Second and Third-Generation Trauma Representation

A Comparison of Thane Rosenbaum’s Second Hand Smoke and Nicole Krauss’s Great House

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Introduction

The main focus in this master thesis is the way the second and third generation of American Jews represent and deal with the trauma of the Holocaust. The second generation are the sons and daughters of the actual survivors of the camps, while the third generation are, strictly speaking, the latter’s grandchildren. Broadly speaking one can also count the grandchildren of the ones who were hiding during the war or those who narrowly escaped to a different country. My intention is to compare how these two generations deal with the past of their parents or grandparents; how they approach this traumatic past, which is often considered the universal trauma of the twentieth century, in a very different, and yet also very similar way in their literary work.

To accomplish this, I compare a novel by an author from the second generation, namely Thane Rosenbaum’s Second Hand Smoke (1999), to one of the third generation, Nicole Krauss’s latest novel Great House (2010). It is of course impossible to come to a general conclusion on the basis of merely two novels, but, by a comparative study of these two works, I want to shed some light on the matter of trauma representation. Much has already been written on the second generation but the third generation has not yet been broadly discussed. My aim here is to show that there is a certain continuity between these two generations. There is no clear breach between them; one generation flows into the other and this is also clear in the ways in which they deal with this same traumatic past.
In the first chapter of my thesis I will briefly discuss trauma theory.¹ I will restrict myself here to explaining the terms second and third generation. Who belongs to these generations and how do they deal with the trauma of respectively their parents and grandparents who survived the war and left everything behind in search of a new and better future in the United States of America? Next, I will discuss the characteristic features of their writing and refer to some archetypical novels to illustrate this.

The second chapter then deals with the second generation of American Jews. I will elaborate on Thane Rosenbaum’s background and analyse his novel Second Hand Smoke, linking it to the second-generation trauma discussed above.

In the next chapter I will do the same with Nicole Krauss’s novel Great House, an example of third-generation trauma literature. Why is this novel typical for the third generation? How does it, in its own specific way, deal with the trauma of the previous generations? We have to be very careful to call the third generation traumatised. The trauma of the Holocaust is certainly still present in their lives, being passed on from generation to generation, but on the other hand this generation is very far removed from it. It is thus important to place it in a broader framework and this is exactly what Nicole Krauss also does in Great House.

In the concluding chapter I will provide a comparison between the two novels discussed above. To what extent is the third generation a continuity of the second and in what ways can we call it a breach? Both on the formal and thematic level we can see striking similarities as well as significant differences. Thane Rosenbaum, as a second-generation Jew, and Nicole Krauss, as one of the third generation, have a different family history and regard this history also in their own peculiar

¹ For an elaborate discussion on this subject I refer you to Cathy Caruth’s edited volume Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995).
way. And this is of course reflected in their novels, that deal, broadly speaking, with the same subject, while they are yet very different in their way of approaching that subject.

By comparing these two novels I hope to contribute some relevant information to the ongoing studies on trauma literature. Many research has yet to be done, especially on the third generation, but one general thread can already be found in the literature of both the second and third generation, and that is the craving to investigate the past of their (grand-)parents in order to construct a history and identity of their own. They write to deal with an undetable past.
1. **Trauma Theory**

1.1. **Second Generation**

“[T]here would always be a hole instead of history behind me.” (Epstein, 1981: 126).

The term ‘the second generation’ specifically refers to the children of actual Holocaust survivors. Although the term ‘second generation survivors’ is also often used – Elie Wiesel says that “[a]ll Jews are survivors”¹ – we should be careful about referring to this second generation as ‘survivors’. I prefer to use ‘survivors’ only in the strictest sense of the word: those who survived the war (by immigrating, hiding or leaving the camps alive at the end of the war). Their children have not lived through the Holocaust as such, only through its aftermath via their parents; therefore they are not traumatised as such but they suffer from what is called a transmitted trauma.³ The parents of these children have experienced unnameable atrocities and have arguably passed these experiences on to the next generation. As Melvin Jules Bukiet states in his introduction to the book *Nothing Makes You Free*: “for the Second Generation there is no Before. In the beginning was Auschwitz. (...) The Second Generation’s very existence is dependent on the whirlwind their parents barely escaped” (2002: 13). The second generation has no grandparents, has no close family apart from their parents – with whom they often have a very difficult and strange relationship – and any siblings. Their past, their family history has been erased by the war. This is precisely what Helen Epstein refers to when she writes:

> [o]ur family tree had been burnt to a stump. Whole branches, great networks of leaves had disappeared into the sky and ground. (...) All that was left were the fading photographs that my father kept in a yellow envelope underneath his desk. (*Children of the Holocaust*, 1981: 3)

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³ Class by professor Philippe Codde on “Contemporary American Literature”, (2010-2011) at the University of Ghent.
The Holocaust is a part of their lives that they cannot escape, whether it is talked about in the family or it is kept dark. Their parents, the actual survivors who have narrowly escaped death, have witnessed or experienced such atrocities that some of it is bound to rub off on the children. They often pretend to live a normal life but the trauma lurks right under the surface. But how exactly is this Holocaust trauma transmitted to the second generation?4

First of all there are parents who talk about their trauma with their children. It is not in all families a taboo. They tell their children stories about their background, about how their lives were before the war and what they went through during the war. It is a certain form of testimony and their children are the ideal audience since they stand the closest to them. But being a witness to such a testimony is a very dangerous business. It gives rise to what Dominick LaCapra calls ‘empathic unsettlement’. The listener is affected by what he or she hears and, as such, becomes a ‘secondary witness’ (a witness to the act of bearing witness). When this act of testifying and witnessing involves people who have a very close relationship – like parents and their children – there is a greater danger that this unsettlement will lead to ‘vicarious identification’ (LaCapra, 2004: 125). This term refers to the fact that the witness to the testimony fully identifies with the one who is testifying, the trauma victim. The secondary witness has the illusion that what happened to the victim also happened to him/herself. A classic example of this is the case of Binjamin Wilkomirski who wrote a book about his childhood experiences in the concentration camps, called Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood (1995). But eventually it was discovered by a journalist, Daniel Ganzfried, that he had never actually been inside a concentration camp and that his memoirs were therefore fake. Wilkomirski, however, still claims they are truthful and he insists that he is a real survivor of the Holocaust. This is an extreme case of vicarious experience where the person suffers from a trauma that he or she never really experienced. This is also what the title of Thane Rosenbaum’s novel

4 The following paragraphs that discuss the mechanisms of transmission are mainly based on the class “Contemporary American Literature” (2010-2011) by professor Codde at the University of Ghent.
**Second Hand Smoke** refers to: the second generation (or ‘hinge generation’ as Eva Hoffman calls them) is contaminated by the smoke of the chimneys of the concentration camps their parents survived; they are like passive smokers who inhale the trauma of their parents and suffer the same consequences. Bukiet (2002: 17) quotes Alain Finkielkraut who says “I inherited a suffering to which I had not been subjected, for without having to endure oppression, the identity of the victim was mine.”

In other families the war is not a subject that is openly discussed. In Helen Epstein’s book *Children of the Holocaust* (1981) there are several examples of families where one or both of the parents do not want to talk about their past and certainly not with their children. Eli for example, a child of two Holocaust survivors, could not make any sense of it when his cousin once told him about Hitler. “[I] had never heard of Hitler before. And what reason would he have had for killing all [our] relatives?” (Epstein, 1981: 16). In cases like these, the trauma of the parents is transferred in a different way into the second generation: merely by living in what is called a dysfunctional family. People who have survived the “worst event in history” (Bukiet, 2002: 18) try to build up a normal family life in a new environment but they do not always succeed in this. Their past haunts them and it makes it difficult for them to fulfil the usual roles expected from parents. They can suffer repeatedly from anxiety attacks which turns the family roles upside down and puts the children in a caring role instead of the parents. In one of the testimonies in *Children of the Holocaust* a woman named Sara talks about her parents who survived the war and explains that “[t]he order of normal life was so confused for them during the war that abnormalities became normalities. (...) Their needs became the center of their universe. My mother was like that. (...) We were there to fill her needs, not the other way around” (Epstein, 1981: 101). On the other hand, parents can also be overprotective. They regard the world as a hostile place and want to protect their children from any possible danger. This can result into phobic behaviour (Epstein, 1981: 181-183). By living in such dysfunctional families children can become re-traumatised.
Very often parents also have high expectations for their children. They want them to live the life they themselves were denied because of the war. This places a heavy burden on the children’s shoulders: they have to live up to the expectations of their parents, which are often very different from their own dreams and wishes. Parents see their children as a victory over the Holocaust. They survived, they won, and their children are the living proof of it. Epstein states that “[i]t was evidence of the power of life over the power of destruction. It was proof that they had not died themselves” (1981: 4). They also impose on their children the role of re-establishing and continuing the family that has been broken because of the war (Wardi, 1992: 30). Parents expect their children to become healthy and strong individuals, to have a good education because one can lose everything except what is inside one’s head (Epstein, 1981: 17). The reason for this is that their children remind them of their own carefree past, of what they lost because of the war and, perhaps even more important, of who they lost during the war. The children then become ‘memorial candles’ as Dina Wardi calls them. They are often named after close relatives or famous Jews who did not survive the war and in this way they are a memorial for these people. This can cause some serious identity problems for the children in question. In *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust*, Wardi relates the story of a man called Arye who says: “When they [my parents] piled on me all the names of the dead relatives. I don’t believe they were thinking of me (...). Now I have no choice but to carry the dead on my back” (1992: 28). Children have to accept an identity that is not their own but of someone who has passed away. It gives the parents the opportunity to mourn those who are lost, but in doing so they often forget to pay attention to the living.

Many children of survivors feel a sense of triviality compared to their parents. They regard their parents as heroes for surviving the horror of the camps and have the feeling that they themselves can never become as strong as their parents. They often have the impression that they have no right to feel angry or sad because, whatever they experience, it is nothing compared to what their parents went through.
Nothing that upset me (...) was important compared to the upsets my parents had known. “Worse things have happened, you know,” they said, and I saw the war rise like a great tidal wave in the air, dwarfing my trouble, making it trivial. (Epstein, 1981: 146-147)

Another characteristic is the survivor’s distorted relationship with God and religion. Many families are deeply disappointed in their God. They cannot believe why He let such horrible things happen to the Jewish people and they feel utterly abandoned by Him. There is a great deal of incomprehension: “I didn’t understand all this business of the Chosen People. It seemed we had been chosen for suffering and not for anything nice.” (Epstein, 1981: 31) Parents are therefore often reluctant to send their children to Sunday school and to teach them about Jewish religion and tradition. They get irritated when they hear rabbis explain the Holocaust as ‘the will of God’ (Epstein, 1981: 129) and the suffering of the Jews as a necessary sacrifice to gain their own promised land. They feel that these American rabbis do not know what they are preaching about; in the camps there was nothing fabulous about the sacrifice. So religion is something many people just do not care about anymore. Of course there are also other voices who believe that it was an act of God that they came out alive and consequently become deeply religious.

One last important aspect that I want to mention is the idea of ‘transferred loss’. Eva Hoffman (2004: 73) uses this term to refer to a feeling typical of the second generation. There is, as I have already mentioned above, an absence in their lives. They have no family history to look back to, no grandparents or aunts or uncles. They have to “live with a multitude of lost “objects” that they never had a chance to know” (Hoffman, 2004: 73). And it is this feeling of absence that is transferred into a feeling of loss, as if they have actually lost those people instead of never having known them. Efraim Sicher talks about “[t]he loss of unknown family members [that] feels like a limb [that] has been amputated: (...) it is a phantom pain” (1998: 30).
1.2. Literary Work

So far I have recited the main socio-psychological problems that are typical of the second generation. In what follows I will discuss how these characteristics are reflected in the work of second-generation authors. I want to emphasise again that these are general characteristics and that they can differ from person to person, from author to author. Everything obviously still depends on one’s specific family background and individual personality.

It is as if the second generation was (and perhaps still is) compelled to write about the trauma of the Holocaust. They were confronted with this trauma on a daily basis, but on the other hand they can take just enough distance from it because they have not actually been there. Everything they know about it is second-hand knowledge; hence they are placed in an ideal position to write about the ‘universal trauma’ and, more precisely, about their own specific traumas. It is not an easy story to tell but it is essential that it gets told, not only because it is a story that should never be forgotten but also because it is part of the ‘therapy’ of the second generation that enables them to work through their own trauma.

Telling the story is a form of working through trauma, which ideally ends with the separation of the second generation of the dead and their connection to a real past, to a family and people in which they are a living link, transmitting a heritage to future generations. It is storytelling above all that shapes the collective and personal memory in that transmission. (Sicher, 1998: 13)

There are some difficulties involved in this process, however: trauma is something that overwhelsms the individual and resists rationality and language, so “how then can it be narratived in fiction?” (Whitehead, 2004: 3) Marianne Hirsch uses the term ‘postmemory’\(^5\) to refer to the ways in which the second generation deals with the trauma of their parents. She emphasises the generational distance and personal connection to the trauma. As I have mentioned before their knowledge is second-hand

and consequently highly mediated and fragmented; therefore imagination is used to fill up the holes in the past. This imagination is a very important characteristic of second-generation trauma literature and it contributes to the distancing that is so familiar in their works. Norma Rosen calls this the “witnessing through the imagination” and says that the Holocaust is “as nearly impossible to write about as to avoid writing about” (Sicher, 1998: 23). Writing fiction about the Holocaust is a tricky business according to some theoreticians. Famous is of course Theodor Adorno’s statement that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz but there are also many other voices who share this opinion. The Holocaust is an event beyond our ability to know and therefore it is impossible to represent it. Writing about it is “to violate it: to distort or trivialize or even to deny it” (Budick, 1998: 330). But the second generation often feels even more obliged than their parents to render the story of the Holocaust. Melvin Jules Bukiet compares the writings of first- and second-generation trauma victims and he concludes that there are striking differences in their style. The first generation, with prominent authors like Eli Wiesel and Primo Levi, writes in a very traditional way about their memories of their lives in the camps or during the war. Literature by the second generation on the other hand is more modernist and, as I have already mentioned, imaginative. They do not have a horrible past to remember like their parents, so it only remains for them to imagine it. The second generation writes in a “voice of lunacy and apocalyptic frenzy”; this “fury at what they have been denied – history, deity, grandparents – comes out on the page” (Bukiet, 2002: 21).

