

FOR SUCH A TIME BY KATE BRESLIN



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In 1944, blonde and blue-eyed Jewess Hadassah Benjamin feels abandoned by God when she is saved from a firing squad only to be handed over to a new enemy. Pressed into service by SS Kommandant Colonel Aric von Schmidt at the transit camp of Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, she is able to hide behind the false identity of Stella Muller. However, in order to survive and maintain her cover as Aric's secretary, she is forced to stand by as her own people are sent to Auschwitz. Suspecting that her employer is a man of hidden depths and sympathies, Stella cautiously appeals to him on behalf of those in the camp. Aric's compassion gives her hope, and she finds herself battling a growing attraction for this man she knows she should despise as an enemy.

Stella pours herself into her efforts to keep even some of the camp's prisoners safe, but she risks the revelation of her true identity with every attempt. When her bravery brings her to the point of the ultimate sacrifice, she has only her faith to lean upon. Perhaps God has placed her there for such a time as this, but how can she save her people when she is unable to save herself?

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Most helpful customer reviews

42 of 45 people found the following review helpful.

Certainly the most compelling WWII fiction I have read over the past 5 years.

By Harold Wolf

The verdict is in: This book wins the American Christian Fiction Writer's Carol Award 2015 for Debut Novel. It's another story about the general population of both sides of WWII; people who were not the instigators of hatred and politics but caught up in a world gone mad. Wow, does this story point that out and give hope that WWII world-levels of hatred will never again surface. There is hope, and it begins with one, or in this case two people.

I'm slow in reading this story. So many books have been written in the past few years, anniversary years of Nazi war. It is fiction, self-accounting of changes in history made by the author, Kate Breslin, to aid her story, which is by the way, also a Biblical based fictionalized book. Esther. The novel flirts with romance, but the primary plot is the characters and their relationships within the real Czech ghetto concentration camp of Theresienstadt.

I noticed some negative reviews for this book, primarily noting license taken to the betterment of a fictional story. Perhaps the reviewers were as caught up in the book as I became, and almost forgot it was a work of fiction. It feels real. Characters are so well developed I became endeared to both Nazi and Jew and felt their

fear and desperation in the fast-paced final fourth of this story. My heart rallied at their determination—a fierceness beyond any fear of death.

I believe there were many, dare I say a majority, of Jews and Germans living in 1944 who wished the war's end, who understood each other's view, and were willing to accept and forgive. It was a war of politics, not hearts. This book talks of the hearts of WW2.

A debut triumph for Kate Breslin, in my humble opinion. The Carol Award places it in the 6 star category.

“For Such a Time” should be adapted for a TV mini-series.

88 of 120 people found the following review helpful.

Despite an interesting re-telling of Esther, there were flaws I just couldn't overlook

By WestMetroMommy

I should start by saying that I read Christian Fiction with a different eye than I do other forms of fiction. Whether this be right or wrong, I feel that Christian Fiction has a different aim and, because of that, I need to look at it with that aim in mind. Because of this, I can overlook some things that would really, really bug my in other genres. Still, the fact that this is Christian Fiction does not give it a free pass.

The idea of re-telling the story of Esther and setting it during the Holocaust is intriguing and problematic. The setting definitely works--both the Biblical account and the Holocaust center around the persecution of the Jewish people. Breslin does a very good job of pacing this book along with the Biblical account so that they line up. I found that the general arc of her story was fascinating and it kept me interested in the book.

Breslin also had a very good grasp of the main character of Hadassah/Stella. She had a lot going on--she was rescued from one concentration camp and then put into the employ of the kommandant of another. She had to hold up the facade of being a gentile while watching her fellow Jews, including her Uncle, suffer. Breslin was able to effectively communicate all the inner struggles of this woman in a believable way.

All this being said, I found two rather big problems with this book. One has to do with the fact that it is Christian Fiction and Breslin had to struggle with how to make it "Christian" while dealing with non-Christian characters. On this count, I don't feel that she completely succeeded. I believe that she tried to remain respectful to the Jewish faith--but having a main character in kind of a limbo land between Judaism and Christianity just didn't work. I think she still could have told this story in a "Christian" tone by focusing on Aric's faith instead of Hadassah's.

