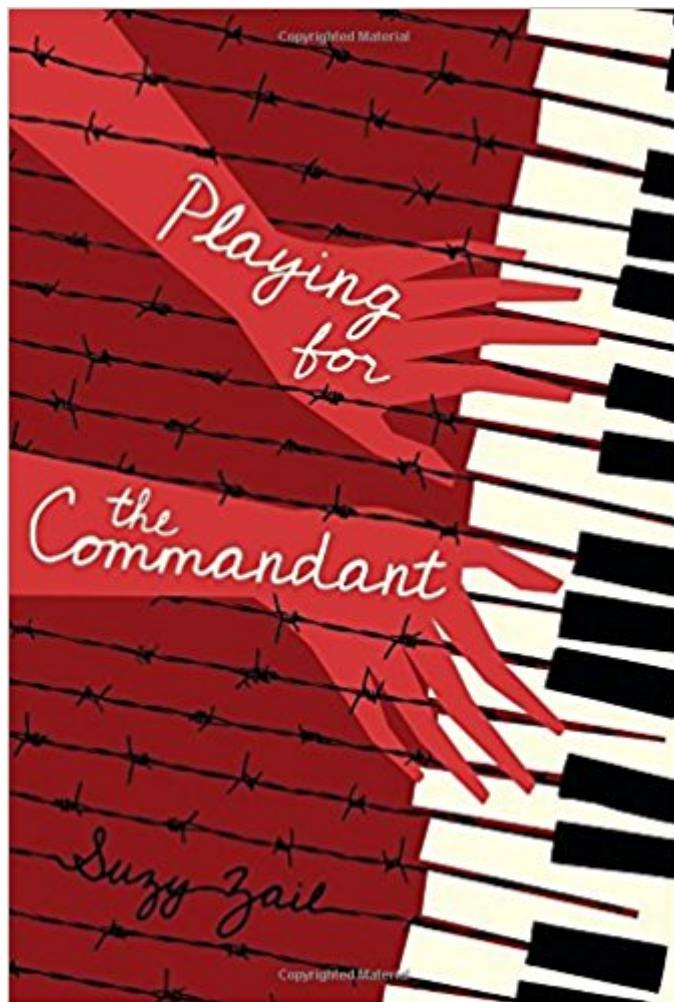


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Playing For The Commandant



Synopsis

A young Jewish pianist at Auschwitz, desperate to save her family, is chosen to play at the camp commandant's house. How could she know she would fall in love with the wrong boy?"Look after each other . . . and get home safe. And when you do, tell everyone what you saw and what they did to us." These are Hanna's father's parting words to her and her sister when their family is separated at the gates of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Her father's words " and a black C-sharp piano key hidden away in the folds of her dress " are all that she has left to remind her of life before. Before, Hanna was going to be a famous concert pianist. She was going to wear her yellow dress to a dance. And she was going to dance with a boy. But then the Nazis came. Now it is up to Hanna to do all she can to keep her mother and sister alive, even if that means playing piano for the commandant and his guests. Staying alive isn't supposed to include falling in love with the commandant's son. But Karl Jager is beautiful, and his aloofness belies a secret. And war makes you do dangerous things.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Gr 8 Up "It's 1944, and 15-year-old pianist Hanna and her family have been taken from their Hungarian Jewish ghetto to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Having lied about her age, Hanna is selected to play piano for the camp leader, or commandant, a job she hopes will help her save her mother and

sister. Captain Jager's casual cruelty contrasts with his son Karl's sensitive compassion, and soon Hanna and Karl develop a secret attraction. The teen feels like a traitor for liking Karl, her fellow prisoners despise her for cooperating with the commandant, and Russian liberators are approachingâ "and with them, truths that Hanna has refused to acknowledge. An oddly adult voice (Hanna says that playing a duet is "like taking a lover") gives way to more typical teenage reactions as the story progresses, but questionable historical accuracies persist: while the protagonist technically could have had a bat mitzvah, studied algebra, and casually carried a thermos, these seem unlikely. Musical details add interest, but light teen romance seems out of place in a Holocaust narrative, and overall the simplistic writing style tells rather than shows ("I learned that to care was weak and brutality a virtue in this upside-down world"). Zail's father survived the Holocaust and her desire to honor him is noble, but recent titles such as *Rose Under Fire* by Elizabeth Wein (Hyperion, 2013) and *Prisoner of Night and Fog* by Anne Blankman (HarperCollins, 2014) offer more nuanced, sophisticated treatments. An additional purchase for collections seeking exhaustive Holocaust coverage.â "Jill Ratzan, I. L. Peretz Community Jewish School, Somerset, NJ

Zail, whose memoir *The Tattooed Flower* recounted how her father survived the Holocaust, poignantly conveys Hannaâ "TMs mounting losses... An elegant, disturbing portrait of one of historyâ "TMs bleakest moments, offset by the subversive power of love.â "Publishers WeeklyZailâ "TMs story is as gut-wrenching as any Holocaust tale, particularly when, upon their liberation by Russian troops, Hanna discovers that her own dehumanizing experiences in the labor camp were nothing compared to the barbarity that occurred in the extermination camps. The haunting, matter-of-fact tone of Hannaâ "TMs story will likely resonate with teens learning about the Holocaust.â "BooklistHanna's story is reminiscent of such classics as Aranka Siegal's *Upon the Head of the Goat* (1981). ... With fewer living Holocaust survivors each year, it's increasingly important to tell their story, and this is one.â "Kirkus ReviewsReaders also feel the pressure as Hanna tries to please the commandant while witnessing his brutality. ... The novel will appeal to a wide range of readers.â "Association of Jewish Libraries ReviewsReviewed.â "School Library Journal