The motif of memory is omnipresent in the works of the second generation. They have no real memory of the traumatic past of their parents. All they know is what their parents or other family members have told them (if at all) and what they have heard and seen in class or in the media. What is more, memory is fallible. When it comes to remembering facts one cannot always trust one’s own memory, let alone someone else’s. This is a subject that has been widely discussed among scholars. Many of them distrust trauma testimonies because they are based on memory and they are therefore not always in accordance with the historical truth. But memory can be very significant and
accurate regarding emotions. To illustrate this, Dori Laub tells the story of a woman who witnessed the Auschwitz uprising. She relates with a firm conviction that she saw four chimneys explode, whereas in reality only one chimney went up in flames. Historians therefore considered her account false. Laub on the other hand insisted that “[t]he woman was testifying, (...) not to the number of chimneys blown, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence” (Laub, 1992: 59-60). This emotive aspect is all the more important in trauma literature, which deals not only with the historical facts but primarily with the effects of it on the people. Writing can then be considered a “memory project”; it seeks the “recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten” (Whitehead, 2004: 82). Moreover James Young states that “memory is never seamless, but always a montage of collected fragments, recomposed by each person and generation”.6

Intimately linked to the motif of memory, a frequently recurring image in Holocaust fiction is that of ghosts. In many of the works by second generation novelists, ghosts and motifs of haunting are rather common. This is not very surprising since a traumatic experience, as I have already mentioned, haunts not only the people who went through it but also the later generations. Anne Whitehead also regularly refers to this aspect in her book *Trauma Fiction*, providing us with many examples of novels where this theme is explored. She states that “[t]he trauma is communicated without ever having been spoken, and resides within the next generation as a silent presence or ‘phantom’. (...) [W]hat returns to haunt is the trauma of another.” (2004: 14). The ghosts keep alive the memory of a history that the second generation has not lived through actively. I will again refer to this motif of haunting in my discussion of *Second Hand Smoke*.

Previous, I have already explained what is meant by the term ‘memorial candles’ but I would also like to discuss this briefly in the light of second generation writing. Since many of these second-

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generation children are considered memorial candles themselves, it is only logical that they incorporate this theme in their novels as well. Moreover, they write precisely to search for their own identity and stop themselves from being a memorial candle for dead relatives they have never known. The characters in their novels are very often named after a family member too, and they therefore go through the same process of identity construction as the authors. In that way some novels can even be called autobiographical. However, the opposite can also occur: survivors can refuse to name their children after lost relatives precisely because they do not want to place such a heavy burden upon their children’s shoulders. All this thematises the general question of how trauma is being passed on to later generations.

It quickly becomes clear that a conventional, straightforward narrative is not the ideal way to represent trauma in literature. Anne Whitehead confirms this by referring to Cathy Caruth’s statement that trauma fiction requires a literary form that diverges from conventional narrative forms (2004: 6). Already present in the works of the second generation, but even more developed in the third, this unconventionality translates into the concept of mediation. There is never a direct look at past events because the story is not based on personal experience but on second-hand knowledge, through the witnessing of testimonies or documents. This mediation creates a certain emotional distance and makes it not only less difficult to write but also to read about it. The unbridled imagination that is so conspicuously present in the majority of the works of second-generation authors can also be linked to this. The narratives of second-generation authors are highly fragmented. Chronology collapses and the stories are not always logically structured or do not follow a rational linear course. Children of survivors gather the fragments of information they have on their parent’s past and try to put them together. They want to form a complete image but end up with a mosaic where certain pieces are irrevocably missing. Their novels, which are the result of this activity, display the difficulties they themselves had trying to reconstruct the past. The reader has as
much difficulty to reconstruct the story as does the author in piecing together the past. Such fragmentation is explored even more elaborately by the next generation.

Another important characteristic of the writing style of the second generation is the extensive use of repetition. This is related to Freud’s notion of repetition compulsion (Whitehead, 2004). The trauma victim constantly returns to the moment of impact of the trauma and relives it, which leads to compulsive repetitive behaviour. The work of the second generation reflects this compulsion to repeat, not only on the thematic but also on a stylistic and structural level, through the repetition of symbols. On a thematic level the story frequently returns to the war-time experiences of the first generation, so the narrative itself is already some form of repetition (Whitehead, 2004: 122). The second generation tries to imagine what it would have been like to live under such circumstances and thus tries to understand the trauma of their parents. Moreover there is a constant recurrence of names, people, objects etc., which creates the effect of a vicious circle. History continually repeats itself and there is no escaping from it.

1.3. Excursion: Maus

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a quick look at the most canonical work of the second generation, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. It is certainly not my aim to provide a complete analysis and discussion of this work but I think it is an interesting and necessary excursion that will enable us to put the previous theoretical characteristics into a broader perspective. The graphic novel – or ‘commix’ as Spiegelman himself names it – is a biographical story about Spiegelman’s own father, Vladek, who survived the camps during the Second World War. It is largely based on Vladek’s own testimonies about his experiences. The novel tries to render not only Vladek’s trauma but also Art’s own trauma, due to his mother’s suicide – she also survived the camps but killed herself many years later. Almost all of the themes and characteristics I discussed above are present in this novel. To begin with the motif of memory: the whole novel is based on Vladek’s memory. He relates to his
son whatever he can remember from his life in Poland before and during the war and on the basis of these ‘interviews’ Spiegelman draws his graphic novel. Vladek is haunted by the ghosts from the past: he still lives in a sort of Holocaust universe and cannot let go of the habits and ideas he gained in the camps. The past clearly has a strong impact on the present, not only on Vladek’s present but also on Art’s, and this is represented both on a thematic level (the story that is told, the plot) as in the drawings (the way in which the story is rendered, the visual). Art is regarded by his father as a ‘memorial candle’ for Richieu, the son he lost during the war. He incorporates this in his novel by inserting a real photograph of his brother, as if he himself wants to emphasise the importance of remembering Richieu. What emerges very strongly in Maus is the difficult relationship between Art and his father. Art has grown up in what I have called a ‘dysfunctional family’ and this situation has contributed to his own trauma. His father lived in the past and his mother was overprotective and eventually killed herself. Maus is therefore not only a tale about Vladek’s past but also a way of Art to get a grip on his own trauma. The whole story shows how he struggles with the rendering of his father’s story. We learn Vladek’s tale in a highly mediated form. It is mediated first of all through Art, but also, and mainly, through the animal imagery that characterises this novel. This creates a certain distance between the reader and the tale and makes it, paradoxically, more accessible. The novel is also extremely fragmented, hopping back and forth between the past and the present. It combines fragments of Vladek’s life before the war, his life in the camps and after the war, with memories of Art’s childhood, boyhood and adult life. The chronological story Vladek is telling gets constantly disrupted by scenes from the present. One last aspect that I discussed but that is both very present and fairly absent in Maus is the use of ‘imagination’. Many second-generation authors try to imagine their parent’s past in their novels but in Maus Spiegelman did not need to do this since he used his father’s testimony. The whole story is based on historical research and on the testimonies of an eye-witness. Yet at the same time: animal imagery – could hardly be more imaginative.
1.4. Third Generation

“JEWISH HAVE SIX SENSES Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing ... memory. (...) For Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks (...) that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.” (Foer, 2002: 198-199).

Due to the recentness of third-generation fiction, not much research about it is available, and it is difficult and slightly premature to draw any conclusions. Nevertheless, we can distinguish some characteristics in their writing that many of them share. But first I will explain who exactly belongs to this third generation.

In many ways the third generation is a continuation of the second. It encompasses the grandsons and -daughters of Holocaust survivors, the sons and daughters of second-generation trauma victims. Most of the characteristics that are present in the second generation can also be found in the third, but they are gradually fading away. As I have already mentioned in the introduction, it is not very accurate to consider the third generation traumatised: they are considerably removed from the original trauma of their grandparents. They are seldom witnesses to first-hand testimonies but rely on documents and second-hand reconstructions to dig up the past of their family. For, even though they are far removed from it, the third generation is still very much intrigued by their compelling family history and is still affected by an “emotional and psychological unsettlement” (Codde, 2010: 68). Whereas the second generation clearly suffered from a so-called ‘transmitted trauma’ (supra), the third generation is not really affected by this. This generation is “marked by a healthy obsession” with a past that is not their own but “that needs to be remembered”; they show a “creative and fairly healthy interest (...) in the generation of [their] grandparents” (Codde, 2010: 69).

Sometimes the third generation does have, comparable to the situation of the second generation, a difficult relationship with their parents. This is not very surprising since their parents were, in their own childhood, in some way re-traumatised by the first generation of survivors. They
have been brought up in a dysfunctional family where they have never seen or learned how to raise children properly. Very often they themselves fulfilled a parenting role, their parents being unable because of their Holocaust trauma (supra). A clinical-psychological study by P. Fossion et al. has shown that the third generation suffers from certain symptoms like “dropping out of school, behavior problems, self-mutilation, eating disorders, drug abuse, depressive or anxiety disorders, and problems with aggression” (Fossion, 2005). He states that the problems that arise during the adolescence of the third generation are due to growing up in a difficult familial environment and hence they are, at least partially, a consequence of the trauma of their grandparents.

Although the third generation does not lack a family (they have parents, grandparents, often aunts and uncles) they still cope with a sense of ‘transferred loss’ (supra). Their family tree does not go on beyond their grandparents; everything before that time has been cut back or as Epstein says “burnt to a stump” (1981: 3). What was before the ‘Big Event’ is something they can hardly imagine. Often survivors fled, during or after the war, to a different country to build up a new life in a new environment, away from the horrors of Europe. For the third generation the family history is therefore not only remote in time – a pre-war period – but also in space. “They imaginatively turn the absence in their lives into a feeling of loss” (Codde, 2010: 69). The concept of postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsh when dealing with the second generation, can be associated with this. The term applies even better to the third generation’s position. It refers to the typical obsession of later generations with a past they have never really experienced, but which haunts their existence. This results in

a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation (...) Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (Hirsch, 2002: 22).
There is an attempt to reconstruct the family history through the use of imagination because members of the third generation never have a direct look at past events and facts. Their knowledge of the family history is marked by a great deal of uncertainty that they try to solve through imagining new versions and explanations.

Whereas the second generation most likely writes to seek some sort of closure, the third generation has no such intentions. Second-generation authors tend to write to get over their own trauma of living in a dysfunctional family. They project their trauma onto that of their parents, as it is a consequence of the latter and, by doing this, they intend to move on with their lives, unburdened. They create a hierarchy instead of chaos (Sicher: 1998, 6). The third generation on the other hand prefers this chaotic situation and their literary work primarily has a memorial function. They do not seek easy closure but want to investigate, know and remember.

1.5. Literary Work

As opposed to what some scholars believed, the Jewish American novel is not dead at all. In the 1980s there seems to have been a “renaissance in Jewish American fiction” and it remains “a vital, important, frequently read and discussed, prize-winning literature” (Meyer, 2004: 104-105). There are at least five general characteristics that can be found in most works by the third generation. A first important point, that I have also cited in my discussion of the second generation’s literary work, is the concept of mediation. The past is difficult to unravel for a generation that is so far removed from it, and this is conveyed very explicitly in third-generation novels. The authors have no authentic information on the traumatic experiences of their grandparents and therefore they try to reconstruct the past themselves, filling in the blanks with their imagination. The novels that are the result of this investigation clearly represent the difficulties they encounter. There are many

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7 My discussion of the characteristics of third-generation writing will mainly be based on the course “Contemporary American Literature”, taught by professor Codde at the University of Ghent (2010-2011).
versions that often contradict each other, so as a reader it becomes very difficult, almost impossible, to decide which version is the real one. The reader cannot see the wood for the trees. He/ she ends up knowing nothing and gets even doubly confused since he/ she does not only know nothing about the historical past but also does not get a full insight in the fictional universe based on that past. As with the historical past, the past in the novel’s fictional universe has equally become unreachable through all these different layers. In that way, the reader is placed in the same position as the third generation: whereas the latter tries to recreate the historical past, the reader gets stuck in reconstructing the fictional past. The third-generation novel hence conveys the feeling of being at a loss. The authors write in a very self-conscious manner that continually draws our attention to the difficulties they meet when dealing with this matter. Their novels display not only a story about facts but also, and perhaps more importantly, about how to render these facts. James Young refers to this with the concept ‘received history’.8

Linked to the inaccessibility of the past is the extensive use of mythological and fairytale elements in the works of the third generation. Since they cannot fully grasp the historical past due to temporal and spatial distance, they recreate that past in their own specific way, including these imaginative elements. Sara R. Horowitz states that “[p]ost-Holocaust writing becomes (...) more imaginative as the writers become more distant from the events of the Holocaust” (1998: 278). In Foer’s Everything is Illuminated for example, the birth of the baby girl Brod in the river can refer back to the myth of the Greek goddess Aphrodite who was born from the ocean.9 Similarly in Nicole Krauss’s novel The History of Love, some of the characters also turn their past into a fairytale – “Once upon a time there was a boy” (Krauss, 2005: 11) – to make it less harsh to talk about. Other implicit intertextual references are also made in this novel. For example, Leo Gursky (one of the main

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8 Class by professor Philippe Codde on “Contemporary American Literature”.

