



The Houseguest

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It is the summer of 1941 and Abe Auer, a Russian immigrant and small-town junkyard owner, has become disenchanted with his life. So when his friend Max Hoffman, a local rabbi with a dark past, asks Abe to take in a European refugee, he agrees, unaware that the woman coming to live with him is a volatile and alluring actress named Ana Beidler. Ana regales the Auer family with tales of her lost stardom and charms and mystifies Abe with her glamour and unabashed sexuality, forcing him to confront his own desire as well as the ghost of his dead brother.

As news filters out of Europe, American Jews struggle to make sense of the atrocities. Some want to bury their heads in the sand while others want to create a Jewish army that would fight Hitler and promote bold, wide-spread rescue initiatives. And when a popular Manhattan synagogue is burned to the ground, our characters begin to feel the drumbeat of war is marching ever closer to home.

Set on the eve of America's involvement in World War II, *The Houseguest* examines a little-known aspect of the war and highlights the network of organizations seeking to help Jews abroad, just as masses of people seeking to escape Europe are turned away from American shores. It moves seamlessly from the Yiddish theaters of Second Avenue to the junkyards of Utica to the covert world of political activists, Jewish immigrants, and the stars and discontents of New York's Yiddish stage. Ultimately, *The Houseguest* is a moving story about identity, family, and the decisions that define who we will become.

The Houseguest Details

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Author : Kim Brooks

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From Reader Review The Houseguest for online ebook

Megan Craig says

3.5 stars probably. I enjoyed the complexity of the characters and the unique treatment of WWII - the time when Americans weren't involved and America Jews were either hopeless or oblivious. Those who tried to make a difference were tormented by themselves or others for messing with the status quo. It was heart wrenching and an important thing to express about that time. But I always felt distant from it all, too cerebral and not emotional enough, though the characters were going through some horrible things. And the epilogue ending was a cheesefest and incongruous with the rest of the book. Imagining the afterlife as a train with Max doomed to be an assistant even after death? Is he in heaven or hell? Well, I guess that's the question. But the train in the field, and the very literal afterlife seemed cheesy. I like it a little better now that I think of it. Okay, 4 stars! Oh, I already gave it that? Well, my work here is done.

Ilaria says

"Muoi e continuo a morire, ucciso e risorto, rimesso al mondo per il massacro, soggiogato alle iniquità della vita, cosicché io possa vedere il dolore dei morti, nè vittima nè superstite, nè testimone nè spettatore, ma pula nella mietitrice della storia, rivoltata, gettata, tranciata, ignorata e calpestata durante il lungo inverno inesorabile."

La casa dei sopravvissuti è ambientato in America poco prima del loro coinvolgimento nella Seconda guerra mondiale. La comunità di ebrei che vive al sicuro in America assiste quasi impotente ai tentativi di fuga degli ebrei europei che cercano di fuggire alla furia nazista. Gli ebrei sono considerati migranti indesiderati anche negli Stati Uniti, paese considerato da tutti una sorta di terra promessa. Alcuni fra gli ebrei americani però sono intenzionati a fare qualcosa per aiutare i loro fratelli in difficoltà, così si imbarcano in un'impresa praticamente impossibile: salvare quanti più ebrei possibili e portarli al sicuro in America.

E' proprio cercando di dare una mano al movimento che Abe Auer accetta di ospitare in casa sua una rifugiata europea, Ana. La guerra sempre più vicina e il crescente odio per gli ebrei che inizia a manifestarsi anche negli Stati Uniti mette alla prova il coraggio di un popolo intero che si trova a lottare per la sua sopravvivenza da una parte all'altra del mondo.

Ho apprezzato lo stile scorrevole della Brooks e la narrazione ritmata della storia. Mi sono piaciuti molto anche i personaggi del romanzo, li ho trovati ben caratterizzati ed estremamente umani. Non si tratta del classico romanzo ambientato durante il periodo nazista, stavolta ci troviamo lontano dal fronte di guerra e dalle persecuzioni più crudeli.

La storia si sviluppa seguendo le gesta di chi, pur trovandosi già al sicuro, cerca di aiutare come può chi si trova ad affrontare delle situazioni impossibili. E' un romanzo che affronta l'argomento Shoah da un punto di vista psicologico, concentrandosi sugli effetti che ebbe anche su chi si trovava dall'altra parte del mondo. Probabilmente avrei apprezzato più accenni al movimento che tentò di aiutare il popolo ebreo piuttosto che leggere delle storie personali dei personaggi.

La casa dei sopravvissuti è comunque un romanzo godibile che fa luce su un aspetto finora poco esplorato della Shoah.

Romanticamente Fantasy says

Recensione a cura di Pippi Calzelunghe per Romanticamente Fantasy Sito

<http://www.romanticamentefantasy.it/r...>

Questo è uno di quei libri che ti costringono a fare i conti con pensieri molto profondi e fanno soffrire un po' il lettore che si impegna a seguire il filo del ragionamento imposto da chi scrive: potrei definirlo un romanzo sulla Sindrome del Sopravvissuto.

