Stones in Water Short Guide

Stones in Water by Donna Jo Napoli

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

In the early 1940s, Italy under the Fascist dictator Mussolini joined Germany in its war against the Allies. In Venice, as in all of Italy, German soldiers were everywhere. It is against this background that Napoli weaves the powerful story of two young Venetian friends and their terrible experiences when used as forced labor in the faroff Ukraine. Her portrayal of Roberto, the self-effacing younger son of a Venetian gondolier, and his steadfast friendship with Samuele, soon to be called Enzo to hide his Jewish origins from their Nazi "supervisors," is a triumph in modern young adult literature.

As it begins the novel includes two other characters: Sergio, Roberto's brother, a teen too young to be in the army but old enough to drill each Sunday, and Memo, the quickwitted friend who is the most street-smart of the younger three. All four boys are forcibly taken from a movie theater with other Venetian youth while watching an American Western. Sergio is immediately put with a group of older youths, and it is only through the keen observation of Memo that the boys quickly drop Samuele's name and start to call him "Enzo" and that Memo's plan to enable the younger three to stay together works—but only once. For Memo, too, is culled from their group, leaving Roberto and the new "Enzo" to begin their awful odyssey together.

The story moves quickly as the boys, now grouped with other young Italians from all parts of the country, each speaking different dialects, are moved by train through Munich east to the Ukraine. There they are to build landing fields for the Axis planes.

It is important for the friends to conceal Enzo's Jewish identity. Even though Sergio had the foresight to take off Enzo's yellow star signifying "Juden" and hide it before their trip to the movies, Samuele's circumcision, mostly a Jewish observance in prewar European countries, would be a sure death sentence if noticed by their German captors. Roberto finds the strength to awaken each day before Enzo and then wake his friend so that he can relieve himself before the other boys wake up. Then an exhausted Enzo stays awake each night, fighting sleep to tell the insomniac Roberto tales from the Old Testament, mythology, and even of his own invention, until his friend falls into a restless sleep.

Together they weather each new obstacle. Roberto, the pragmatic Catholic, early on decides to eat his daily ration of sausage, Friday or not. But Enzo, who has heard at the family table more fearful tales of the price paid by Jews in this awful war, holds fast to his people's dictates not to eat pork, even if it means awful privation. Both boys suffer terribly, but they always manage to look out for each other. Roberto takes Enzo's sausage in exchange for Enzo's hard-boiled egg or piece of hard cheese. Roberto steals and shares the fresh eggs that keep them stronger for a time. It is he who provides the diversion so that Enzo can strip naked to wash and swim in the water when the German guards order them to bathe.

But it is that swim that signals the beginning of the end for Enzo. When he floats dreamlike on the surface of the water— remembering Venice and his life at home— his

circumcision is seen by another boy, who from that moment blackmails Enzo for his food ration. The daily sight of PolishJewish families starving behind a barbedwire enclosure the boys were forced to build and his final beating for his share of the boots retrieved from the frozen corpses of two German soldiers lead to Enzo's death.

In his final moments, Enzo touches Roberto's chest and makes his friend promise to keep fighting "inside", where it counts, and to keep his, Enzo's, spirit alive in Roberto's heart. In his grief, Roberto defends his friend's corpse, buries him in the snow, and then walks away from the work site.

His captors are unaware or just do not care.

With Enzo's death and his own successful escape, Roberto finds maturity and courage. From the snowy Ukraine, he plots a course by the sun south and west. Home is thousands of miles away, and the route is fraught with danger. When Roberto comes upon a small village whose inhabitants have been recently murdered by the Nazis, he befriends an orphaned boy. Together they set off. The young boy leads Roberto to a larger town, still untouched by war, but Roberto's ignorance of the language and his German boots confuse the villagers.

Before the villagers can kill Roberto because they think him a German, he escapes.

Accidentally stumbling upon a small boat, Roberto paddles toward Italy. Again he is in jeopardy when he meets an Italian deserter. After a time, Roberto and the deserter realize their value to each other and save each other's life in turn. They discover a common desire, to reach Italy, where they can join the partisans (the partigianos) and help end the war.

Based loosely—very loosely, says Napoli—on the experiences of a real partigiano, this novel portrays the extraordinary journey of two young friends into the world of war. It is an outstanding tale that is beautifully crafted.

About the Author

Born in Miami, Florida, in 1948, Donna Jo Napoli was the youngest of the four children of a building contractor and a housewife, both of whom were children of Italian immigrants. In many respects Napoli's success is the culmination of the American dream. She recalls, in an autobiographical essay in Something about the Author Autobiography Series, that there were never any books in her home. Yet by second grade she had discovered the school library, where she soon got the librarian to allow her to visit twice a week in order read more than the allowed two books per week, thus beginning a lifelong affair with words.