The second issue was far more troublesome to me. The relationship between Aric and Stella was just outright uncomfortable to read. The idea was that Aric was in love with Stella (at first sight, of course) and that is what led him to rescue her from a firing squad and that she fell in love with him as she discovered his good heart under his SS uniform. Unfortunately, that is not how the relationship came off. Instead, it came across more like a frightening case of sexual harassment couple with Stockholm Syndrome. I was incredibly repulsed by the whole situation--and the fact that what I find stomach turning from this book is the love story and not the fact that it was set in a concentration camp should tell you something.

Honestly, Breslin could have told this story in a way that conveyed a believable love story and I think that is probably the biggest failing of the book, which is too bad because the overall story is quite good.

I might recommend this book to others--but only to those with an interest in Christian fiction and who were willing to overlook a badly written romance in order to see a fascinating re-telling of Esther.

64 of 89 people found the following review helpful.

The Criticism is Warranted

By Janet Morris

I've read many books that I could classify as "bad books" over the years, but this one is quite special in how awful it truly was. There was nothing enjoyable about Kate Breslin's debut novel *For Such a Time*.

First, let's tackle something that was brought up repeatedly in the book and in its official descriptions. The lead female character Hadassah Benjamin (known through most of the novel as Stella Muller) has blonde hair and blue eyes. On the back of the copy I checked out of the local library, it is specifically described as, "her Aryan-like looks allow her to hide behind the false identity of Stella Muller." According to the official description on Amazon's app, the description starts, "In 1944, blonde and blue-eyed Jewess Hadassah Benjamin feels abandoned by God when she is saved from a firing squad only to be handed over to a new enemy." On page 14 of the story, she is described this way, "Morty once told her that her beauty would save her--a "changeling," he'd called his young niece, Stella's blond hair and blue eyes a rarity among their people." Early in the war, this might have protected her, but it wouldn't have been guaranteed. When you consider that Werner Goldberg, the man who was literally the poster boy for the Aryan ideal, was expelled from the army in 1940 when it was discovered he was a "1st degree Mischlinge" and had to help his father escape a hospital in 1943 so that he wouldn't be deported to Auschwitz, you can be sure that appearance wouldn't guarantee the safety of a non-influential light-haired, light-eyed Jewish girl. And the supposed rarity of the trait is questionable due to the fact that now 32% of German-Jewish children also have blond hair. Brown (light and dark) and black hair each have slightly percentages than that. One would assume that the dark hair stereotype is just that, a stereotype. By focusing so much attention on the appearance of this woman who is also described as a savior, it is promoting a white supremacist ideal of beauty and moral value, while simultaneously justifying that ideal's belief of punishing those who don't fit their narrow standards of beauty.

Somehow her beauty is able to trick Aric into believing that she isn't really Jewish and that the papers that have been stamped saying that she is must have been wrong. Aric will eventually blame her for not telling him that she is Jewish and for not telling him that she did not support the Nazi's cause. This is after he has seen her traumatized at the brutal killing of Anna while in a camp. He saw that this broke her spirit, but he believes she still might be willing to support Hitler and his group of bigoted, sociopathic thugs.

Her beauty and position as Aric's secretary also seem to convince every Nazi officer that she must be a prostitute. She even calls herself a "brazen hussy" when she is forced to kiss Hermann in order to save the life of Joseph, Aric's houseboy. And Hermann muses that she is a sorceress using her beauty to bewitch the Commandant into sympathizing with the prisoners. (Of course, Hermann also calls women weak-minded and mere vessels for man's use, so he's not exactly a great example of non-sexist thinking.)

