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Our Holocaust



Synopsis

Amir and Effi collected relatives. With Holocaust survivors for parents and few other 'real' relatives alive, relationships operated under a "Law of Compression" in which tenuous connections turned friends into uncles, cousins and grandparents. Life was framed by Grandpa Lolek, the parsimonious and eccentric old rogue who put his tea bags through Selektion, and Grandpa Yosef, the neighborhood saint, who knew everything about everything, but refused to talk of his own past. Amir and Effi also collected information about what happened Over There. This was more difficult than collecting relatives; nobody would tell them any details because they weren't yet Old Enough. The intrepid pair won't let this stop them, and their quest for knowledge results in adventures both funny and alarming, as they try to unearth their neighbors' stories. As Amir grows up, his obsession with understanding the Holocaust remains with him, and finally Old Enough to know, the unforgettable cast of characters that populate his world open their hearts, souls, and pasts to him... Translated by Jessica Cohen from the Hebrew Shoah Shelanu.

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Customer Reviews

Israeli prize winner Amir Gutfreund debuts with an astonishing chronicle of two young children's abilities and inabilities to understand what happened "over there" in Our Holocaust. The author takes the stage as a fictional character along with Effi, the only other child on Katznelson Street in Kiryat Haim. As members of the second-and-a-half generation to the Shoah (the Holocaust), they try to fit the pieces of the puzzle together--from the bits and pieces they are given--because they are not "Old Enough" to comprehend. Amir is the more questioning of two, begging for stories and

information. Fifty years may have passed but the Shoah's survivors are still haunted. As the children age and become "Old Enough" to learn the truth, Amir becomes obsessed with learning more. He interviews the family--everyone who survived is now a relative, not so much as by blood as shared experiences--and collects their stories. One of the more unusual characters is Attorney Perl, not for what he remembers or what he experienced in the camps. He, too, keeps records. Not about the atrocities, but about what happened to those who committed them. What happened to the Nazis after liberation? Ask Attorney Perl. Behind the wall of his hardware store is a wall of little drawers. Amir at first believes they contain the store's inventory, but when he's finally "Old Enough," he learns that the drawers are crammed with index cards full of notations, sentences, releases, and deaths of Nazi party members. Our Holocaust takes readers on two voyages. One is through the minds of the survivors and their children, and another is through the camps. It takes readers through the ghettos where the Nazis perform the "Aktions" and the "Selektions" of who stays, goes, and who dies on the spot.

If Elie Wiesel's "Night," is fiction, then "Our Holocaust," by Amir Gutfreund fits into the same category. I have waited a long time for a book as well-written as this one, on a subject that is never, ever funny. All one can hope for as a reader is to get an unsentimentalized picture that makes one consider a fuller perspective on the subject. Gutfreund does this, and more. Gutfreund re-creates an entire neighborhood in Israel from his childhood, as it was lived among Holocaust survivors who desired to keep their past from damaging the "2nd and a half" generation. Unexpected comedy is created by this fantastic author, as he writes of the devious, childish tricks used by Amir and Effie in the book to get around their Grandpa Yosef's stern edict that nobody talks about the past to these curious children. The neighbors are charming, engrossing in their dysfunction, and captivate the reader immediately. As the boy grows up, he continues to search for complete stories from these broken souls. He himself becomes damaged by some of the knowledge he learns, and ends up looking for ways to make peace with the complexity of the pains he uncovers. Some of the other reviewers are better equipped than I to address the potential political implications of the fictional protagonist's musings. I was just glad to finally read something that was balanced and beautiful in the depiction of the familial love for these wrecks and ruins of people as they steer--unwittingly sometimes--towards each person's individual end or "documentation" of what had happened to them, what was lost in the past.

I highly recommend that you read this novel ... "Our Holocaust" by Israeli author Amir Gutfreund.

The main characters are two second generation children of holocaust survivors living on a quiet suburban street in Israel. Having lost much of their real families to the Holocaust the children and their parents assemble substitute grandparents, uncles, etc from the Holocaust survivors in living in the neighborhood. Drawn to learn more about the lives of these pseudo relatives and trying to understand their sometime unusual behaviors - the children over time learn the individual stories of these "grandparents, uncles, aunts" - their lives before the SHOAH (Holocaust), how they individually survived the death camps (sometimes by sheer happenstance) and how the events shaped them forever. This first time Israeli author weaves into the tale many historical facts about this dark period including the stark reality that many of the perpetrators of the holocaust from planners of the final Jewish Solution, camp commandants, sadistic guards and others tasked to cleanse Europe of Jews were either not held accountable and lived out their lives amongst ordinary Germans or when tried and sentenced served only a very small portion of their punishment. Using humor, sometimes black the author, Amir Gutfreund compels the reader to ponder whether the world is just a blink away from another SHOAH. After all as he points out many Germans were not cruel in carrying out their duties as guards, trainmen, industrialist utilizing slave labor - yet they still managed to contribute to the effort to eliminate 5 million ethnic minorities and 6 million Jews returning themselves to life as normal after the war.

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