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A Novel of Love, Loyalty, and Political Intrigue in World War II

Robert Arthur Neff

Old Stone Press

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BOOK REVIEW

Neff tells the story of a couple caught up in the rise of the Third Reich in this debut historical novel.

Dieter Meister, an orphaned pianist, was made homeless when the Nuremberg laws shuttered the Jewish-run music school where he resided, so he's forced to make his way in the streets of Berlin. While working as a pub musician, playing songs for off-duty Nazi officers, Dieter encounters Sofie von Seigler, a music school graduate and the daughter of a Wehrmacht general. They are united by a shared secret: each is the child of a Jewish mother. Dieter's has been dead for many years, but Sofie's remains alive, working for Poland's intelligence service. The couple shares a love of music, particularly American music, and they hope that art might insulate their lives from the political madness roiling around them. It can't: after the discovery of the Oster Conspiracy, in which some members of the Nazi military sought to overthrow Hitler, the two young musicians flee the country, due to Sofie's involvement. Their journey, from the streets of Prague to the surreal village of the Theresienstadt concentration camp, will bind them together but ultimately separate them. Although the times require Dieter and Sofie to live extraordinary lives—dodging agents and pursuers, playing the roles of smugglers and spies—they still remarkably attempt to maintain their lives as artists. Despite the constant threat of war and genocide, they consistently face calamity with their love of music and each other. Neff is an impressive storyteller, both as a shaper of prose and as an architect of plot. For example, a memoir, penned by Dieter at Theresienstadt and later smuggled to Sofie's mother in London, is central to the book's structure. It provides a story within a story with its own chilling narrative voice: "*They say that there are only two ways for a Jew to leave Theresienstadt—on a train to the East, or in a plain pine box.*" The author also shows a mastery of detail and context—indeed, the book is a history lesson as much as a novel—and his controlled maneuvering of his characters through the events of the period make this book stand out from the still-crowded field of World War II epics.

A complex, resonant love story, set in a detailed landscape of Nazi-occupied Europe.

EXCERPTING POLICIES

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