The Lost Year* emerges most clearly not from authorial explanation but from the narrative strategies through which young characters learn to question official versions of reality.

The Lost Year has been translated into French, Polish, Romanian, and Czech, which extends its reach beyond anglophone readerships and positions it as a transnational educational resource. Its availability in multiple languages enables the novel to be used in diverse school contexts, where it can support historical learning about the Holodomor and broader discussions of memory, genocide, and contemporary relevance. In this way, the text circulates beyond its original linguistic and cultural setting, reinforcing its potential as a cross-cultural pedagogical tool.

A key component of engaging with the text involves familiarising readers with its historical and ideological contexts, including the Russian Empire, the Russian Revolution, communism, the Soviet Union, collectivisation, Stalinist repression, and the Holodomor. The term “Holodomor,” meaning “murder by hunger,” reflects both the deliberate nature of the famine and the broader attempt to erase Ukrainian cultural and political resistance (Bezo and Maggi 2015). The novel foregrounds questions of propaganda and epistemic distortion, particularly through references to journalistic complicity in concealing famine conditions, as exemplified by figures such as Walter Duranty, whose reporting obscured the reality of famine in Ukraine. Developing this historical literacy enables readers to critically situate the narrative within broader structures of political violence and information control.

At the same time, the novel extends beyond the interwar Soviet context to engage with other historical and contemporary crises, including the Great Depression, Ukrainian migration to the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These overlapping temporalities foreground the continuity of displacement, state violence, and informational instability across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, encouraging readers to read history relationally. Ultimately, *The Lost Year* operates as both historical fiction and pedagogical intervention, demonstrating how narrative can recover suppressed histories while inviting reflection on how contemporary crises are mediated and understood in an age of global information saturation.

Teaching Trauma: Children’s Literature as Memory Work

Over the last fifty years, children’s literature has increasingly engaged with representations of atrocity, addressing twentieth- and twenty-first-century events such as Auschwitz, the Gulag, Hiroshima, and 9/11. These narratives no longer aim to shield children from historical violence. As Kenneth B. Kidd observes, there

is now a broad consensus that children's literature is "the most rather than the least appropriate literary form for trauma work" (Kidd 2008: 161). This marks a shift from earlier protective paradigms, where educators and authors sought to limit children's exposure to traumatic material. Contemporary children's texts, alongside educational and publishing frameworks, now often encourage engagement with disturbing histories, sometimes assuming that trauma must be experienced affectively to be understood. As Kidd suggests, children's literature has thus become increasingly "haunted," preoccupied with unresolved historical violence that resists closure. Building on this, Eric Tribunella argues that trauma narratives also serve a disciplinary function, exposing young, often sheltered readers to hardship in ways that encourage moral seriousness and compliance with social norms (Tribunella 2010).

The Lost Year exemplifies this pedagogical function by introducing readers, through Mila's perspective, to Soviet crimes that were systematically denied, concealed, or justified by official ideology. Initially accepting the state's version of reality, Mila gradually confronts evidence that challenges her assumptions. This process is particularly evident when she searches for her missing cousin and encounters a group of ragged street boys in Kyiv. At first, she dismisses them as delinquents and potential thieves, reflecting the prejudices instilled by Soviet propaganda. In reality, they are starving, homeless children – victims of the Holodomor. Reluctantly approaching them because they are her only source of information, Mila learns of "the Collector" and the bodies stored beneath the Besarabsky Market:

"Where would they take her?" I asked. "The Collector. Or, depending on how starving she is, under Besarabsky." The other boys laughed grimly, but I didn't follow. I had no idea what the Collector was. Besarabsky was the indoor marketplace at the end of Khreschatyk. "What do you mean under it?" "They got a big freezer and no food these days," the boy explained. "So that's where they put all the people who die of hunger." I rolled my eyes. "You're making that up." The boy looked squarely at me, his dirty face serious. "Am not." (Marsh 2023a: Chapter 15)

Unable to reconcile the boys' account with the official narrative she has internalised, Mila dismisses their testimony as the product of "dangerous ideas and ghoulish imaginations." (Marsh 2023a: Chapter 15). Nevertheless, she rewards them with Bumble Bear chocolates in exchange for the information, setting in motion a confrontation with the reality they describe.

