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Saving Rafael

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Not a Choice:

off

BfK Rating:

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The intensity and drama of World War II continue to attract writers, but few novelists set their stories within wartime Berlin; here, Leslie Wilson explores that increasingly wretched city as food shortages, Allied bombs and the Nazi jackboot reduce decent civilians to despair.

Before the war, Jenny was growing up contentedly with her puppet-maker father, her dressmaker mother and her brother Karl. Her best friend Raf, the boy next door, lives with his parents who, in turn, are the closest friends of Jenny's mother and father. Jenny's father is a Quaker while Raf's family are Jewish. With frightening speed and violence, the persecution of the Jews smashes the gentle security of both families. One by one, the war relentlessly invades all their lives. Raf's father is beaten in the street and bundled into a Gestapo truck. Jenny's father is called up into the Army medical branch, only to spend most of the war in American POW Camps. Karl dies serving under Rommel in Tunisia. At home, Raf's mother is taken and presumably sent to a death camp, leaving Jenny and her mother to hide Raf within their own house. Information given by neighbours brings the Gestapo hammering at the door. Readers might well be reminded of the claustrophobic tensions of Anne Frank's family, but this is a significantly different story. These are Berliners who loathe the regime, surrounded by neighbours, classmates and teachers hysterically loyal to the Führer, suffering a blitz which eventually reduces their city to a far greater devastation than that of London.

Pressured by danger every moment, Jenny and Raf fall in love as they enter their mid-teens. Among all the brutality, they find tenderness only in each others' arms. (It may be this, rather than the violence, which provokes the 'Not suitable for younger readers' warning on the back cover.) Jenny's mother, though terrified in case Raf is discovered with the consequences this would bring for Jenny, nevertheless supports the young couple with loving sensitivity.

The pace of this story is unhurried, despite all the terror which permeates each day, for that rhythm is necessary if we are to sense the endurance demanded by those long years in the crumbling city. Things become savagely worse for Jenny. There are no easy resolutions, few joyful reunions. And yet, the love between Jenny and Raf remains undaunted, a gleam among the ruins of a mighty city and so many lives.

Running Order:

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