

YAA to Z: Being Heard – Anne Frank, Diaries and Teens, a discussion of Anne Frank with Author Mary Amato

MARCH 28, 2018 BY [KAREN JENSEN, TLT LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Today as a part of our ongoing A to Z look at teen issues, teen fiction and more, author Mary Amato is discussing Anne Frank and diaries with us.

On March 28, 1944 a radio address changed Anne Frank's relationship to her diary. Gerrit Bolkestein, the Dutch Minister for Education, Art, and Science gave the address from London, where the Dutch government was in exile. In it, he asked for the Dutch people to save written evidence of the persecution and oppression that they had endured or were enduring under the German occupation. Diaries would be particularly useful.

When Anne heard about Bolkestein's interest in collecting personal records, she turned to her own diary with a new passion and began seriously revising. The prospect of sharing her words with a larger audience must have given Anne a sense of purpose and power, a feeling that her experience and her expression of that experience was valid and valuable.

The fact that Anne was intentionally revising her diary for possible publication is a remarkable detail about the Frank story that many readers don't know—one that I didn't know until a recent visit to the Anne Frank House.

The gift of a diary to a child or teen is an old-fashioned tradition, a sweet gesture that typically comes with the modest hope that the child will enjoy writing down his or her thoughts. Who knows, the child or teen might even enjoy sharing the entries with his or her own children in the years to come.

In June of 1942, when Anne received the cute red-and-white checked diary for her 13th birthday, she began writing in it with the typical mix of reluctance and desire. Most kids want to write, but don't know what to write about. In her diary, she noted that writing might be a substitute for something she wanted but didn't have at that moment: a close friend. Anne named her diary Kitty, after a character in one of her favorite books, and began to write as if writing to a friend. Ordinary stuff.

In July, life for the Frank family changed radically. Anne's older sister Margot received a call-up notice from the Nazis to return to Germany and work in a labor camp. Otto Frank knew what this meant, and he had a plan. The family went into hiding in a series of walled-off rooms in the rear of the building of the spice-distribution company where he worked. When the Franks took that desperate act, Anne took her diary with her.

"The nicest part is being able to write down all my thoughts and feelings, otherwise I'd absolutely suffocate." –March 16, 1944.

Most of the readers of Anne's diary know this much of Anne's story, and many assume that the published edition (known most commonly in English as *The Diary of a Young Girl*) was Anne's one and only diary. The red-and-white checked book was Anne's first diary. After it was full, Anne wrote in several additional

notebooks, and—a heartbreaking thought—we don't have them all. According to the Anne Frank House, nearly all of 1943 is missing. *The Diary of a Young Girl* is a compilation of her original diary, three notebooks, and the revision on loose sheets of paper that she began after hearing the radio address and that she was working on up until the time of her arrest and deportation to Bergen Belsen in 1944, where she died in March of 1945, just a month before the death camp was liberated by British troops.

When I was first read Anne Frank's diary, I couldn't imagine or understand anything as horrific as the holocaust. I wasn't Jewish and knew only the basics about World War II. I connected with Anne because I was the same age and, by that time, also a serious diarist.

It was my mother who gave me my first diary. Although she had cancer at the time, I'm certain that she thought she would beat her disease, that she had no inkling that she was giving me the tool that would help me most to cope with her death. Because the culture in which I grew up was all about silent stoicism and the suppression of emotions, my diary became the only place to voice the truth of what I was experiencing, the only place for me to cry, to scream, and to ask questions.

At the time, even though most of what I wrote was for myself, I also wrote some things with the goal of sharing my experience. The biggest platform I could hope for was a mimeographed and stapled literary journal that my English teacher, Mr. McCauley, organized. The emotion I remember feeling when I first saw my words in print was a sense of relief. Seeing my words in print made me feel real and valued. *Publication* was the permanent proof of not only my existence, but also the worth of my existence. I think about that and then I think about Anne and how powerless she was and how the thought that her diary might be published must have energized her in the darkest time.

And now I'm also thinking about the Parkland, Florida, students, the survivors of that school shooting, and what happened when they began speaking the truth of their experience. What has struck me is how radically some things have changed. Social media and the internet has enabled the voices of children and teens to be received and delivered at a dizzying speed. A speech written by a teen and given at a small-town meeting can be recorded and uploaded onto YouTube one day; and, within 24 hours, that student can be on CNN.

Unfortunately, what hasn't changed is that there are still people out there who believe that young people should not be taken seriously, that young voices aren't worthy of time or respect, that young voices shouldn't be trusted or even actively silenced. How heartbreaking it was to see and hear the ridiculing of the Parkland students by some adults and the accusations by others that the students must be paid actors or shells for liberal adults in power.

From the time Anne's diary was published until his death, Anne's father Otto Frank—the only member of the immediate family that survived the death camps— had to deal with numerous people who claimed that the diary was a forgery, a ploy for sympathy, a propaganda tool. Today the Anne Frank House has to continue in the fight and has taken successful legal action against deniers.

What hasn't changed is that teens need and want to be heard. Perhaps more than ever, the diary is a tool that can help.

On a personal note, I have to say that when I finally made my pilgrimage to the Anne Frank House, I was worried that the place would have the emotionally-flat atmosphere that some museums can have. And during the initial part of the visit, my fears were confirmed. The building itself is drab and unremarkable looking. Snaking my way through the first few rooms along with so many tourists, holding the audio wand to my ear, and straining to peek at the various photographic and textual displays, I felt nothing. But the second half of the tour is different. When you pass by the specially-constructed false bookshelf and duck through the portal to the secret annex of the building, the rooms where Anne, her family, and four other Jews lived in hiding for two years, the audio portion suspends, and you are forced—wisely—to experience the heart of the museum silently. You walk through the small rooms and see where Anne slept and wrote. You listen to the sound of your footsteps, the creaking of the floorboards, the hushed whispers of the visitors in the next room, and it hits you as it has never hit you before. To be any age and have to be quiet, contained, restrained minute after minute, day after day, month after month within these dark walls would be a nightmare. But to be fourteen?

I have a deeper understanding now, how, at a time when a young girl's voice was quite literally suppressed, her diary gave her both a place to speak and the hope of being heard.

If you work with teens and haven't encouraged diary writing, please consider trying a station with supplies in the library. No need for expensive blank books—pretty or thick books can be intimidating. Some businesses will donate small notebooks and pens, or small, thin diaries can be made on the spot by folding and stapling standard copier paper. I have a pdf of tips for download and display.

[Encourage Diary Writing Display](#)

And if you have a teen in your personal life, consider giving a diary as a gift. I recommend something plain and small with a gentle reminder that writing can be a powerful friend.

Mary Amato, 2018