A Night in Distant Motion Short Guide

A Night in Distant Motion by Irina Korschunow

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Overview

A Night in Distant Motion discusses issues of good and evil, prejudice, and forgiveness in a suspense-filled manner that rivets the attention of the reader.

The story takes place in Germany during the 1940s. At that time, the Nazi government, led by Adolph Hitler, ruled Germany under a totalitarian regime called the Third Reich. In a totalitarian government, the governmental leader has supreme authority over all subjects and can decide the legality of an issue based on his or her personal prejudices and whims. Hitler decided that only true Germans, or Aryans, could have rights in Germany.

Aryans were idealized Germanic people who were tall, strong, intelligent, blond- haired, and blue-eyed men and women who would die for their country and their leader. Those not considered true Germans included all foreigners living in Germany, Jews, homosexuals, and any physically or emotionally disabled persons. These groups wore different symbols on their clothing—a yellow star or a letter to mark them apart from society. The government appropriated their property, encouraged attacks on them, and finally deported many to concentration camps where thousands died from enforced labor, hunger, disease, and murder.

Some Germans openly resisted the laws by hiding people or smuggling weapons to partisans, but many refused to comprehend the truth of what was happening around them or lived in fear of being taken away if they protested. It is in this environment of fear and deceit that the story's action occurs. Although some people blindly follow the Fuhrer—Regine's mother and Feldmann the air-raid warden among them, others like Dr. Muhlhoff, Doris, and Gertrud endure and survive knowing the war will end and the evil recede. Regine discovers her prejudices hold no basis in fact. Although labeled "subhuman," Jan is a good, gentle person who exhorts Regine to "lay a path" toward the future. She finds Maurice, a French schoolteacher forced into military life, an intelligent, tender, and wise individual, and she sees the compassion and strength hidden by Gertrud's tough exterior. Korschunow conveys the idea that these qualities, rather than blind faith and trust, form the basis of a good future.

About the Author

Very little biographical information is currently available about Irina Korschunow. Although well-known in her homeland of Germany and a winner of international book awards from organizations like the Women's International League for Peace in Geneva, her works have not garnered as much attention in the United States. Korschunow has more than forty titles to her name, but most of her English-translated works have been fairy tales written for young children.

Setting

The story is set in two different parts of World War II Germany—the factory town of Steinbergen and the farming community of Gutwegen. Regine lives with her mother in the company-owned apartments of a canning factory in Steinbergen. A distinct contrast exists between these two places. Although not physically described, Steinbergen's atmosphere comes across as dark and stifled. Bombings occur sporadically, good food is scarce, and neighbors occasionally disappear. Few people openly question the morality of the war or their government's actions, but some of Regine's acquaintances harbor doubts and send out ambiguous signals to any who may share these feelings. In this community, no one trusts one another. Warnings to a teacher become couched as suggestions, and Regine cannot even bring herself to tell her friend Doris about Jan, although she strongly suspects her friend's sympathies lie with the Allies, not the German government. Gutwegen, where Regine escapes after being caught with Jan, is more open. The residents treat the prisoners of war sent to labor in the fields as human beings. The farmer's wife, Gertrud, Maurice, and Regine listen to outlawed Allied broadcasts and discuss the war's problems and evils with one another. Even though both communities live under the shadow of the Third Reich, the countryside is much more open than the city where people live in close quarters.

Social Sensitivity

Korschunow discusses two topics relevant to today's society in her work —a nonglorifying view of war and a resurgence of prejudice in today's world. In Regine's world, many of the people she knows have been called to be soldiers, including her father who is listed as missing in action. Korschunow makes no effort to hide what war does to a community. The government drafts husbands and sons, leaving many families fatherless, as with Regine's, or childless, as with the farmer's wife. People lose limbs or their sanity, and those who return are never the same. Those living in a war zone also suffer. In Germany and in London bombs frequently fall on large, populated areas, killing innocent people and destroying crops.

While Korschunow does not dwell on this aspect of her novel, it does form a part of the whole.

By believing all Poles, Russian, Jews, and other non-Germans are "subhuman," Regine initially cuts herself off from two people who prove very important to her life—Jan and Maurice.