When Mila reaches the Collector's, the rumours are confirmed in a deeply traumatic scene. She witnesses workers carrying the bodies of several dead children concealed beneath a tarpaulin, exposing the catastrophic human cost of the Holodomor. The encounter shatters her faith in Soviet propaganda as she imagines countless other victims hidden throughout the city. The scene culminates in a striking juxtaposition between this horrific reality and a loudspeaker broadcasting claims that children enjoy happy lives in the socialist paradise. By exposing the gulf between lived experience and official discourse, the novel reveals how the Soviet regime not only engineered mass starvation but also erased and concealed its victims.

At the same time, it invites young readers to participate in an act of postmemory by confronting a historical trauma long excluded from public memory.

Rather than presenting the Holodomor as a detached historical fact, *The Lost Year* mediates the event through Mila's gradual loss of faith in Soviet ideology. Her emotional response mirrors that of the implied child reader, who is invited to move from disbelief to recognition alongside the protagonist. In this way, the novel exemplifies Kidd's notion of children's literature as "trauma work," historical violence is not simply narrated but affectively experienced, transforming suppressed history into an ethical encounter. Simultaneously, the novel fulfils the pedagogical function identified by Tribunella by using trauma to cultivate historical consciousness and moral engagement.

Reconstructing Memory: Intergenerational Transmission and Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides a vital framework for understanding how Katherine Marsh's *The Lost Year* reconstructs the Holodomor as a trauma inherited across generations. Postmemory describes the relationship that subsequent generations bear to personal, collective, and cultural trauma that preceded their lives, transmitted not through direct recollection but through mediated fragments: stories, images, objects, and profound silences (Hirsch 2012). In the context of Soviet atrocities, where the state systematically falsified demographic records and enforced a strict epistemic erasure of the famine, memory cannot be passed down as a fixed historical record. Instead, it must be actively reclaimed. As Astrid Erll argues, cultural memories are not static; "books are nothing but dead material" without readers who actively engage in their meaning-making processes (Erll 2008: 5). Children's and young adult literature functions as a critical site for this memory work, offering younger audiences a narrative bridge to historical traumas they cannot inherit through direct experience.

The Lost Year dramatises this postmemorial transmission through the domestic encounter between the young protagonist, Matthew, and his grandmother's long-hidden belongings. While sorting through old boxes, Matthew discovers a photograph that appears insignificant to him at first: a faded image of two young girls labelled "Nadiya and Helen." However, the object immediately triggers an emotional response in his grandmother, revealing that it carries a meaning inaccessible to the younger generation. When Matthew asks about the photograph, his grandmother does not provide an explanation but instead reacts with distress, insisting that he "put it away" and leave (Marsh 2023a: Chapter 3). Her response demonstrates how traumatic memories may persist through silence rather than explicit narration. The past has not disappeared; rather, it remains embedded

within objects and emotional reactions that communicate its significance without fully revealing its content.

This moment illustrates Hirsch's concept of postmemory, in which later generations inherit not direct memories but the emotional traces and fragments of experiences that precede them. For Matthew, the photograph functions as a material link to a history he does not yet understand. The object becomes a site of memory transmission precisely because it resists interpretation: he recognizes that it matters, but he lacks the historical knowledge necessary to understand why. His grandmother's refusal to explain the photograph therefore creates the conditions for his later search for the suppressed history of her childhood in Ukraine.

The scene also demonstrates the affective dimension of postmemory. Matthew does not simply receive information about the past; he encounters its emotional consequences through his grandmother's grief. Her tears become a form of embodied testimony, communicating trauma before it can be articulated verbally. As Anastasia Ulanowicz argues, children's literature often provides a space where "the unruly ghosts of the historical past might be channeled" (Ulanowicz 2017: 3). In *The Lost Year*, these "ghosts" emerge through fragments – a photograph, a name, and an emotional reaction—that invite both Matthew and the reader to reconstruct a history shaped by systematic silencing and loss.

