



## Children and Fire

*Ursula Hegi*

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## **Children and Fire Ursula Hegi**

The fourth novel in Ursula Hegi's acclaimed Burgdorf cycle is "a thoughtful, sidelong approach to the worst moment in Germany's history that invites us to understand how decent people come to collaborate with evil" (*Kirkus Reviews*).

*Children and Fire* tells the story of one day that will forever transform the lives of the people in Burgdorf, Germany, the fictitious village by the river in Ursula Hegi's bestselling novels. February 27, 1934—the first anniversary of the burning of Reichstag, the Parliament building in Berlin.

Thekla Jansen, a gifted young teacher, loves her students and tries to protect them from the chaos beyond their village. Believing the Nazis' new regime will not last forever, Thekla begins to relinquish some of her freedoms to keep her teaching position. She has always taken her moral courage for granted, but when each compromise chips away at that courage, she knows she must reclaim it.

Ursula Hegi funnels pivotal moments in history through the experience of Thekla, her students, and the townspeople as she writes along the edge where sorrow and bliss meet, and shows us how one society—educated, cultural, compassionate—can slip into a reality that's fabricated by propaganda and controlled by fear.

Gorgeously rendered and emotionally taut, *Children and Fire* confirms Ursula Hegi's position as one of the most distinguished writers of her generation.

## **Children and Fire Details**

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Author : Ursula Hegi

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## From Reader Review Children and Fire for online ebook

### Cynthia Paschen says

So you are sick to death of reading about the Holocaust?

Please just be quiet and read this book. Oh, but read "Stones from the River" first.

Better now?

(Page 69)"What the parishioners and the priest didn't know was that the Siderovas distrusted the ritual of confession. They seemed so devout as they knelt in the dim confessional. But all they fed the priest were made-up sins because they suspected all priests disturbed the garden of secrets by tearing at the roots."

(Page 165)*"Exercising for the Fuhrer. Really.* Thekla wants to laugh but keeps her face impassive. She can stay outside all of that. But just then she remembers the rally when, just for an instant, she felt part of it. Like touching a flame but getting burned instead and feeling tricked. Though she shook herself free from that spell and returned to who she believed she was, she felt agitated for days. But if she has to she'll tell her students that the Fuhrer wants them to exercise more. If that makes their lives easier while the regime lasts. *But bad poetry? Never.*

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### Jill says

With the luxury of time, we look back and ask ourselves: how did so many educated and cultured people become manipulated by a madman – Hitler—to justify torture and genocide?

The answers we come up with are all too often dismissive and simplistic – a good vs. evil dichotomy. In reality, the answer is far more nuanced, and Ursula Hegi captures how a surge of national unity goes so very wrong and how the absence of complexity or doubt can lead even good people astray.

Set in Burgdorf, Germany, a teacher, Thekla Jansen, is entrusted with teaching a classroom of boys the year after the parliament building is burned. Like so many, she is not enamoured of Hitler and believes that his time will be limited and things will soon go back to normal. She even rationalizes that her charges may benefit from joining the Hitler-Jugend, with its unity and songs and bonfires.

As books get burned and the country becomes enraptured over a new savior, Thekla teaches a Schiller poem, about a young diver's courage and death. But the last stanza – the one that focuses on his hubris, as the young diver steps toward the mad king and leaps into the rough waters, is left out. For now, she thinks, "let them believe that the young page gets to keep the golden cup. Let them believe he gets the princess and the fairy-tale ending..."

The problem is, it's difficult to separate propaganda from truth and, as Thekla discovers "being true to yourself doesn't necessarily mean you are truthful...After all, she has felt that reverence as child in church, the emotional pitch that proves your transformation. Easy enough to use that reverence in politics."

Thekla's awakening is gradual as she begins to realize that individual freedom is different from national

freedom, and that it's become too easy to rationalize giving up those freedoms to live. In this, Children and Fire is a cautionary tale, not only to understand the Hitler era but for our times.

I wanted to award this book its fifth star except for a few flaws. The author tries too hard – in my opinion – to weave in other books of the Burgdorf Cycle, most notably Stones from the River; it doesn't quite feel organic. More troubling, she relies on a rather tired plot device about parentage to demonstrate how vulnerable we all are. Despite these flaws, this is a worthy, thoughtful, and important book that dares to ask the question: "What would YOU do in Thekla's place?" Most of us, I'm afraid, would come up wanting.