Both teach her to see beyond people's differences to their similarities and open her up to new ideas. This prejudice is again appearing in Germany and other parts of the world. Revisionists, who try to prove the Holocaust never occurred, find new believers for their lies; ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, reminds people of the horrors of Nazi Germany; and neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups sprout up in countries all over the world. With its constantly moving story, A Night in Distant Motion shows quite clearly the futility of the belief systems put forth by these groups and events.

Literary Qualities

A Night in Distant Motion incorporates several different literary techniques to make the work interesting and thought-provoking to its readers.

Among these are Korschunow's use of symbolism, her use of World War II as a setting to give the reader a sense of place, and the uses of a shifting time perspective and flashbacks to generate suspense in the story. Together, these qualities draw the reader into the world of the story.

Some of the symbolism in the book pairs light and dark, but not in an obvious way. As Korschunow only sketchily describes her characters physically, the light and dark comes forth in personalities. For example, outwardly, Jan and Feldmann resemble one another somewhat. Both are small men; Jan is "tall, but certainly not athletic . . . Everything about him [has] something cautious . . . He [looks] more like someone who slinks off when there's shooting." Feldmann walks cautiously as well from a limp which defers him from military service. These two serve as diametrical opposites.

Feldmann's "sheer servility [makes] him more and more twisted" and while the residents of the apartment building find "him ridiculous, [they] still [fear] him." He maintains order by the imposition of fear. Jan prefers a peaceful method of dealing with people. He tells Regine that hating another group of people is futile; rather than condemning people, one should help them understand. Jan represents the light and Feldmann darkness. One cannot exist without the other's balance.

By using World War II Germany as a setting for her story, Korschunow assumes the reader will be familiar with events and historical figures of the time. She is then able to forgo a lengthy discussion of history and move directly into the action of the story.

Even readers without an extensive background in twentieth century events are likely to possess a basic knowledge of Hitler and the Third Reich from popular fiction and other media, allowing Korschunow to set a mood where deceit and horrifying actions seem almost normal.

The most noticeable literary device in A Night in Distant Motion is the shifting-time narrative style known as the flashback, a technique where the story jumps from event to event without following a chronological order. When the book opens, the reader has no awareness of who tells the story or what the narrator has experienced.

Regine's random, almost stream-of-consciousness, memories serve mainly to engage the reader, to create interest in the character and situation, and to build suspense. The reader discovers piecemeal the reasons for Regine's flight to Henninghof, of her change of beliefs, and of the intensity of her love affair with Jan and its consequences for them both. Told in a conventional, chronological order, the story would not be as compelling. The flashback style requires readers to remember people and events with more clarity and adds a sense of urgency to the telling. The title adds to this urgency by emphazing

the feeling that these events will replay over and over in the far reaches of memory, as something that is finished but somehow still continues.

Themes and Characters

The characters in A Night in Distant Motion are ordinary people whose ranks include farmers, soldiers, students, and workers. On one level, the differences between them hold no importance—all lead difficult lives, hounded by the possibility of death— but on another level they are profound.

Those with courage enough to see past the differences of race will, as Jan says, "lay a path." Not all the main characters do this.

Regine Martens, the seventeen-year-old narrator of the story, is honest, open, and also a loyal follower of Adolph Hitler and the Nazi Party, "a regular Girls' League Bitch" as Gertrud originally calls her. Raised upon her parents' stories of her father's success because of his party membership, she believes in the truth and honor of the Third Reich until she encounters Jan, a Polish prisoner. Finding him as human as any German person shatters her perceptions of her world. From the time she meets Jan, her honesty and need to share her feelings with others get in her way. Deceit does not come easily to Regine. She writes a school essay about war's futility, endangers herself and a friend's family by speaking on behalf of Russians, and disturbs her mother attempting to explain the truth of Hitler's plans. Once Regine sees where she is wrong she persistently tries to make amends for her actions.

While Regine's relationship with Jan forms the focal point of the story, little tangible information appears about him. Regine herself says at one point that although she knows "his voice, his face, his body," she is not sure if her knowledge of Jan is real or simply a fantasy. Jan sees himself as a coward, but his actions defy that description; the Gestapo punishes with death Polish men who have affairs with German women. He also wants Regine to tell others after the war what she now knows. Jan embodies all the good traits missing from the Third Reich, such as compassion, forgiveness, and understanding.

Although Steffans, the Communist farm-stand owner, is an not an admirable man—he drinks and makes advances toward Regine—he nevertheless serves as the real catalyst for Regine's change of view by insisting she treat Jan as a person, not as "subhuman."