I sopravvissuti sono coloro che, scappati dalle persecuzioni, in tempi non sospetti, in USA si trovano a fare i conti con quelli che sono rimasti dall'altra parte dell'oceano e devono decidere se far finta di nulla o affrontare il mostro a viso aperto. Non è un libro facile da leggere. Chi si aspetta un qualcosa di avventuroso resterà deluso; più che altro è un saggio che, analizzando gli atteggiamenti e le convinzioni dei protagonisti, dipinge l'affresco di un'epoca e di un Paese che non visse direttamente la guerra, seppur partecipandovi, e della tragedia degli ebrei stabilitisi definitivamente lì. Alcuni sono attaccati al loro benessere e non si preoccupano di chi sta dall'altra parte altri si arrovellano sui modi per aiutare i fratelli in pericolo. Il protagonista principale, accetta invece una profuga in casa, una donna misteriosa dotata di grande carisma con tanti segreti; si intuisce subito da cosa è fuggita e i ricordi la soffocano .

Perciò Abe, sebbene mai direttamente perseguitato per la sua religione ma fuggiasco anche lui dal regime tirannico dello Zar, formatosi una famiglia con una brava donna e costruito la sua ricchezza si sentirà, suo malgrado, vicino alle sventure della donna misteriosa. Tutto il libro è uno snocciolare di ricordi e sensi di colpa di entrambi, questo lo rende molto introspettivo. Meno preponderanti gli altri personaggi di contorno..quasi sbiaditi.

Faticoso...

VOTO 3,5 STELLINE

David says

Pro: Captures what might have been the emotional weather of the Jewish-American home front during the beginning of the Shoah.

Con: 1) Its ahistorical chronology. For example, Brooks has the 1939 voyage of The St. Louis occurring in 1941. 2) Brooks' prose includes too many cliches and forced figurative turns of phrase.

Chris Roberts says

Auschwitz galvanizes
the U.S. infantryman
his mind slips, now
it must be known to the world
he saves what's left
of humanity
in front of his platoon
symbolism saves him
burning himself alive

offering his life up
to the perished race
while the Jews in New York
wring their hands, talking cheap
they do nothing substantial
and they do nothing lasting.

To all the Jews slaughtered
I carry you in my soul
I mourn you.

Chris Roberts

Annie says

What do we owe one another? This question and some of its variations keep coming up in *The Houseguest*, by Kim Brooks, leaving us to think about altruism, rescues, gratitude, and obligation. Set in Utica, New York, in 1941, two men become involved in the Jewish refugee crisis from different angles. Abe Auer and his family take in a Polish Jewish actress who managed to get to America. Max Hoffman, Abe's rabbi, starts to work for an organization that is not only trying to help get Jewish refugees out of Europe but also field a Jewish army. Helping others escape genocide might seem like the obvious choice, but things rapidly get complicated...

Read the rest of my review at A Bookish Type.

Jan says

Compelling story of the Jewish American movement to evacuate European Jews in the path of Hitler, with a focus on just a few fully fleshed characters.

Rachel says

I wasn't expecting too much when I read the cover copy, which promised the story of a "volatile and alluring" refugee who stirred up the home of her hosts, so much so that the patriarch, Abe, became "consumed by his desire" and went on a hodge podge journey through actors and activists to find her. Seemed rather soapy. I also took into account the low reviews on GoodReads and the grumblings about unlikable characters, though personally I'm a fan of the flawed. It's the one dimensional sort that annoy me.

These concerns were quickly scuttled to the wind. Brooks is an evocative writer--in setting up physical descriptions and in probing the nuances of relationships and personal narratives. And beyond any of that, the book was transcendent. I could feel my frustrations rising at the Jewish American community--those who sat in useless committees shifting blame and those who ignored the crisis in Europe all together. It's easy to get riled up when the Holocaust is in hindsight, but I also couldn't help but realize that nothing's much changed. We have a far more robust media machine in the 21st century; we're connected like never before, plus it's far more accepted to show empathy for refugees and the marginalized. But still, atrocities continue to happen all

around the world, and for those of us removed, this is often our response.

So, to recap: the setting is predominately New York in 1941, on the cusp of America's involvement in WWII. We open on a synagogue fire in Manhattan, which seems to bring the antisemitism in Europe a little closer to home. This is our stepping stone to be introduced to a variety of characters--Shmuel Spiro who desires to start a Jewish army to fight back; his friend, Max Hoffman, once politically active and now a rabbi upstate; Abe Auer, one of Max's congregants whom he encourages to take in a refugee at Spiro's request; and Ana Beidler, said refugee. There are two general plotlines--a domestic one where Ana stirs things up in the Auer household, and a political one where Max gets more involved in refugee activism at Spiro's request.