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### **Mary V says**

I was lucky and won CHILDREN AND FIRE: A NOVEL by Ursula Hegi on a Goodreads giveaway. I enjoyed reading it and am passing it on to my daughter. It was a very emotional story about a teacher and her young students in Germany in 1935 at the time of Hitler and the Nazis. The teacher, Theckla, is undergoing uncertainties about her own life (questions about her past, and her beliefs) as well as questions as to how best to teach and protect her class of fourth grade boys. The book focused on the lives of the characters on one select date in time alternated with flash backs to Theckla's life beginning before her birth. It all inter-relates and the reader can see how Theckla's childhood has forged her into the adult she is now and how it effects everything she does and believes. It is a thought provoking book on all levels.

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### **Susan Katz says**

This book has inspired me to immediately seek out the rest of Hegi's Burgdorf cycle. I'd read and loved Stones from the River, and when I read a review of this book set in the same small German village in the first half of the twentieth century, a companion book to Stones, I got hold of it immediately. Characters who in the first book were minor here spring to full life. Wilhelm Jansen, the shell-shocked veteran, reveals here his earlier history, his marriage to a pregnant woman and the fate of their child, who becomes the central character in this book. Trudi Montag, the dwarf protagonist of Stones, is here merely an occasional background figure, though an interesting one to a reader who already knows her story and can see here, through Thekla Jansen, how Trudi is viewed by townspeople. It also presents a more complete portrayal of Bruno Stosick, the boy who committed suicide in Stones because he wasn't allowed to join the Hitler-Jugend. Particularly fascinating to me was the story of Ilse and Michel Abramowitz who are seen here from a different and deeper perspective than Trudi's. A wonderful, wonderfully written account of what happens when propaganda is substituted for truth, and fear for reason, an issue Americans should certainly be thinking about in our own current political climate.

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### **Meredith says**

I listened to this one read by the author. She did a beautiful job, and her voice and accent were so soft and melodious, it really made the words "come to life," though I know that is cliche.

I read Stones from the River many years ago for book club, and when I read the review of this book, which takes place in the same town but among different inhabitants, I knew it was a world I wanted to explore again. It is pre-WWII Germany in a small town, which means everyone has secrets and they are all difficult to keep from one's neighbors. The characters are so flawed and melancholy, but there is something about Hegi's writing that draws me in and makes me care so much about them all.

Here's my blog entry:

Beautifully and emotionally written, Ursula Hegi's Children and Fire examines how good people with honest spirits and valid aspirations could succumb to the propaganda of Hitler's early regime.

Set in the same Burgdorf, Germany as Hegi's Stones from the River, Children and Fire follows the intertwining stories of some of the small town's inhabitants as they lead up to a single day and the heartbreak event that will change them all. Since the burning of the parliament building one year before, teacher Thekla Jansen has slowly been relinquishing her freedoms in the name of better opportunities for her students, and though she hates to admit it, for herself. Through the histories of some of the townspeople first introduced in Stones, we get perspective of the climate of Germany at the time, and the physical and emotional oppression that helped make its people vulnerable to mass fear and manipulation.

It isn't necessary to read these books in order, but as companion books, their effect is deepened by experiencing them both.

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### **Kimberly says**

This is a must read for any Ursula Hegi fan. Set in Burgdorf, Germany, a popular setting for several of her books, Children and Fire tells the story of a single day that forever transforms the lives of the townspeople. The book explores the reactions of the German citizens to Hitler's rise to power one year following the Reichstag fire. Hegi masterfully weaves past and present events in order to explain the motives of her characters. Although this novel revisits a common place and theme for Hegi, readers can read this without having read the prior Burgdorf trilogy. As is always the case when I read a Hegi novel, I finished the novel craving for more.

