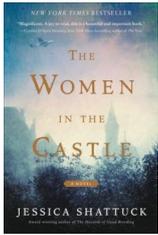


The Women in the Castle



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War, it is said, tears families apart and brings strangers together. In this compelling WWII novel, two German widows of Nazi-resisters and a third woman, a refugee from the East, move in together, along with their children. They help each other with child-rearing and preparing meals, despite the privations of rationing. Most importantly, they give each other deep emotional support, as good families do.

The novel opens on a grand harvest party in a castle, ramshackle and falling apart, near a small town in Bavaria. Marianne, the main character, plays host for its ailing owner, Countess von Lingenfels, her husband Albrecht's aunt. Marianne brings to hosting the skills of someone who has an eye for beauty and taste—and particularly the complicated dynamics of relationships between people. She greets, cajoles, and introduces strangers with the flair and manners of a great lady.

All is not well in the castle, however. As Nazis and other Germans mingle in the grand rooms, a small group meets in Albrecht's study. The men there debate about what they can do to stop Hitler's evil policies and his invasions of other countries. Albrecht argues forcefully for following the rule of law, but the other men, including Marianne's childhood friend Connie, believe that assassinating Hitler is the only way to save their country. They're devising a plan as Marianne enters.

When one guest relates that the Nazis have destroyed countless shops and homes of Jewish people in Munich, everyone expresses shock—yet Albrecht insists that they cannot attempt an assassination because of the risk to their families. But Marianne tells the group that she supports them strongly, and that many other women will as well.

That same night, Connie introduces his beautiful fiancée, Benita, to Marianne, and asks her to help Benita raise their unborn child should something happen to him. Although Marianne does not understand why Connie has chosen this naïve, apolitical woman—she is barely educated and comes from a poor family in a remote village—she gives her promise. Before leaving the room, Connie gives Marianne a passionate, lingering kiss.

Soon Ania, the wife of another resister, joins the group after a brutal return from Poland. Marianne helps find her two missing boys, who remain silent and fearful for many months. Unlike Benita, Ania appears selfless, and joins Marianne in her orphanage work and in finding others missing. In amazement, Marianne often watches Ania turn very few ingredients into meals for the Nazi regiment who have taken over the castle.

One beautiful day, the women and their children share a picnic, where Marianne takes photographs of the group. In looking back at the picture, Marianne sees in Benita a look of pure joy, and finally realizes what Connie sees in her: someone living each moment with all of her being.

Long ago when they played as children, Connie had told Marianne that she had the personality of a judge, always weighing right against wrong and insisting that their playmates follow exactly each rule. However, the hardships of war teach Marianne that life can never be white or black—that countless shades of grey exist.

There are thousands of World War II novels, many from a woman's point of view (including recent [Books Plus selection *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah](#), about two sisters who take very different paths in dealing with the enemy in occupied France). *The Women in the Castle* stands with the best of them, presenting three heroines constantly making difficult choices. It also tells the stories of those we seldom hear about: Nazi resisters and ordinary Germans who confront evil daily—but also struggle to stay alive.

Posted by Dory L. on November 9, 2017

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Fiction

The Women in the Castle: A Novel
