First Opinion: Quiet Beauty


J. Kye Valentine

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched—they must be felt with the heart’—Helen Keller” (LeZotte front matter). This is a brilliant opening that plainly describes the journey the heart takes throughout this novel. Ann Clare LeZotte, the author of this novel, creates an unforgettable character who embodies the greatness of mankind during one of the darkest periods in our history.

Paula Becker is a young girl who is born deaf during the period of Hitler’s reign in Germany. At this time, the Nazis have begun to round up Jewish people and take them to concentration camps. The total domination of the Aryan race was their goal. However, LeZotte does a great job of not only focusing on the familiar aspects of this horrific time period. During this same time, the Nazi party was also rounding up the gypsies and the disabled. Any thing or person who might tarnish the “perfect race” was destroyed. Consequently, Paula must leave her family and hide. The German Nazis had started many “clinics” that were run by doctors, and these clinics practiced some of the earliest forms of eugenics in history. Euthanasia is what Paula is running from throughout the novel.

Ann LeZotte takes the reader on an emotional journey beginning with Paula’s descriptions of isolation. The description of isolation within her own house at the beginning of the
novel creates a vivid picture and foreshadows the life she will have. Paula’s description of her dog Schatze barking at her back until he learns to tap her leg is an emotional moment for the reader. In “I didn’t learn to speak” (p. 6), Paula tries to speak and is told it is probably best she stayed quiet. From these descriptions of isolation and her journey to the barn and the scare she experiences when the Nazis appear, to her work in the shelter, LeZotte creates a narrative journey that is not only emotional but highly engaging.

LeZotte has written a novel that can easily be read in under an hour; however, she demands the readers’ respect by writing this novel in a poetic form. Poetry can never be read once and be fully understood. LeZotte seems to understand this fact because you can read through the whole novel and get a great story, but unless you re-read you will miss out on the historical aspects that have been included in this piece. For example, I had to back up and re-read to catch that there is a period of a few years that passes from the time Paula leaves to the time she returns to her family.

I am a little biased because LeZotte has done such a great job of very artistically, but plainly, educating the reader on aspects of history that are sometimes forgotten. However, if I were to criticize this as poetry, I would say it is not my cup of tea. If readers expect a rhyme scheme, as I did, they will be disappointed. The book reads like a summary—with the free verse lines succinctly offering a story. While I enjoyed reading the book, the ending is abrupt, and the story progresses so fast that I believe much might be lost to readers who don’t linger over the work. Because I am critiquing this book as a potential novel for young adults, I would have to recommend it as a high school-level read. Even then, it would be up to the teacher to make sure young readers understand the depth this verse novel. T4 would be difficult to teach, but as a supplement to a World War II unit in a history class, it has endless potential.

Overall, I recommend this novel, and I believe LeZotte has created a brilliant piece of literature.

About the Author

J. Kye Valentine is a senior at Purdue University, majoring in history and English literature.