



## The Baker's Daughter

*Sarah McCoy*

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A routine interview between a reporter and an elderly baker brings out memories of darker times: her life in Germany during that last bleak year of WWII. As their lives become more intertwined, all are forced to confront the uncomfortable truths of the past and seek out the courage to forgive.

In 1945, Elsie Schmidt is a naive teenager, as eager for her first sip of champagne as she is for her first kiss. She and her family have been protected from the worst of the terror and desperation overtaking her country by a high-ranking Nazi who wishes to marry her. So when an escaped Jewish boy arrives on Elsie's doorstep in the dead of night on Christmas Eve, Elsie understands that opening the door would put all she loves in danger.

Sixty years later, in El Paso, Texas, Reba Adams is trying to file a feel-good Christmas piece for the local magazine. Reba is perpetually on the run from memories of a turbulent childhood, but she's been in El Paso long enough to get a full-time job and a fiancé, Riki Chavez. Riki, an agent with the U.S. Border Patrol, finds comfort in strict rules and regulations, whereas Reba feels that lines are often blurred.

Reba's latest assignment has brought her to the shop of an elderly baker across town. The interview should take a few hours at most, but the owner of Elsie's German Bakery is no easy subject. Reba finds herself returning to the bakery again and again, anxious to find the heart of the story. For Elsie, Reba's questions are a stinging reminder of darker times: her life in Germany during that last bleak year of WWII. And as Elsie, Reba, and Riki's lives become more intertwined, all are forced to confront the uncomfortable truths of the past and seek out the courage to forgive.

## **The Baker's Daughter Details**

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## From Reader Review The Baker's Daughter for online ebook

### David says

What to say? It really had the potential to be a great novel, but the non-chronological jumping around between families felt like a chore. I quite literally could not have cared any less about Reba and Riki and I wish they had been left out of the book altogether. After reading a bio of the author I realize that they were meant to be loosely based on her own experience, but truthfully, I found them to be annoying. I felt that the author was trying to make a parallel between the US Border Patrol and Hitler's SS, but again...really? The other complaint I have about it may be limited to the Kindle edition, but I could not even read the chapter headers because they were written vertically and got completely lost in the margins the way the Kindle is set up.

A disappointment. I would gladly have given a better review if the story had only focused on Elsie and at-war and post-war Germany.

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### Jenn says

I absolutely loved this book. I loved the parallel stories although I enjoyed Elsie's a bit more. The writing was great, really grabs you and emerge you into the story line right away. I could hardly put it down. The book made me gasp out loud and cry at parts. Definitely a great read, highly recommend it. It's a book that you can't stop thinking about even after it's over. Loved it.

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### Angela M says

It seems to be a trend - stories with alternating narratives of the past and present. I know that for some this mechanism has gotten tiresome but I happen to really enjoy the blending of the past and present, the connecting of stories and characters from different times. The place and the circumstances are almost always different and if this is done well, there is something that grabs me as the stories are brought together. Sarah McCoy has done just that in this moving novel set in El Paso Texas in 2007 and WW II Nazi Germany.

I almost always like the past story more than the present and this was the case here with the moving story of Elsie and her family during WW II in Garmish, Germany. The perspective of how the war impacted the Germans, even Nazi supporters is an interesting one as well as heart breaking as you see what happens to Elsie's sister Hazel and her family. The historic part of the story unfolds in several ways - letters between Elsie and her sister Hazel, third person narrative and in what Elsie tells Reba. The story does focus on the plight of the Jews as well as we see the courage and humanity of a teenage Elsie attempt to save a young Jewish boy bringing great risk for her family.

I was also touched by Reba's story taking place in 2007 El Paso, Texas. She has had a less than happy family life, growing up with a father who has suffered the emotional and mental consequences of the Vietnam War and a mother and sister who seem to be in denial over the problem. Reba, herself seems to be in denial about her true feelings for her fiancé, Riki, or at least unsure of what she really wants. She is a writer looking for that feel good Christmas story when she meets Elsie and her daughter, Jane and the story of Elsie, the baker's daughter comes to life.