9 Class by professor Philippe Codde on “Contemporary American Literature”.
characters) his best friend Bruno, alludes to Bruno Schulz, a famous Jewish writer who was murdered by the Nazis.

A third important characteristic of third-generation literary work is the important motif of the ‘quest’. In many of these novels, the quest is the central structuring device. It is a search for an effaced past, a past they have never experienced but which they feel they have lost (‘transferred loss’). This missing past is reflected both on the thematic and on the formal level by means of emptiness. Scenes are missing from the story, words are missing from sentences, pages are only half filled with words, etc. I will illustrate this in my short discussion of a canonical work of the third generation, namely Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (infra). According to Sicher the postmodernist novel indeed “explores the limits of representation”. The full reality can never be known and the “conventional modes of representation are inadequate”, so a new approach is necessary (1998: 311).

A fourth characteristic, one that can be connected to the mythological aspects and to the quest, is the failure of language. Third-generation trauma fiction can be regarded as a formal experiment where language fails to translate the experiences, not only of the past itself but also of investigating that past. Alternative forms of representation are therefore necessary. The author constantly mangles things up to confuse the reader: sentences go on without ending, spelling mistakes are deliberately made etc. All this to show the troubles of dealing with an unknowable past.

Because the third generation writes about a past they have never experienced, the reader should never unconditionally accept whatever is written. The narrators are unreliable and they try to – or inevitably do – confuse the reader by juxtaposing different versions and stories. The reason for this is that they are incapable of writing a rational story about what happened, being too far removed from it. Sicher refers to post-Holocaust writers as “grappling with their memory and trying to imagine the past (which is not just past but also their present)” (1998: 5). They often attempt,
through and in their fiction, to retrace history and to reconstruct and change the past. But obviously the past cannot be changed and it is this incapability of changing history that is one of the major third-generation problems.

Quite often third-generation novels also look at the after-effects of the Holocaust instead of looking directly at the disaster itself. They also frequently link Holocaust trauma to other traumas (a characteristic that cannot easily be found in work by the second generation). Writers of the third generation widen their perspective and associate the Holocaust with other traumas from different times and places. They are no longer focused on that one specific traumatic past of their own family. By including other historical crisis moments they create an idea of circularity, as if history is constantly repeating itself. We can see examples of this in Foer’s work\(^\text{10}\) but also in *Great House*; I will come back to that latter later on in my thesis.

**1.6. Excursion: *Everything is Illuminated*\(^\text{11}\)**

To illustrate the characteristics of the third-generation’s fictional work I have discussed above, I briefly wish to explore Jonathan Safran Foer’s prototypical debut *Everything is Illuminated*. It is impossible to discuss this novel elaborately in such a brief space, but I will try to illustrate each above mentioned characteristic with an example. The story deals with the fictional novelist Jonathan Safran Foer who travels to the Ukraine in search of Augustine, a woman who presumably saved his Jewish grandfather from the Nazis in the shtetl Trachimbrod during the war. He is assisted on his journey by Alex Perchov, his Ukrainian translator, by Alex’s ‘blind’ grandfather, and by his seeing-eye bitch Sammy Davis Jr. Jr. *Everything is Illuminated* splendidly combines all elements typical of third-generation fiction. First of all there is a high level of mediation in this novel. As readers, we never get

\(^\text{10}\) In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* for example, Foer combines the trauma of the Second World War with Hiroshima and 9/11.

\(^\text{11}\) Based on professor Codde’s analysis of the novel in his class on “Contemporary American Literature”.

a direct view of what has happened but we have to untangle different versions of the same event to get the complete picture (a mission impossible). One of the reasons for this is that there are different narrators who all tell their own story: first there is the author Foer; then the fictional staging of himself as a novelist who writes an invented history of Trachimbrod; next we have Alex Perchov, narrating their adventures in the Ukraine; we also see a correspondence between Foer and Alex but we only have access to Alex’s letters. All these different stories keep generating new texts and the reader is placed in a very difficult position trying to untangle the whole jumble. This definitely stages the problems of the third generation: being witness only to documents they try to reconstruct the past in their own way by inventing and generating all sorts of explanations because they have a craving to fill in the empty spaces. “[B]ut instead of illuminating the past, these contradictory versions only make the past become more inaccessible” (Codde, 2010: 70). To reconstruct/ invent the past, Foer makes use of mythology. His story starts with Brod, who has been miraculously born without an umbilical cord in the river (supra). He creates this legend to devise a family history given that he cannot reach the real past. The idea of a ‘quest’ is also clearly present in this novel. Foer tries to reconstruct the past in the fictional universe. He goes looking for this woman Augustine to find out about his grandfather. It is a quest for the truth, a truth that cannot be found. Language fails to represent all of this. In some of the traumatic representations in the novel, the syntax crumbles or language is not at all capable of rendering the story and the pages are left blank, like for example with the bombing of Trachimbrod. A last characteristic that is also very much applicable to Foer’s novel is the aspect of unreliable narrators. The fictional Jonathan Safran Foer starts inventing a fictional past on the basis of some documents. He has no proof or whatsoever that any of the things he writes down have actually happened. The whole history is originated from his own fantasy. And also his Ukrainian translator Alex is “being very nomadic with the truth” (Foer, 2002: 179). The result of all this self-invention is that the reader knows nothing more in the end. Codde concludes that “[a]lthough the ontological and epistemological doubt will never be resolved and nothing is really
illuminated in the end, it should be clear that the reader is continually invited or forced to participate in the third generation’s historical reconstructive activity” (2010: 72).

Having provided a general overview on the second and third generation and the major ideas in their works, I will now discuss two representative novels by respectively the second and the third generation: Second Hand Smoke by Thane Rosenbaum and Great House by Nicole Krauss.
2. **Second Hand Smoke**

“The world had been reborn with Auschwitz. The Big Bang that doubled as a Second Coming. The Burning Bush that this time consumed whatever was within its flame. God spoke, the ovens of Auschwitz swallowed. Whatever happened before no longer mattered. Whatever happened during was stored away as life lessons. Whatever happened in the immediate after didn’t count, as though it were all a false start. The hope was just to be forgiven.” (Rosenbaum, 1999: 18).

2.1. **The Author**

Thane Rosenbaum was born in 1960 as the only son of two Holocaust survivors and was raised in Miami Beach, Florida. His mother survived the concentration camp of Majdanek and his father that of Auschwitz. He is a novelist, essayist and law professor. His most famous novels are *The Golems of Gotham* and *Second Hand Smoke* and for his novel-in-stories *Elijah Visible* he received the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for best Jewish American Fiction. He teaches human rights at the Fordham Law School and directs the Forum on Law, Culture and Society. His reviews and essays frequently appear in, among others, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and some of them show that he is still very much concerned with the Holocaust. He currently lives in New York with his daughter Basia Tess, to whom *Second Hand Smoke* is dedicated.

2.2. **Second-Generation Characteristics of Second Hand Smoke**

Firstly, I will discuss this novel in the light of the second-generation characteristics I developed in the previous chapter. Then I will move on to a deeper discussion of the different characters and how each of them individually deals with the traumas that have befallen him/ her. As a final point I will analyse how Rosenbaum succeeds in illustrating the effects of trauma-transition in this novel. *Second Hand Smoke* perfectly illustrates how the life of the second generation is affected by the experiences of their parents. The story focuses on the life of Duncan Katz, a son of two Holocaust survivors, who was born and raised in Miami. Duncan’s parents still suffer very much from their experiences in the camps during the war. His mother Mila fled from Warsaw to Germany after

the war, where she met her husband Herschel, who changed his name to Yankee once they arrived in America. In Miami, Mila has excellent connections with the mafia. One of the mob leaders, Larry Breitbart, even becomes Duncan’s godfather. Mila is a dominant mother who raises Duncan to become an ideal ‘war machine’. She still lives very much in a Holocaust universe and transfers this burden to her son. Duncan grows up to become a strong young man who does not live an easy life. Mostly because of his mother, he is full of hatred and becomes one of the principal Nazi hunters with the OSI, the Office of Special Investigations that tracks down Nazi war criminals. He is so absorbed by the Holocaust and by his profession that his marriage has gone on the rocks; and the rest of his social life does not amount to much either.

When Duncan’s mother lies in the hospital, fighting cancer, she reveals her deepest secret to the three nurses that stand by her 24 hours a day. Right after the war, she gave birth to a son named Isaac, whom she left behind when she fled from Poland. More than ten years after Mila’s death, godfather Larry exposes this secret of hers to Duncan, who immediately sets off to Poland to find his long lost brother. Isaac turns out to be the complete opposite of Duncan. He is a pacifist who takes care of the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw and teaches yoga classes. The two get to know each other and little by little, with the help of his brother, Duncan learns to deal with his rage. When the two brothers pay a visit to Birkenau, to see where their mother survived, they get assaulted by a group of German neo-Nazis who lock them up inside the barracks, shave their heads and put them into striped camp uniforms. Being locked up in the barracks, Duncan goes through an emotional purgation. Eventually, everything turns out to be a bad dream, a trick of the mind, but for Duncan it becomes the turning point in his life, almost an epiphany. From then on he sees everything more clearly and he really comes clean with himself. Together with his brother, he returns to America to visit his parents’ grave and he is finally able to say Kaddish\textsuperscript{13}.

\textsuperscript{13} A prayer in memory of the deceased.
It is almost impossible not to read this story as autobiographically inspired: author and protagonist belong to the second generation and both were raised in Miami Beach; both went to law school and left their main jobs to write a novel. Still, the novel is explicitly presented as a work of fiction. Being a son of two Holocaust survivors himself – even though the subject was never mentioned in the Rosenbaum household – “the after-effects of the Shoah found their way into his adult work” (Royal, 2007). Indeed Rosenbaum’s novel focuses largely on the aftermath of the Holocaust, instead of on the event itself. He writes about living in a dysfunctional family that is scarred because of the Holocaust; about how Duncan’s family history is erased and hence inaccessible (Mila’s mafia friends function as an improvised family due to a “shortage of grandparents” (Rosenbaum, 1999: 10)); and about how Duncan, because of all of this, suffers deeply from a ‘transmitted’ trauma. This trauma is transmitted to him through various ways.

Mila and Yankee do not really communicate with each other or with their son about their experiences during the war. Duncan knows that they were in the camps – he sees of course the blue digits on their forearms – but they never go into much detail about those years. Yankee confesses his traumatic experiences only to his typewriter and when his son asks him about the war he just remains silent and taps on, not able to let another word pass his lips. Mila on the other hand is more direct about what she went through, not only to her son but also to other people. She is not afraid to let anyone know she spent time in the camps. But she does not communicate any details either. She has deep secrets that remain hidden for the rest of the world. So Duncan’s trauma is not really generated by witnessing a testimony of his parents, but merely by living in a dysfunctional family.

Duncan has a very difficult relationship with his parents. His mother shows little or no affection and love for him; she does not seem interested in his personality but wants to mould him according to her own wishes. She wants to make him a fighter. Mila still lives in a Holocaust universe and does not want her son to become weak, because the weak ones die first. For example, she
pushes him to take karate lessons and is not even pleased when he gets his black belt at age nine: it should not have taken him so long. His black belt becomes a “symbol of strength” for her, even though “it meant nothing to him” (28). But a black belt is not enough: Mila sends her son to nearly every possible fighting class. Duncan, on the other hand, did not even want to fight and would rather have played an instrument but: “[h]ow will the violin prepare you for life? (...) What kind of protection is that? Such a delicate instrument” (29). She is very fanatic about his sport. She has high expectations for her son and wants him to be able to survive on his own. Besides, the Jewish race is in need of “a few Jewish animals” (30). Mila reasons as if the war were still going on or could restart any moment. That is also why she loves football and is glad that Duncan takes an interest in the sport. Football is all about war and survival and “[a]ny activity that even remotely prepared her son to do battle against real or imagined enemies could not be harmful” (34). She trains him to become the saviour of the Jewish people and by raising him like that she completely destroys him.

As Epstein also frequently illustrates in her book *Children of the Holocaust* (1981), Duncan has been robbed of a normal childhood and adolescence. He has never been able to enjoy the things children of his age usually enjoy. Toys for example, were not allowed in the Katz family: “Duncan had skipped many steps from birth to manhood, his family life having much in common with basic training during the war. Adolescence was a luxury that the Katzes could ill afford” (19). When a child never experiences love or never feels at home in a family, this more than likely returns later on in life and causes difficulties for his or her social life. This is without doubt the case for Duncan, who has trouble trusting people he does not know, and who frequently suffers from panic and rage attacks. He becomes panicky in closed spaces and around trains, subconsciously still linking them to the cattle cars during the war. He also cannot stand German craftsmanship and suddenly, out of nowhere, starts demolishing a Mercedes (154). Duncan is obviously re-traumatised by his parents’ trauma. The screams he hears from his parents’ bedroom when they dream at night also rub off on him, and they return later on in his adult life. He sleeps very lightly and regularly wakes up screaming, in the middle
of the night, from a bad dream: “his unsettled, spasmodic sleep was haunted by the open ditches and smoking chimneys of a Europe that he had neither visited nor known” (143). From his childhood on, he also suffers from a stomach condition. Every time he gets upset or feels nervous or threatened he gets stomach spasms; a malady that can only be relieved with Donnatal, the medicine he constantly carries with him. At Mila’s funeral he concludes: “I am what I am today because of my mother” (55). But even though his mother was never able to fulfil the role of a caring and loving parent and scarred her son for life by pushing him to the limits, Duncan’s feelings towards her are somehow ambivalent. He has some feeling of triviality towards her: he considers her a heroine for surviving Auschwitz and for still being such a powerful lady who can cope with the world. He could never do what she has done: he collapsed immediately when he was supposedly trapped in Birkenau. On the one hand he hates her for what she has done to him, but on the other hand he also has great respect for her and sometimes even admires her.

