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The Winter Horses



Synopsis

From Philip Kerr, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Bernie Gunther novels, comes a breathtaking journey of survival in the dark days of WWII in Ukraine, a country that remains tumultuous today. This inspiring tale captures the power of the human spirit and is perfect for fans of *The Book Thief*, *Milkweed*, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. It will soon be another cold winter in the Ukraine. But it's 1941, and things are different this year. Max, the devoted caretaker of an animal preserve, must learn to live with the Nazis who have overtaken this precious land. He must also learn to keep secrets—for there is a girl, Kalinka, who is hiding in the park. Kalinka has lost her home, her family, her belongings—everything but her life. Still, she has gained one small, precious gift: a relationship with the rare wild and wily Przewalski's horses that wander the preserve. Aside from Max, these endangered animals are her only friends—until a Nazi campaign of extermination nearly wipes them out for good. Now Kalinka must set out on a treacherous journey across the frozen forest to save the only two surviving horses—and herself. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 15 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Gr 6—This story follows the harrowing journey of Kalinka, a Jewish orphan

searching for safety, and the horses that provide her with comfort, power, and hope. Set in 1941 in war-torn Ukraine, Kerr's novel is also a tale of survival-not only Kalinka's, but of Przewalski's horses, a rare breed of wild horse that dates back tens of thousands of years. The story opens on the Askaniya-Nova animal sanctuary where Max, the longtime caretaker, has been ordered by the SS to kill all of the animals, including the nearly extinct Przewalski's horses. As Max struggles with the demands of a cruel Nazi officer who has turned the reserve into his headquarters, he meets Kalinka who is travelling alone after witnessing the deaths of her family. With Max's guidance and support, Kalinka and the last pair of the horses embark on a journey across the Ukrainian wilderness. As Kalinka faces frightening obstacles, her ability to communicate with the horses and other fantastical elements give her the courage to face serious threats and her own fears. Threads of "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Hansel and Gretel" contribute to the sense that this is an "old" story handed down through generations. Like the best stories told around a campfire, it is spellbinding, but it can also be terrifying. Ultimately, *The Winter Horses* ends on a note of hope and triumph-for both Kalinka and the horses. Kerr's novel will be enjoyed by readers who like a touch of fantasy in their historical fiction. --Shelley Sommer, Inly School, Scituate, MA --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

The year is 1941. The place, Ukraine. After her entire family is murdered by invading Nazis, Jewish teen Kalinka finds herself alone on the vast Ukrainian steppe until she encounters two Przewalski's horses. These prehistoric animals, depicted in ancient cave paintings, are the rarest horses in the world and have never been domesticated. But the preternaturally intelligent creatures quickly and improbably bond with Kalinka, and along with a Russian wolfhound named Taras, the three flee for their lives from the invading Nazis, who are determined to exterminate the horses, which they consider to be an inferior species. Their flight is a perilous one, as they are beset not only by the Germans but also by the forbidding winter weather, wolves, and even cannibals! Can they possibly survive these vicissitudes? Best-selling adult author Kerr presents his story as legend, not historical reality, which gives him the latitude necessary for his plot's improbabilities and anthropomorphized animals. Though sometimes didactic and slightly contrived, the story is nevertheless engaging and exciting and is sure to appeal to horse lovers and fans of survival fiction. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: It's big news that the best-selling author of the Bernie Gunther novels for adults has moved into children's literature, and the full-court marketing campaign for this title reflects that. Grades 7-12. --Michael Cart --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

The Winter Horses is a middle grade book about a young Jewish girl who escapes death at the hands of the Nazis in her small village and ends up in an old Ukrainian zoo that is looked after by an elderly man named Max. The zoo has been overtaken by the SS and many of the animals, much to Max's horror are slaughtered to feed the soldiers. When Max discovers that two very special and nearly extinct Przewalski (pronounced Shuh-VAHL-skeez) horses have been spared and are being tended to by a thin, freezing girl he steps in to help them and puts his own life on the line. Blending magical realism and history, Kerr has spun a unique story of survival during a bleak time in history. The name Kalinka is taken from a Ukrainian folk song and she is a great heroine in this book as she makes her escape from the zoo bound southward to find the Red Army as the SS close in on her and the horses which are to be put to death as they're too deemed an inferior breed and should be cleansed from the Earth. I enjoyed this tale. Though it deals with the random killing of zoo animals by the brutal SS, it isn't too graphic in nature. I enjoyed the tale of Kalinka and her love of animals made the story worthwhile. Old man Max is a gentle soul who adds character and depth to the story. The descriptions of war and brutality are given a go over in this book but not overly so, and I think this is an age appropriate tale for kids who like history.

