In this chapter, I will discuss diaries by children and young people – those Holocaust works which appear most fully to unite the time of events with the time of writing. The strong appeal of Holocaust diaries in general arises from the fact that here alone, of all the literary genres I have discussed, present-tense narration does not entail the temporal separation of character from narrator. Diaries written by children and teenagers during the Holocaust years are striking and unusual documents and texts. They offer the impression of a return to the moment of events unfolding. Yet the writers of the diaries I discuss here are conscious of the limitations as well as the possibilities of the diary form, and all take this form to its temporal and structural limits.

Introduction: documentary or testimony?

The diary as a genre has been little considered in literary-critical terms. Even the fictional diary has not been widely analysed. In general, the diary is viewed as an artless, amateur form which is neither literary nor historical. Most studies of autobiography tend not to mention the diary; while autobiography and the diary are not synonymous, the ‘journal intime’ in particular has a strong autobiographical strand in its focus on the writer’s subjectivity. Alain Girard argues that the ‘journal intime’ is characterized by an emphasis on the diarist’s private rather than exterior life, on public events as they affect him or her, and that the diary’s ‘privacy’ is guaranteed by a lack of intention to publish. The counterpart of the ‘journal intime’ is the ‘journal externe’ or chronicle of public and historical events without emphasis on the writer’s life or subjectivity. This absence of critical attention is surprising, since the diary has great narrative potential in its representation of time, voice and viewpoint.
Although the fictional diary has been criticized for avoiding ‘the laborious tasks of narrative focalisation or temporal reconfigurations of plot’, both fiction and non-fiction diaries possess a distinctive narrative structure. While the memoir is characterized by retrospection, overview and integration, an awareness of historical irony, and the creation of suspense, the diary is characterized by a focus on temporal duration, accumulation and extent. Even at this level, however, the Holocaust diary does not follow the usual pattern; as Lawrence Langer points out, it is characterized by disintegration – of the familial, communal and even personal continuity usually presupposed by the *journal intime* – and by narrative disintegration, as I shall argue.

Susan Rubin Suleiman argues that the non-fiction diary is also characterized by contingency and factuality: contingency in the sense that ‘the day-to-day unfolding of the story […] necessarily escapes the foreknowledge and control of the writer’, factuality because the diary ‘guarantees’ that an event took place, on the date indicated […] I who am writing now was there to witness it or hear about it or experience it’. Suleiman’s plea for contingency supports Michael André Bernstein’s notion of the diary as the ultimate expression of sideshadowing, in the sense that it must present a range of outcomes and cannot prioritize those that turned out to take precedence. However, Suleiman’s assertion of the diary’s factuality is less compelling. The only event ‘guaranteed’ to have taken place by the diary is the act of recording itself, as all accounts of events must be *interpretations* due to the diary’s part-subjective, part-historical nature, and to its writer’s proximity to the events recorded. One of the diaries I discuss below, Ana Novac’s record of Auschwitz and Plaszów, shows this clearly, as the diarist is aware that the act of writing in the camps is itself worthy of note. Novac also puts into question the very notion of an ‘event’: most of the ‘facts’ of Novac’s diary involve subjective accounts of other inmates and the camp personnel, details of food and clothing. Similarly, an anonymous diary written by a boy in the Łódź Ghetto consists largely of commentary on the difficulty of keeping a diary, and meditations on the ‘rumours’ – as opposed to news or facts – that the ghetto inhabitants are subject to. Indeed, James Young argues that while Holocaust testimony, including the diary, endorses the authenticity of an account – in its eye-witness proximity to the events recorded – it does not necessarily endorse that account’s factuality.

Equally, there are few studies of Holocaust diaries – of which children’s and teenagers’ are a subsection – although a relatively large number of such diaries exist, of which a substantial percentage has been published.