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### **Linda says**

In Children and Fire, Hegi revisits the German town that was the setting for her earlier novel, Stones From the River. The era is the early twentieth century, post WWI, pre WWII, as Hitler and the Third Reich are changing the German political and social landscape as they rise to power. Hegi's theme, in both this book and "Stones" is the exploration of how it could have happened. I always wondered how good, kind, ordinary German citizens allowed the rantings of a madman to sway their good sense and over-ride their compassion. Hegi must have wondered that too, as it is a theme she returns to again and again. Children and Fire follows the life of one teacher...Thekla Jansen, a lively, nurturing, intellectual woman who tells herself that every concession that she makes is necessary in the moment- to keep her job, to stay alive, to wait out the madness. As she struggles with daily decisions related to the "new rules", we struggle along with her, asking ourselves "What would I do in that situation"? Ultimately, the question becomes: How many times can one compromise one's values and still be the person that one has always believed oneself to be? Ursula Hegi is a masterful writer and her stories are always beautiful and haunting. If you only read one of her books, choose

Stones from the River as I think it's her best, and if you like it, try this one or any of her other novels or short stories. They're all really good!

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### **Suzanne says**

I really liked Ursula Hegi's first book, Stones in the River, which I'd read a couple of years ago. However, this newest book was confusing and difficult to follow. It switches back and forth in time frames and, for me, nothing was ever very clear. Also, there's a non-too-surprising climax at the end which I'd figured out (as would most readers) way before it was put into words. All in all, disappointing.

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### **Michale says**

It was nice to be back in Burgdorf, but I feel that Hegi only began to explore the possibilities of the character of Thekla Jansen, as compared with that of Trudi Montag in her earlier works. Chilling descriptions of Germany in 1934, already robustly beginning to follow Nazism and venerate Hitler. The denouement at the end should come as no surprise, but the story does provide an interesting platform for a discussion of what makes up any individual's true identity.

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### **Chrissie says**

NO SPOILERS!!!

Through Chapter Two and a little more: Yesterday I finished the marvellous memoir *A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan* by Netofer Pazira. I gave it five stars, but having just finished a memoir, I wanted a novel. But which? I had read all of the books loaded into my Kindle! Since I am so picky about how an author writes, I checked my GR list of books that are available on Kindle, deciding to sample a few until I found one I could not put down. I found it - Ursula Hegi's new historical fiction entitled *Children and Fire*. It portrays a wonderful teacher, a teacher of 10-year-old boys in a Catholic school, who is convinced that her kids should join Hitler-Jugend! How are we going to feel about a woman who is a marvellous teacher but is misguided?! How has she been fooled, and how did the German people get fooled by Hitler? It takes place on one day – February 27, 1934, one year after the burning of the Reichstag in Berlin. This was Shrove Monday, the end of the festivities before Lent. Every student and even the teacher remember exactly what they were doing when they heard of the burning. The shock they felt, and the fear that Hitler induced in them, this fear and hatred for the Communists, is vividly portrayed. We know now that the Communist/anarchist Van der Lubbe was not responsible, but this was not known then. Hitler accused the Communists to create fear and hatred. He did it for his own purposes. A year later the children were still scared that the Communists might come and burn their school, their homes, their.....Hitler was an adept manipulator of fear.

What I immediately noticed in reading just a few chapters of the sample was that the writing is intelligent, compassionate and humorous. Even serious topics can be humorous. Bruno's father exclaims that Hitler should be hung up by his balls, or maybe just one, if rumours are correct! I read samples from other books about us adults..... Really, they were so depressing - married couples having affairs, discrimination against blacks, rape and whatnot. I am not saying this book about the build up to the Second World War is light

reading, but the difference is that some of the people portrayed, the school children and their teacher Thekla are good people, perhaps misguided and confused by events, but their hearts are in the right place. I really cannot take a book filled with depravity and coarseness when no characters make any effort to at least try and be good people. I don't mind mistakes, but I dislike reading about people who are not even attempting to be good or moral or kind. Such is just too dam depressing!

And I love Thekla's view on premarital sex and sensuality. Both the belief that God created the earth in six days and the sin of pre-marital sex could be thrown out together with the dirty dishwater! I simply adore Ursula Hegi's ability to string together words in an amusing, compassionate and intelligent manner.

