



# Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust

*Gary Weissman*

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## **Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust** Gary Weissman

Fantasies of Witnessing explores how and why those deeply interested in the Holocaust, yet with no direct, familial connection to it, endeavor to experience it vicariously through sites or texts designed to make it "real" for nonwitnesses. Gary Weissman argues that far from overwhelming nonwitnesses with its magnitude of horror, the Holocaust threatens to feel distant and unreal. A prevailing rhetoric of "secondary" memory and trauma, he contends, and efforts to portray the Holocaust as an immediate and personal experience, are responses to an encroaching sense of unreality: "In America, we are haunted not by the traumatic impact of the Holocaust, but by its absence. When we take an interest in the Holocaust, we are not overcoming a fearful aversion to its horror, but endeavoring to actually feel the horror of what otherwise eludes us." Weissman focuses on specific attempts to locate the Holocaust: in the person of Elie Wiesel, the most renowned survivor, and his classic memoir *Night*; in videotaped survivor stories and Lawrence L. Langer's celebrated book *Holocaust Testimonies*; and in the films *Shoah* and *Schindler's List*. These representations, he explains, constitute a movement away from the view popularized by Wiesel, that those who did not live through the Holocaust will never be able to grasp its horror, and toward re-creating the Holocaust as an "experience" nonwitnesses may put themselves through. "It is only by acknowledging the desire that gives shape to such representations, and by exploring their place in the ongoing contest over who really 'knows' the Holocaust and feels its horror, that we can arrive at a more candid assessment of our current and future relationships to the Holocaust," he says.

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