

Not Just a Game

Doug Zipes

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Not Just a Game is exciting, fast-moving historical fiction with a speculative edge.

Doug Zipes's *Not Just a Game* delves into what it's like to be a Jewish athlete across multiple time periods and generations.

The Beckers—Adam, Dietrich, and Kirsten—are all Jewish Olympian (or Olympic-bound) athletes. They enter the games during different eras, facing anti-Semitism and prejudice from 1936 to the 2016 Rio Olympics.

The first half of the book commits to historical accuracy, with minor fictionalization and dramatization. Though Dietrich and Adam Becker are fictional characters, their contemporaries in the novel include Jesse Owens and Gad Tsobari, with whom they have imagined interactions. This setup gives more depth to the story's situations.

The story moves at a fairly rapid pace, shifting smoothly between time periods and perspectives with simple, easy transitions. It slows significantly with setups for important historical moments, like the Munich massacre, and while exploring their outcomes. The second half of the novel focuses less on such historical events and moves at a faster and more exciting pace, seemingly thanks to the freedom that fictional events and characters afford it.

Later portions of the book are more speculative fiction than historical fiction, playing with questions like: What if Hitler had survived and moved to Argentina? What if Hitler had Jewish lineage and fathered a Jewish son? The novel blends such possibilities to imagine what would become of the neo-Nazi movement if such discoveries were made.

Such possibilities come through Kirsten Becker's perspective as she competes in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, the postwar home to many Nazis. When Kirsten is attacked, she meets fellow fencing Olympian Stefan. The two form a fast friendship and relationship, hinging on adventures and conspiracy theories.

Though their relationship is quick and intense—falling in love and traveling together within a day—the parameters surrounding their intimacy are believable.

These portions of the novel center in a world where neo-Nazis have power and the means to follow through with their agenda again. There are plenty of twists and turns here, including the start of the Olympic Games, a Nazi plan coming to fruition, and answers to conspiracy-theory questions introduced throughout the book.

The novel's greatest strength is in its collaborative story lines and characters. Individually, characters and story lines sometimes lack depth, but when woven together, the book's different arcs have more meat. Switching between time periods grants historical insight into anti-Semitism and gives character relationships more meaning.

Though technically historical fiction, *Not Just a Game* is exciting, fast-moving historical fiction with a speculative edge.

JENNIFER MILLER (May 30, 2017)

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