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Then

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Profound, demanding and harrowing, this book about the Holocaust, set in occupied Poland and the sequel to **Once**, demands the most of its young readers. The story opens with young Felix and six-year-old Zelda running for their lives, having jumped from a cattle train bound for the death camps. Deep in a forest echoing with machine-gun fire, they stumble across a pit filled with the bodies of children ? young Jewish orphans shot by the Nazis. Felix comforts Zelda through the horror as best he can ? by calling upon his imagination and the power of storytelling. He has a favourite writer, Richmal Crompton, to whom he refers in moments of stress and whose influence has enormous consequences later in the story.

The children journey on and soon find themselves at the mercy of a plain-speaking young farmer called Genia. Surprisingly, she gives them refuge, changes their appearance and passes them off as relatives. But events have a momentum of their own and move fast towards a devastating and horrific scene from which there is no return.

Narrated from Felix?s point of view, the book is shot through with humour, which, for the reader, acts almost like a shock absorber to the incidents described. Yet this humour, so fragile and innocent, jars horribly, making all the more shocking the monstrosities committed.

The story touches upon many themes and emotions: persecution and fear, hope and survival, occupation and resistance, war crimes and genocide. It is a reminder of human barbarity but also of courage ? and the power of storytelling as witness of and escape from reality.

Running Order:

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