When Regine expresses distaste at Jan's presence Steffans tells her, "you shouldn't be like that, girl. They're all people." Steffans introduces Regine to truths she needs to hear. He opens her eyes to the fact that good and bad exist in all people, including her father who once stole a chicken from Steffans to keep from starving, and that one must judge someone by who he or she is as a person, not by race or political ideals.

Gertrud, Maurice, and the farmer's wife are perhaps the three most important characters besides Regine and Jan.

Collectively, they show the need for normalcy in life, the need to continue living. The farmer's wife loses all four of her sons to the war, but she runs the farm, gets up every Sunday to walk to church, and hides Regine although she knows the danger. Gertrud shows the pliancy of life. When she first meets Regine, she hates the girl, knowing Regine to be a follower of Hitler, but she does not let her dislike get in the way of the harvest, and later changes her mind when she sees Regine has changed. She also carries on an affair with Maurice while her husband fights in the war. For Gertrud, life and love intertwine. Maurice lends philosophy to the mix. He refers to Gertrud as "a cow" for her love of the land and of contentment, but obviously cares for her deeply. He also tells Regine that the farmer's wife taught him how not to hate by treating him as a person, not an object. Together, these three prepare Regine for the future.

Regine's mother represents the many people living in Germany who refuse to see the true actions of their government. She fully believes the rhetoric she hears concerning German superiority and closes her eyes to the worsening conditions of the non-Germans around her. Absolute trust in the Fuhrer forms the basis of her world, and she feels all the good things in her life—enough food, her husband's job, even her apartment and furniture—can be directly attributed to Hitler and the Nazi party. Her faith in her government fuels her disgust of the "subhumans," who, according to Hitler, are ruining Germany and are responsible for the greatest evil in her life, the seduction of her daughter. Jan explains to Regine that her mother and those like her can be compared to the children who follow the Pied Piper. "They run after anyone who will make them promises."

While Regine's mother represents one segment of German society, Doris, Miss Rosius, and Dr. Muhlhoff and Use Mattreid and Feldmann form two other segments. The former group sees and understands the evil perpetrated by the government but lives in fear of having their convictions discovered and denounced. They perform their assigned tasks, raise their right arms in salute, and mouth the platitudes of the party, hoping no one notices their reticence.

The latter group takes the other extreme, reveling in the strict societal constraints where any misstep by another provides the chance of self-promotion, whether by enforcing air-raid rules or reporting a teacher. While both of these groups have their grey areas, they both show what can happen to a society where fear rules.

The main themes of the story are the struggle between good and evil and the healing power of forgiveness. Korschunow sets up the idea that evil can resemble good and that only a practiced eye can see the difference. For many the Nazi party provided jobs, security, and a future. Here the evil hides behind a veneer of goodness, for only by stripping other people of their rights and property could the party live up to its members' expectations. The rallies and youth groups brought children closer together but mainly served to indoctrinate the young into believing Hitler's rhetoric. The small pockets of resistance appear evil to the mainstream believers because they cannot offer attractive rewards like victory and jobs for all. The forgiveness Jan speaks of comes in to play at this point. In order to purge the evil, it becomes necessary to forgive the perpetrators, for only through forgiveness can people learn from their mistakes.

Topics for Discussion

1. Regine's mother believes wholeheartedly in the truth of the Nazi movement. Does this make her a bad person, as much to blame for the atrocities committed by the Gestapo, or does naivete cloud her judgement?

2. How easy would it be for a totalitarian regime like the Third Reich to rise to power in today's world?

3. Why does the farmer's wife cry for Fritz Kruse?

4. Ethnic separation was mandated by law in Hitler's Germany. Are there still countries that subscribe to similar laws? What about social separation of ethnic groups? Look at South Africa, the former Yugoslavia, and urban America.

5. What do you think will happen to Maurice when the war ends? To Gertrud? To Regine?

6. When the farmer's wife dies, Maurice tries to comfort Gertrud by telling her, "It was a good death, cherie."

Gertrud responds, "A good life wouldn't have been a bad thing, either."

What does she mean by this?

7. Regine believes that although Walter was not the right person, that she did the right thing in sleeping with him, and she regrets not sleeping with Jochen Creutzer. Is she right to feel this way about the two men?