Rather than functioning merely as parallel storylines, the novel's interconnected timelines create a narrative of historical recovery. As readers move between Matthew's present-day investigation and the experiences of Mila and Helen during the Holodomor, acts of reading, remembering, and interpreting become structurally embedded within the narrative itself. The three young protagonists occupy different positions in relation to historical trauma: while Mila and Helen experience famine, repression, and denial directly, Matthew encounters these events decades later through photographs, letters, testimonies, and family silence. His gradual reconstruction of GG's past mirrors the process through which later generations access traumatic histories – not through personal recollection but through mediated traces and acts of imagination. The novel's alternating temporal perspectives therefore transform remembrance into an active interpretative process, requiring both Matthew and the reader to piece together connections between past and present.

At the same time, Marsh extends the novel beyond personal memory by exploring the role of truth-telling and historical denial. Through Helen's attempts to expose the famine despite widespread misinformation and Mila's confrontation with Soviet repression, the novel highlights how young people navigate environments shaped by ideological distortion. Their experiences reveal the political dimensions of memory, demonstrating that remembering the Holodomor is not only an act of recovering the past but also of challenging narratives that sought to erase it.

This intergenerational transmission is particularly evident through the character of Matthew's grandmother, whose relationship with her Ukrainian past is shaped by silence and avoidance. Her reluctance to discuss her childhood experiences

reflects a broader pattern in post-traumatic memory, where painful histories may remain unspoken rather than forgotten. Allowing suppressed experiences to re-enter cultural memory through later generations. In *The Lost Year*, the absence of direct testimony does not erase the past; instead, silence itself becomes a form of transmission. Matthew inherits not a complete narrative of the Holodomor, but a series of absences that motivate his search for understanding.

The novel's engagement with the Holodomor also reflects broader changes in cultural memory surrounding Soviet repression. For decades, the famine remained marginalised or denied within Soviet public discourse, while survivors often struggled to articulate their experiences. As Kamińska-Maciąg observes, traumatic histories frequently become narratable only after sufficient generational distance has developed, allowing previously silenced narratives to enter public consciousness (Kamińska-Maciąg 2023: 72). Contemporary historical fiction participates in this process by transforming suppressed histories into accessible narratives for younger audiences. However, rather than simply recovering a forgotten past, *The Lost Year* demonstrates that remembrance is an ongoing reconstruction shaped by narrative perspective, emotional engagement, and the needs of subsequent generations.

This process corresponds with Świetlicki's understanding of historical fiction as a medium that transmits "seeds of memory" to readers who have no direct connection to the events represented (Świetlicki 2023a: 1). As authors assume readers will encounter the past through mediation rather than lived memory, the process becomes anticipatory in nature (Świetlicki 2023a: 3). Consequently, reading also becomes an active process of engagement in which memory is not simply received but imaginatively reconstructed. Through Matthew's gradual discovery of his family's history, the novel anticipates a reader who must also encounter the Holodomor through mediation. The act of reading therefore becomes an act of participation in memory work: readers do not merely receive historical knowledge but imaginatively reconstruct a past that was deliberately obscured.

By combining historical reconstruction with the perspective of young protagonists, *The Lost Year* positions children's literature as a significant site of intergenerational remembrance. The novel does not present the Holodomor as a distant historical tragedy but as a continuing presence that shapes identities, family relationships, and collective memory. Through the dynamics of postmemory, Marsh demonstrates how suppressed histories can be transmitted across generations and transformed into shared cultural knowledge.

