



Nightmare Enemy, Dream Friend

Jerry Blanton

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Jerry Blanton's *Nightmare Enemy, Dream Friend* richly chronicles the life of a German medical student who becomes a U-boat captain during World War II. The novel offers a less-often-explored perspective on the amply documented war—that of an average German who has deep qualms about being pressed into military service. The author reflects on what it means to serve and do good during troubled times despite being morally compromised, portraying a man who does his best to keep his faith while waging a war he doesn't believe in.

Blanton's protagonist, Luther Weitgucker, is a covert Christian who rejects Nazism but who nonetheless serves so he can someday return to his family in Dresden. The first half of the book charts the rise of Nazism in the background as Weitgucker progresses through a middle-class childhood to university. In the second half, the action abruptly moves to a U-boat, where it's revealed that Weitgucker had to abandon the medical profession to helm an attack submarine, a role at which he's very proficient. He establishes himself an expert tactician, racking up kill after kill. He strives to be as humane as possible, though, fleeing after torpedo strikes to minimize death and damage. He spares prisoners, returns them to safety, refuses to turn in a gay couple on his U-boat, prays in his cabin, and forbids the Nazi salute on his vessel. Undercover Gestapo agents on the submarine often seem to pose a more grave threat than British planes or American aircraft carriers.

While Weitgucker is a thoroughly developed character, the supporting cast isn't drawn out as much, with a few memorable exceptions. The story gets filtered through Weitgucker's perspective as major world events unfurl, giving an idea of what it must have been like for a reluctant German to witness the ascent of the Nazis; the atrocities they perpetrated; and the gradual, then sudden, loss of the war. When on leave, Weitgucker becomes troubled by cattle cars that appear to carry people while civilians keep reading "as if they didn't notice or didn't want to notice the phantasmagoric train that flickered by as if part of a newsreel."

The book provides an interesting boots-on-the-ground look at a period that may be very familiar to many, but from a different perspective. The naval escapades possess a strong element of realism, reflecting Blanton's research on U-boats and their operations. Occasionally, the author lapses into too much exposition, which is sometimes crammed into the dialogue, but which does advance the plot.

The riveting story is logically divided by mission, breaking it up into digestible chunks and keeping the pacing lively. Action scenes are well crafted, particularly when the submarine narrowly avoids bombs. The prose has memorable flourishes, such as "indeed the army seemed invincible as it swept all opposition away like a large woman sweeping cobwebs from the attic."

Nightmare Enemy, Dream Friend would appeal to anyone interested in history in general and military history in particular. World War II buffs might appreciate the underrepresented perspective, and veterans likely would enjoy the

descriptions of battle and military life. Some may initially balk at the depiction of a Nazi U-boat captain as a sympathetic figure, but the author and protagonist repeatedly make clear their contempt for National Socialism. On the whole, it's a brisk, compelling read.

JOSEPH S. PETE (January 13, 2017)

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