Another serious issue is the repeated use of rape and assault as a way to threaten Hadassah/Stella into doing things & the underlying Stockholm Syndrome-esque quality of the relationship between her and Aric. When she first meets Aric von Schmidt, she tells him that the Gestapo assaulted her in some way and suggests that it may have been a sexual assault attempt. He classifies their behavior as a prank. Twenty five pages into the book, he threatens her with being returned to Dachau while he tries to seduce her. She is reminded over and over that she is essentially his prisoner, that she has no true sense of free will or personhood, but that she should be thankful for his saving her and for his attraction to her. When she has a traumatic flashback in a nightmare around page 47, Aric expects her to be thankful that he's moved her to Czechoslovakia with him, but he's threatening her with being sent back. He even uses sexual innuendo in these conversations, while having no regard for the suffering that she has been through. All that he cares about is that attraction he has. And he tries to make that attraction seem more important than what he knows, as he witnessed some of it, she's been through. He threatens her when she doesn't want to do as he has told her, tells her he will send her

to Dachau for not eating, forces her to eat food pork, forces her to type of the lists sending prisoners to Auschwitz, forces her to sit through meals as Aric and other SS officers talk about the benefits of slave labor in the camps and ghettos, threatens to kill people unless she kisses him, and forces her to agree to marry him. As I read the story, I saw his behavior as similar to Christian Grey's behavior in the Fifty Shades series, only Aric was so much more vile.

When the book started, Hadassah saw Aric as a "Jew Killer" and a potential threat to her safety. By page 82, she has begun to trust him, while knowing that he could turn on her at any moment if he found out who/what she really is. This is so reminiscent of Stockholm Syndrome. She is living in the home of an SS-Commandant and sees him as a good person who doesn't really want to hurt Jews. She doesn't recognize that he continuously fails to show real compassion for the prisoners in his camp--only trying to help the people who he knows and likes. It horrifies her when the General dismisses the life of Joseph, but it doesn't horrify her that Aric is dismissive over any life other than Joseph in Theresienstadt. He doesn't feel guilt over the abuse of Morty or the sending of Sophie to Auschwitz for having rotten teeth. She doesn't recognize that he has never truly shown her real compassion. He's just treated her as a possession. One that he could rid himself of at any time. And he is continually pushed upon the reader as a hero? I don't think so.

Throughout the book, there are moments of antisemitism that made me cringe. When Aric gives Hadassah a red wig to wear to cover her nearly bald head, it is a potential use of red hair as a symbol of Judaism. While not explained in the book, red hair and antisemitism have been linked for around two thousand years. Judas Iscariot was portrayed as a redhead. Lilith, the first wife of Adam, was portrayed with red hair. Liars, thieves, murderers, etc. would be described as having red hair. Any time there was racist propaganda, including art for nobles, Jews would be given red hair. Red hair was a symbol of a person who couldn't be trusted. Even though Hitler didn't believe redheads to automatically be Jews, he did believe that red hair was indicative of a person who could not be trusted. The red wig being used in the book until her identity was discovered was clearly an example of this continued stereotype.

The magical Bible that always seems to show up when Hadassah is losing hope is a different symbol of antisemitism. Instead of solely focusing on the books within it that are shared between the Jewish and Christian faiths, Hadassah ends up focusing on ones in the New Testament, including John 3:16. The author manages to, by page 311, convert a Jewish woman to Christianity, turning her into a Christian saving the poor Jews in the camp rather than an empowered Jewish woman helping her fellow Jews escape their oppressor. It is almost like the author could not allow Hadassah to be herself while executing the escape. She had to become someone different. She even says that she believes that God had abandoned her, Marty, and other Jews, while staying with Aric and Marta, her Christian friend. Considering that part of her conversion is inspired by her relationship with Aric, Marta's past attempts to convert her, the atrocities taking place around her, this could be considered a forcible conversion. forcible conversions are an atrocity Jews were made to endure for two thousand years that promised them safety, but was often used to further segregate them within society. (They would not be trusted by Christians or by Jews after their conversion.) During the Holocaust, these conversions were simultaneously supported and condemned by the Catholic church.

Conversions like this are considered religious cleansing, which like ethnic cleansing, is a type of persecution and is not something that one should find "inspirational" as this novel seems to suggest. This is a type of violence being perpetrated on a person based upon their religion. Why is it being celebrated? Coerced and forced conversions and "inspirational" propaganda that promotes them like this have been condemned by groups like the Anti-Defamation League, "The history of the Jewish people is filled with tragic incidents of forced conversions, resulting in the death of untold numbers of Jews throughout the centuries...More recently, there has been an increase in the use of deceptive tactics by so-called 'Messianic Jews' targeting Jews for conversion. This new document makes clear that Christians using deception and aggression to

missionize non-Christians is not only inappropriate, but a betrayal of Christian values."