Structuring Memory: Focalisation, Testimony, and Digital Postmemory

Katherine Marsh's use of three interconnected focalisers is central to the novel's mnemonic and pedagogical project. Rather than presenting the Holodomor through a single perspective, *The Lost Year* juxtaposes the experiences of historical witnesses

with the investigation of a contemporary child, allowing readers to encounter the past through multiple temporal and emotional positions. This shifting focalisation transforms historical knowledge into a process of discovery rather than transmission, encouraging readers to move between direct experience, diasporic witnessing, and retrospective reconstruction. As Świetlicki argues, historical fiction enables young readers to “live” history through narrative, fostering both ethical engagement and critical reflection (Świetlicki 2023a: 7). In Marsh’s novel, the structure itself becomes a vehicle of memory work, inviting readers not simply to learn about the Holodomor but to participate in reconstructing its suppressed history.

Marsh’s decision to focalise parts of the narrative through a privileged child such as Mila underscores the capacity of totalitarian systems to reshape perception and reduce individuals to ideological labels. Initially, Mila internalises Soviet propaganda, accepting official narratives about “kulaks” and class enemies without question. However, her encounter with her cousin Nadiya destabilises this worldview, exposing the gap between state discourse and lived reality. Through Nadiya’s testimony, revealing that her father was arrested for resisting collectivisation and later died in Siberia, the novel introduces both Mila and the reader to the mechanisms of repression underpinning the Soviet regime. Mila’s reluctance to accept this truth reflects the depth of ideological conditioning. Nadiya’s insistence that “everyone in the countryside is dying – we’re being starved to death! It’s not kulaks who are starving us! It’s the Soviet government, the Communists” (Marsh 2023a: 144) reframes the famine to Mila as a product of state violence. This tension between belief and revelation illustrates how propaganda operates not only by concealing facts but by structuring emotional and moral understanding.

Whereas Mila experiences propaganda from within the Soviet system, Helen represents the struggle to make suppressed suffering visible beyond Ukraine. Living in Brooklyn, she attempts to challenge Western indifference and journalistic denial by collecting evidence of the famine and encouraging survivors to testify. Yet her narrative also reveals the ethical difficulties of witnessing, as traumatic experiences may resist articulation even when survivors recognise the importance of remembrance. Helen acknowledges this tension when she admits, “I tried to get her to talk about the famine. I explained everything, all about the New York Times. But it’s too painful for her” (Marsh 2023a: 311). The novel therefore presents testimony not as a straightforward recovery of lost information but as a negotiation between the necessity of remembering and the emotional consequences of revisiting trauma. At the same time, Helen recognises that preserving historical truth does not always require immediate public testimony. When her friend Ruth encourages her to document the famine stories, she argues that writing itself can become an act of resistance against historical distortion: “Even if you don’t send those stories to the Times, by writing them down, you’re saving the real history. You wouldn’t want Walter Duranty to be the one everyone believes in a hundred years, that no one was starving, and everything was fine” (Marsh 2023a: 70). Memory preservation

therefore becomes not only a personal act of remembrance but also a challenge to narratives that seek to erase or deny suffering.

Mila's inability to articulate her experiences reveals the affective burden of traumatic memory and helps explain the silence that later surrounds Nadiya's past. Matthew later reflects on his great-grandmother's deliberate self-reinvention in the United States – her assimilation into American life, distancing from her Ukrainian identity, and refusal to share her past even with close family members. At the same time, the narrative reveals that Helen's commitment to truth-telling persists. Archival traces, including a newspaper clipping documenting her contribution to oral history projects, attest to her sustained efforts to record survivor testimonies and counter historical erasure. This commitment culminates in her final appeal to Mila: "I know you never wanted to revisit what happened to you and your family. But I still encourage you to consider sharing your story. History is simply that – stories – and it matters enormously who gets to tell them" (Marsh 2023a: 318–319).

This tension between silence and testimony encapsulates the novel's broader concern with narrative authority and memory transmission. The novel therefore presents testimony not as a simple recovery of lost information but as a negotiation between the need to remember and the emotional costs of remembering. In post-Soviet contexts shaped by selective and ideologically mediated memory, such delayed acts of storytelling enable the recovery of previously silenced experiences and open space for alternative historical perspectives. Helen's narrative thus positions diasporic witnessing as a crucial mechanism in the reconstruction and circulation of cultural memory.

