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ESSAY

The Story of 'Night'

By RACHEL DONADIO

This fall, Elie Wiesel's "Night" was removed from the New York Times best-seller list, where it had spent an impressive 80 weeks after Oprah Winfrey picked it for her book club. The Times's news survey department, which compiles the list, decided the Holocaust memoir wasn't a new best seller but a classic like "Animal Farm" or "To Kill a Mockingbird," which sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year largely through course adoptions. Indeed, since it appeared in 1960, "Night" has sold an estimated 10 million copies — three million of them since Winfrey chose the book in January 2006 (and traveled with Wiesel to Auschwitz).

But "Night" had taken a long route to the best-seller list. In the late 1950s, long before the advent of Holocaust memoirs and Holocaust studies, Wiesel's account of his time at Auschwitz and Buchenwald was turned down by more than 15 publishers before the small firm Hill & Wang finally accepted it. How "Night" became an evergreen is more than a publishing phenomenon. It is also a case study in how a book helped created a genre, how a writer became an icon and how the Holocaust was absorbed into the American experience.

Raised in an Orthodox family in Sighet, Transylvania, Wiesel was liberated from Buchenwald at age 16. In unsentimental detail, "Night" recounts daily life in the camps — the never-ending hunger, the sadistic doctors who pulled gold teeth, the Kapos who beat fellow Jews. On his first day in the camps, Wiesel was separated forever from his mother and sister. At Auschwitz, he watched his father slowly succumb to dysentery before the SS beat him to within an inch of his life. Wiesel writes honestly about his guilty relief at his father's death. In the camps, the formerly observant boy underwent a profound crisis of faith; "Night" was one of the first books to raise the question: where was God at Auschwitz?

Working as a journalist in his mid-20s, Wiesel wrote the first version of "Night" in Yiddish as "Und di Velt Hot Geshvign" ("And the World Remained Silent") while on assignment in Brazil. But it wasn't until he returned to Paris and met François Mauriac, a noted Catholic novelist and journalist, that "Night" took the shape we know today. Mauriac urged Wiesel to rewrite the book in French and promised to write a preface. Still, "it was rejected by the major publishers," Wiesel recalled in a recent interview, "although it was brought to them by François Mauriac, the greatest, greatest writer and journalist in France, a Catholic, a Nobel Prize-winner with all the credentials." Les Éditions de Minuit brought it out in 1958, but it sold poorly.

The American response was similarly tepid. Georges Borchardt, Wiesel's longtime literary agent and himself a Holocaust survivor, sent the French manuscript to New York publishers in 1958 and 1959, to little effect. "Nobody really wanted to talk about the Holocaust in those days," Borchardt said. "The Diary of Anne Frank," published in the United States in 1952, had been a huge success, but it did not take readers into the horror of the camps. Although "Night" had sophisticated literary motifs and a quiet elegance, American publishers worried it was more a testimonial than a work of literature. "It is, as you say, a horrifying and extremely moving document, and I wish I could say this was something for Scribner's," an editor there wrote to Borchardt. "However, we have certain misgivings as to the size of the American market for what remains, despite Mauriac's brilliant introduction, a document." Kurt Wolff, the head of Pantheon, also turned "Night" down. Although it had qualities "not brought out in any other book," Pantheon had "always refrained from doing books of this kind," meaning books about the Holocaust, he wrote to Borchardt.

Finally, in 1959, Arthur Wang of Hill & Wang agreed to take on "Night." The first reviews were positive. Gertrude Samuels, writing in the Book Review, called it a "slim volume of terrifying power." Alfred Kazin, writing in The Reporter, said Wiesel's account of his loss of faith had a "particular poignancy." After the Kazin review, the book "got great reviews all over America, but it didn't influence the sales," Wiesel said.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 brought the Holocaust into the mainstream of American consciousness. Other survivors began writing their stories — but with higher visibility came the first glimmerings of criticism. In a roundup of Holocaust literature in Commentary in 1964, the critic A. Alvarez said "Night" was "beyond criticism" as a "human document," but called it "a failure as a work of art." Wiesel, he argued, had failed to "create a coherent artistic world out of one which was the deliberate negation of all values."

By the early '70s, the Holocaust had become a topic of study in universities, spurred in part by the rise of "ethnic studies" more

generally led a surge of interest in Jewish history after Israel's dramatic military victory in the Israeli-Arab wars of 1967 and 1973. Wiesel, who had moved to New York in the mid-'50s, began lecturing regularly at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan and teaching at the City University of New York. (Since 1976 he has taught at Boston University.)

Although his books were all reviewed respectfully, some critics questioned Wiesel's role as a self-appointed witness. "His personal project has been to keep the wounds of Auschwitz open by repeatedly pouring the salt of new literary reconstructions upon them, and thus to prevent the collective Jewish memory — and his own — from quietly letting the wounds heal," Leon Wieseltier, now the literary editor of The New Republic, wrote in Commentary in 1974. Reviewing Wiesel's novel "The Oath," about a pogrom, Wieseltier criticized Wiesel for "turning history into legend." His characters were "archetypes of the varieties of Jewish pain," Wieseltier wrote, so "what remains is ... a kind of elaborate superficiality which does justice neither to the author's intentions nor to his terrible subject matter."

In 1978, President Carter appointed Wiesel to a commission that eventually created the Holocaust Museum. In Wiesel's mind, the "real breakthrough" that brought "Night" into wide view came in 1985, when he spoke out against President Reagan's planned visit to the Bitburg military cemetery in Germany, where SS members were buried. While Reagan was awarding him a Congressional Gold Medal at the White House, Wiesel told him: "That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS." The next day, Wiesel's words were on front pages worldwide. (Reagan still made the trip.)

Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize the following year. The Nobel committee called Wiesel "a messenger to mankind," teaching "peace, atonement and human dignity." Wiesel's "commitment, which originated in the sufferings of the Jewish people, has been widened to embrace all repressed peoples and races." By the late '90s, "Night" was a standard high school and college text, selling around 400,000 copies a year.

Yet some critics have homed in on the very qualities that have helped "Night" find a broad readership. Some have criticized Wiesel for universalizing — and even Christianizing — Jewish suffering. In "The Holocaust in American Life" (1999), the historian Peter Novick cites crucifixion imagery in "Night" as evidence of the "un-Jewish" or Christian tenor to much Holocaust commemoration. Others have suggested Wiesel may have revised the book to appeal to non-Jewish readers. In a 1996 essay, Naomi Seidman, a Jewish studies professor at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union, detected strong notes of vengeance in the Yiddish version. In the final scene, after the camp has been liberated, Wiesel writes of young men going into Weimar "to rape German girls." But there's no mention of rape in the subsequent French or English translations. Wiesel said his thinking had

change between versions. "It would have been a disgrace to reduce such an event to simple vengeance."

To Lawrence L. Langer, an eminent scholar of Holocaust literature and a friend of Wiesel's, what sets "Night" apart is a moral honesty that "helps undermine the sentimental responses to the Holocaust." To Langer, "Night" remains an essential companion — or antidote — to "The Diary of Anne Frank." That book, with its ringing declaration that "I still believe that people are really good at heart," is "easy for teachers to teach," Langer said, but "from the text you don't know what happened when she died of typhus, half-starved at Bergen-Belsen." Wiesel takes a similar view. "Where Anne Frank's book ends," he said, "mine begins."

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