



Katerina

Aharon Appelfeld, Jeffrey M. Green (Translator)

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Fleeing an abusive home, Katerina, a teenage peasant in Ukraine in the 1880s, is taken in by a Jewish family and becomes their housekeeper. Feeling the warmth of family life for the first time and incorporating the family's customs and rituals into her own Christian observances, Katerina is traumatized when the parents are murdered in separate pogroms and the children are taken away by relatives. She finds work with other Jewish families, all of whom are subjected to relentless persecution by their neighbors. When the beloved child she had with her Jewish lover is murdered, Katerina kills the murderer and is sent to prison. Released from prison years later, in the chaos following the end of World War II, a now elderly Katerina is devastated to find a world that has been emptied of its Jews and that is not at all sorry to see them gone. Ever the outsider, Katerina realizes that she has survived only to bear witness to the fact that these people had ever existed at all.

Katerina Details

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From Reader Review Katerina for online ebook

CVV says

"During the dreadful nineteen forties I almost didn't write, and what I did write, I destroyed with my own hand. I worked without fatigue, as if the beet field were my own farm."

Sally says

"Nothing Jewish is strange to me"

By sally tarbox on 1 October 2017

Format: Kindle Edition

The novel opens with Katerina, an eighty-year old woman, looking out of the window of her cottage in the Ukraine - the home she grew up in but spent so many years away from - and musing over the past.

We go back to her youth, daughter of a harsh and abusive peasant family. And she recalls the large Jewish population - their 'otherness': "Thin Jews used to gather like grasshoppers and sell their wares. They were one of the frightening wonders of my childhood. With their appearance, their way of sitting and bargaining, they weren't like creatures of this world but like dark spirits scuttling about on spindly legs."

But homeless and destitute, Katerina finds herself working for a Jewish family and gradually allying herself more with this group than with her hate-filled Ruthenian neighbours.

This is a strange and dream-like tale which brings to mind paintings by Chagall. Katerina's life covers the years before and during WW2; she relates the anti-semitic attitudes of those around her - and the prejudice against herself for her new friends - and recalls the ever-present trains in the background taking the Jews away. But it's all kind of vague - no politics or warfare, just the incidents that she suffers. It clarifies how the holocaust came about, with the unreasoning herd-mentality of the people blaming the Jews for some unspecified crime (often the fact that they "killed Jesus").

An unusual little tale that also pictures old age and the calm and acceptance that come with years - even to those who were once fiery and passionate.

Astrid says

not my cup of tea.

Vera Novitsky says

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Anca says

I had heard of Aharon Appelfeld long before reading this book and had always been curious about his writing. I had also seen an interview with him a while back and judging from all I knew about the author and theme, what I hoped to find in this book was enlightenment. Not of the spiritual kind, but of the pragmatic one. I've always wanted to understand why the Jews were the colossal victims of WW2 and what led to all the hatred towards them.

I am not Jewish and I don't have any close acquaintances who are, so the subject has always eluded me and I was always stuck with the question "why?". Aside from the abomination and the genocide, I just couldn't grasp the reasons behind such a widespread dislike of the Jewish people.

Now, after reading the book, I do feel illuminated in some ways. I still don't have the exact answer to my question but I did find out just how long before the war the actual harassment of the Jews started. At least in South-Eastern Europe, which is where I am from, so the geographical area was of particular interest to me.

Another aspect that the book goes in depth of consists in the grueling living conditions in the Moldova/Bessarabia/Bukovina area at the beginning of the past century. This was at the time and continued to be for a long time a very poor, tormented and torn area. Although I live in a neighbouring country (some of that particular territory was ripped from us by the Russians etc), I am not even sure where the geographical area in the book belongs nowadays. I think it's in Ukraine but I can't be too sure. The novel details this aspect very well as it translated to its horribly accurate depiction of the relationships between the inhabitants, the discrepancy between the rural and urban population and, of course, the deep, agonising, barbaric, ancient hatred of Jews. In my opinion, it seems that the population in that particular area blamed the Jews for all their problems and for the chaos which reigned there.

The poverty depicted is striking. It dehumanizes almost everyone but the Jews who seemingly try to continue leading their normal lives despite a very abnormal environment and for this they must be punished.

Another aspect that is as true as it is dramatic lies in the widespread habit of heavy drinking among the non-Jewish population. This, of course, contributes to violent crimes. To this day, the Russian/Moldovan population regards drinking hard liquors (vodka) as something normal and suitable for all. I know this from first-hand experience.

I don't know how well this book can be understood by those who are outsiders to the region or to the Holocaust.

In the end, this is hatred in its purest form, one which cannot be explained because it defies reason. I also think it says a lot about humanity and its animal nature.

Lada Moskalets says

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Roland Martinez says

Trite. The climax is a revelation from God.

Mikey says

This is a fairly simple read in the way it is written as well as being short (only 200+ pages which are small). The story is based on the life of a young woman in the late 1800's and early 1900's up through the holocaust. It is hard to recommend this book because it is one hardship (horrible ones) after another her entire life other than a few years here and there while helping Jewish families that she becomes extremely close with, all the while her past haunts her. About 2/3 through the most horrible thing ever happens to her which I will not divulge herein, but I screamed out loud and threw the book down unable to read it any longer. I have now picked it up again and will finish it in a day or so. UPDATE: Book finished and I would leave my initial review as is. I can recommend it to anyone who is interested in this type of story since it was well written.

Joey Gold says

Gritty and violent yet never sentimentally or unnecessarily so, "Katerina" should be read by anyone looking for an authentic piece of Holocaust literature, or, really, just very good literature. "Adam Resurrected" is also very powerful.

Beverly says

The story wasn't quite what I was expecting. The dust cover referred to a 'succession' of Jewish households so I kept waiting for another household after the second. It seemed that Katerina had no goal or direction for her life. Her dreams made me wonder if she struggled with a mental illness.

I was shocked at the hatred towards Jewish people. Did Christians really refer to them as 'children of Satan'. The prisoners were cheering that Jews were headed to death camps. And quotes from characters, "... death to the Jews," "... That's their fate. That's God's will," "The Jews have destroyed her soul, and she can never be redeemed." It boggles my mind that any Christian would view a Jew in that way. If this is truly how Christians felt then it helps explain how Hitler may not have had a lot of resistance (not that I know whether he did or didn't have resistance).

Robert Wechsler says

I read this short novel in memory of the author, who died last week. Although not considered one of

Appelfeld's best works, this first-person narrative by a troubled Ruthenian woman who, when young, worked in Jewish homes at the end of the 19th century, is both unique and, for the most part, very well executed and translated.

Necessarily simple and full of repetition, Katerina's narration is both quiet and emotional, and it sometimes explodes in harrowing sequences and dialogue (there is little dialogue) as well as lyrical passages. I will have to read more of Appelfeld's work, which I know only from before this novel was written.

Anghel Iulia says

This book was a nice surprise ! The writer knows how to send you in his story, to empathize with Catarina and all she went through . A time of suffering and crimes where people forget to treat each other equally, where nationality/religion cannot be respected . The essence of this book is deep in worldwide history

Sergey says

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