While there is the death, sadness, hunger, the toll on Elsie's family, the sadness in Reba's family and the timely inclusion of the illegal immigrant issue, there are moments that shine reflecting, family, love, friendship and caring people. I really enjoyed this story and highly recommend it.

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### **Sarah McCoy says**

Can't wait to share this novel with you all!

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### **Tania says**

No one is good or bad by birth or nation or religion. Inside, we are all masters and slaves, rich and poor, perfect and flawed.

I really enjoyed this story about Elsie living in WWII Germany. The book shows that all Germans were not active in the atrocities, and that many families were trying to live their normal lives. Some of them were also affected by things like the Lebensborn program. The aim of this program was to increase the Germanic/Nordic population. It was basically a place where racially pure woman got to "meet" and have children with SS officers. These children were then taken by the SS and became children of the Fatherland. It must have been quite difficult believing in your country and Hitler, and then with time only realizing what exactly was happening, and what horrors was being committed. For me this is what the author does best in this book - showing that it's very easy to judge other people, but that we can't judge as we were not there, and have no idea how we would have acted. I also liked the fact the book is not overly sentimental. Although I thought Reba's story (Texas, 2007) wasn't as strong as Elsie's I was still very interested in reading about the effect of a Bipolar parent, US immigration issues and Dia de los muertos (day of the dead).

I recommend this book to anyone who liked The Storyteller or other similar WWII novels.

How new and unknowing their minds are to the world's history. I wonder if it is better for them to remain that way - innocent and naive. Should we bury our memory barbs to keep them from piercing budding hearts? No doubt they will encounter their own tragedies in due time. Or should we warn our children that the world is harsh and men can be wicked? Warn them so that they take care to guard each other and seek out compassion

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### **Alex (not a dude) Baugh says**

There seems to be a lot of anticipation about to soon to be released novel The Baker's Daughter and I can understand why. Split between past and present, Nazi Germany in the last year of World War II and present day El Paso, Texas, it is the story of two very different women and how they each find themselves. Elsie Schmidt, 16, is the second daughter of bakers in Garmisch, Germany. Her older sister, Hazel, has been in the Lebensborn Program to produce strong, racially pure babies for the Fatherland since her fiancée was

killed. Their young son Julius is also there being educated in Nazi dogma.

The Schmidt's have always been supporters of Hitler and his policies, and when Lieutenant Colonel Josef Hub, a family friend since Peter's death, invites Elsie to the Nazis Weihnachten (Christmas) party, they are thrilled. At the party, Joseph asks Elsie to marry him, giving her a ring that has a Hebrew in it. Elsie doesn't know what to do - on the one hand, he provides the bakery with supplies and the family with protection, on the other hand, he is much older and she doesn't want to marry him.

At the same party, a young Jewish boy with a breath-takingly beautiful voice is brought in to entertain. Elsie later learns he will be killed as soon as he is taken back to the concentration camp he was in. When a General Kremer attacks Elsie in an alley she escaped to for some air, it is the boy's voice that saves her. Later that night, when the boy shows up at the back door of the bakery, their lives are changed forever.

Years later, in 2007, Reba Adams, a journalist, is trying to get in touch with the now elderly Elsie Schmidt to do an article on Christmas traditions around the world. She wants to talk to Elsie about German traditions. But her interviews turn out to be very different from what Reba had expected. And again lives are changed. The Baker's Daughter is about the journey two women must make in order to find their true selves. And even though the time and facts of their individual journeys are different, the outcomes are very much the same.

There is a very diverse cast of characters in this novel, some nice, some not, but all very relevant in the lives of Elsie and Reba. I felt more connected to Elsie's story and found it much more compelling than Reba's story. I believe that is because we are given more details about her life and follow it from 1944 to the present, whereas we learn about Reba's past mainly from her thoughts and they are not as thoroughly explored. I also found myself more drawn to Elsie than I did to Reba and maybe that is why.

Don't get me wrong, however. I really enjoyed reading The Baker's Daughter, and found it hard to put down. I found it to be a well researched story and it does bring out a disturbing aspect of the Lebensborn Program that many people may not know about.

A bonus: at the end of the novel, there is a collection of recipes to bake that are mentioned throughout the story, some from Elsie's family's bakery in Germany, so new ones from life in El Paso, and all, I am sure, scrumptious.