While Helen represents an earlier generation's attempt to preserve memory through journalism and oral testimony, Matthew inherits this responsibility within a contemporary media environment shaped by digital technologies. The novel's opening epigraph from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* provides an important metaphor for his relationship with inherited memory: "You may not be at a point where you have fully recovered all your power or all your memories ... But courage need not be remembered ... For it is never forgotten." (Marsh 2023a)

Rather than treating memory as something complete that can simply be retrieved, the quotation frames remembrance as a process of recovery. This logic structures Matthew's investigation into GG's past: he begins not with a complete family history but with fragments whose meaning must gradually be assembled. Photographs, documents, and stories function as traces of a suppressed past, requiring interpretation before they can become part of collective understanding.

Marsh's choice to frame Matthew's inquiry through *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) functions as a powerful metaphor for contemporary processes of historical reclamation. Representing a paradigm shift in open-world game design, *Breath of the Wild* deviates from the strictly linear progressions typical of its franchise predecessors; its narrative centers on a protagonist who awakens

from a century-long slumber into a post-apocalyptic, ruined kingdom. The gameplay loop prioritizes absolute player autonomy, environmental survival, and non-linear exploration, compelling players to autonomously reconstruct fragmented historical memories to neutralise an existential threat. Because the ludic progression revolves entirely around unearthing hidden knowledge, parsing structural absences, and restoring a fractured world via scattered artifacts, it offers a structural mirror to Matthew's archival investigation. Matthew approaches his family's silenced history in remarkably similar ways: his inquiry unfolds not as a chronological reception of facts, but as an active excavation where photographs, forged documents, and suppressed testimonies function as material artifacts that gradually reveal the truth about GG's childhood. By mapping the logic of open-world gameplay onto the narrative structure of historical fiction, Marsh successfully reframes remembrance as an adversarial, investigative process. Rather than passively consuming a completed account of the past, both Matthew and the reader must actively assemble a national history that a totalitarian state deliberately sought to obscure.

Matthew extends Helen's commitment to preserving suppressed histories into the digital age. As he gradually uncovers his great-grandmother's past, he assumes responsibility not only for remembering her story but also for developing new forms through which it can circulate among future audiences. Rather than producing a conventional family history, Matthew creates "The Legend of GG," a multimodal project that combines letters, photographs, journals, music, and personal reflection. Memory is therefore presented not as a fixed archive but as a dynamic process of assembly, requiring interpretation, selection, and creative reconstruction across different media.

The novel further situates this process within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Matthew initially turns to video games as a way of coping with lockdown, isolation, and uncertainty; however, these same digital practices are gradually transformed into methods of historical inquiry and remembrance. The medium that initially provides distraction and connection during a period of physical isolation becomes a framework through which Matthew reconstructs his family's past and engages with inherited trauma. Marsh does not suggest an equivalence between the pandemic and the Holodomor; instead, the contemporary crisis provides young readers with an affective point of entry into a much more distant and catastrophic history. By linking COVID-19, the Great Depression, and the Holodomor through a multi-temporal narrative, the novel demonstrates how experiences of crisis, uncertainty, and misinformation can prompt ethical engagement with histories that might otherwise appear remote.

This connection between historical and contemporary information crises is reinforced through Matthew's conversations with his father about propaganda and disinformation. Matthew reflects on how millions of people accepted Soviet narratives despite overwhelming evidence of suffering, while his father explains that such narratives gain power by constructing shared enemies and creating

a sense of belonging. The novel thus links Mila's susceptibility to Soviet ideology with contemporary forms of misinformation, suggesting that propaganda operates not only through the suppression of facts but through the creation of emotionally compelling alternative realities.

Matthew ultimately emerges as what the novel calls a "Keeper of the Story." Unlike earlier generations, who preserved memory primarily through oral testimony, personal archives, or acts of private remembrance, he assumes responsibility for reshaping the past through digital and multimodal forms that resonate with contemporary youth culture. His decision to share GG's story with historical archives transforms inherited family memory into a broader form of collective cultural remembrance. In this way, *The Lost Year* extends the concept of postmemory by demonstrating that inherited histories are not simply received but actively reconstructed through the media practices of subsequent generations. Matthew's project suggests that contemporary acts of remembrance increasingly rely on participatory forms of storytelling that allow young people to engage with, reinterpret, and circulate histories they did not directly experience.