One more thing - Thekla is one of those teachers that stands out above all the rest. We all look back at our years at school and if we have been lucky we will remember one teacher, maybe two, that meant the world to us. She teachers her students a given subject right when that topic captures their interest. On the curriculum she should be teaching "Lent", but what does she teach? Geography! Why? Well, because the students want to know where Berlin is. How close is it to their homes? How can you teach about the importance of giving up more food when poverty is strangling them? Acquaint yourself with this teacher:

*She loves them all: the boys with crossed eyes and crooked teeth; the brainy boys and the beautiful boys; the boys from good families and the boys with "Rotznasen" – runny noses -who've been born into families with something as basic as wiping your nose is not done for you when you're little, and you never learn how to do it for yourself. Like the Führer. This is where he came from, and the uniform can't cover that. His skin may be clean and dry, but he'll always have "Rotznase". It's a way of living, a way of having been brought into life. (7%)*

15% through the book: When I read a good book, I want to share my thoughts with others. I have noted that when I really like a book my reviews tend to get longer and longer. Gundula, here is a message just for you. This book discusses legends and myths and poetry and famous German authors. I just learned of Friedrich von Schiller who wrote "Der Taucher" – "The Diver". You will learn why the children decided to change the name of their classroom frog from Copernicus to Icarus. And poetry hasn't spoken to me before?!

Who is Fraulein Siderova? I know she was the boys' teacher before Thekla, but why is she no longer the teacher. It was her that started the routine of teaching the children one poem every week. They were not ordered to memorize the stanzas. Oh no! She aroused the children's curiosity so they wanted to recite the poem, so they each felt compelled to seek the meaning of the poem for themselves. Hegi pushes her readers just as Fräulein Siderova and Thekla pushed their students, by arousing our curiosity to seek out the answers. Here follows another example:

*But the midwife, Lotte Jansen, knew there was no God. Of course, she kept this secret from the nuns who employed her to bring life into the world. At the St. Margaret Home, she was known for her kindness and skilful hands, but most of all because not one single death happened on her watch. It was said that her great tragedy protected anyone she touched because death would be embarrassed to come near her again.*

*In the dining room of the Home hung a diptych of St. Margaret. In the first panel, the patron saint of pregnant women was swallowed by a dragon. Actually, it was the devil disguised as a dragon – by divine preordination, so it was said – St. Margaret clutched her book-size cross as she was being sucked down the tunnel of the dragon's throat. The edge of her cross scraped and pierced the lining of the dragon's throat, causing his engorged body to contract, a brutal reminder – the midwife thought – to the pregnant Girls of what they had yet to endure. That's why she advised them to sit with their backs to the picture while they ate.*

(15%)

I do not know any than you how this connects to the plot. I only know that this is a flashback to 1899 to the St. Margaret Home on the North Sea. Lotte Jansen, is she related to Thekla Jansen? Questions???? I **do** know what is painted on the second panel of the diptych so I **amon** the way to find out how this is related to Thekla, her boys and Burgdorf, Germany. As I page through the table of contents I see that there are many flash backs, these chapters alternating with the events that take place February 27, 1934, i.e. one year after the burning of the Reichstag.

OK, I finished the book. Yes, I liked it, but for me three stars feel adequate. There is very good character development. The characters are multidimensional. For a while I thought Thekla was "holier than thou", but then she too fumbled and was brought down to earth. There are many characters. You have Thekla, her mother and father, the nuns, teachers, the students, villagers and friends. You learn to know the characteristics of all of these people. Maybe, a few less would have been better.... The relationships are complicated. You read the book to understand these relationships.

One can also choose to read this book for its excellent portrayal of how teaching should be done. However I felt the message got a bit preachy, a bit redundant, a bit too much of a lecture.. On the other hand, the reader is given interesting informations about a wide range of German authors.

I think Hegi's Stones from the River was better.

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### **Kathy says**

This is a brilliant book about...moral choice, love, secrets, self knowledge. And more. Set on one day in Germany (February 27, 1934) in Burgsdorf, Hegi's village of the other books in this series (Stories from the River, Floating in My Mother's Palm, The Vision of Emma Blau) this novel is astonishing in the absolute rightness of each word.

That doesn't even begin to say how good this book is.

I received this as a Good Reads First Reads win (and there was some delay in receiving it from the publisher). Worth waiting for. Hegi is one of the most interesting contemporary novelists around.

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### **Nancy says**

This is my first experience with this author and it was incredible. She paints pictures with her words, one brush stroke at a time. Concisely and clearly, she reveals the conflict and the shocking resolution, which - as a reader, you know that shortly after this day World War II will begin.