I don't mean "stirs up trouble" the way that the cover flap implies; this is no tawdry affair about a simple family getting hoodwinked by a vixen. Ana is surely a flawed person--sometimes rude, often self-absorbed; and occasionally she uses people for her emotional needs. But she's also very human, with motivations and a backstory that define her as more than a one dimensional refugee.

Similarly, her affair with Abe isn't just about sex appeal but also because of his own motivations and backstory--as a Russian immigrant with his own traumas, he sees a kindred spirit in her. His wife, daughter and neighbors often ignore the Old World and it's sufferings. Brooks is also letting us into a cusp of time in American Jewish history, before the Holocaust was fully understood, before most Jews were considered "white," and when there was still a schism between assimilated German Jews like Abe's wife, Irene, and greenhorn Eastern European Jews like himself. I also feel, as a Jew, a palpable connection to this time-- Jewish history today is so much different than it was 76 years ago BECAUSE of the Holocaust and the founding of Israel, but this was shpilkes that got us there. And largely still governs us, in one way or another.

I can see why some people had problems with the pacing because there's a lot of fleshed out characters with a lot of different side stories going on. Sometimes I found it difficult to shift, too, but the narrative kept me so riveted. I wanted to know more about everything and hear from everyone, particularly the apathetic and committee American Jews, who of course got a bad rap with most of these characters. Near the end of the novel, Spiro has a fascinating argument with his rival, a rabbi. But I also wanted to hear more from Irene, and Abe's daughter, Judith. In fact, Judith did get a chapter, and although it was mostly there for the plot, she didn't come off as bitchy and shallow as I feared. She's definitely a little self-centered and a little sheltered, but she picked up on things and had genuine feelings about her relationships, too. I felt somewhat similar with an Abe/Irene altercation near the end, too. I don't know; maybe it was all a little too much. Actually, this had me thinking about Tolstoy's novels (and how I ought to read them *blush*) but mostly about how he combines characters and their rich interior lives with huge, societal topics. Maybe this novel should have been longer, encompassing more time than just 1941.

In fact, Brooks's insistence on the 1941 time frame led her to take liberties with parts of history--she wanted her characters to interact with the St. Louis, for example, which in reality made it's doomed journey a couple of years before. Some folks took issue with this, but eh. Historical *fiction* gives the work some leeway, and so long as Brooks remains true to the impact of these real events and people, then I'm cool.

In terms of her plot, I don't want to give anything away, but I think it's clever how Brooks doles out the details about the event that sparked this book into motion. This is still a novel, and although the characters are on varying paths, we are tied into the story by the synagogue fire in the beginning and the attack on Pearl Harbor at the end. I'm a little ambivalent about the epilogue--the premise is a little schmaltzy, but the way Brooks tells it ties into all of the other thoughts and feelings that she churned up in me throughout. I'm not sure this will be in my tip top favorite books of the year, but it's definitely in the 5-star club. :P

Rob Hood says

If you need a bok to help you go to sleep, here is one of those.

Victoria Shepherd says

A rare look at lives impacted by WWII from the other side of the ocean - frustrating, heartbreaking and mysterious.

Ruthie says

The writing/character development did not live up to the potential of the story summary. Finishing it was work!

Cathy says

Overall, I enjoyed this although it was slow in places. It's 1941, and Abe, a Russian immigrant living in New York, leads a happy, successful life with his wife and daughter. When he is asked to temporarily house a woman who has escaped the Nazi's, Abe is initially reluctant but then agrees. Ana, a beautiful Yiddish actress, is an intriguing woman who causes unrest in Abe's home and in his mind as he recollects painful memories about his family. Max, a rabbi in the same community, is an interesting man although ineffectual as he struggles to find his place in a radical Jewish group is trying to gain attention for the plight of European Jews. I found the narrations among the many characters disconnected. And as some reviewers have noted, for a novel based on historical events, some of the dates are incorrect. Interesting perspective; generally well-written.

Julie says

War is raging in Europe, and America has not yet joined the fight, but a small group of American Jews is rallying to bring awareness to the plight of their European brethren. Most American Jews are content with their own safety, but some are consumed with guilt for the inaction of their people and their government. Ana, a Polish refugee and the title character, is a destructive force, leaving broken men in her selfish wake. Max, a remorseful Rabbi, and Abe, an assimilated Russian and Ana's host, know their contributions aren't enough and they both wallow in a despondency that permeates the entire narrative. It's an introspective book, and there's not much in the way of plot. It is more of a character study and commentary on the fate of European Jewry, so yes, it's a bit depressing. Regardless of the overall tone, the book offers insight to the efforts of American Jews just before the ultimate conflict escalates.

I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publisher.

Linda says

I could not put this book down! I wish I wrote the name of the reference so I could personally thank the person/reviewer who referred this book to me.

Lee Ann says

I felt like this was work to finish. The characters felt as superficial as their actions or inactions in the book. The stories jumped and rambled and felt very stilted.

Ultimately, I did not care what happened to any of them. The historical references were just that, mentions of events or organizations with no depth.

This was an enjoyable read for me, not because of the context, I just did not connect to any of the characters.