8. On the first evening they meet, Jan calls Regine "moje kochanie" (my love). They have barely spoken, and Regine still holds her prejudices of the "subhumans." How believable is the relationship between Jan and Regine?

9. When Regine's father comes home on leave, she finds him as thin as in his wedding picture, but her mother "cried over [his] vanished paunch." Why is Regine's mother so concerned with food and weight?

10. The people in A Night in Distant Motion who disagree with Hitler's views are shown to be highly principled but fearful of exposing those views and being taken by the Gestapo.

Was their quiet understanding effective in protecting others? Did they have any other options?

11. When Regine first meets Jan, he wears a "P" on his clothes to mark him as Polish. Other symbols the Nazis used to identify "subhumans" included a yellow star for Jews and the now-familiar pink triangle for homosexuals.

Today, as in ancient times, the Star of David still represents Jewish culture and religion, and Gay rights groups turned the meaning of the triangle from persecution to pride. How do you think these groups overcame the prejudices attached to these symbols by others?

12. Who do you think betrayed Regine and Jan?

13. Is Jan alive? Does it matter?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the racial laws enacted by Germany's World War II government to the "Jim Crow" laws found in the United States' past. Is it fair to condemn Germany when our country can be considered guilty of some of the same injustices?

2. Many people were hidden from the Nazis by people like Gertrud and the farmer's wife. Compare Regine's experiences in hiding with those of Anne Frank in her Diary of a Young Girl and Joanna Riess in The Upstairs Room.

What difficulties did they face that Regine did not?

3. Regine describes the activities she participated in as a member of German Girls' League as being "almost like church . . . Solemn. Truly holy . . . Belonging to a community . . . [and having] something to believe in." Author Hans Peter Richter writes of similar experiences in his autobiographical novels Friedrich and I Was There. In most cases, children were encouraged to think of the Hitler Youth Groups as their family, giving their allegiance to group leaders instead of their parents.

How does this compare to the family structure found in today's gangs?

4. Hitler's government used propaganda very effectively to convince people of the world that all Germans flourished under Germany's racial laws and the concentration camps served more as minimum security labor facilities.

How is propaganda used today in the news media and in marketing?

5. At the 1936 Summer Olympics held in Berlin, Jesse Owens, a black American track star, shattered Nazi ethnological theories by winning four gold medals in his sport. Controversy arose over the United States' decision to send a team to compete in the games. Discuss the pros and cons of the choice made. Should the U.S. have boycotted the games, as later happened in 1980 over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, or did the 1936 United States Olympic Committee make the right choice?

6. During World War II, the United States placed many of its Asian citizens, especially those of Japanese descent, into internment camps. Is this comparable to the Nazi's internment of their "undesirables"? Why? Why not?

7. Many justified Germany's World War II racial policies because of Hitler's ability to turn the German economy and Germany's pride in itself around after World War I. Can this justification be compared to modernday issues? Look at the speeches of Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam and the teachings of Meir Kahane for examples.

8. Reread Leigh Hafrey's translation of the Rilke poem on page 105. How does it mirror the events of the story?

Try to find other translations and compare the imagery. Do other translations provide the same insight into the story?

For Further Reference

Heins, Paul. Review. Horn Book 59,6 (December 1983): 717. Heins reviews Korschunow's book, providing a short discussion of its plot and literary merit.

Related Titles

There are no related titles or adaptations of A Night in Distant Motion. According to the publicity division of its first American Publisher, David R. Godine of Boston, Farrar, Straus and Giroux recently purchased the publication rights of this work, but at this point no plans exist to reissue the book. Some of Korschunow's fairy tales are currently in print with Harper Collins, but few of her other young adult works appear in English.

The themes and ideas Korschunow develops in A Night in Distant Motion appear in other works for young adults about World War II. In Joanne Reiss's The Upstairs Room, the young protagonist hides from the Nazis in a peasant farmhouse, experiencing much of the fear and uncertainty Regine feels. In Hans Peter Richter's novels, Friedrich and I Was There, readers can see the other side of Regine's life, the faction of German society that saw Hitler almost as a savior, a leader allowing young Germans to belong to a youth alliance and providing their parents with new-found prosperity. Another book with similar themes is Yoko Kawashima Watkins's So Far from the Bamboo Grove, which tells of the escape of Watkins, her mother, and her sister from Korea to Japan during a time when public sentiment turned against the Japanese in Korea, leading to their persecution.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996