The identification with his parents’ past goes so far that we can almost call it a ‘vicarious identification’ (supra). Both his childhood and his adult life are overshadowed by what his parents went through; a past that is not even his own. He starts working for the OSI for personal reasons: he feels a personal hatred against Nazis and wants to revenge what they did to his parents and the six million other Jews. His work becomes his life. Tracking down Nazi war criminals is something he is good at and which he does very convincingly. Another very clear example of vicarious identification is the scene at Birkenau. When he visits the former concentration camp at Birkenau together with his brother Isaac, Duncan gets so overwhelmed by the place and its history that he starts imagining himself in a comparable situation, trapped by neo-Nazis, shaven and dressed in stripes like his mother and father once were. This stressful situation (even though it is an invented one) functions as a trigger for reliving the trauma, not his own trauma but that of his parents. He gets spasms in his stomach but his Donnatal bottle has been emptied by the neo-Nazis. He cannot escape and, suspecting that the gas chambers are waiting for him, he becomes very panicky and claustrophobic.
and even soils his pants. He drops out of reality and different scenes pass before his eyes: scenes from his family, his job, his parents. He completely freaks out and starts screaming: “DON’T BRAND ME! (...) I DON’T WANT THE NUMBERS! (...) GET ME OUT OF HERE! (...) I WON’T SURVIVE! I’M NOT MILA!” (270-271). There is an almost literal reliving of the things his parents probably went through: not knowing whether they were going to survive another day and whether all this was ever going to end. He says to his brother: “[i]t feels like there is no difference between my life and what happened to our family during the war” (263).

A last second-generation characteristic that is present in this novel, though it lingers in the background instead of appearing explicitly, is the ambiguous relationship towards God and religion. Both Duncan and Isaac do not believe in God. They have problems with religion and faith because of their family’s history. This is something that often returns both in the first and in the second generation. In Poland, the two brothers visit a service at the Nozyk Synagogue. The synagogue looks extremely worn out and the few old men who attend the service beg some tourists for dollars. There is not even a rabbi present. Duncan finds all of this so depressing that he wants to leave. Even so many years after the war, Poland is still very anti-Semitic. There are not many Jews and the Jews who do still live there practice their religion in a hidden way, afraid of attacks by the Poles. At the start of Duncan’s life there is some ambivalence towards religion: by unconventionally naming their boy Duncan, Mila and Yankee decide to take a step back from Jewish religion; but on the other hand, they do hold a bris, showing their “obedience and good faith (...) forever branding their child as a Jew” (5). The bris, though, was very unkosher “in ways that violated not just the menu” (8). The rabbi present at that bris, and who later on also leads Mila’s funeral service, is outspokenly a-religious. He never lets a moment pass to announce that there is no God, or if there is one, that He fails in every possible way. At Mila’s funeral he talks about the deceased: “so filled with life and yet so familiar with death. This is precisely why I don’t believe in God” (49). It is clear that most of the people in this
novel do not think highly of God. They wonder where he was during the Holocaust and why he did nothing to save the Jewish people from such horrendous fate.

2.3. The Importance of Names for the Jewish Identity

The aspect of naming is very important in this novel as it carries all sorts of symbolical meanings. Duncan is a very strange name for a Jewish boy, even when born in America. The family (members of the mafia) were indeed rather surprised when they heard that Mila’s and Yankee’s boy would be named Duncan. Mila’s explanation is that her son is named after her uncle Duncan Keller who died in the camps during the war. That would make Duncan a perfect example of a memorial candle, in which case he would carry with him not only the trauma of his parents but also the legacy of the lost family he never knew. But probably this is just an explanation Mila gives to soothe everyone and to be absolved from having to answer further questions. It is likely that the real reason for this strange name choice is that the Katz family more than anything wants to blend in. They are professionals when it comes to disguises. This can often be seen with survivors or children of survivors: both a letting go of and holding on to a Jewish identity. Yankee and Mila are afraid that if they would name their son differently, with a common Jewish name, he would suffer too much from the Holocaust legacy. They wanted Duncan to be able to “blend in on the other side” (5). This is rather ironical because Duncan, more than anyone else, does suffer from his Holocaust legacy. His parents may have wanted to protect him by naming him Duncan, but they could not prevent that the Holocaust became a major and threatening part of his life.

Duncan though, is not the only one who is encouraged to appear American instead of Jewish: Yankee, formerly known as Herschel, also changed his name when he first came to America, desperate to start anew and to leave his old self behind in Germany. Mila did not change her name: “[a] name change alone would not have been enough, at least not in her case” (6). Someone whose name does function as a memorial candle, however, is Duncan’s daughter, Milan. She is obviously
named after his mother, which is perhaps weird since he did not have a very strong bond with Mila, but which clearly proves the ambivalent relationship he had with her (supra). The extra letter \( n \) is added to pretend she is Italian. Just as Duncan was given his name to pretend he was American and to hide his Jewishness, Milan’s true identity is also disguised. Duncan hoped that “she would learn how to breathe without the gas and smoke entourage” (81). But still, by naming Milan after his mother, a Holocaust survivor, Duncan passes on the legacy to the third generation. Milan is burdened by the memory of the Holocaust and her grandmother, by a past she has never known and from which she is even further removed than her father, but which she cannot escape either. Besides, Milan will suffer from a trauma of her own: the separation of her parents will undoubtedly leave scars on her soul as well.

2.4. How to Deal with and Work through Trauma?

Mila vs. Yankee

The way Rosenbaum draws the personalities of the different characters explicitly shows that not everyone deals with their traumas in the very same way. All of the characters in this novel have experienced similar traumas: Mila and Yankee have survived the concentration camps, and Duncan and Isaac suffer from a transmitted trauma and a (transferred) loss, but Rosenbaum clearly shows that this does not mean that all of the characters cope with their feelings in the same way. Duncan’s parents, for example, react very differently to the traumas that they have experienced. As I have already mentioned Mila does not feel uncomfortable speaking about her experiences. She never reveals many details but people do know that she has been in a concentration camp. Yankee on the other hand refuses to talk about the terrible things he has been through. Whereas Mila plays a very important role in this story and in Duncan’s life, Yankee lingers in the background. Mila is, opposed to her husband, a strong, enterprising woman who dominates Duncan’s life. Yankee, on the other hand, is more of a passive character: “[t]he life that began for Yankee after the camps was only a
temporary life (...) From the moment of liberation, each day was both a blessing and a curse. Life demanded too many episodes of extreme coping” (30). He is, however, very important for Duncan’s existence because, if it had not been for him, Duncan would probably have never been born at all. When she first found out she was pregnant in America, Mila did not want to keep the baby. She did not feel ready and thought she was not entitled to have and love another child, given that she left the first one behind in Poland. Yankee on the other hand was of the opinion that it would be “a sin – a schande – for people like us to have an abortion. ‘We survived a death factory (...) we cannot be killers ourselves.’” (206).

Even though Mila and Yankee both left the concentration camps alive, they suffered deeply from its horrors later on in their lives and eventually still died because of the Holocaust. Yankee goes first: he dies of a “heart attack from acute war time trauma. Nightmares” (66). Mila’s death can be attributed to the Holocaust trauma as well. She was regarded and worshipped as a “survivor among survivors” (47). She was the strong, independent woman whom everybody looked up to. And when she is diagnosed with cancer and dies some time after, it is a great shock to all the survivors who have known her. There is no clear cause for her cancer but: “[t]he miseries of life. The unfulfilled promises. The murderous memories. And of course, the disappointment of children. All just as likely reasons why a body can go bad” (47). Due to the cancer, Mila is again reduced to the same corpse she had been in Auschwitz/Birkenau, with which Rosenbaum illustrates the circularity of life and the inescapability of life’s traumas.

Mila is obviously stuck with some unsolved matters. She has secrets that nobody knows about but with which she cannot cope alone. That is why the three black nurses play such an important role in the novel. Mafia gangster Larry Breitbart hires them to stay with Mila 24 hours a day at the end of her life. They nurse her while she remains in the hospital but that is not their only or most important job. Mila confesses to them her life story. They are the first ones to whom she
trusts her deepest and most shameful secret: not only the fact that she left her first son Isaac behind in Poland so that she herself could search for a new and better future, but, more importantly, that she branded him in a way that is unimaginable. She tattooed her camp number on his frail arms to mark him for life, to literalise their bond as mother and son. The nurses play their role as empathic listeners convincingly. Before they met Mila, they had not even heard of a place like Auschwitz. But during their nursing assignment, “[t]hey learned to speak Mila’s language. (...) Listening was just as important as caretaking; in fact, it was all that mattered. Mila didn’t expect miracles, just an audience” (206). That is why these nurses can be called a holy trinity, more so than three furies (69-70). Because of them, Mila is finally able to testify and come clean with her past. This shows how important testimony is for a trauma victim. It is only when Mila can confess her story to others that she is able to deal with it, and that she arrives at what LaCapra calls ‘working through’ the trauma (LaCapra, 2004: 118-119). She could not possibly take her secret with her to the grave and in the three nurses she saw the ideal listeners. Mila can be called a victim in the ‘gray zone’. She is both victim and perpetrator at the same time: a victim of the Holocaust, and a perpetrator of a crime against her own child Isaac by branding him for the rest of his life. Similar to Duncan, our relationship as a reader with Mila is a very ambiguous one. On the one hand, we can regard Mila as a very selfish person, who only thinks about herself and about how she can make the best of her life. But on the other hand, we cannot really blame her for this because it was the Holocaust that made her this way.

**Duncan vs. Isaac**

As much as Mila and Yankee differ from each other, so do Duncan and his long lost brother Isaac. The two are each other’s opposites even though they partly share the same genes. First of all, they look completely different on the outside. Whereas Duncan is a tall, muscular young man with wild blond curls, Isaac is a short, round man who has Mila’s red hair and is already balding. “Isaac had

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14 Class by professor Philippe Codde on “Contemporary American Literature”.
inherited all that was Mila’ (Rosenbaum, 1999: 243), even her Auschwitz camp number. However, not only their appearances, but also their characters are flatly opposed to each other. Both brothers have had their share of family traumas but they deal with them in a very different way. Duncan’s trauma is that of the second generation: growing up in a dysfunctional family, being raised by a powerful dominant mother who determines the rest of his life. He is obsessed with the Holocaust and Nazis, and cannot let go of a past that he never experienced himself. His apartment is filled with books on the Holocaust and the war. He is so driven by it that it affects his own family life: his wife leaves him because she cannot cope with it anymore. It is almost like a downward spiral: he could not live with his parents because of their trauma and his family cannot live with him because of his trauma, caused by his parents. The question is where this spiral will end? Will it continue to ruin the lives of the next generations as well? Duncan cannot help thinking like his parents, even though he does not want to. He sees everything through the Holocaust lens.

Isaac too has his own traumas: as an infant he was abandoned by his mother, when a child, his father died, and when he was a grown-up man, his wife killed herself. But Isaac deals with his traumas in a much better way than Duncan. They do not fill his existence; unlike Duncan, he does not get consumed by them. Whereas Duncan is filled with hatred because of his legacy, Isaac is a pacifist/passivist who tries to see the good things in life. Duncan has difficulty to understand that his brother is a Jew in Poland and that he is not “obsessed with what happened over there. (...) [T]he hate part in me, that comes from Mila, and so does he” (135). Isaac may have the same legacy as Duncan but he never knew his mother and because of that, “he had somehow been better off” (211). Isaac has learned to deal with his traumas, partly through yoga and meditation. He has learned to transfer negative energy into something good. “If I have rage, I express it through my spiritual life. Fists and anger are not the way” (213). Duncan does not know about such things and is disgusted by it. According to Isaac it is important always to keep on breathing and to let the energy flow freely through your body. He considers the stomach the centre of power and spiritual energy. This is
impossible for Duncan, who suffers from stomach spasms because his energy cannot flow. In Isaac’s opinion Duncan does not have a real stomach condition; the problem lies much deeper. He suffers from a problem of the mind, created by his mother, that travels to his stomach. This can also be connected to the scene where Mila wants to unravel her deepest secret to the three nurses, and she suddenly gets pains in her stomach. Her energy has also been blocked for many years as a result of the camps, and it is as if finally admitting to her sins is dangerous, as if the pain is a warning not to testify. But when she finally does confess, she feels liberated of her burden because the energy can run again. If Duncan cannot let go of the Holocaust trauma, he will never get better. He needs to be liberated from his own concentration camp, his own prison of the mind, in order to live a normal life, one that is not overshadowed by the past of his parents. Little by little, with the help of his brother and yoga classes, Duncan learns to breathe and to let go of the past. It is not an easy process and it takes a shocking (although imaginative) experience like the one in Birkenau, but eventually he gets there.