This book is recommended for readers age 15 and up.

This book was received as an E-ARC from Netgalley.com

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## Sara says

I probably need to shy away from anything that is written about Nazi Germany, but there is so much potential for good material there and so much excellence in some of the things already written that I find myself being pulled in again and again. Can you say "cliche"? You cannot humanize a man who runs a concentration camp by having him kill a fellow soldier who kills a Jewish woman while arresting her husband. Why can't you tell the story of a normal German family who find themselves almost automatically joining the Nazi party, but aren't fanatics, without having the story of a saved Jew interwoven? I doubt the American servicemen were so charming that every German girl fell hopelessly in love with one look. She might have explored the Lebensborn Program, which is introduced as a side track, and take a route that isn't already over-trodden, but she didn't.

I'm sorry to say that I found her characters stilted and I never felt connected to any of them. The bouncing between then and now, with the parallel stories of Elsie (our WWII German) and Reba (our modern day American) distracted rather than added to the story. Had she stuck to Elsie's story alone, I might have remained a bit more engaged, but the stops and starts killed whatever chance there was of caring for the characters.

Then there was the attempt to draw similarities between the Nazi treatment of Jews and the mission of the border patrol in Texas. She may see those as two sides of the same coin, but it was ludicrous in my mind. Two very different issues that should be treated as such. One group is trying to destroy an entire segment of the population by murdering them...the other is trying to protect a national border from illegal entry. You might find flaws in the later and you can surely find tragedy there, but they are far from having anything in common.

I considered DNFing at several points but stuck it out to the end. It didn't really matter, she had lost me far before the end.

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## **Rachel says**

This book ended up being very disappointing, although I thought the plot had a lot of potential. It read very much like Sarah's Key, switching back and forth between a modern story and a WWII story in Germany. But it had the same problem as Sarah's Key--the modern line was almost completely uninteresting, and I just kept waiting to get back to the WWII story.

I don't think this book was written very well, and it relied mostly on dramatic events to be exciting. I prefer books that are written in a way that makes any event interesting, not just the dramatic ones. I often found myself bored and skimming ahead to get to some action. I also don't think the characters were very well-written . . . they all seemed to be either really flat, or written as if the author hadn't decided yet what/who she wanted them to be. It might have been a stronger book if it had ended after the main action, but it dragged on for 50 years, which is difficult to keep interesting when the characters aren't very well-constructed.

And, at the risk of sounding like a monster, I found the connection of Holocaust victims to illegal aliens entering the US to be ludicrous, bordering on offensive. I can hardly believe the author had the nerve to try and make a connection between the slaughter of millions of innocent people during WWII, and the plight of families crossing the border illegally only to be caught and deported. Maybe I'm reading too much into it and she didn't intend for it sound like she was linking the situations in the modern and past story lines, and maybe I just don't have a very good understanding of border/immigrations issues . . . but the connection seemed pretty hard to miss, and I found it tactless, extremely hard to swallow, and rather offensive.

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## **Staci says**

First thoughts after finishing: "What an emotional powerhouse!"

I love books that make me weep with sadness and feel such empathy to the characters...this book does that and so much more. I cracked the spine of The Baker's Daughter late in the morning on Saturday and finished it as the sun peeked over the horizon announcing the arrival of Sunday. I was so thankful that I was the only one awake during those first early hours because I was able to be alone with my thoughts after I finished the book. The last quarter of the book had left me with tears streaming down my face and once again realizing that we can NOT judge others....it's not our place. What struck me with such force was something that the main protagonist said when asked if she was a Nazi. She replied, "I am a German." I think that over the years, the general public has lumped being German into automatically assuming they were all Nazi's too.