The nature of her father's business—building a house, selling it, then moving to another site nearby—led to Napoli's feeling of not belonging. Always the quiet tomboy, she retreated deeper into the world of imagination as she read.

Napoli had been born and baptized Catholic and made her First Holy Communion, but in an age when it was "cool" to stop going to church at the age of twelve, Napoli remained deeply religious. This love of religion would be manifested in her novel Song of the Magdalene, which also reflects Napoli's own questioning of religious authority as a young woman.

In addition, Napoli's vision deteriorated early on, until hard contact lenses opened the world even more fully to her. She then began to excel in a variety of subjects. She won many awards during her junior high and high school years, culminating in a scholarship to Radcliffe, then the women's college of Harvard University. At Harvard she majored in mathematics, the precision of which would prefigure her love of linguistics, and took many courses in modern dance, a vehicle that allowed her mind and body to soar!

It was while at Harvard that she met and married Barry Furrow, another scholarship recipient, himself a poor boy from South Dakota whom she describes as "radically left-wing, radically anti-clerical and wonderfully sweet." Together they excelled academically and in their roles as parents.

Napoli earned a doctorate in linguistics from Harvard and attained success as a writer and poet. Furrow excelled as a law professor at Weidener University. They have been married for thirty years and have five children.

Napoli's family life inspired some of her books for children, while others developed from the Napoli children's curious questions and her own propensity to take everything seriously, a characteristic she developed over a lifetime of being a worrier— about her family, herself, and the whole world. Her concern led to her involvement in many areas of social justice, including activism on behalf of the poor, women, and minorities. While at Harvard, Napoli discovered the Boston City Missionary Society and worked at its summer camps in New Hampshire with children who were wards of the State of Massachusetts. After college, she worked as a counselor for teens in the Neighborhood Youth Corps.

Upon marrying Barry Furrow, Napoli focussed on her roles as wife and mother. Events in her children's lives and their irrepressible spirits fueled her writing. She and husband Barry worked and parented together while she taught at Smith, Georgetown, and the University of Michigan. Sickened by the sexism she encountered in much of academe, Napoli moved at last to Swarthmore College, where she became the chair of the Linguistics Department.

Napoli began writing for children many years ago, but it was not until 1984 that her first book was accepted, and not until 1988 that it was published—The Hero of Barletta.

The acceptance of her retelling of an Italian folktale gave Napoli pause, for she wondered if her original work had any value in the marketplace. Although the field of linguistics is her academic forte, Napoli is compelled to write, not only in her field where she is widely published, but also of her experiences as a parent and her own quest for truth. Many of her novels for elementary and middle-grade children reflect events and dilemmas in the life of her own children. The 1991 title Soccer Shock was named to the Hall of Fame Sports Books for Kids in 1996 by the Free Library of Philadelphia and was nominated for the Nutmeg Children's Book Award by the Connecticut Library Association in 1994 and 1995. When the Water Closes Over My Head received boxed reviews and was named to the Bank Street's 1995 "Books of the Year" list; Shark Shock (1994) received commendations, as did On Guard (1997), a book that reflects one son's interest in fencing. The Bravest Thing (1995) was inspired by a daughter's love of animals.

A fantasy takeoff on the tale of the Frog Prince, The Prince of the Pond (1992), grew out of Napoli's serious reasoning that a prince turned into a frog could never have survived without the help of a real frog knowledgeable in the ways of pond life.

The success of that story led young readers to demand a sequel detailing the life of Jimmy, the frog prince's son. Jimmy the Pickpocket of the Palace (1996) is the result of their inquiries. Trouble on the Tracks (1997) is set in Australia, a spot visited by the Napolis in recent years.

Napoli's skills are evident in her 1997 telling of a World War II story about two Italian boys, one Catholic and the other Jewish, who are forcibly taken, along with other Italian boys, to build airstrips for the German army in the Ukraine. Stones in Water is a historical novel that tugs the heartstrings and reveals a side of the war not usually revealed. It has already garnered kudos, including the "Golden Kite Award" for 1997 and, like other of her works, it will be published in Dutch and German, as well as English.

In the mid-1990s, Napoli was inspired to write for young adults. After her daughter questioned the plethora of evil women in folklore, Napoli decided to retell the story of the most wicked woman in fairy tales— the witch in "Hansel and Gretel." The Magic Circle (1993) portrays the witch as a healer cursed with an appetite for children. She hides in the forest to allay all temptation until the fateful day the children happen to come upon her forest cottage.