But although these two brothers differ so much from each other (“The brothers were nothing alike even as half-brothers go. One was human, gifted with vision; the other, more machinelike and out of warranty.” (209)), there are also certain similarities. Both are regarded in one way or another as saviours of the Jewish people. Duncan is raised to be a strong warrior, a Jewish animal, who can defend his people when necessary. He is constantly preparing for the moment when the Jewish people will again be under attack. His whole life is in function of war, the one that happened so many years ago and the one that could, according to him, start any day. When he is in Poland, his initial plan is also to re-conquer the land. He wants to reclaim his birthrights. Poland belongs to the Jews so he wants to make it safe again for them to live where they were once driven away. Isaac on the other hand is “a shaman, a mystic, a holy man” (199). People from all over Poland come to his yoga classes to be taught about the power of spiritual energy. They look up to him. Whereas Duncan wants to save their lives, Isaac saves their souls. And it appears that this latter one is more decisive, because,
no matter how strong Duncan appears to be, he clearly has unsolved issues that control his life, and it is only until Isaac learns him how to deal with them, that he is able to live a normal, unburdened life.

2.5. Reaching Closure

The novel ends with a very apocalyptic scene. The two brothers visit their mother’s grave at Lakeview Memorial. There they meet the three nurses who stood by Mila at the end of her life and who were witnesses to her testimony. They explain that Mila had trusted her story to them and that they have been carrying it with them all those years. Isaac and Duncan finally find out that their mother did care about them: “[s]he never forgave herself,” Louise added. “You should know that.” “And she took it out on Duncan,” (...) “She was sorry about what she did to you too.”” (301). Mila’s life was not a Hollywood story with a happy ending, but now that Isaac and Duncan have found each other and themselves and have learned about their mother, life could end happily for them. They are no longer alone in the world and they know now that they actually never were. The five of them respectfully recite Kaddish together and suddenly a tropic storm breaks out, as if to erase the past and allow them to start anew: “[m]isty streaks of water, as though spiked with acid, were slowly washing away the numbers [on Isaac’s forearm]” (303). Duncan is finally able to reach closure. This can be linked to Rosenbaum’s own statement on redemptiveness. In an interview with Derek Parker Royal he states: “I have a curious strain of redemptiveness running through my novels – an impulse that I detest personally in connection with the Holocaust but that somehow makes sense to me in my fiction” (2007: 4). He wants to leave the reader with something essentially good. The post-Holocaust world has the possibility to reach closure “and the post-Holocaust demands that the memory of the Holocaust not prevent the forward march into the future” (Royal, 2007: 4).
2.6. Formal Characteristics

Thane Rosenbaum, as a member of the second generation, is compelled to write about his transmitted trauma. But, unlike many of the second-generation authors, he does not feel this drive to return in time to his parents’ past and to the moment of their trauma; he focuses on his own trauma, that is derived from theirs. In contrast with, for example, Art Spiegelman, he does not return to the Holocaust and does not rely on his imagination to fill up the holes in the past. On the contrary, he deals with the aftermath, with a post-Holocaust universe and the generational distance that is involved in it. The characters in the novel, however, are concerned with the past. Isaac, and eventually even Duncan, want to learn about Mila’s past, in order to understand their present situation. But “[i]magination and fantasy – poor substitutes for the lived experience – were all that they ever had” (287). As Rosenbaum points out in an interview: “[t]hey have to do all the work, knowing from the outset that their efforts might be entertainingly imaginative and emotionally true, but perhaps never literally true” (Royal, 2007: 13).

Central to Rosenbaum’s work is how the Holocaust affects so many lives so intensely, even long after the actual events happened. Because Rosenbaum deals with things he himself has experienced very closely, and not with something he knows through second-hand knowledge, this novel appears to be very realistic and drawn from life. Bukiet’s characterisation of second-generation fiction is very much applicable to Second Hand Smoke: this novel is indeed written in a “voice of (...) apocalyptic frenzy” (Bukiet, 2002: 21). But all the fury that the character of Duncan shows is countered by the tranquillity of his brother, and hence indeed leaves the reader with something essentially good (supra).

In Second Hand Smoke an omniscient narrator is speaking, but the story he tells is a montage of collected fragments. Chronology collapses and the story is filled with flashbacks, flash-forwards and mind wanderings. Flashbacks to Duncan’s childhood are combined with his present life. The
story Mila is telling to the nurses is constantly interrupted by Duncan’s story and his adventures in Poland with his brother. This fragmentation illustrates the view the second generation has on the past and the trauma of their parents. The repetition of images, words and situations link the different parts in history, the different generations, the different places and times and create a feeling of circularity. They function as threads running through the novel, creating one complete whole of different storylines and showing how the trauma of the first generation is passed on to the second and the third. I will now discuss several of the images and themes that occur throughout the story, linking the different passages.

One important symbol that returns throughout the novel is the *pysanka*. A *pysanka* is a decorated Ukrainian Easter egg. This tradition involving the *pysanka* has existed for over ten centuries, having started in a pagan culture but quickly having been picked up by Christianity. In pagan culture it symbolised the spring, the promise of new life; in the Christian tradition it commemorates the resurrection of Christ. Duncan receives a beautifully carved wooden *pysanka* from Maloney, who was presumably the former butcher of Maidanek. It is in suing him that Duncan loses his job at the OSI because of illegitimately received and doubtful evidence. Maloney gives the egg to Duncan as a going-away present for luck when he leaves for Poland. He sees how self-conflicted Duncan is. It is this egg that will rescue him at the national border between Germany and Poland and that will give him free passage: “[f]or some superstitious reason known only to Poles and to Russians, whoever was carrying around a *pysanka* (...) wouldn’t be all that bad” (Rosenbaum, 1999: 195). It is also this *pysanka* that Duncan places at his mother’s grave at the end of the novel. The egg bears some kind of mystical power: it works as a guardian for Duncan in Poland and enables him finally to come clean with his mother. It indicates the start of a new beginning. The irony of it all is that it was handed to him by a former camp guard who used to keep guard over the Jews but

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definitely did not need to look after their well-being. Hence, this *pysanka* can also refer to a person in the gray zone: Maloney symbolises not only the perpetrator but functions also as a saviour, a perpetrator of the first and a saviour of the second generation of Jews. What is also striking is that this Easter egg is regarded as an ultimate Christian symbol and has nothing to do with Judaism; so it is not completely clear to me why it is such an omni-present symbol in this novel.

There are several other images that keep on returning in this novel. One of them is the image of ghosts, which is typical for the second generation’s fictional work, as I have mentioned before. The present of Holocaust survivors and their children is haunted by the deceased from the past. The ghosts are especially present in Poland, a land now largely deprived of Jews but not of their spirits. When Isaac and Duncan walk through a Polish park, Duncan notices “[t]welve empty swings rocking all by themselves. (...) This is where all the Jewish children used to live and play” (216). It is the ghosts of the Jewish children that keep the swings rocking. Similarly, the cemetery that Isaac maintains is filled with Jewish ghosts. Poland was “[a] nation poor in Jews, but rich in Jewish ruins” (107). Another image is that of smoke: references to the title appear throughout the novel. Isaac and Duncan are both contaminated by second hand smoke. And so is Duncan’s family: “[t]he environment in this house is polluted with smoke imported all the way from those German ovens. We all need some air to breathe” (84). This is the reason why his wife Sharon leaves him: because she wants their child to grow up in an uncontaminated family. The image of the weeping willows also quite often returns throughout the story. We see the willows when Mila leaves Poland and when Duncan enters Poland; and also when Isaac and Duncan stand beside each other at the tomb of their great-grandfather, rabbi Lewinstein. The weeping willows gloomily loom over Poland’s history, “sorrowful, bent over, disgraced” (221).

Another Leitmotif is the name *Keller*. *Keller* functions as a codeword in the Katz’s household: whenever someone is about to reveal too much information about their personal life to strangers,
that word is said to restrain him or her. Duncan unconsciously adopts this. Keller similarly functions in his own family as a codeword. This again illustrates how much his parents have determined his later life, how much his actions resemble theirs. Keller was the name of Mila’s former partner in Poland; he was the father of Isaac. So perhaps Mila starts using his name as a codeword for memorial reasons; she wanted to remember him. After all, she left him with their six-month-old son.

What also links different generations and situations are the words “Rock. Rock. Rock”. They appear when Mila has just finished tattooing her camp number on her son’s forearm: she rocks her child to soothe him and to stop him from crying. But the words also appear in Washington where Milan is swinging in the park and complains to her mother about how much she misses her father. Hence, two situations of abandonment are linked like this. Mila abandons her son Isaac in Poland to search for a better future in America, and Duncan abandons his daughter Milan to visit Poland in search of his brother, likewise hoping for a better future. “A sad but ultimately true Katz paradox was that abandonment ran in the family” (221).

The most important link between the generations is probably the song ‘Someone to Watch over Me’. This is Mila’s favourite song: she used to sing it to Isaac all the time but when she came to America “the music stopped for [her]. (...) Music is a luxury” (127). She never sang the song to Duncan but he still knows it and sings it to his own daughter Milan to rock her to sleep. It is like the family theme song. Isaac plays the song in a bar in Warsaw and Mila plays it in the cafeteria of the hospital. Other references to the song are also included. The image of a tower ‘watching over’ the characters in the novel frequently returns. For example, when he returns to Miami with Isaac, “[a] lifeguard (...) waved from his South Beach Tower, signalling that he was watching over Duncan” (297). A rather ironical reference to the song is made when the two brothers are being observed from the watchtowers in Birkenau before being taken captive: “[s]omeone had indeed been watching over Mila’s boys” (251). Although this too may not have happened for real; it is difficult to
draw the line where reality stops and Duncan’s imagination takes over in this scene. The song thus plays a very important role throughout the novel, illustrating the importance of company and friendship, of having someone to watch over you and stand by you. The message on Mila’s gravestone also reads “SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER THEM” (303).

One last link between generations that I will discuss to finish this chapter on Second Hand Smoke, is when Mila leaves Poland and Duncan enters Poland. There are some striking parallels between these two scenes that clearly link Mila’s past to Duncan’s present. Mila left her son behind because she wanted to flee Poland and that would have been impossible with an infant. But passing the border still is not easy. She is stopped by a Polish patrol unit that is playing poker but she can convince them to let her join and when she wins, they let her go. She does have to leave everything behind, including a picture of Isaac. When Duncan wants to enter Poland, he also gets stopped by custom officers. Passing the Polish border is like crossing an inner threshold for Duncan. He returns to the lion’s den, “the forbidden motherland. The place where his family roots slipped out of the earth” (179). He gets a panic attack and that alarms the customs officers. They too stop him to investigate him but when they find Maloney’s pysanka in his trunk, they let him go without further ado (supra). In the commotion that preceded it, Duncan lost the picture of his daughter Milan, just like his mother lost Isaac’s picture. Both of them enter a promised land (the promise of a better future for Mila, the promise of finding a relative for Duncan) without the comfort of having something with them that reminds them of their family back home.

All in all this novel gives us a very clear depiction of life in a (fictional) Holocaust-survivor family. Trauma is in one way or another transferred onto the next generation, and everybody deals with their trauma in their own way. This is clear both on a fictional level and in reality – otherwise Rosenbaum would not feel compelled to write about this subject. It shows how members of the second generation feel the need to communicate their experiences through the medium of fiction.
3. **Great House**

“Having been denied an answer – having been denied an answer *while at the same time* being cursed as a people who for thousands of years have aroused in others a murderous hate – the Jew has no choice but to live with death every day. To live with it, to set up his house in its shadow, and never to discuss its terms.” (Krauss, 2010: 175).

3.1. The Author

Nicole Krauss was born in New York in the seventies. She can be called a third-generation Jew because she is the granddaughter of survivors. Both of her grandparents managed to escape Eastern Europe just in time before the Second World War broke out. But the rest of the family remained behind and did not survive. Krauss is named after her great aunt who died in the Warsaw ghetto and is therefore a perfect example of a memorial candle herself. She made her debut in 2002 with *Man Walks into Room* and her second novel, *The History of Love*, became a huge bestseller. Krauss has lived in London for some time, but at present she lives with her husband, writer Jonathan Safran Foer, and their two children in Brooklyn, New York.

3.2. Structure and Re-Structuring

In *Great House* four voices/stories are juxtaposed that sometimes overlap. The novel is divided into two main parts, each consisting of four stories with the same title (“All Rise”, “True Kindness”, “Swimming Holes” and “Lies Told by Children”/“Weisz”). The first part functions more or less as an outline: the characters and their situations are sketched and already a corner of the veil is lifted. In the second part, the stories of the different characters unravel: mysteries are revealed (or not) and the link between the four stories gets clearer. The novel starts with “All Rise”, the story of Nadia, a New York writer, who inherits some furniture from DanielVarsky, a Chilean poet who wants to return to his native country to take part in the revolution against the cruel regime under Pinochet,

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16 Based on: Jan Stevens. “We houden van de illusie dat de wereld zin heeft”. Interview met Nicole Krauss. Knack 41:10 (2011); Nicole Krauss. “On forgetting”.
and who is eventually tortured to death. The most notable piece of furniture is a large desk with many drawers that supposedly belonged to the poet Federico García Lorca, and that will function as an Leitmotif throughout the novel. Nadia writes for more than twenty years at that desk but when she receives a phone call from Leah Weisz, who introduces herself as Varsky’s daughter, she (reluctantly) hands the desk over to her. From then on her troubles start. She finds herself unable to continue to write and is on the verge of collapsing. With the help of her psychiatrist, Nadia pulls through and decides to undertake a journey to Jerusalem (not coincidentally the city where Leah Weisz is supposed to live). In Jerusalem (Part II) she falls for the charms of a young Israeli boy named Adam. She asks him to take her to Leah Weisz’s house to have one last look at her desk but there they do not seem to know a Leah Weisz. Disappointed, Nadia surrenders herself completely to Adam but apparently he does not have the same things in mind and he leaves her. Completely dismayed, she takes a car and starts driving until she suddenly hits somebody. The man ends up in the hospital and he is the one to whom she addresses her tale.