The book is many stories twisting together and introducing different characters. The main protagonist is Thekla, a German teacher who has finally secured a position in a Catholic school. The day is in 1934. Thekla is teaching the boys in her class through example, first hand experience, and redirecting their attention so the children will not tell on each other or turn in their own parents for not being patriotic.

Thekla's day progresses while we flash on her memories, her ideas, and her made-up conversation with Sonja Siderova, the converted Christian from Jewish teacher who was put on administrative leave once her Jewishness was uncovered.

The book flashes a lot on different times which is not confusing. There are actually 2 distinct times that alternate. The book starts with Thekla teaching her boys then flashes back to 1899 when Thekla was but an illegitimate fetus in her mother's womb at a Catholic home for unwed girls. It is here that we come to understand her mother, her father, and her biological father who plays a part in Thekla's upbringing without her knowing his true role.

Foreshadowing is beautifully weaved through the pages as the reader understands that the burning of the Reichstag, one year earlier, is only the beginning of the many fires. The most moving is a quote by Heinrich Heine: *"That was but a prelude; where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people also."*

The book is beautifully written, drawing upon symbolism while Thekla grapples with her stance. She believes she can continue to sit on the fence. She can believe what she chooses and enjoy her moral standing while enforcing the new laws of the land that continue to constrict the freedoms of individuals.

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### **Fergie says**

My only complaint with this book (if it can be called that) was that I didn't want the book to end. It left me craving to know what happened next. Ursula Hegi has earned her place as my favorite modern day writer. I've read all of her novels and have yet to be disappointed. In my opinion, Stones From The River (the first book of this series) is one of the greatest novels ever written. No one weaves a story like Hegi and pulls the reader into the past, making the stories relevant and timely while evoking imaginative heights of a great novel. This is the fourth novel in Hegi's Burgdorf series, but true to Hegi's talent, she creates a unique story which is free to stand on its own. Children and Fire takes place over the span of a single day, interspersed with occurrences from the past. Hegi is no Jodi Picoult (thank God). She doesn't churn out a book a month, but when she does write, it is a masterful creation and telling worthy of the reader's patience. As one of her biggest fans, Children And Fire has left me excitingly anticipating Hegi's next book.

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### **J.Elle says**

Oh, Ursula Hegi, I so want to like your books, but, for some reason, I just can't. You are firmly in the two star category for me: Stones from the River. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm lacking in some way? NAH. :) I think my real opinion is that everything is just too drawn out and too much time is spent on everything, as if the premise of the writing is, "why explain something in a paragraph when I can turn it into a whole chapter?" And people, therein lies one of the main reasons I read so much young adult fiction. I am busy. I work full-time. I have a husband. I have a toddler. I cook most of our meals. I try to bake the majority of our bread. I have a cat that never stops meowing. I have things to do and I cannot waste, yes, I wrote WASTE, my time on gratuitous descriptions of everything, especially when I am not overly in love with the book anyway. Young adult fiction? So fast and easy and if it's lame, (shrug), it's 185 pages. I'm done reading it in two hours. But Ursula Hegi, I slogged through this for four days, an unheard of amount of time for me and then, I admit to skimming the last 20% of the book. I had a life I needed to get back to.

And now I'm laughing at myself. You're probably going, "you just wrote a huge paragraph overly describing why you don't love this book without even mentioning what the book was about. You are just like Ursula Hegi." And I would argue that my goodreads reviews have never been chosen for Oprah's booklist and so, are held to a much lower standard.

This book centers on the life of Thekla Jahnson, a teacher to a class of 10 year old boys. It's set in 1934, a year after the burning of the Reichstag and the book jacket led me to believe it would be about how one woman (Thekla) could become so seduced by the Hitler propaganda that she would encourage her class of boys to join the movement. Instead, I got a warbling, timeline-jumping story about Thekla's parentage which frankly ended up being so predictable that it caused the aforementioned skimming. And thus, I concluded my final attempt with Ms. Hegi's writing.

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### **Kimberly says**

Ursula Hegi has the talent to put into words emotions I have felt but not understood their roots. Children and Fire is a story within a larger story. The larger story being her novel, Stones from the River. You do not have to read one before the other. The characters from each book intersect and you see them with deeper meaning. Both books take place in a small German Village, Burgdorf. Children and Fire tells the story of a single day in the early months of Hitler's regime. It's beautifully written and although it takes place in 1934, the humanity, both good and evil is timeless.

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