



## **A Faraway Island**

*Annika Thor , Linda Schenck (Translator)*

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*Torn from their homeland, two Jewish sisters find refuge in Sweden.*

It's the summer of 1939. Two Jewish sisters from Vienna—12-year-old Stephie Steiner and 8-year-old Nellie—are sent to Sweden to escape the Nazis. They expect to stay there six months, until their parents can flee to Amsterdam; then all four will go to America. But as the world war intensifies, the girls remain, each with her own host family, on a rugged island off the western coast of Sweden.

Nellie quickly settles in to her new surroundings. She's happy with her foster family and soon favors the Swedish language over her native German. Not so for Stephie, who finds it hard to adapt; she feels stranded at the end of the world, with a foster mother who's as cold and unforgiving as the island itself. Her main worry, though, is her parents—and whether she will ever see them again.

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## A Faraway Island Details

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## From Reader Review A Faraway Island for online ebook

### Amanda Tero says

This book fascinated me, being translated to English from Swedish. It was written in third-person, present tense, which took a little while to get used to, but I thought it well-written.

As a WWII children's book, it was well done. It felt like I was transported to the era as I followed Stephe as a child-immigrant from Austria to Sweden with her younger sister, placed in separate foster families, and learn to survive in a culture and language that was new to them. The author did a fantastic job seeing the situation and world through Stephe's eyes—the reader knew that her foster mother wasn't unreasonably strict, but Stephe saw her as such.

There are a few reasons I wouldn't just hand it over to any child.

First, there was some bullying and name-calling (a lot of "idiot's").

Second, while Stephe was a Jew, it was more of the fact she was born a Jew than that they lived by the Bible. Her foster family was Pentecostal, and there was one church meeting with speaking in tongues and then, when Stephe began crying because music was so pretty, they brought her to the altar to "accept Jesus" (even though she acknowledged that nothing happened). So the spiritual content did not line up with Scripture, and Stephe almost came across as an agnostic. So while I enjoyed the book, it could be confusing spiritually to younger children.

Third, there were a lot of attitude issues that weren't resolved.

It would probably make a fantastic family read-aloud with discussion.

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### Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

The first of a series of four historical novels set in Sweden during World War II, this book had me thinking long after I finished it. I didn't know that Sweden took in 500 Jewish refugee children just before the war started. The author's relatives were among those granted asylum, and it is their lives that she bases the story on. Stephe and her sister Nellie are sent to live in an island off the coast of Sweden, but while Nellie is given to a kind family with children, Stephe has to live with a gruff older woman and her fisherman husband. Thor does an excellent job portraying Stephe's frustration as nothing goes right for her, and she feels constantly frustrated by her host family, the bullying of the local girls, her lack of friends, and her longing to help her parents back in Austria. It's a perfect example of how some refugee children, like Nellie, were able to adjust to their new surroundings fairly easily, and some, like Stephe, were not. Once I started reading, I couldn't put it down, and will be reading the second book, *The Lily Pond*, as soon as I can. This is an outstanding novel that I highly recommend, especially if you want to understand the problems that refugee children face, no matter what era or country they're from.

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### Brianna says

Audience: This book is intended for grades 4th-6th with an interest in historical fiction.

Appeal: What appeals most about the book is it based on real accounts of Jewish sisters being transported from their parents to Sweden to escape the Nazi's. It has a lot of relativity that 4th-6th graders can

understand, with or without siblings.

Application: I would like to apply this book to my classroom by giving a whole lesson on the Holocaust and what things may have been like around that time. Have the students break off into groups of about 4-5 and give each group a book relating to the topic we are discussing, (example: Faraway Island.) They read a couple chapters each night, then collaborate with their peers the next day in class discussing what they liked and disliked, and write down their own feelings as well as peer's feelings. At the end, have the students make some sort of project, whether it be powerpoint, poster, memory box, etc. that would give the other groups a sense of what it was like for one book's aspect. Another thing I would like to do with this book specifically is to read it aloud to the class during a time we spend in Social Studies on the Holocaust and World War II. Let the children wind down after recess and listen to the book.

Awards: 2010 Mildred L. Batchelder Award Winner 2010 ALA Notable Children's Book  
2010 Sydney Taylor Book Award, Association of Jewish Libraries  
2010 NCSS/CBC Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Studies

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### **Johanna says**

Omläsning drygt 20 år sen första gången jag läste den. Mindes den väldigt stark och att jag tyckte om den, nu är den än bättre och jag ser verkligen fram emot att läsa de andra tre delarna.

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### **Dorian says**

Reading this one because it's one of my student's forever faves.