In “True Kindness” an Israeli father buries his wife who died of cancer. His youngest son, Dovik, who immigrated to London and whom he has not spoken for many years, returns for this occasion to Jerusalem. After the funeral, Dovik stays with his father, Aaron, for a couple of days. Father and son never got along and many things remain unspoken between them. When one morning, Dovik is not sitting at the kitchen table as he used to do every day, his father begins to worry and converses with his son in his imagination. Everything he once wanted to say but was unable to, he now spills to his son.

“Swimming Holes” is the story told by Arthur Bender, an aged widower living in London. He tells us about his life together with his wife Lotte, who left the Continent before the war broke out as the leader of a Kindertransport to England. Lotte is a very mysterious and withdrawn woman who does not speak about her past or about her inner thoughts. She is a writer and confides her thoughts
to paper at the same large desk that keeps popping up throughout the story. At the end of her life she suffers from Alzheimer, and Arthur finds out that, long ago, before they met, she had a son whom she gave up for adoption. She never mentioned any of this to Arthur and after her death he starts looking for this lost son, only to learn from the latter’s adoption mother that the son died several years ago in an accident.

The fourth story, “Lies Told by Children”, is told by Isabel who relates how she met and fell in love with Yoav Weisz. Together with his sister Leah, Yoav lives in a great mansion in London that is packed with furniture. Their father is an antiques dealer who travels around the world in search of certain pieces of lost furniture. He rules over his children with an iron hand and because of this Leah and Yoav have a very special bond, almost on the verge of an incestuous relationship. Their father’s business is very important: people come to him because they want him to retrieve a chair, a bed, etc. from their childhood years before the war, out of pure nostalgia. George Weisz himself is also looking for a certain piece, namely the desk from his father’s study. In his house in Israel he tries to reconstruct the study of his father, which the family had to abandon because of the war. He is obsessed with this desk because it is the only piece left missing from the reconstructed study. In Part II of the novel, “Lies Told by Children” continues in the story “Weisz”. There it is not Isabel who is talking, but George Weisz himself. In a very short chapter, he explains his history and how he finally does find the desk he spent his whole life looking for. His daughter Leah possessed the desk for some time but refused to hand it over to her father, as a final act of rebellion against his tyrannical reign.

As readers, we try to retrace the history of the desk as well, just as the third generation tries to retrace their family history. The chronology of the four stories has been mixed up and the reader is expected to try to put the events back into their chronological order. As Arthur says: “[w]e search for patterns (...) only to find where the patterns break” (89), only to find that we never have access to the full story, that we cannot be completely certain of anything. Chronologically speaking the story
starts with Lotte who came to London on a *Kindertransport*. She received the desk as a gift from a former lover, presumably the father of the child she gives up for adoption. But we do not know this for sure, nor do we know how and when exactly the desk came in Lotte’s possession. In London she marries Arthur Bender and one night, Daniel Varsky stands at their front door. He claims to be an admirer of Lotte’s books and he and Lotte become very close. He reminds her of her own son who would probably be the same age by then, and therefore she gives him her desk; the desk Arthur always saw as a bit of a threat because it meant so much to his wife. We do not know if Varsky really was an admirer of her work or if he knew already that she possessed that desk. The reader is kept guessing. Varsky moves to New York where he lives for some time but then he decides to return to Chile to fight against Pinochet. Around that time, Nadia’s boyfriend leaves her and takes nearly all his furniture with him; so while she is in need of new furniture, Varsky needs someone to look after his furniture in case he decides to return to New York. A meeting is arranged through a mutual friend and Nadia receives Varsky’s furniture, including Lotte’s large desk with the many drawers. She writes at it for several years until one day she receives a phone call from Leah Weisz, who pretends to be Varsky’s daughter and claims the desk back. Her father, George Weisz, has spent his entire life looking for that desk to recreate his father’s study – he has even been to Arthur’s house to ask for it but by then the desk was already long gone – but Leah refuses to hand it over. In the meantime Nadia is suffering from a mental breakdown and she travels to Jerusalem. She falls in love with Adam and persuades him to bring her to the address Leah gave her. George Weisz answers the door but when she asks to see the desk, he pretends he does not know anyone named Leah. When Adam then turns her down as well, she steals a car and starts driving until, in the dark, she hits someone who is immediately taken to the hospital. This someone is Dovik, Aaron’s son, who was on one of his nighttime ramblings and to whom Nadia is now telling her tale. Afterwards, George Weisz travels to New York to find out what his daughter did with the desk. Apparently she has stored it in a warehouse and when he finally, after all these years, sees it again, “it almost surprised [him]: the disappointment,
then the relief of something at last sinking away” (289). What appears to be, at first sight, a collection of four individual stories, now clearly is one whole in which the chronological wanderings of a desk can be retraced.

3.3. Five Characteristics of Third-Generation Fiction

Just like Second Hand Smoke, Great House does not deal specifically with the Holocaust. It focuses on its aftermath and places the event in a wider perspective. For Krauss, as a third-generation novelist, the effects of the Holocaust are faded. Therefore, this novel deals more generally with an inherent feeling of loss. The Holocaust is still present but only beneath the surface. It never becomes any of the stories’ main focus. In many ways this novel is rather a-typical for the third generation as discussed above. I will first analyse the novel in the light of the five characteristics identified for third-generation fiction. Next, I will move on to a more detailed discussion of the historical and personal traumas in this novel.

The first characteristic that is applicable to this novel is that of mediation. Great House is not so much about unravelling the past of grandparents who survived a war, nor is it about grandchildren using their imagination to fill in the gaps within their family’s history. Nevertheless, the four stories in Great House are rendered with much mediation. For example, we learn about Dovik’s childhood through what his father remembers; but his father, being an old man, is bound to forget certain things or to have misinterpreted certain situations, hence giving the readers a biased view of his son. Similarly Arthur Bender tells us about his wife Lotte but because she has always been a very withdrawn person, we – just like Arthur himself – do not really know anything about her. He never succeeds at getting through to her deepest core. Because the five narrators (Nadia, Aaron, Arthur, Isabel and Weisz) each tell us the stories about their – and especially other people’s – lives, the overall story that is told to the reader is also very much mediated. The history is layered and the reader is confused because of this medley of voices: he can do nothing else than to trust the person
speaking. Or not. It is as if Nicole Krauss tries to retrace the period starting with the Second World War by introducing these different characters and their life stories. They live in different times and places and do not always have an immediate connection to the Holocaust, but each character has suffered his/her own trauma or loss. On the basis of these different generations of Jews, Krauss sketches the overall history from the late 1930s onwards. While this general history lingers in the back; it is the personal stories of the characters that matter. Because of these many voices the reader encounters difficulties reconstructing the fictional past (supra). The characters, who are not very forthcoming with information, often set the reader on a wrong track. There is nothing we know for certain; all we can do is guess.

What is striking in this novel is how some of the characters describe their dreams very extensively. This can, in a way, be linked to the second characteristic of third-generation fiction: the use of mythological and fairy tale elements. As I have already mentioned, *Great House* is not so much about retracing the past than about evoking a general sense of loss. Although Krauss does not really rely on fairy tales or myths to fill in the gaps in a family history, she sometimes creates a similar mystic sense through the description of these dreams. But an explanation or analysis of these dreams is never provided. The reader has to decide for him-/herself about the meaning and importance of the dreams. In the first chapter for example, Nadia recounts a dream about a man asking her to pull a red thread hanging from his mouth. She pulls and pulls until “he and I became joined in the conviction that something crucial lay at the end of that string” (Krauss, 2010: 19). This red thread hanging from the man’s mouth can refer to the thread linking the four different stories of the novel, namely the desk of Daniel Varsky. The reader then has to pull and pull to retrace the history of the desk, to go back to its origins, in the hope of finding something crucial at the end, which is precisely what third-generation fiction is often about. Another example is the reoccurring dream Yoav had when he was a child. He dreamt that he lived with his father and sister on a shore and that every night, with the tide, furniture would wash ashore. They brought this furniture into the
woods and assembled the pieces in rooms. Once, a lamp was found and his father plugged it into Yoav’s mouth to illuminate the rooms (119). This dream can possibly refer to the important role George Weisz plays in the lives of his children, how much he overshadows their lives and brings them under his yoke. Weisz wandered with his children around the world in search of furniture, and through this passion, or duty, as Leah calls it (“He was burdened with a sense of duty that commanded his whole life, and later ours” (115)), he dragged his children down with him. Isabel says: “[t]hey were prisoners of their father’s, locked within the walls of their own family, and in the end it wasn’t possible for them to belong to anyone else” (113). So the dreams described in this novel obviously carry some deeper meaning with them: on the level of the novel itself (third generation is trying to retrace the past) or on the level of the individual stories (Yoav’s dream as a symbol for the relationship with his father).

The motif of the quest, a third characteristic of third-generation fiction, really typifies this novel. The quest is present on two levels. On the highest level, the level of the novel itself, there is a quest to retrace the history of the desk. The reader engages in this challenge to investigate the past but this is by no means an easy challenge. As with many of the third-generation novels, here too scenes are missing from the story to make it extra hard for the reader to reconstruct the past. The fictional past is unknowable, both for the characters and the reader, which is comparable to the inaccessibility of the real past for the author. On a lower level as well, the level of the different stories, some of the characters go on a quest, in search of that one object they do not yet possess. The most striking example is that of George Weisz’s business. He explains his job to Arthur as follows:

Like a doctor, I listen without saying a word. But there’s one difference: when all of the talking is through, I produce a solution. It’s true, I can’t bring the dead back to life. But I can bring back the chair they once sat in, the bed where they slept (275).

People come to him to retrace furniture from their past. Beds, tables, closets they had to leave behind to flee from the Holocaust, or that were taken away from them by Nazis. Weisz searches for
these pieces and brings them back, or, if he cannot find the exact piece, he reproduces it. “Because he [the customer] needs it to be that bed where she once lay with him more than he needs to know the truth” (276). Weisz himself is also on a similar personal quest. He searches for the desk that once stood in his father’s study in Budapest before his parents were arrested by the Gestapo. In his own house in Jerusalem he tries to reassemble his father’s study, piece by piece. This is what Dori Laub also refers to when he states that a survivor “relentlessly holds on to, and searches for, what is familiar to [him] from [his] past” (Laub: 2004, 63). Leah describes it like this in a letter to Isabel: “[f]or forty years my father labored to reassemble that lost room, just as it looked until that fateful day in 1944. As if by putting all the pieces back together he might collapse time and erase regret” (Krauss, 2010: 116). By piecing the past back together, he is looking for redemption or healing (Whitehead, 2004: 55). But since Leah refuses to reveal the location of the desk, the one piece that is missing, no redemption is granted to Weisz. Weisz belongs to the first generation. Even though he was still a young boy when his parents were arrested, he carries the burden of losing them, of losing everything that was dear to him. He carries this trauma with him for the rest of his life and this burden is transferred onto his own children.

But Weisz is not the only one with a quest. Nadia too is in search of something she fears she will never possess. She is trying to write the perfect book. After Leah calls to claim Daniel Varsky’s desk, Nadia looks back upon her accomplishments as a writer and she is not at all pleased with them. She regards the desk with its many drawers as something that had helped her all these years to write her novels. “[A]s if they held the conclusion to a stubborn sentence (...) the radical break from everything I had ever written that would at least lead to the book I had always wanted, and always failed, to write” (Krauss, 2010: 16). Now that the desk is gone, the gift of writing leaves her as well. When Nadia leaves for Jerusalem, it is also in the hope of finding something there that she has missed all this time in New York. Maybe she can see the desk again and write her perfect book at
last. All her life she is looking for something higher, something that will lift her to a loftier state, far removed from the triviality of her own existence.

There are definitely unreliable narrators in Great House. As I have already mentioned, the five different characters who tell their stories cannot always be trusted. We do not know if they speak the truth or if they create their own version of the truth. For example, do we have to trust Varsky when he claims that his desk was formerly used by the poet Lorca? This mystery of the desk is never solved so the reader is left with many questions. The five narrators each reveal a small part of the overall story and it is the reader’s task to puzzle the pieces together. But the narrators do not tell us everything and their minds are wandering in a non-linear and non-chronological way, which makes it even harder for the reader. All of the characters try to reconstruct the past. Arthur Bender, for example, glances through his married life with Lotte, hoping to come across something that could finally reveal her mysteries and secrets to him. Because, when he discovers that she had a baby she gave up for adoption, he realises that all this time he has been married to a mystery; that he has never really known his wife.

On the one hand, Great House cannot be called a classic example of a third-generation novel, given that not all characteristics apply, but then of course that is something inherent to third-generation fiction: that, because the writers are so far removed from the traumatic event itself, they do not all deal with it in the same way. On the other hand, Great House is a typical third-generation novel, because it raises more questions than it provides us with answers.