This new outlook toward female protagonists would prove intriguing fodder for teen readers, as Napoli followed The Magic Circle with Zel (1996), a rendition of the Rapunzel tale in which she cast the mother as the witch. Song of the Magdalene also appeared in 1996. In this novel, Napoli was inspired by her daughter's love of the character in the play Jesus Christ Superstar to portray the adolescent Mary Magdalene.

During this time Napoli was awarded grants by the American Association of University Women and the Leeway Foundation to research her work. Napoli has chosen teens as the main characters in a 1998 release, For the Love of Venice, which features an American teenaged tourist and a lovely Italian girl who is alarmed by the damage tourism is doing to her beloved city.

Napoli's amazing versatility and her masterful use of language have propelled her to the forefront of young adult writers. Each new venture is eagerly awaited by librarians, teachers, and an increasing number of young readers.

Setting

Stones in Water begins in the wartime Venice of the early 1940s. Young boys imitate the drilling of Italian soldiers, shout war slogans, and wish they, too, were old enough to carry a gun—if only on Sundays like their fathers and older brothers in the nearby campo. Jews are under new restrictions now. They have lived for hundreds of years in their quiet, beautiful ghetto, as in many European cities. But there are new things happening to the Venetian Jews, such as having to wear the yellow star on their arms now that the Germans and Italians are allies. Roberto's parents have told him to not go into a Jewish home, or even be seen talking to a Jew like his friend Samuele, who is in the same grade. But Roberto does not listen. Samuele is his friend—and this friendship is about to be deeply tested.

The two boys' trip to the movies catapults them into a horrific experience because the movie is a trap to conscript all the young boys attending as forced labor. They are not even allowed to return home for additional clothing or to bid their families goodbye. The conscripted boys' confusion turns quickly to terror when the Nazis coldbloodedly shoot three boys on a train platform as an example to the others. The fact that their captors break them up into diverse groups from many towns only intensifies their fear. It is only because of their friend Memo's fast thinking that Roberto and Samuele are put in the same group— where they promise to keep together—no matter what might befall them.

The action of the novel quickly moves from the relative complacency of Venice to their day-to-day existence at the whim of their captors. As day follows day and month follows month, the insidious onset of winter in the East brings its own terrible hazards. The young boys were swept up in June—mainly dressed in shorts—others in light clothing suitable for home. In the Ukraine they steal potato sacks to serve as blankets and coats. The weak sicken and die. The strong are kept alive by the intensity with which they work and their daily fortification of bread, sausage, or egg, and water.

The once carefree boys dream of home, wonder if their parents know they are thinking abut them, and pity the families of Polish Jews for whom they have been forced to build barbed-wire enclosures. Napoli's description of a sadistic Nazi soldier who watches a little girl come close to the wire, which she touches as she laughs at a nearby dog and duckling, then cold-heartedly plucks, "like a musician plucks the string of a violin", the wire to make it snap back and rip the little girl's lips, tears at the reader's heartstrings. The proximity of the captive Jews affects Enzo and Roberto both, but the Jewish Enzo feels his people's plight more strongly. The boys both feed the children their food, but in every Jew Enzo sees himself and so begins his decline.

Enzo's death so numbs Roberto that he is able to walk away because he no longer fears the bullets that might follow. Thus he begins the impossible journey home, out of the cold and into the sun.

Social Sensitivity

The author's sure hand in the pages of this novel has given young readers a legacy of a time and places gone before—but, sadly, with no guarantee that they may not come again. There is a hope, though, that readers may also become "Stones in Water." Stones in Water is a novel of such sensitivity that it may inspire its readers to do all in their power to prevent Roberto and Samuele's story from happening again.

Literary Qualities

As one would expect of a linguist, Napoli is a master wordsmith. The one- and twoword titles of the chapters in Stone in Water mark it for a short, quick work: "The Film," "The Train," "The Picks," "Wasser," "Stones," "Boots," "The Woods," "Cold," "Life," "The Sled," "The Boy," "Boots Again," "Under Bushes," "Fever," and "Stones." These simple words, if reread after finishing the story, will "throw" the reader back—like the quick crack of rifle shots—into the action of the novel.

Each word recalls images of the story.

The film recalls that it was the seemingly innocent action of going to the movies that changed the boys' lives forever. The train is the vehicle that carried them so far from home. "Wasser" recalls the water and the German soldier who sloshed their daily ration into their tin cups. The picks and stones remind the reader of the rubble they lifted day after tortuous day. The boots are the harbinger of Enzo's death. The woods and cold remind the reader of Roberto's flight into life, as do the sled and the boy.

When the boots recur it is to threaten Roberto. The bushes are the hiding place in which Roberto finds the boat. While the fever almost claims him, he wins a friend forever. Finally, the stones provide the richest imagery. In water they speak of remembrance, farewell, and a future yet to be built.