Authorising Memory: Postmemory and the Ethics of Testimony

The "Author's Note" in *The Lost Year* plays a crucial role in situating the novel within a framework of postmemory and next-generation memory, reinforcing its status as both a literary and pedagogical intervention. Generationally deferred narratives offer a distinctive perspective on the past through inherited memory, often grounded in family histories that authors explicitly foreground. Such framing aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which describes the relationship of subsequent generations to traumatic events they did not experience directly but inherit through stories, images, and affective transmission. In this sense, fiction becomes a medium through which subjective reconstructions of the past challenge official historical accounts and recover suppressed experiences. As Kamińska-Maciąg observes, post-Soviet cultural memory has long been shaped by the suppression of narratives related to Soviet terror, yet contemporary literature increasingly participates in the resurgence of these repressed histories. This process, as Świetlicki suggests, enables the transmission of "seeds of memory" through imaginative engagement with the past (Świetlicki 2023a: 4–5).

Marsh's "Author's Note" explicitly reinforces this dynamic by grounding the novel in both archival research and familial memory. She emphasises that writing from the perspective of a child such as Mila was a deliberate choice, intended to expose how totalitarian systems "reduce people to labels, distort the truth, and destroy basic humanity" (Marsh 2023a: 343). This narrative strategy not only enhances reader identification but also aligns with the mechanisms of postmemory, where affective proximity enables engagement with otherwise distant historical trauma. At the same

time, Marsh underscores the role of oral histories as foundational sources, noting that her reconstruction of famine experiences was shaped by testimonies passed down across generations. These accounts, often marked by silence and emotional difficulty, exemplify the challenges of transmitting traumatic memory, particularly in contexts where such histories were both personally painful and politically dangerous.

Indeed, Marsh highlights that for decades the Holodomor remained not only traumatic but also actively suppressed within the Soviet Union, where public discussion was forbidden, and memory survived primarily through clandestine, intergenerational transmission. Oral storytelling thus emerges as a crucial medium of preservation, sustaining historical knowledge in the absence of official recognition. By incorporating these dynamics into both the narrative and its paratextual framing, the novel foregrounds the fragility and persistence of memory under conditions of repression.

At the same time, the “Author’s Note” strengthens the text’s credibility – an essential component in fostering postmemory – by explicitly linking fiction to documented history. Marsh references archival research, survivor testimonies, and historical commissions, thereby positioning the novel within a broader evidentiary framework. This blending of fiction and historical documentation enhances the ethical dimension of the narrative, signalling to readers that while the characters are fictional, the histories they represent are grounded in lived experience. Such framing is particularly significant in children’s literature, where, as Peter Hunt argues, texts are inherently educational and influential (Świetlicki 2023a: 7). The interplay between author, text, and reader thus becomes central to the formation of next-generation memory, as young readers engage with narratives that they may internalise and reinterpret through their own perspectives.

Ultimately, Marsh’s “Author’s Note” not only contextualises the novel historically but also reinforces its function as a vehicle of memory transmission. By foregrounding the interplay between personal history, archival research, and imaginative reconstruction, it exemplifies how children’s literature can participate in the recovery of silenced pasts while encouraging readers to critically reflect on the processes through which history is remembered, narrated, and contested.

Conclusion

Contemporary children’s literature can function as a complex site of memory work, where historical fiction, postmemory, and pedagogy intersect. *The Lost Year*, weaving together multiple temporalities, situates the Holodomor within broader patterns of crisis, disinformation, and intergenerational transmission. As I have argued, the novel’s intergenerational structure is central to its mnemonic function. Through its layered narrative and multimodal storytelling strategies, the text

positions young readers not as passive recipients but as active participants in processes of remembrance. In doing so, it contributes to the recovery of suppressed histories while also encouraging critical reflection on how memory is constructed, mediated, and sustained in contemporary culture.