An amazing story of survival, this book kept me spellbound at the horrors this young girl had to endure. I liked that the author didn't hesitate to drop the reader right into the middle of Auschwitz and the tearful separation between family members. The author incorporated a ton of details about the camp itself and the experience of the prisoners. The research required for such a work as this

was evident throughout the book. At the beginning, I did feel the lack a bit of an introduction to Hanna and her family. Yet, as the story went along, that lack didn't seem to matter so much. The author does a fantastic job in introducing her characters and letting her readers get to know them throughout the narrative. As a result, I felt every emotion, heartache, and burst of hope after all the horrors were over. I felt like I got to know the character of Hanna, just as well as if she was my own little sister experiencing this trial. She's a thoughtful character who's devoted to her family and artistic craft. She dedicated herself to helping her sister when she got the opportunity to get a better job and was broken when she couldn't always follow-up on that dedication. Yet, there were also moments where the young, innocent teenager showed through as well: her undying belief that her parents are alive and just somewhere else in the camp and her momentary flashes of selfishness when she just eats the food available rather than saving it to split with Erika. I do have a bit of an issue with this book being touted as a "Romance", though. Sure, there is tenderness between Karl and Hanna, and I enjoyed that journey toward what might have been called "Romance" in the future. What scenes they had together were powerful in their subtlety and hints at what could be/might have been. But at the end of the day, it just feels that the power of Hanna's survival story and her piano talents were the star of the story (not that that's a bad thing, it's a great story!). Karl almost seems sidelined as a secondary thought, which is a sad point as he had a ton of potential. Beyond a bit of wrong billing and a lack of introduction to the book's players, this book was a fantastic look at a young girl's journey through hell, out to the other side. The author does a fantastic job at characterization for her main character and in creating a setting of true horror that transported this reader smack dab into that hell. Don't let the fact that this isn't really a romance turn you off; the story of a young girl navigating the Holocaust stands firm on its own as a fantastic reason to read this book. Recommended for readers of Holocaust fiction, especially the YA readers, and for the 70th anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation.

Cool story showing "both sides" of the Holocaust experience. Nice addition to the books we were reading with our homeschool curriculum. Would recommend 7th or 8th grade and above (depending on the maturity of the reader). Not difficult reading, but the topic includes very difficult situations. This is not too explicit in description, but it could be problematic for some kids.

Very good - enjoyed it

Rating: 3.75 stars
MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS

"It didn't make any sense. They couldn't be kicking us out of the ghetto. It was their idea to create it, their idea to crum us inside its claustrophobic walls. We'd done everything they'd asked of us. We'd painted yellow stars on our apartment buildings, we'd obeyed curfew, we didn't take buses or use the telephone. I wasn't a troublemaker. I was a straight-A student. I'd won a scholarship to the Budapest Conservatorium of Music. I was smart. I was talented."First I would like to say that I am very happy they changed the title of this book. (It was called The wrong boy.)Secondly, while there was a romance in this story you don't see much of it until the end and it happened so gradually that it wasn't that surprising when it happened.

Now onto the review....Hannah Mendel wants to be just like her idol Clara Schumann, she tries to replicate everything Clara has done in her music life even if it is just recreating it in the town that she lives in. Hannah is very talented, so talented that even though it will get her teacher arrested she still comes and teachers her piano and insists that she keep playing no matter what. Hannah is extremely dedicated and is sure that once the war is over that she will be able to be just like Clara. That is until the family gets forced out of their home and sent to the train yard where they live, for several days. That's when Hannah starts realizing that things aren't going to get better, and that she might not be able to do what, her idol has done.Hannah is extremely naive mostly due to her family protecting her so much and just making sure that she stays focused on her piano playing.Once her family gets to Auschwitz and they are separated from her father, and Hannah quickly realizes that this isn't going to be like what they have heard from others. When she sees a familiar face in the crowd she goes to them and they help her get an opportunity to play for the Commandant in his home.Hannah gets the position and then lives in fear every day that she will do something to make him mad or upset him and he will kill her. The perk to working at the Commandant's house though is that if he isn't home she can practice as much as she wants and as long as she isn't caught she can take enough food for herself and her family.

Now for the romance. When Hannah first sees Karl she is afraid of him. But slowly as she gets to see how he acts and shows compassion for the other Jews working in the house she knows that he isn't like his father. Slowly Karl starts to "befriend" Hannah, he saves her several times from his father and makes sure that she always has something to eat when he can. Karl is nothing like his father, but yet he is also somewhat afraid of his father I think and just wants his father to show some interest in him.Throughout the book you get to see that Karl is very lonely and he wants life to go back to how it was before the war that is something that they have in common.

One thing that surprised me about Hannah and Karl was that she never hated him or blamed him for his father's actions and what his father was doing to her family and the other prisoners. (Mostly because up until the end she didn't truly realize how different things were from

what she thought.)"When they look at you, they don't see a girl who hands her homework in on time. They don't care that you wake at six every morning to practice piano. They don't see a concert pianist when they see you- They see a Jew."

I picked up this book because of its title and cover. I was familiar with other stories of prisoners who played for the entertainment of SS officers in the death camps during the Holocaust. Remarkably told in the first person, it brings to life not just the narrator, but other characters and situations very well. The action clips along without melodrama, but with full import of the horrors personalized. The ending is upbeat as best as it can be for such a story and closes it out nicely. Knowing nothing about piano, composers or compositions doesn't matter to this story. The author is able to enhance nuance and meaning in a quite understandable way. The facts from ghetto to liberation, to just exactly what occurred when liberated Jews were sent back to their homes is incredibly contained in 245 pages. It will be on my list of recommended books.

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