3.4. An Extended Look

The Holocaust is not the only historical trauma present in this novel. Krauss widens her perspective to include other traumas of the twentieth century. Michael Rothberg emphasises the importance of such an inclusion in his book Multidirectional memory (2009). He makes a distinction
between multidirectional memory and competitive memory; the first one being the most desirable: “many people assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for pre-eminence” (Rothberg, 2009: 3). But this is not the case according to him. When combining different traumatic events, different collective memories, a “productive, intercultural dynamic” arises, that can “create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice” (Rothberg, 2009: 3-5). By introducing other traumas in a third-generation novel, Krauss also brings to attention the fact that the genocide of the European Jews is not the only trauma of the twentieth century. In Great House she connects three different historical traumas: the dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile, the Yom Kippur war in Israel and the Holocaust. All of the characters are confronted, directly or indirectly, with at least one of these three traumatic events. The trauma in Chile haunts the whole novel and returns in almost each of the four stories through the person of Daniel Varsky and his desk. Krauss herself says in an interview with Jan Stevens that, for some time, she was obsessed with Chile and what had happened there. She put all of her fears in the character of Varsky who does not say a single word in the novel, but who carries the darkness of the Pinochet period throughout the whole story.\textsuperscript{17}

Nadia is most directly affected by this. Varsky follows her everywhere and overshadows her life. “I don’t know if I knew about Villa Grimaldi yet, (...) but whatever the case I knew enough that at other times, having fallen asleep on Daniel’s sofa as I often did, I had nightmares about what they did to him” (Krauss, 2010: 13). When she travels to Jerusalem and meets Adam, she immediately falls for him because he reminds her so much of Varsky: “[t]he sight of his young face, of his big nose and full lips and his long hair that I knew would smell like a dirty river, sent a shock through me no greater than if the boy I’d known for one night so long ago had at last emerged” (215). She puts herself into

\textsuperscript{17} Jan Stevens. “We houden van de illusie dat de wereld zin heeft.” Interview met Nicole Krauss. Knack 41:10 (2011): 88.
Adam’s hands because he makes her feel 24 again and she enjoys immensely the attention of the young man. In her mind, she constantly mixes up Adam and Varsky. When she is having dinner with Adam, “[she] thought of his dead mother, (...) and then the needle of [her] mind slipped and it was Daniel Varsky’s mother [she] was imagining” (224). Similarly, in the life of Arthur Bender and his wife Lotte, Varsky plays an important role. One night, Daniel Varsky rings the door of Arthur and Lotte, claiming that he is a great fan of Lotte’s writing. Arthur is rather intimidated by the relationship between his wife and that Chilean poet. It is only later that he discovers the reason for the intimacy between them: Varsky probably reminds Lotte very much of the son she gave away for adoption years ago. When Arthur first discovers that Lotte once had a child, “[i]t wasn’t long before [his] mind arrived, inevitably, at the ghost of Daniel Varsky. (...) [H]e would have been almost exactly the same age as her child. (...) [S]uddenly [Arthur] understood what had drawn her to him [Varsky]” (103).

Lotte is also very upset when she finds out what has happened to Varsky, and she cries when she hears that he had been arrested, tortured and killed by Pinochet’s secret police. After letting go of her parents to come to London, and putting up her son for adoption, she now loses whom she considers a son.

In the interview in Knack, Nicole Krauss links the coup of Pinochet in Chile with the Yom Kippur war herself, because both events took place in 1973. She includes these two historical events, which at a first glance have nothing to do with each other, to express the idea that the world is connected, and to create a sense of unity. On a higher level, this is exactly what Great House is about: the four stories are, at first sight, unrelated, but, when one takes a closer look, they all turn out to be connected. The Yom Kippur war particularly plays a great role in the story of True Kindness, where father Aaron addresses his youngest son, Dovik. Aaron himself has fought in several wars: the Israeli independence war of 1948 and the Suez-war in 1956. These experiences have made of him a

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stern man who believes in a strict upbringing of his sons. Perhaps he is traumatised by these wars but he does not consider them important enough to talk about. “Did I have nightmares afterwards? Did I scream out in the night? Pass over it. What’s the use of going into these things?” (49). This “pass over it” returns a few times in his account; he is not a man of many words who exposes his feelings easily. When the Yom Kippur war breaks out in October 1973, both his sons go to war. What Uri goes through is not explicitly mentioned, but Dovik experiences something terrible and returns home completely traumatised: “[w]hen you came home at last you were neither the soldier I had watched disappear into the crowd, nor the boy I knew. You were a kind of shell, emptied out of both of those people” (186). This is one of the main reasons Dovik and his father do not get along: both of them deal with their problems in a completely opposite way. The experiences of the war had left such an impact on Dovik that, at first, he refuses to talk about it; only in time does he testify to his mother. He completely cuts himself off from the rest of the world, to his father’s great frustration of course, who cannot understand this. Aaron and his wife often fight over their son and the situation in the household is tense: “[w]e failed each other then, she and I. (...) Maybe she was right (...) about a lack of generosity in the way I viewed your reaction to the tragedy that had befallen you. You ceased to live” (189). Eventually, Dovik can no longer stay in Israel and he moves to London to study law. There are too many memories in Israel and he flees from the country where his trauma keeps following him.

The Holocaust is most present in the story of Weisz and his children. Weisz, as I have already mentioned, had to leave Budapest to flee from the Nazis. In an attempt to cling onto the past he retraces furniture for people who are in search for a long lost piece, a bed or table that has been lost because of the war and that they need to see one more time, so they can linger once again in the presence of the people they lost. But the Holocaust is also present in Lotte and Arthur’s story, given that Lotte came to London accompanying a Kindertransport and had to leave behind everything and everyone she had ever known. She rarely speaks about her past. Arthur says: “Lotte was a mystery to
At the center of her was her abysmal loss” (79). In the stories and novels she wrote, there was never a reference to her past or Germany “[b]ut there was a story buried near the end that touched on the horror” (88).

3.5. Personal Traumas and the Burdens of Inheritance

The three historical traumas I mentioned above are not the only traumas present in this novel. All of the characters also suffer from a personal trauma in their past or present, and the desk symbolises all of these. It is as if each of its many drawers holds one of the characters’ traumas. All characters have also suffered a loss and Varsky’s desk is also a metaphor for these losses. Great House is very much a story about “the burdens of inheritance”.\(^{19}\) The traumas and losses are passed on and infect the next generations. Krauss herself, being a mother of two children, has thought much about what we pass on to our children, and considers the desk as a symbol for the emotional inheritance we receive from our parents.\(^{20}\)

First, there is Nadia, who had a sad childhood, and this inevitably affected her later life: “my loneliness, or the fear and sadness of the years I spent inside the bitter capsule of my parents’ marriage, after all, who isn’t a survivor from the wreck of childhood?” (200). She survived because she believed she possessed a unique strength and was chosen for a better life, which is how she became a writer. But her miserable childhood is probably the reason she has difficulty exposing herself and connecting to others. She has been married to S (who remains rather unimportant and therefore anonymous throughout the novel) for several years but eventually that did not work out. S says to her: “[y]ou’re lost in your own world, Nadia, in the things that happen there, and you’ve

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locked all the doors” (38). It is because of the difficulties she has with her writing, that her marriage with S falls apart. She was so busy trying to write the perfect book, that “[she]’d hardly stopped to think of how S might have felt (...) when he walked through the door of [their] home and found his wife silent, with back turned and shoulders hunched so as to defend her little kingdom” (39). They sometimes think of having children, but Nadia feels as if they are not ready for this yet. She is afraid to bear such heavy responsibility and “to make a mess of it” (210), because she herself never had a happy childhood. But throughout her story, she frequently hears a child’s cry or laugh, never knowing where it comes from. The cries remain with her and bewilder her; as if her subconscious is trying to tell her something, to persuade her to have children. Similarly, when she meets Adam in Jerusalem, it is not only lust that draws her to him, but also something else: “it was also a kind of tenderness, as if I might be able to lessen the pain I had seen in the face he had wiped away with his sleeve” (228).

Aaron, too, has had his share of traumas and losses. I have already mentioned that he fought several wars and witnessed gruesome scenes, but he considers this unimportant (“pass over it”) and mentions it only in about ten sentences. What shocked him most, was the death of his wife to cancer and the knowledge that he is now alone in this world. His youngest son Dovik has experienced some traumas as well. Similar to Nadia, his childhood was not a happy one. He got along very well with his mother but not at all with his father: “[in] the wells of your eyes your mother saw the suffering of a child raised by a tyrant” (47). His father has always been a physical, practical man, in strong contrast with Dovik, who is more emotional and who lives in his own mind. The problems started already at a very early age when he began to have fits when something was not exactly his way. He was “[a] strange boy, who grew inward from the beginning” (70). Aaron does not understand what takes place in Dovik’s mind and his constant suffering frustrates him because:

When I was your age (...) there was nothing to eat, and no money for toys (...) but we went outside and played and made games out of nothing and lived because we had our lives, while the others were being murdered in the pogroms (...) And look at you! You have everything in the world, and all you do is shriek your head off and make everyone’s life miserable! (73).
Later, when Dovik returns from the Yom Kippur war, he shuts himself off from the outside world even more. Again, his father cannot deal with this, but eventually, “I never gave up being your father” (197). Since he cannot address his son in real life, he talks to him in his imagination. And when he dies, the only stone on his grave that will matter will be Dovik’s because “[t]he stone that can mean so many things to a Jew, but in your hand could mean only one” (196), namely, forgiveness.

In the third story, of Arthur and Lotte, the desk again symbolises the traumatic losses Lotte has gone through during her life. She cannot easily separate from the desk because it has been given to her, presumably – but not for sure – by her former lover and the father of her child. It Remind her of everything she had to leave behind when she left the Continent just before the war. It is only when she meets Daniel Varsky, who reminds her so much of her own child, that she is able to part with her desk. Giving up her child was the greatest loss Lotte ever experienced and she feels guilty about it her whole life. Because of this trauma she is incapable of raising and loving another child. It would not be fair to love one when she abandoned another, and she too is afraid of what she could pass on to a new child. Arthur himself cannot grasp how his wife, with whom he had shared 48 years of his life, “was capable of coolly giving her child away to a stranger” (266). Lotte has not only lost her whole family and her child; at the end of her life, suffering from Alzheimer, she also loses her memory. But Arthur does not consider this another terrible loss; he looks at it in a different way: “the loss of her mind at the end, made grotesque sense: a way for her to leave me effortlessly, slipping away an immeasurable amount each hour of each day, all to avoid a final, crushing goodbye” (253).

Finally, in “Lies Told by Children”, the Weisz family is also quite familiar with loss. Yoav and Leah have lost their mother, who died at a very young age. It is probably because of this lack of a mother figure and the many travels of their father that the siblings cling so much to each other. George Weisz himself is obsessed with the loss of his parents, who were rounded up by the Nazis;
and it is as if, by re-creating his father’s study, he is trying to undo the past. His family life got destroyed when the Nazis burst into their home in Budapest in 1944. The riddle at the beginning of the very last chapter refers to this:

A RIDDLE: A stone is thrown in Budapest on a winter night in 1944. It sails through the air toward the illuminated window of a house where a father is writing a letter at his desk, a mother is reading, and a boy is daydreaming (...). At that moment the life they know ceases to exist. Where does the stone land? (283).

The stone lands many years later, many miles further, even in a different generation. But even though the place and time where it lands are so far removed from the place and moment where and when it had been thrown, the effect is no less pervasive. The traumatic event is passed on to a later generation who suffers from what happened in the past. Yoav and Leah suffer very much under the burden of their father’s inheritance. He only wants the best for them but by controlling their life in such a way, he nearly suffocates them. George Weisz is a man used to getting what he wants and it is therefore extremely difficult to refuse him, but he tries to push his children in a lifestyle they do not want for themselves at all. “[I]t was not within the realm of possibility for them to refuse their father. He ruled over them not with an iron fist or a temper, but rather with the unspoken threat (...) of the consequences of even the slightest discord” (165). The desk connects the traumas and losses of all the characters, and the consequences of these on the lives of later generations. As Krauss herself explains: Great House is “a novel whose many parts are connected, sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely, by the movements of that enormous desk”.21

3.6. The Titles

With her titles, Nicole Krauss tries to capture some of the ideas inherent to the third generation and their fiction. They all carry some deeper meaning that can be linked to dealing with (transmitted) trauma and loss. First of all, the title of the novel itself carries multiple meanings,

relevant to both the content of the novel, as to the formal lay-out. In the second part of “Swimming Holes”, George Weisz himself provides an explanation for the title of the novel. When visiting Arthur Bender to inquire about the desk, he tells him the story of rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Ben Zakkai’s goal was to “[t]urn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book (...) Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form” (279). His scholars created, by arguing over the laws, the Talmud. This school later became known as the Great House, after a phrase in the Book of Kings: “He burned the house of God, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire” (279). But apart from this novel-intrinsic explanation, Nicole Krauss also gives us another clarification. For in an interview in De Standaard she says that “her novels are like old houses of which the roof may leak”. The novel is actually one great house, harbouring different stories in different rooms. “As a writer it is my job to discover the coherence between the stories and to find the structure of the novel, the house”. And this is precisely what the reader engages in as well. This very same idea is symbolised by the desk, with its many different drawers which all contain something else, and which form one whole. The one drawer that remains closed throughout the novel can refer to the fact that we can never get a full view of the past, nor of the present, and definitely not of the future.

Apart from that, a great house can also be a symbol of solitude and loneliness. Even Nadia’s small apartment feels like a great house because she is lonely. In attempting to make her place feel like home, it is crammed with furniture to create a safe haven. Weisz had to abandon his house when he was a young boy and in recreating the study of his father, he tries to bring back that cosy feeling of the past, of his former home. This is also why Isabel likes to visit Freud’s former home. Similarly to


Weisz, Freud’s family reassembled his study piece by piece. She concludes: “[m]aybe all exiles try to re-create the place they’ve lost out of their fear of dying in a strange place” (110).

The titles of the four different stories also carry a deeper meaning. In the first one, “All Rise”, Nadia is talking to Dovik in the hospital because she hit him with her car. Dovik used to be a judge in London before he quit to come back home to Jerusalem and his father. She addresses him with ‘Your Honor’ and the title of the chapter also refers back to the legal jargon. It is as if she is testifying to him about everything that went wrong in her life, eager to justify herself. The importance of an uninterrupted testimony is something I have mentioned in the first chapter on trauma theory. Confessing enables a person to work through his/ her trauma. The title of “True Kindness” is explained in Aaron’s account itself. He is telling Dovik that, even though he could never do it in real life, in his head he addresses him for every little problem, to chat about unimportant things, or to talk about his thoughts after witnessing something horrible like the bombing of bus 18. The people who come to clean up the mess after such a bombing call themselves ‘True Kindness’, “because the dead cannot repay the favour” (198). These people too, facilitate the working through the trauma of losing a family member for the relatives.