Instead, this book brings to light how many of them became compliant to Hitler's propaganda and laws because of FEAR. Fear of death to self, fear of the death of loved ones, and fear of the death of their way of life. I learned about the Lebensborn Program and couldn't believe the atrocities that were committed against the German mothers and the children the women gave birth to. The author made me feel some sadness about Josef, a SS Officer. This character was someone who had supervised the murder of thousands of Jews and fellow Germans, but Sarah McCoy humanized him and showed the inner demons that he carried within his black soul. She showed the other side of the war...the German side. She didn't make excuses for any of their behaviors, but rather gave the reader an insider's view of what happens when a human is trapped and feels as if they have no options. Elsie is a character that I loved from the moment I met her and she's one that I think may have embodied many unspoken heroic acts of Germans. She hides an emaciated Jewish boy, gives him shelter, food, attention, and love. She is what it means to be human in the face of war. She is what humans try to aspire to when given no options but death or doing something against their moral fiber. Even knowing that death may be her ending, it doesn't stop her from loving and protecting this child. Her story will stay with me...I have her tucked under my heart.

I loved everything about the bakery in Germany and the bakery in Texas. The aroma of baking bread, cakes, and cookies says comfort and home to me. I'm sure that is how Elsie felt when she was busy with the daily chores of making the baked goods. This was a beautiful thread throughout the book and really helped to connect the past with the present. The recipes at the end of the book are calling my name!

I have to admit that Reba's story really didn't do much for me at all. I liked how the past influenced the future and the way the author tried to tie the two stories together. But overall I'm not really sure if Reba/Riki's storyline added to my overall enjoyment of the book. I was more than happy to stay in the past and learn more about Elsie's life and what eventually happened to the people she loved.

Recommend? I would give this book to anyone who is looking for a story that will touch them on a very human level. This is a tale of love, choices, hardship, heartache, and hope. It puts another face on the ravages of war and makes a person stop and contemplate a very big and heavy question.....What Would You Do?

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### **Laura says**

Given the excellent reviews this book has received, I was disappointed. Sarah McCoy's story tracks the life of Elsie (the baker's daughter of the title) during World War II in Garmisch, Germany, where her family, stalwart National Socialists, runs a bakery, and in present day El Paso, Texas. In the El Paso segments, Elsie's story is subordinate to a plot line involving Reba, an American writer and Riki, a Latino border patrol agent. I guess the author's intent is that Reba learn to face life challenges from Elsie and her experiences, which certainly are challenging. Unfortunately, other than setting a few scenes in Elsie's El Paso bakery, not much is done to interconnect the stories. There aren't any conversations where Elise or her daughter tell the story to Reba - in fact, it's pretty clear Elsie doesn't talk about it a lot. So how does Reba get to know what happened, although it's implied that she does? And it's a pity, because the German story is a good one. I really liked those parts of the book. But Reba seemed like a contrivance and her trials totally extraneous, so every time she showed up I was irritated.

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### **Kaitlin says**

ehhhhh, I thought this book was ok. I think the author had a theme (parallels that highlight that the moral

high ground isn't always defined by a bright line, whether US border patrol or a German soldier or citizen--pretty ridiculous)and executed against it. The writing was really lacking for me. The parallels felt forced, the characters fell flat, and the book overall came across as a little contrived and even trite. The characters felt caricature-ish (southern writer with depressed dad has trouble trusting a relationship, plucky German girl fights the regime without really knowing why, militaristic German boy learns his lesson, American doctor saves the day, good-hearted Hispanic Border Patrol character struggles with the job). There are two plot lines in this book, and neither was well-developed. And the connection between the two wasn't clear--the modern characters never really talk about what happened in WWII, there was one interview where Elsie (the German) and Reba (the reporter) start to talk about the past (which seemed forced and unrealistic--who would even open that can of worms with a basic stranger? Especially a reporter!?), but it's never really tied together.

I'd recommend *The Lost Wife*, or *Beasts in the Garden of Eden* before this one. For being a WWII book, it was a light, quick read, however. But it just wasn't for me.

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### **Andrea at Reading Lark says**

Review Posted on Reading Lark 3/6/12: <http://readinglark.blogspot.com/2012/...>

*The Baker's Daughter* by Sarah McCoy is one of those books that grabs you and refuses to let you go. There are so many elements that rise to the surface with this one that I found myself having to put the novel down and walk away for a bit to digest it all. I went through a wide range of emotions while reading this one. *The Baker's Daughter* is a story that spans three generations and focuses not only on the past, but is laced with implications for the present.

