

*“Anne Frank Collection”*

Kendra Anspaugh

Like many a junior high school girl before me, I discovered Anne Frank’s diary just when it seemed most appropriate. I was thirteen, the same age as Anne when she began writing her diary, a dark-haired, moody, often misunderstood youngest child, and in Anne I felt that I had found a kindred spirit. I sympathized with Anne as she argued with her mother, sighed when she snuggled with Peter in the attic, and sobbed the angry tears of a child just beginning to understand absolute evil upon learning exactly what had happened to Anne and the other members of the Secret Annex.

I eventually accumulated more and more books about Anne’s life in an attempt to make sense of everything, and when I wanted to boggle my mind I would gaze at photos of Anne as a toddler, smiling in the sunshine in Frankfurt, the German city in which she was born, and try and imagine the universe I lived in as the same universe that led this happy child to a death from malnutrition and typhus in the filthy hell of Bergen-Belsen a decade and a half later. Even today I cannot fathom it. I have learned so much since then about the Third Reich and the Holocaust, and think I understand everything, but all I have to do is glance through one of my books and see a sixty-year-old image of Anne Frank playing hopscotch on a sidewalk in Amsterdam, and my illusions are instantly shattered.

With age I have come to appreciate this child’s diary on a much deeper level. My self-absorbed thirteen-year-old self could only take heart in Anne’s and my similarities, but today I can look back at Anne’s life and mine with the wisdom of almost-adulthood; I am now nearly five years older than Anne was when she died, and through her life I can appreciate the greater magnitude of the talent wasted in that greatest of tragedies. I read the diary now and come across the beginnings of an amazing clarity and intelligence; however, I choose not to romanticize it. I am amazed at the number of ways Anne’s story has been interpreted in the years since her death, particularly when she is mythologized into an ideal child, surpassing normal adolescent wisdom, but to me the very humanness of her tragedy is what makes her so compelling.

Last summer I was lucky enough to travel to Amsterdam and see Anne’s hiding place during the war for myself. In addition to carrying away several of the less common books about her, I came away with a renewed appreciation for the girl whose life and death have forced me to look at the world in different, and often critical ways. Somewhere in the back of my mind we are still “kindred spirits”.