ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Children of Pithiviers
Sheila Kohler
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Writing in an elegant style about dark topics, the author invents a shadowy world, in which a sunny summer in 1950s France isn't quite as idyllic as it might sound. The narrator of this tale is eighteen-year-old Diedre, an American who is shipped off to Pithiviers, a town in the French countryside, after a youthful affair with a boy in Paris. Alone after being rebuked by her family, she's befriended by "Madame," an aristocratic woman who takes her in as a paying guest for the summer.

What begins as a standard coming-of-age story soon turns a little twisted as Madame unveils a rather sordid plan for her boarder. Others also notice the uncomfortable situation. At a birthday party, Diedre meets an American couple who are practical, reasoned, and vaguely worried about their compatriot: "I put my arm around Madame's waist and let my head rest on her shoulder for a moment. I felt safe and warm by her side, but I noticed how the Hawthornes stared at us, concern in their shortsighted eyes."

Compounding the creepiness, the young woman finds a diary of two Jewish girls in the attic, who were kept hidden from the Nazis. In the midst of sexual awakening, Diedre's erotic impulses mingle with the diary's intense descriptions of fear and evil. The result is fascinating, and Kohler handles it adeptly, writing in a manner so cultured that it makes the events of Diedre's life even more horrifying. There are no gritty, jarring details here, but rather a mingling of dreamy impressions, soft dialogue, and half-remembered scenes, adding up to suspicion in the midst of grace. Diedre is a delicate, wonderfully flawed narrator who can see trouble coming but can't escape it, preferring instead to revel in its intricacies. Readers will be drawn to do the same.

Elizabeth Millard