The format of the book was refreshing since it took so many forms. There is narrative, letters, emails, and recipes that help tell the story. One main story line surrounds the life Elise Schmidt, a German teen who helps run her family's bakery, as the Third Reich's power holds the land in its iron grasp. I thought I knew so much about the German experience during WWII, but this book forced me to look at things with a different perspective. I had never once stopped to consider what life was like for the German people. So many times I fell into the trap of believing that they all must have accepted Hitler and his agenda - and while this would hold true for some - there were just as many people in Germany who disagreed with Hitler. Voicing opinions in this time period could result in death so many had to hide their opposition. Elsie's story gives voice to those who had to hold their tongues during this time period.

I also really enjoyed it because most often women during this time period were not given equal rights and their experiences were seen to have little value. That becomes abundantly clear based on Elsie's older sister, Hazel's, experiences in the Lebensborn Program. I had never heard of this program before which led me to the internet to do some searching of my own. I have no idea how I missed the existence of this project. I have a degree in History, but my only in depth study of WWII was from the military and political standpoints. Again, I was exposed to the male view of these events and the female voices were left largely silent. Basically, The Lebensborn Program was a way to increase the ranks of the Aryan race. Young German women lived in homes and were basically used for breeding purposes. Once children were born, mothers were no longer integral in their lives beyond feeding. The children were raised and instructed by the SS. Babies who did not appear strong enough were often killed. The inclusion of this in the book was one of the things I found to be fascinating. Watching Hazel as she deals with the effects of this system was truly heart breaking and helped me see history from a different vantage point. There are so many other elements in the 1940's segments of the book that are also well written and intriguing, but this was the one that stuck out the most for me.

The second story line is set in 2007-2008 in El Paso, Texas. Elsie is now an elderly woman running a bakery in the border town and she is being interviewed for a local piece on Christmas traditions by Reba Adams. Reba has her own set of issues - including an engagement ring that she chooses to wear around her neck rather than on her finger. Finding Elise and her daughter, Jane, marks the beginning of a transition for Reba that will help her find out who she really is and what makes her happy. Reba's fiancée, Riki, is also an important fixture within the contemporary segments of the book. He is a Mexican American who watched his parents struggle in Mexico while awaiting their US citizenship. To prove that he is an American, he joins the US Border Patrol and hopes to help others see that there is a right way and a wrong way to get to America. However, after many nights on the job and some heart wrenching moments he starts to realize that not everything is so black and white.

I found it so compelling that McCoy chose to tell these two types of stories along side of one another. I would never have thought that German experiences during WWII would work so well alongside the current debate about immigration to the United States from Mexico. It also really made me stop and think about what life is like for those who are desperately seeking admittance into the land of the free. I appreciate that McCoy is shining a light on something in society that truly needs a solution. I can see the reasoning behind both those that support stricter immigration laws and those who want to cross the border. I don't pretend to have answers to how we can solve this conflict, but I do think generating discussion and thought around the topic is crucial. Discrimination and prejudice are nasty beasts that have plagued humanity since the dawn of time. We can never truly quell their vicious nature until we learn to see those who are different from us as valuable.

In addition, I was also drawn to these characters and their struggles. In particular, I found myself relating to Reba. She is unhappy with her life, but can't quite put her finger on what's missing. She thinks if she can just move to California and just snag her dream job then everything will be fine. Reba even remarks that she'd, "always been melancholic and unsatisfied with nearly everything about herself" (pg. 32). I often have that mentality and I'm trying to break myself out of that way of thinking. I have so many wonderful things in my life, but sometimes I just crave those things that are slightly beyond my grasp. I think that is human nature, but the problem is some of us dwell on what's lacking rather than focus on what is right in front of us. Like Reba, I need to calm down, take a deep breath, and just enjoy living. There is so much heartache and hardship in the world; I need to be thankful that my life is comfortable and I am loved. I am learning to be comfortable in my own skin and I always find it some comforting to find characters who are going through the same struggles. Reba held up a mirror for me to explain my own flaws and think of ways to grow beyond what I see reflected.