The suffering of Aric over being injured is also representative of antisemitism. He was in the hospital for a year, which led to his offer of a position within the SS as Commandant at the camp. Hadassah has more sympathy for his year in the hospital than she has for her friends, her neighbors, and her relatives who have been taken from their homes, stripped of their citizenship, and treated like vermin for years. He's in pain, so she feels sorrow for him. She feels less sorrow for the torture and murder of many lives she knew before the war. His suffering is portrayed as more important than theirs. Hadassah is told by Grossman that the only place a disabled Wehrmacht soldier like Aric or like Grossman could find work was within the SS; that the Wehrmacht wouldn't want them after they were injured and that employers within Germany would not employ a soldier injured in the war. (Apparently the author has never heard of Claus von Stauffenberg, who was injured in the war and was still allowed to work for the Wehrmacht. He also was part of Operation Valkyrie, an attempt by people within the Wehrmacht to kill Hitler.) He admits that he joined the Wehrmacht willingly a decade before and believed for the next ten years that Hitler was doing the right thing, and she still supports him. Hadassah even pities that Aric is "far from the excitement of battle", knowing that he would be fighting to continue to abuse the rights and the bodies of so many. She is more concerned with getting him away from Hitler's reach than helping persecuted individuals get away.

There's also a portrayal of Jews as being less educated than the Nazis. Jewish characters have poor grammar, while the SS officers have proper grammar. They are portrayed by the author as being less trustworthy, less loyal, and more prone to bad behavior/mischief than the Nazi characters. Morty's acts as the Judenrat, acts which are grossly distorted, are seen as more vile than the beatings inflicted by the officers, the attempts to murder Hadassah and Aric by the officers, sending people to Auschwitz for bad teeth, etc. His failure to be perfect morally is seen as more grotesque than the atrocities that are being committed right in front of the characters. And Hadassah is actually shocked when she finds out that SS officers have no regard for the lives of Jews. This seems completely unrealistic.

What alarmed me most was that this book seemed to lift certain elements from the lives of real individuals. For example, the alias of Stella Muller. There was a Holocaust survivor by the name of Stella Müller who was "saved" by a Nazi along with other Holocaust prisoners. She was one of the real individuals saved by Oskar Schindler by being sent by train to Czechoslovakia. Various other elements from Schindler's story (including the theatrical version of it) were also present in this novel, including the use of red apparel (a hat instead of a coat) to distinguish an innocent individual and ash and soot being used to symbolize a life having no value to outsiders. Then there was the lack of value placed upon the lives and stories of the real prisoners of Theresienstadt when the author took real events, like the Red Cross investigation and the subsequent closing of the camp, and moved it to another date so that it would coincide with Purim? Was it so necessary to retell the story of Esther that the author needed to change real events and erase real suffering to do so?

Aside from the many issues with racism, religious violence, sexism, the abusive nature of Aric and Hadassah's relationship, the historical inaccuracies, the potential appropriation of identities and stories of others, and the general grossness that was promoted throughout this book, the book was also poorly written. Even if all the other issues were changed, the book would still be full of purple prose. I am flummoxed by how this book managed to attract any fans, positive reviews, or awards, or how any person who has seen the recent criticism of the year-old book can see that criticism as censorship. If a person writes a truly awful book and people point that out to them, that isn't censorship. This book deserves all of the criticism that it is receiving. The author may not have meant to write a book that is so offensive as this one is, but she accomplished that anyway.

I'm not always a fan of "inspirational" stories, but I have never seen one so callously written, with so much

disdain for the suffering that was endured by so many. I cannot imagine anyone feeling truly inspired by this book. How does a book "inspire" when it romanticizes mass murder, racism, and abuse? How could any person see that as a way to inspire people of faith?

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