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### **QNPoohBear says**

It's 1939 and the Germans have taken over Austria where 12-year old Stephanie Steiner and her eight-year-old sister Nellie are from. To keep them safe, their parents sent them to Sweden to stay until they can all get visas to enter Amsterdam and go to America. Stephanie entertains her sister with tall tales about faraway Sweden with its endless sandy beaches and palm trees. The reality is vastly different! The sisters are shipped to a faraway island- a rugged, wild island off the coast far from the mainland. Worse-they're separated. While Nellie gets to stay with a loving family and have other children to play with, Stephanie is alone. Her foster mother, Auntie Marta, is as severe as her bun. Swedish is difficult for Stephanie to learn and a mean bully makes school unbearable and friends unthinkable. How can she survive? As the situation in Europe escalates into war, Stephanie fears for her parents and wonders when they will all be together again.

It's always hard to read a Holocaust novel from the perspective of someone living today who knows the facts about what happened. It's hard not to cringe when characters say "Oh they really wouldn't put innocent people in prison would they?" and "oh politics! I don't want to get involved." Ignorance is not bliss. I had a hard time putting the book down because I wondered what kind of conclusion it would have. I was surprised to discover similarities to Anne of Green Gables. I'm almost certain those similarities were intentional. I did not like the present tense voice but once I read the author's note, it made sense. I like how she drew a parallel

between what happened to refugee children in the 1940s and what is happening today. I hope readers will feel more compassionate towards refugees after reading this book.

While Anne Shirley may have been able to come through her rough childhood as an optimist, Stephe has been through a lot worse and has a harder time adapting. I really don't like her very much. I understand she's having a rough time and taking all the burden on herself because Nellie is too young to share the burdens. I get that she doesn't understand the language and the culture and I totally empathize with her in those respects. What I don't like is how she doesn't make any attempts to learn anything about her foster parents and she doesn't seem to understand just how much her life of wealth and privilege (up to now) has spoiled her. It's clearly obvious her foster family is not wealthy. Nellie's family seems to have more money and Sylvia's family, as shopkeepers, seem to have the most money of anyone on the island and even still, none of them are as wealthy as the Steiners once were! Stephe takes for granted the privileges she had like new clothes, an education, no chores and doesn't even think about WHY Auntie Marta needs her to do chores or WHY she's given an old-fashioned, hand-me-down bathing suit. I suppose some of that is her age but once she's been there almost a year, she still doesn't seem to understand the locals. She's also very mean to her little sister. The conclusion of the book is too much of a change for Stephe that fast. I didn't care for her total personality change or the other changes.

I did think that her relationship with Auntie Marta would mirror that of Anne and Marilla. Auntie Marta is very much a Marilla. I can not, however, forgive Auntie Marta for forcing Stephe to convert to her bizarre evangelical Christian faith. She knows Stephe is Jewish but apparently that constitutes a "sin." The whole church scene was completely repugnant to me and I was surprised Stephe and Nellie accepted it so easily. Stephe worries what her parents will think but it doesn't sound like they were Orthodox or even really observant. The conversion may end up saving their lives but at this point they don't know that. Uncle Evert is absolutely Matthew Cuthbert. He's a very dear man and as unlike his wife as Matthew is his sister. I had a lot of respect for Uncle Evert for getting involved in "politics" when no one else would.

Nellie is cute in an annoying, innocent little girl way. She is too young to understand fully what is happening but she does have some lingering trauma from an event that happened before they left Vienna. She adjusts quickly because she has to. She's young and innocent. I can understand Stephe's fears that Nellie is forgetting who they are- their language and culture. Nellie will probably not want to leave Sweden when and if the time comes.

I do have sympathy for Vera. She must have been the butt of Sylvia's wrath before Stephe came along but she does something unforgivable in my opinion. Sylvia is beyond queen bee mean girl. She's a cruel bully. Perhaps the author wanted to bring the Nazi ideology down to a child's level and made Sylvia cruel, manipulative and a downright despicable person. I believe she's somewhat jealous of Stephe for coming from a wealthy family but also probably motivated partly by anti-Semitism. The other children are all horrid queen bee wannabes and extraordinarily cruel.

This isn't the best Holocaust refugee novel I've read but I'm curious enough to see where the story is headed to read the sequels.