“All Rise” refers to the cold water ponds Lotte dives in every morning. It is one of the rituals between Arthur and Lotte to make their lives easier. But the swimming holes also carry a deeper meaning: they stand for the mysterious depth of Lotte’s life. When she dives into that black water, she disappears into a place where Arthur cannot follow her, just as when she withdraws into her own mind. She is inscrutable, a mystery to him. Arthur can thus never get fully through to this wife, just like the reader can never know every secret the novel is hiding, and just like the third generation never has fully access to a family history.

In the last story, “Lies Told by Children”, the title alludes to Yoav and Leah who lie to their father all the time. George Weisz interrogates his children almost as if they are suspects in a case.
Partly because they do not want to worry their father, but also partly because it is the only way to get out from under his yoke, the children make up stories about parties and events they have never attended. Yoav “lied with grace, without the slightest hint of guilt” (163). While witnessing this scene, Isabel gets filled with guilt because she herself tells her parents all kinds of lies about her work at Oxford, while she is almost never there. She is afraid of disappointing her parents, because she received opportunities they never even dreamt about, and now she is letting them down and is even lying about it. Weisz has, similar to Isabel’s parents, high expectations for his children. This is something that frequently returns with children of the second generation (supra). These parents want their children to make something of their lives, they want them to be successful. The children on the other hand, are not interested in the path their parents have delineated but they do not want to let them down or to worry them. They suffer from the burden that is placed on their shoulders and rebel against it, but mostly only in a hidden form.

Perhaps Great House is indeed not a stereotypical third-generation novel, but it clearly deals with many subjects that are central in third-generation fiction: the search for an unknowable past, the difficulties of dealing with trauma and loss, and the hint that everything is connected. Besides, the novel is also clearly structured as a third-generation work of fiction: the story is layered and rendered with much mediation, and the narrators cannot always be trusted. In Great House all the different voices and confessions lead back to one point: the desk of Federico García Lorca. All the characters are connected to it indirectly or directly and it symbolises the traumas and losses in their lives. The losses they wish to restore or at least remember through this desk.
4. **A Comparison Between *Second Hand Smoke* and *Great House***

4.1. Thematic Level

Both *Second Hand Smoke* and *Great House* focus on the aftermath of the Holocaust instead of on the event itself. The novels look very different and they handle their subjects in a very different manner but we can see that they more or less deal with the same themes. One of the most important themes that can be found in both novels is that of loss, and how to deal with it. Thane Rosenbaum, as a member of the second generation, writes about life as a child of survivors; something that very closely corresponds to his personal experiences. Nicole Krauss on the other hand, being further removed from the Holocaust, widens her perspective, covering multiple generations and including other traumas. But both deal with the concept of loss, because it is inherent to their family’s history. In *Second Hand Smoke*, Duncan lacks a family. He has nobody but his parents; grandparents, aunts and uncles, were all lost in the war. This is what Eva Hoffman has called transferred loss (supra). Even though he has never known these people and this family history, he is haunted by an immense feeling of loss. Duncan did not even consider his parents as close family. When they died, he did not really miss them because all his life he had felt alone. That is also why he is so afraid to lose his wife and daughter. He finally belongs to a family, one that is not yet branded by loss and trauma, and he cannot bear to lose them as well. Isaac has also been familiar with loss throughout his life: his mother abandoned him, his father died when he was still a young boy and his wife killed herself. Isaac’s losses are therefore much more explicit than Duncan’s. But unlike Duncan, Isaac has learned to mourn and to grieve, which is why he is better able to deal with these losses. When the two brothers meet, part of their loss is restored. They have discovered something of their past and are no longer alone in the world. Together they can finally mourn about the loss of their mother.
In *Great House* each character has experienced loss as well. Nadia has lost her grandparents, and her husband left her; Aaron has lost his wife to cancer and his youngest son moved to London; Arthur has lost his wife Lotte, who died of pneumonia; Lotte herself has lost her whole family during the war and she lost her son by giving him up for adoption; George Weisz lost his parents in the war and later on his wife passed away, leaving Yoav and Leah with the loss of their mother. And the greatest loss, one that haunts the whole novel, is that of Daniel Varsky, imprisoned and tortured to death by Pinochet's secret police. His desk symbolises the losses of all the other characters. There is a striking parallel between Mila in *Second Hand Smoke* and Lotte in *Great House*. Both women have abandoned their son: one left him in Poland with his father, and another gave him away for adoption to an unknown couple. But both women feel immensely guilty, and they suffer their whole life from this burden. In the end, they are unable to part from life carrying such a secret, and they want to confess. Mila does this to the three nurses in the hospital and even to Duncan (intentionally or not), who at that time does not know what she is mumbling about. When at the end of her life, Lotte suffers from Alzheimer, she runs away to a magistrate to “report a crime” (Krauss, 2010: 101) and she too confesses that she gave up her child.

Another recurring theme in both of the novels is the emphasis on family ties. The relationships between parents and their children, and between siblings, play a very important role. In *Second Hand Smoke* the relationship between Duncan and his parents is not a very smooth one. “He may have been born into the family, but he was never accepted into its inner circle” (Rosenbaum, 1999: 8). Traumas are passed on from generation to generation. He has been contaminated with his parents’ Holocaust trauma and unintentionally passes this on to his own daughter as well, who herself suffers from the divorce of her parents. In *Great House* as well, the relationship between parents and their children is not optimal either. Aaron gets along very well with his son Uri, in contrast to his youngest son Dovik, with whom he has always had a painful relationship. “When she [his wife] died I called Uri first. (...) it was Uri who came when the garage door was stuck, Uri when
the stupid DVD player was on the fritz (...) Uri who drove her to the chemotherapy twice a week. And you, my son? Where were you during all of that?” (Krauss, 2010: 49). Uri was the son he could be proud of; with Dovik on the other hand, he did not really know what he was supposed to do. Similarly, in the story of the Weisz family, the bond between George Weisz and his children Yoav and Leah is rather ambivalent. George loves his children very deeply but he tries to push them in a direction they do not wish for themselves. He rules over them with an iron fist and they cannot get out of this imprisonment that impedes them in their growth towards independence.

Whereas – and perhaps because – the relationship between parents and their children is not superb in both novels, the bond between siblings is very strong. Although Duncan and Isaac do not get along well from the very beginning, because they are completely each other’s opposites, they grow to each other throughout the novel and create a strong brotherly feeling. In Great House as well, Yoav and Leah have a very special and intimate relationship. They depend on each other to deal with their father, just as Isaac and Duncan depend on each other to deal with the loss of their mother and to finally work through the trauma. Yoav and Leah are almost one: “frequently he spoke of the two of them collectively” (Krauss, 2010: 140). But eventually Leah cannot take it anymore. After their father killed himself, “[they] went home to the house in Jerusalem. And [they] stopped living” (Krauss, 2010: 116). She has to leave her brother and create distance between them because otherwise it would mean the end for both of them.

One important difference between the two novels is the ending. Whereas Second Hand Smoke ends very positively, Great House ends with a rather depressing note. In the final paragraph of the last chapter George Weisz finally reaches what he has been questing for his whole life: his father’s desk. He says: “[h]ow often I had witnessed it in others, and yet, now it almost surprised me: the disappointment, then the relief of something at last sinking away” (Krauss, 2010: 289). At first sight this sentence indicates a feeling of closure: the relief of finally possessing the object of his
quest, of finally being able to let go of that obsession with the desk. But, when taking a closer look, we discover that the story really ends with Weisz’s suicide, which is obviously not a very constructive ending. This characteristic really typifies the third generation: clearly not everything has been worked through. The third generation does not crave for closure because they are aware that it is impossible to reach. What they want is to remember and investigate, because there will always be things that will remain undiscovered. The second generation also wants this but, contrary to the third, they are more eager to reach closure. They want to close off a chapter to work through their trauma. This does not mean that they want to forget, only that they want to learn to live with it. Rosenbaum’s novel ends on a remarkably constructive note. Duncan and Isaac are standing at their mother’s grave, and are finally able to say goodbye. With the help of his brother, Duncan has managed to grow past his trauma and he can now forgive his mother. “Four pebbles and one pysanka lined up on Mila’s gravestone, silently bearing witness to the memory of the life that stirred within” (Rosenbaum, 1999: 303). This can be linked to Royal’s interview with Rosenbaum where he states that, in fiction, redemptiveness can be obtained (2007: 4).

4.2. Formal Level

In spite of the many correspondences between the two novels on the thematic level, there are many differences on the formal level. Second Hand Smoke is a more traditional novel than Great House. There is an omniscient narrator who shifts from Duncan’s to Mila’s to Isaac’s story. The reader knows more than the characters because of this, but he/ she is kept in suspense. By constantly shifting perspectives and moving backwards and forwards in time, the reader only discovers the story bit by bit. For example, we do not know about Mila’s secret straight away but we learn about it as she is revealing it to her nurses. Already at p. 151, she confesses how she left her son behind and fled from Poland. But it is only almost a hundred pages later that we find out what has happened exactly and what her deepest secret is (the branding of baby Isaac with her camp
The reader is placed in the same position as the author, who discovers his or her personal history only gradually (if the past is revealed at all). But, contrary to the third generation, the second generation has greater access to the past. They can never grasp it fully, relying on second-hand knowledge that can never provide a complete image, but they stand closer to the event than the third generation, who can rely only to documents or third-hand knowledge that provide even a more biased view.

In Great House there is no omniscient narrator but we hear five different voices, each telling their own version of the facts. By doing this, Krauss leaves the reader often groping in the dark, not knowing what to make of certain events in the stories. After finishing the novel, there are still many uncertainties left: was Varsky’s desk really originally owned by the poet Lorca? Who once gave the desk to Lotte? George Weisz knows the answer to this last question and he writes the man’s address on a note for Arthur Bender but he, not wanting to disturb the past for his own reassurance, burns the note without looking at it. So the reader never gets to know the answer to the mystery either.

Krauss’s writing style recreates the difficulties the third generation has trying to unveil the past. The different storylines intersect and it is not immediately clear in what way they are related. Only as the stories unravel do the links between them get clearer. Second Hand Smoke, on the other hand, is a much more straightforward narrative. The shifts in time and perspective do not make it easy to untangle the past, but the great difference is that the reader is able to more or less untangle the past in Second Hand Smoke, and that is not the case in Great House, which keeps many of its secrets safely in the desk’s locked drawer.
5. Conclusion

In this thesis I have analysed two novels, one belonging to the second generation of American Jews, and one to the third, with the aim to investigate how these two generations deal with the trauma of the Holocaust. I have first provided a theoretical framework about respectively the second and the third generation of American Jews and their fictional work. I want to emphasise again that the characteristics, both of the second and third generation themselves, as of their fictional work, are general characteristics and therefore definitely not applicable to every American Jew(ish author) belonging to those generations.

The second generation is generally typified by a feeling of loss – transferred loss. They are infected with the primary trauma of their parents, being confronted with it almost every day. It is nearly impossible to break loose off this trauma, but one way of dealing with it is by writing about it. Many authors of the second generation write to get a grip on the trauma of their parents, and consequently also of themselves. Because they are re-traumatised by something they never experienced themselves but which haunts their existence, their fiction is interspersed both with an imagined past and an unimaginable present.

The third generation, being further removed from the event of the Holocaust, is not that marked by the trauma of their grandparents. The effects of the trauma are blurring and, even though the memory – or better, the postmemory – still lives, this generation is less affected than the second. They can hardly be called ‘traumatised’ and are more interested in investigating their effaced history. Because of this, their fiction often does not deal with the Holocaust as such, but places this event in a broader perspective of general trauma. The five characteristics I have summed up (supra) are interesting and extremely useful to analyse third-generation fiction, but can certainly not always be found in every third-generation novel.
Second Hand Smoke, as an example of the second generation, clearly deals with the after-effects of the Holocaust. In this novel, Rosenbaum does not really try to imagine the past of his family but focuses on the here and now, depicting the life of a second-generation child in a family that is scarred by the Holocaust. He shows how his main character, Duncan Katz, is affected by the trauma of his parents; how their primary trauma influences and marks his own life. Rosenbaum beautifully illustrates how each person individually deals with his/her trauma and how trauma is being passed on across generations, not only on a thematic level, but also on the formal level by the use of repetition of images and scenes.

In Great House, Nicole Krauss combines four different stories by four different persons, that, at first view, have nothing to do with each other, but, when taking a closer look, seem all intertwined. By linking stories from different times and places – primarily by Lorca’s desk – she too concentrates on this circularity and repetition. Krauss does not only pay attention to the trauma of the Holocaust, but includes other traumas of the previous century as well, like the dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile and the Yom Kippur war. The storytellers each talk about the traumas, losses and difficulties in their lives and in a way, they are all looking for some kind of redemption.

I have tried to make clear within the scope of this thesis, that there is indeed a continuation between second- and third-generation fictional work. Trauma representation obviously plays a very important role in the second-generation’s novels, but the interest in it certainly does not die out in the following generation. It merely intertwines with other, more general topics, as we can see in Nicole Krauss’s novel. With their writing, both Thane Rosenbaum and Nicole Krauss emphasise the difficulties one encounters when trying to understand the past and its traumas. The second and the third generation approach their history in their own peculiar way, but the similarity lies in the fact that they are still, after all these years, very much intrigued by this history, and this is reflected in their fiction.
Bibliography


