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A Boy In Winter: A Novel

A BOY IN

WINTER

A NOVEL

RACHEL

SEIFFERT



Synopsis

Early on a grey November morning in 1941, only weeks after the German invasion, a small Ukrainian town is overrun by the SS. This new novel from the award-winning author of the Booker Prize short-listed *The Dark Room* tells of the three days that follow and the lives that are overturned in the process. Penned in with his fellow Jews, under threat of deportation, Ephraim anxiously awaits word of his two sons, missing since daybreak. Come in search of her lover, to fetch him home again, away from the invaders, Yasia must confront new and harsh truths about those closest to her. Here to avoid a war he considers criminal, German engineer Otto Pohl is faced with an even greater crime unfolding behind the lines, and no one but himself to turn to. And in the midst of it all is Yankel, a boy determined to survive this. But to do so, he must throw in his lot with strangers. As their stories mesh, each of Rachel Seiffert's characters comes to know the compromises demanded by survival, the oppressive power of fear, and the possibility of courage in the face of terror. Rich with a rare compassion and emotional depth, *A Boy in Winter* is a story of hope when all is lost and of mercy when the times have none.

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this novel very much, it made me happy to think that there are still people in the world who would put those who are helpless ahead of their own needs. In the end it makes you feel good, even amidst the horror

Brief summary and review, no spoilers. This will be a very brief review because of my concern for spoilers; in fact one of the things that keeps you so nervous and biting your nails while reading this book comes from the anxiety of wondering what will happen next. Therefore, let me just say that this story takes place in 1941 in a small village in the Ukraine. The Germans have taken over the town and complete pandemonium and panic has set in. The Jews are being herded off into trains, neighbors are fearful and turning on each other and everyone is wondering what the future will bring and if they will survive. There are just a few main characters we follow closely - a Jewish father named Ephraim who is forced into one of those trains with his wife and daughter. He is worried about his two missing little boys; the eldest one named Yankel. Another character is Otto Pohl, a German engineer who is being forced to build a road for a cause he believes to be criminal. We also have a good-hearted and seemingly naive young Ukrainian woman named Yansia who is waiting for her lover to come home from the war. And that's all I want to say about the plot other than the main part of the story takes place over a mere few days in time. I was happy that there was an Epilogue that takes us into the future. I have read a lot of books about the Holocaust and WWII and about the horrors inflicted upon innocents under SS and Nazi domination and cruelty. If written well - and this one is - these are tough books to read because you can empathize with the characters and that's obviously not a comfortable place to be, even in the comfort of a reading chair at home. I think it's important that we read these books and recognize just what so-called decent human beings are capable of doing to each other. Even though I've read many books in this genre, this one stood out for me, in particular in regards to one storyline. Again, I don't want to give away a spoiler and this isn't one, but part of the story is that the father Ephraim is on the train with his wife and little girl and he is wishing that his two sons were with him since he is worried about them. He had thought himself safe in his village even though his wife had talked about her brother going to Palestine before the war. We know from the first page that Ephraim's two young sons had fled moments before the capture of his father - his father just knows they are not on the train. As the train ride continues, Ephraim begins to ponder his own decisions and he understands the pessimistic future for himself and his wife and daughter and he questions his own prior actions in not leaving. He also wonders if it was a good thing that his sons were not with him on the train. But is it? Does that mean

they are dead? But is it better that they might still be alive somewhere and maybe will be safe? Or is it better that they were with him even though he is now helpless in helping them? It is a horrible, horrible moral dilemma. A different sort of Sophie's Choice. I thought this was brilliantly done and my heart went out to Ephraim as I felt myself in his position and the horror that he must've felt. But the book itself is a lot more than just Ephraim's tale; there are other characters that face their own horrors and ethical conundrums although it was Ephraim's tale that will always remain with me. Recommended. It's a quick read, I think well-written and extremely moving.

Rachel Seiffert's short novel *A BOY IN WINTER* is set in Ukraine in 1941. The Germans have invaded. The central characters are Ephraim and his wife Miryam who are Jewish; Otto Pohl, a German engineer; Yasia, a young Ukrainian woman; her boyfriend Mykola, a deserter from the Russian Army; and two of Ephraim and Miryam's young sons Yankel and Momik. The lives of these characters all intersect in sometimes surprising ways. Ms. Seiffert deftly describes the horrific happenings in understated sparse language. There are no excessive words. Flowery prose would have detracted from her somber story. And we are spared the details of the terror that the SS is spreading over Ukraine; Ms. Seiffert only gives us glimpses, making what we know is happening all the more abhorrent. In spite of the atrocities that the Germans are engaged in, the author does not portray them as cardboard characters—at least the central ones—no small achievement on her part. One example: Pohl, the German engineer, wrestles with what is taking place and his part in it with continuous soul-searching. His wife Dorle, who writes letters to him stating her views, is even more vocal in condemning what he is doing. In a conversation between Arnold, an SS officer and Pohl, Arnold appears to be conflicted about what he has to do and says: Where the light shines strongest, there is always shadow. He apparently is looking for some kind of support and/or assurance from Pohl that he understands that Arnold hates his orders too and reminds Pohl that “This will soon be over.” In all this horror, there are patches of beautiful tenderness and love. For example, the passages in the novel where the older boy Yankel has whittled a collection of wooden trees, toys for his younger brother to play with: “The small one has made a tight group of the trees now; there are enough to add up to a small grove—far more than could fit in both their pockets—so Yashia thinks the older one must have spent some of the long day hiding in whittling more for him.” The end of this sad story slipped up on me. I will ponder it for a long time to come. Ms. Seiffert asks a serious question: if we stand by as witnesses and do nothing, don't we share the guilt with the perpetrators?

But she makes also profound statements about both love in a dark place and compromise. A good, good novel.

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