More timely than the author and publisher could have known. I foresee some prize nominations. This book is magical and real, filled with love and death and hope. I was lucky to receive a review copy from the publisher, but I have just bought two copies to send as gifts. I wish I could see the author's note, for I am sure there is a personal connection for him somewhere. At any rate: It's WWII. The Germans have invaded Russia. Young Kalinka is on the run after everyone in her village is killed by the Nazis. No one will take her in, for she is a Jew. Old Max lives in a cottage on a nature preserve (founded by a German). The horses, living history--the horses of the cave-paintings--take Kalinka under their wings, taking pity on her. Nazis come to the nature preserve. War is a force that brings meaning to our lives--it reveals the worst and the best of the human character, and it's all on display here. Good and evil are everywhere, it's up to each of us to choose--and the natural world is caught up in the drama, too. Story is a wonderful vehicle for not only thinking about these things, but feeling our way to what our own reactions and answers will be as we grow into our futures. There are a couple of places where the dialogue seems stilted and unreal (fictional!), but the story is meant to be mysterious and compelling, and it is. The author never plays it false with feeling. Keeping it on my personal shelves for re-reading. Highly recommended. For middle-schoolers, I would read as a class and discuss or make sure my advanced reader had

somebody to talk to about it.

3.5 Stars This book turned into something unexpected for me. Not necessarily a bad thing as the turns were interesting in their own right, but my expectations going in and how the book started made me not appreciate them as much as another reader might. I went into the book expecting an engaging survival story against the elements (Ukraine in winter, enough said!!), escape from the Nazis, and a helping hand from fellow humans. And I got all those. Kalinka was a smart girl who found herself swept up into the tragic events of the Holocaust and WWII. Striking out on her own across Nazi-occupied Ukraine, she finds help from some unexpected quarters. I found her journey through the many parts of this devastated land suspenseful and illuminating for her character. I also liked the secondary characters; they were well-fleshed out and enthralling. Of course, Max shines as Kalinka's savior. A sweet older man who has made it his life's work to protect and work with the animals on his preserve, he stands as a bright light against the darkness of persecution and despair. I even liked the Nazi Captain Grenzmann. He had a certain charm about him, even though he also embodied all that was evil about the Nazis. He actually illustrated well how scary the Nazis could be: outwardly helpful and charming but willing to put a bullet in your head at the slightest cause on the inside. The main animal characters of Temujin, Borte, and Taras were also given pretty strong personalities, to the degree that they could hold "conversations" with Kalinka and each other. They had distinct personality traits like stubbornness, protectiveness, and a strong will. This is actually where the book started to go in a different direction than I expected. It never comes out the animals are having actual conversations with Kalinka; it's more like an intuitive knowing what the other is trying to get across and what-not. Yet, it's enough that the book slides into historical fantasy rather than a survival/WWII story. Those elements are still there, but the fantasy elements start to take over, with more and more of these "conversations" happening to the point that they are most of the exchanges we see. There's also the whole tomb thing as the finale of the book. That is pretty much ENTIRELY fantasy with visions, dream chats, and help from celestial bodies. Maybe the animal conversations were building up to this so it wouldn't completely feel out of step with the book, but I was still jarred. I was looking for more of a realistic showdown/resolution with the chasing Nazis rather than this fantastical stuff. Left me a bit disappointed and feeling cheated. So not a bad book but not what I was expecting. I loved the characters, even the horses and dog, as well as the WWII/survival elements. The story itself was

suspenseful and kept me engaged. But the heavy presence and use of fantasy elements drove the book into unexpected directions and left me jarred. They didn't work for me. Maybe another reader would appreciate them and like them better. I don't know.

This book is really well written. It deals with happenings during World War II, so expect it to be sad and tragic. However, there is a constant strain of hope that runs through it. While it may not be historically accurate, the author opens the book by saying that "there are times when history must take second place to legend" (Prologue). Not only does this book confront the harsh realities of the destructive nature of war, but it also shows the very realistic struggles within people. The author is careful to remind over and over that hate is not a good option, all life is valuable, and he conveys the inward struggles within both the protagonists and antagonists. He even presents the thoughts of the animals well. This book also introduces some fun information about Przewalski's horses. It made me want to learn a lot more about that part of the world and these horses.

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