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## **April Helms says**

A touching book. Two sisters, Stephe, 12, and Nellie, 7, are sent to Sweden as part of a children's refugee program to escape the Nazi occupation and repression in Austria. Nellie adapts to her family quickly, embracing the language and her adopted parents. Stephe struggles with trying to fit in, while maintaining her Jewish and Austrian identity. Stephe also has an uneasy relationship with her strict adoptive mother,

whom she calls Aunt Marta, as well as problems with the school bully. Above all, she worries about her parents and wants to reunite with them. Or, try to get them to Sweden. By the end of the book, of course, it's obvious the troubles in Europe are not only going to last longer than most people initially thought, but they are spreading. This is the first in a series of translated books. The characters are well-rounded, and most are sympathetic. It strikes me as an honest look at what the children probably faced. The author used real-life stories from children in similar situations.

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## **Rebecca says**

Following the invasion of Austria by the Nazis, two young Jewish sisters from Vienna, twelve-year-old Stephanie Steiner and her eight-year-old sister, Nellie, are sent away by their parents to safety in Sweden. Their parents hope the family can reunite soon and travel to a safer country, but shortly after the sisters arrive in Sweden, World War II breaks out in Europe, trapping the two young girls in a strange and foreign country, away from their parents.

The two girls are placed in separate homes on a small island in Sweden, and have very different experiences. Nellie loves her foster parents, who have young children of their own. Stephanie however is placed with a seemingly cold and unloving childless couple. While the younger Nellie quickly adapts to life in a strange new country, Stephanie struggles to learn the new language, and feels like an outcast in school. Will she ever adjust to her new country and new life? And what will become of the parents she left behind?

Before reading *A Faraway Island*, I had never even heard of the story of the 500 Jewish refugee children Sweden accepted just before the start of World War II. The author, Annika Thor, grew up in a Jewish family in Sweden and had young refugee cousins who had fled the Nazis in Europe. She has published three other books about Stephanie and Nellie in Sweden, that tell the rest of their story during and shortly after World War II, and I hope to see them published in English so I can find out the rest of the story. This book would make a good choice for preteens looking to supplement their learning about World War II with historical fiction, as well as for any reader looking for a unique story set in this time period.

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## **Reading is my Escape says**

Sisters sent to Sweden to escape WWII...

During World War II, many Jewish children were sent to other countries and placed with families to keep them safe. Stephanie and Nellie were two of those children. They end up on a small island and with two different families. At first glance, Nellie is in the warm, loving family and Stephanie ends up with a woman who doesn't seem to even like her. Stephanie is holding on to the idea that their parents will join them and they will all go to America.

This is a great story about two girls adjusting to their new life and dealing with bullying and prejudice. I felt so bad for Stephanie. She is trying so hard, but she misses her old life and her parents so much. Her parents sent her and her sister away to save them from the Germans and their hatred. But, even in Sweden, they can't avoid it completely.

When Stephanie finally reveals her pain to her foster mother (Aunt Marta), she finds that Aunt Marta is dealing with her own pain. They both realize they aren't alone and don't have to deal with everything on their own.

Recommended to:

Middle school ages, especially girls. Even though it's historical fiction, the problems the girls deal with are easily relatable. The book doesn't deal with the horrors of the concentration camps, but the way the war affects Stephie, Nellie, and their family.

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### **Evelina says**

Andra gången jag läser dessa böcker och de är ännu bättre nu! Älskar den historiska miljön och karaktärerna. Läs hela recensionen här: <https://ewelinasbokblogg.blogspot.se/...>

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### **Fanny says**

Som barn älskade jag bokserien "En ö i havet", berättelsen om de två systerarna som skickas från Wien till den lilla göteborgska ön i Sverige, i flykt undan nazisterna.

Nu, nästan tio år sedan jag läste den första boken senast, är den fortfarande lika gripande och viktig. Hur systerarna bearbetar vad som hänt dem, hur de försöker förstå och anpassa sig till sin nya miljö, hur människorna omkring dem bemöter dem, och Steffis känslor kring allting. Tycker hennes relation med Evert är så fin.

Det är berättelsen som är dess stora styrka, snarare än språket som är väldigt enkelt, på gränsen till platt. Jag har alltid föredragit målande beskrivningar med många superlativ, och hade väl önskat det med denna också. Språket känns så övergripande att det nästan - bara nästan - skapar en distans mellan läsaren och karaktärerna. Men det är en petitesse i sammanhanget, eftersom själva berättelsen är så fin, bra och viktig. Dessutom, jag som tjugotvåring är ju faktiskt inte målgrupp - utan typ 9-12-åringar - och det passar den helt perfekt för.

Ps: Sara Edströms nydesignade omslag till bokserien är så oerhört fina!!

