Fairy tales are moral fantasies, tales filled with mystical creatures more powerful than their physically inferior mortal counterparts, who often rely on morality and intellect to deliver them from evil. The fairy tale provides, in all cultures, a social consciousness that awakens our most primitive notions of fear, hope, and good over evil. Little Red Riding Hood's wanderings evoke the trials of any young girl or boy confronted by one capable of great harm. The wicked lurk, waiting to use their supernatural abilities to corrupt innocence. Seducing Hansel and Gretel with cakes and candy allows the witch to easily assume the role as maternal replacement for the wretched step-mother who disposes the children in her charge. The step-mother archetype serves two essential purpose, to force the children into the world and learn to remind the children that adults have their own wants too. In adult fiction, the fairy tale motif addresses the psychological triumph over nightmare, tyranny, domination, and confinement. The plot, symbolic imagery, and moral questions of good and evil in Grimm's "Hansel and Gretel" provide a sketch for Murphy's adult tale of tyranny, lost innocence, wickedness, goodness, hope, and independence.

"Tales of Grabowski" belongs to the documentary end of Holocaust fiction's spectrum, shadowing John Auerbach's own experience of escaping the Warsaw ghetto, then surviving the war by impersonating a Polish gentile and working in the German shipyards. His young hero, David Gordon, a classically educated, philosophically complex Jewish man who transforms himself into Wladyslaw Grabowski, a cog in the German war machine. In his writing, Auerbach's postwar working life in the Israeli merchant marine, combines a wide erudition with a blunt, almost primitivist stylistic beauty. The two create a nearly unbearable authenticity of description, transforming memory into art while rescuing historical details that might never otherwise have been known. (Another, more wide-ranging volume of Auerbach's short fiction, "The Owl: And Other Stories," has also been released by the same publisher.)

In the Warsaw ghetto, Gordon experiences the slow degradation caused by starvation and disease, as well as a host of sudden humiliations, including the sight of venerable rabbis being tormented by Nazi youths. But Auerbach captures rarer glimpses of history, like the claustrophobia produced by listening to loudspeakers that repeat "endlessly, a million times, hammering it into human skulls, that Germany was winning the war on all fronts, that this was the reality, the only reality."

Throughout this book, Auerbach reveals the surprising faces of goodness and evil. On the one hand, a Polish sergeant risks his life to allow Gordon to escape capture by the Germans: "God knows what they plan to do with you, with Jews, once they've got you in their claws." Conversely, a Polish acquaintance of Gordon's casually reminisces about his student days, in which he and his friends had the "usual fun of chasing the Jews around a little bit." Gordon remembers this "little bit" all too well: "two or three Jewish students killed, others with faces cut by razor blades stuck in a walking cane."

There is also a wonderful portrait of the lived reality under the competing and complementary tensions of anti-Semitism and nationalism, as well as the two equally consuming attitudes toward Soviet Marxism: passionate hatred and blind servitude. These are the forces expressed in one of the book's strongest characters, a former Polish officer who hates the Nazis for their easy conquest of his country but hates the Soviets just as bitterly and in whom anti-Semitism is forever ingrained by his suffering at the hands of a Jewish Red Army officer.
Auerbach's intention is, however, not documentary but artistic -- the question of identity and its philosophical implications troubles Gordon deeply. Wladyslaw Grabowski means to forget David Gordon, and he means to escape the shipyard in Danzig for Sweden. Neither project works. Finally the two men merge in an unexpected way: awaiting the chance to escape, Grabowski is recruited as an intelligence agent; at great risk, he gathers tiny details about the activities of the shipyard and puts them into a pipeline that ends on a desk in London. It is a world Graham Greene and Alan Furst have visited; Auerbach invests it with authenticity both would deeply admire.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of Holocaust fiction is Louise Murphy's purely imaginative novel, "The True Story of Hansel and Gretel," a retelling of the classic fairy tale set in and around a tiny Polish town during the war. Here the father is a Jewish man who has desperately protected his children during the family's flight from both the Nazis and the Soviets, but who has lost his wife in the process. The cruel stepmother is the determined Jewish woman with whom he and the children are fleeing. These four are at the very edge of being caught by German soldiers when the woman insists on abandoning the man's son and daughter: "Your children will be dead if they catch us. . . . Leave the children, and we'll all have a chance." The witch Hansel and Gretel find in the woods is a marvelously drawn old crone, part Polish and part Gypsy, who takes them in and shelters them, making no distinction between these children and her own kin.

It's no surprise that a writer should feel the archetypal pull of a fairy tale when dealing with Poland under the Nazis. But Murphy uses the Grimms' story as only the most external outline for the narrative she builds in the tiny Polish forest community that gives shelter -- unwittingly, since most residents are suffering such terrible privation that they have virtually forgotten the long-gone village Jews -- to the two children through the long last winter of the war.

After the experiential vividness of Auerbach's stories, one might expect a diminished sense of reality in Murphy's novel, but that is never the case. Her evocation of this fictional Polish town feels every bit as real as the Poland of Auerbach's memories: the Nazi commander demanding that the children recite the ranks of the German Army; the partisans lurking in the woods -- Jews, Poles and Russians coexisting until, with the end of the war, their mutual hatreds are given free expression. Murphy also captures the polarity of good and evil in such times. As one character says (and one suspects that Auerbach might agree): "Every Pole who isn't a devil is an angel."

A critic can give only the barest sense of the insights provided by these two contributions to the literature of the Holocaust, and their vast implications about the world we live in today. From deep in a war fought more than half a century ago -- whether imagined, like Murphy's, or remembered, like Auerbach's -- their characters speak to us with terrible prescience. "These are difficult times," one of David's professors tells him. "Still, we might live to see light again, don't you think?" "No," David said frankly.

By Neil Gordon