Stones will always speak to Roberto of a little girl, a friend who wove him tales old and new, and the stones to build himself anew. Napoli's search for reality, apparent even in her spinning of fantasy, serves her exquisitely here.

Themes and Characters

Roberto and Samuele/Enzo are the central figures in Napoli's extraordinary novel, which though written for young adults will appeal to a wider audience. Roberto is the "everychild," the boy who, because of adversity, grows from childhood and ignorance into adulthood. Samuele/Enzo, who in the beginning of the story is a Jewish boy relatively untouched by the happenstance of his birth, grows symbolically and truly into the Victim of all his people throughout time.

Napoli's novel is outstanding. Of all her works, of which many have been translated into other languages, this story most deserves to be shared worldwide. The inhumanities of war are flashed daily on screen and in print. Yet seldom do children feel the awfulness of war. Napoli's story, while short in length, is long on lesson. The reader cannot fail to be moved by her words. The novel is simple enough for a preteen to read and devoid of sensationalism; yet it is heartrending in its truth, simplicity, and horror.

In Napoli's story, love supersedes inhumanity: the love of a Catholic boy for a Jewish friend; the love of a Ukrainian orphan for the boy who saves him; the love of an Italian deserter for an escaping child he hardly knows; and the love shown by Roberto when, at the story's end, he vows to join the partisans. He vows never to kill, but to help other Jews, like his friend Samuele and the little Polish girl in the enclosure, find freedom from the sure death that awaits them in the camps.

Napoli has created children who deserve to be remembered in literature. Roberto is first seen as the gullible younger brother and friend of Memo, the street-smart Romeo who trades the price of a movie ticket for the promise of a gondola ride with his new girlfriend. After their capture, it is Roberto who seems numbed by the situation. It is quick-witted Memo who warns Samuele to hide his circumcision from the German guards; it is he who in a second changes Samuele to "Enzo." Memo remains a presence in the novel despite his early separation from the other two boys for his ploy to keep the three of them together.

Samuele, the Jew, is different from Roberto in his youthful sophistication. Roberto would be content to be a Venetian all his life—his only regret is that as a second son he will be unable to inherit the license of a gondolier when his father retires or dies.

He is a true son of the water that is the soul of Venice. Samuele, though also a Venetian, holds in deepest being the knowledge that to be a Jew is to be at risk—always at the whim of History. He is the better student, with knowledge of the world's history and geography. He knows the places from which his people once came and the meaning of the tides that swept them from one end of the world to another. He is privy to the fears the Jews are experiencing as they hear tales of what is happening to their counterparts in other parts of Europe at this, the beginning of World War II. Samuele's pretty ghetto (neighborhood), no matter how quaint and charming, is still a place of separation, and his circumcision is a uniqueness that could cause his death. Samuele's spirit is weighed down by the sure knowledge that his people are once more marked for

extinction. It is only Roberto's enduring friendship and love that sustain him until he can no longer fight the cold, the privation, and the hate.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Roberto's mother caution him about his friendship with Samuele?

How much does she know about the Jews' plight?

2. Why does Roberto seem to like the idea of Italy being at war? Does the book tell us how the Italian people feel about the United States?

3. If Roberto really wants to be a gondolier, will it be possible for him to do so?

4. How do the German soldiers act toward the boys? Does their behavior change over the course of the novel?

5. Why are the two little Jewish girls so important to the story?

6. What are your feelings about the deserter? In your opinion, how should soldiers behave?

7. Could you, would you, eat the things Roberto and Samuele do to stay alive?

8. Why are the Ukrainian villagers so suspicious of Roberto in his German boots?

What do you suppose they are thinking?

9. How is Roberto able to navigate the boat toward Italy? Would Samuele have been able to?

10. Does the story lead you to believe that Roberto would ever be able to kill another person?

11. Do you think Roberto's and Samuele's families knew what had happened to their children?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explore the situation of the Jews in Italy during World War II. Compare their plight to that of the Jewish people in other parts of Europe at the time.

2. Research the word ghetto and define its use throughout history.

3. Much of the novel's action takes place in the Ukraine. What was the importance of that geographical area during World War II?

4. Who were the "partisans" in World War II? Were they unique to Italy?

5. Research the role of the gondolier in Venetian history from its beginnings to the present day.

6. Discuss the symbolism of the stones mentioned throughout the novel.

7. Consider the structure of the novel.

Why is it so successful?

For Further Reference

Flynn, Kitty. Horn Book Magazine 74,1 (January-February 1998): 77-78. Review of Stones in Water, citing Napoli's book as a "gripping coming-of-age novel about the human costs of war."

Kirkus Reviews (October 15,1997): 1585. Review of Stones in Water, calling Napoli's work "a powerful novel set in a vividly realized wartime milieu."

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