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### **Lori says**

Two Jewish sisters are evacuated from Austria to Sweden by the Swedish Aid Society. The story mostly follows the older sister Stephie who lives with "Aunt Marta" and "Uncle Evert" on a small island. Evert is a fisherman by trade, and the couple doesn't have much money. Nellie lives in the same village with another couple, although the plan had been for the two girls to live together. Nellie ends up adapting to the new situation and making friends more easily than Stephie who is bullied by classmates. Stephie dreams of going to "grammar school" upon completion of the sixth grade (which she'd already completed in Austria) and of eventually becoming a doctor like her father. The girls also work to try to get their parents out of Austria into Sweden after their parents' attempts to get into America fail. A friend and I listened to the first thirty-seven chapters on the audio book on a trip. I had to complete the short remainder with the e-book version available to me. I really enjoyed the narrator of the English translation. I also enjoyed the author's comments at the conclusion of the book and hope to be able to read or listen to the remainder of the books in the series.

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## **Louis says**

I listened to the audio translation of this book. At first, I was going to give this book a "2" rating. Poor Stephie: she is the victim of constant bullying and brutality through the first half of the book. This brutality includes having her braids set on fire with a candle. Besides the bullying, Stephie seems to have a knack for making poor choices based on her stubbornness that cause her endless grief. So one way or another, she is beset by difficulties. It became so frightful that I began to see if there would ever be a chapter in this book where something horrible doesn't happen to her. It took into the high twenties before there was a chapter where she did not experience some kind of taunting or predicament of her own causing.

Now this is a story that needed to be told, viz. the tale of the 500 Jewish children who were allowed to enter Sweden prior to the beginning of WWII. I enjoyed reading about the disparities between the children's Vienna upbringing and their new Swedish home. I appreciated the insights into Swedish culture.

The later chapters develop the foster-parents' character more fully. For most of the book, I felt that Aunt Marta was portrayed as a caricature. Yet you knew that there had to be more to her story, which you eventually find out. But why couldn't these insights have been developed throughout the course of the story, instead of at the denouement?

If I had read about some of the more normal experiences of living in Sweden which Stephie had during those unrelenting chapters of woe, it would have provided a more balanced look at her life. Because frankly, her life is portrayed as so horrible I was not surprised when she decided, again in another foolish decision, to take to the ice and head for the mainland.

Of course I have to allow for the fact that the consciousness about bullying is not as high then as it is now. I suppose in even my own generation of upbringing that such behavior was believed to toughen up kids who were on the receiving end, i.e. to build their character. But the fact that the adults are so clueless about what is happening to Stephie and the behavior which she endures from her peers makes this novel a prime anti-bullying text on top of its historical value.

The reason that I raised this book to a "3" rating was that in the final few chapters the book finally fleshed out other characters in the text who had been stick figures beforehand. We start to see some more normal activity, such as Stephie fishing with her Uncle Evert, that helps to develop the interrelationships between characters better. The story progresses more as well, instead of just being about Stephie as victim of herself and others.

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## **Lisa Vegan says**

Only when I had the book in hand did I realize this was the first book in a series of four books, and it looks as though the fourth is unfortunately not yet translated into English. I do wish that this story was told in one long book; sometimes I don't like having to read multiple books to read what is essentially one story. I wasn't sure I would read on but I plan to keep reading and hope that the fourth book will eventually be available for me to read. This is a wonderful first book. The series is apparently very popular in Sweden and a mini-series was made based on it. I'd love to see it, with English subtitles.

This is a lovely story. It's a great story with great characters. I loved the two sisters from the start and came to care about a great many of the characters.

It's heartbreaking but not depressing. In fact, if anything it's uplifting.

Via the viewpoint of the twelve year old older daughter it gives a great feel for what it would feel like to move to a strange place, to experience the loss of family, to feel lonely, to be bullied, to be different from those around you, to have strangeness turn into familiarity.

The ending seemed a bit rushed, so often true in books, possibly especially children's books. In one of the fairly early scenes I wondered if a 12 year old would be that naïve even as a stranger with a strange language, and I could have done without the two painful dog scenes, one in real time and one via a memory.

There is a helpful, informative, touching author's note at the end about her personal connections with this story (she is Jewish and grew up in Sweden, and had relatives who'd died in the Holocaust) and also about refugee children, and about the history of how Sweden took in 500 Jewish children from three countries in Nazi occupied Europe early in the war.

4-1/2 stars I'm rounding down but I'm tempted to change my rating and give it 5 stars. It's an excellent book.

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### **Elvira says**

åh, superfin!! och gripande och verklig och kärleksfull och varm osv

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