The Baker's Daughter is a book with so many delicious layers written in compelling prose. It is a critique of love, the human spirit, and racism. It is also a look into the hearts and minds of strong women who have made impossible choices in the midst of bleak times. Ultimately, The Baker's Daughter is a triumph of the human heart and the impressions we make on the lives of others. I highly recommend this book to those who enjoy historical fiction, women's history, and those looking for critiques on families and love. I don't think its possible for me to capture in this review how much I loved this book and how deeply it spoke to my heart.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with a quote that really spoke to me: "The marks on our lives are like music notes on the page - they sing a song" (pg. 123). I am inspired to go forth and make sure the marks I leave in my encounters with others will produce beautiful harmonies.

One Last Gripe: I wanted to know more about Josef and the ship. What truly happened?

My Favorite Thing About This Book: Learning new things about WWII and the current immigration debate

First Sentence: Long after the downstairs oven had cooled to the touch and the upstairs had grown warm with bodies cocooned in cotton sheets, she slipped her feet from beneath the thin coverlet and quietly made

her way through the darkness, neglecting her slippers for fear that their clip might wake her sleeping husband.

Favorite Character: Elsie

Least Favorite Character: Major Kremer

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## **Melissa Crytzer Fry says**

I fell in love with this novel that not only told a compelling story of one of the strongest, most likeable female characters I've read, but did so with language that was delicious enough to eat (the baking themes and metaphors were melt-in-your-mouth good). I seriously could not get enough.

McCoy is a master of weaving concurring plots – one set in '40s Nazi Germany and a parallel plot set in 2007-08 Texas. The book was part historical fiction (readers are introduced to the unscrupulous Nazi Lebensborn project that aimed to increase the country's declining German population) and part contemporary women's fiction. The novel is always character-driven, never reading as too factually 'dense', and draws the reader through many nail-biting scenes.

The main characters, Elsie and Reba, take unforgettable journeys that lead them to internal growth and introspection, as well as self-understanding. Circumstances bring these two women together in near-present day Texas, braiding together a formidable tale of loss, love, sacrifice and hope -- and the impact of war (Reba's father was a Vietnam vet as well). Elsie's experiences growing up in Nazi Germany and Reba's life in a Texas border town lead both to a broader understanding of what humanity is and what happiness is. It also raises questions about loyalty to country and self, and the sometimes-gray lines between right and wrong, secrets and truth.

The novel was also part epistolary, including letters between Elsie and her sister, as well as correspondence between Reba and her sister. These letters added an element to the story that was so well done – just like the brötchen in Elsie's bakery. (The bakery recipes at the end are simply another treat!)

Readers of literary fiction will not be disappointed with the exquisite language and literary techniques McCoy has so artfully mastered. This is a book I will re-read, and one that has found a permanent home on my library shelves.

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## **Melodie says**

Exceptional story told from a unique perspective. Most of the stories I have read based during WWII are narratives of victims or relatives of victims of the Third Reich. In *The Baker's Daughter*, the tale is told of loyal citizens of Germany both during the war and in the present.

Told between the past and the present, Elsie and her family's emotions run the gamut from fervent nationalism and blind loyalty to doubt and fear as the war grinds on and the atrocities mount. And in the present we are treated to Elsie's future as she moves beyond the war. The depth of all the characters made for compelling reading.

And my knowledge of history grew deeper. I learned of Hitler's breeding program where young German

women were used as literal incubators to further the Aryan nation. And in their callous disregard for life, those babies who were "defective" were terminated along with their mothers. I did not know of this atrocity against their own vulnerable youth.

Incredibly moving read.

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### **Diane S ? says**

I fell in love with the character Elise from the very beginning. From the past, in her homeland of Nazi Germany to her current life in El Paso, Texas, the connecting thread a bakery and the baked goods that sustain her and her families souls. The present story is also interesting with a woman unsure of the future and her fiance, who works for the border patrol and like Elise in the past begins questioning if what he and his country is doing is right. The cruelty of Nazi Germany, the saving of one little Jewish boy and modern day immigration amid the indifference of a people who can't or won't question whether the decisions being made are in anyway inhumane. This is a novel that warms the heart and leaves one with the lingering feelings of hope.

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