At the same time, the novel's engagement with propaganda, ideological distortion, and archival silencing highlights the ethical stakes of historical representation. From Mila's initial internalisation of Soviet discourse to Helen's efforts to document famine testimonies, and finally to Matthew's attempt to preserve and circulate these narratives, *The Lost Year* foregrounds the tension between erasure and articulation that structures both historical memory and its contemporary recovery. The "Author's Note" further consolidates this framework by grounding the fictional narrative in archival research, oral histories, and survivor testimony, thereby reinforcing the credibility and ethical responsibility of literary postmemory.

Additionally, Matthew's intersectional position as a modern gamer and a pandemic-confined adolescent gives rise to a form of digital postmemory. His investigative methodology relies on the same digital literacy required by contemporary youth to parse the decentralised, hyper-mediated documentation of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. By mapping the investigative mechanics of open-world gameplay onto the real-world crisis of the "first TikTok war," Marsh demonstrates that contemporary historical recovery is fundamentally digital, requiring next-generation readers to actively cross-reference fragments to resist state-sponsored amnesia.

Ultimately, Marsh's novel illustrates how children's and young adult literature can function as an active pedagogical medium through which "seeds of memory" are transmitted, negotiated, and reinterpreted by new generations. By positioning young readers as participants in processes of remembrance rather than passive recipients of historical knowledge, *The Lost Year* contributes to the formation of ethical, reflective, and critically engaged approaches to the past. In this sense, it not only recuperates silenced histories such as the Holodomor but also invites readers to consider how memory itself is constructed, contested, and sustained in a world shaped by ongoing crises of truth, representation, and historical responsibility.

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Summary

This article examines Katherine Marsh's *The Lost Year* (2023a) as a work of children's historical fiction that mediates the memory of the Holodomor through narrative, pedagogy, and postmemory frameworks. Situating the novel within broader debates on trauma, collective memory, and media literacy, the article argues that *The Lost Year* functions as both a literary and educational intervention that recovers suppressed histories while engaging contemporary readers in processes of critical reflection. Through its intergenerational structure, multimodal storytelling, and authorial framing, the novel facilitates the transmission of "next-generation memory" and encourages young readers to actively participate in the reconstruction of the past. The article ultimately highlights the role of children's literature as a site of ethical engagement and mnemonic transmission in an era shaped by information saturation and contested historical narratives.

Keywords

Holodomor, children's literature, historical fiction, memory studies

Streszczenie

Przedstawienia Hołodomoru w literaturze dziecięcej: ludobójstwo, pamięć i metody odbudowy świadomości historycznej w powieści Katherine Marsh Stracony rok

W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano powieść Katherine Marsh *Stracony rok* (2023) jako dzieło dziecięcej literatury historycznej, które pośredniczy w przekazywaniu pamięci o Hołodomorze poprzez narrację, strategie pedagogiczne oraz ramy postpamięci. Umieszczając powieść w szerszym kontekście debat nad traumą, pamięcią zbiorową i edukacją medialną, artykuł dowodzi, że *Stracony rok* pełni funkcję zarówno literackiej, jak i edukacyjnej interwencji, która odzyskuje zapomniane historie, jednocześnie angażując współczesnych czytelników w procesy krytycznej refleksji. Dzięki międzypokoleniowej strukturze, multimodalnym strategiom narracyjnym oraz autorskiemu opracowaniu ram interpretacyjnych powieść umożliwia przekazywanie „pamięci następnego pokolenia” (*next-generation memory*) i zachęca młodych czytelników do aktywnego udziału w rekonstrukcji przeszłości. Artykuł podkreśla także rolę literatury dziecięcej jako przestrzeni etycznego zaangażowania i transmisji pamięci w epoce naznaczonej nadmiarem informacji oraz spornymi narracjami historycznymi.

Słowa kluczowe

Hołodomor, literatura dziecięca, proza historyczna, teorie pamięci