

Among the Clouds Above

John Rhodes

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Among the Clouds Above combines history, realism, and strong characters for a compelling war story.

John Rhodes's *Among the Clouds Above* is an intense, sharply observed WWII novel whose animate characters bring the air war against Germany to life.

In 1940, Hitler controlled most of continental Europe, America had not yet joined the war, and England stood alone in an air war against German bombers sent to pave the way for a land invasion. From this lofty overview, the book's scope narrows to Royal Air Force bases along the southeast coast of England, then down to Squadron 339, and finally to the squadron's Group 11 and pilot Johnnie Shaux.

Raised an orphan, self-effacing Johnnie feels he has no particular claim to life or happiness; he is resigned to die in combat. The book opens in the cockpit with Johnnie under attack; it's a scene that burns with white-knuckled drama and intensity. Miraculously, he survives this—and months in a job that kills half its flyers in the first week.

Eleanor Rand is a young war widow whose job is keeping track of casualties and troop availability. Her Oxford-trained proficiency in higher math is recognized, and she's reassigned to analyze data in hopes of devising a strategy for Squadron 339 to overcome the superior numbers of Luftwaffe.

Johnnie and Eleanor are developed in alternating chapters, living separate lives within their own circumscribed worlds. Johnnie flies as many as five sorties a day and trains newly arrived replacements. Eleanor uses her knowledge of a new kind of data analysis (known today as game theory) to make the most of depleted forces.

If at times Johnnie's sorties become exhausting and Eleanor's analyses dip too far into the mathematical weeds, theirs is an accurate picture of war and the narrowly defined, often tedious efforts of millions of people joined in an incomprehensibly vast effort. Johnnie and Eleanor's interlocking backstories are slowly revealed as their orbits draw closer together and finally intersect.

At every turn, the world described is convincing, down to details such as radar not being fully in use: when Eleanor looks down on the strategy control room, she sees a map of southeastern England painted on a thirty-foot table surrounded by women in headsets pushing aircraft markers around to indicate unit positions.

The halting development of Johnnie and Eleanor's relationship sustains suspense among the falling bombs, though a scene that should have been the story's emotional payoff is staged in absurd action. Peritext brings in real people and historical speeches.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (November 14, 2018)

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