Clarion Review

Historical

Siegfried Follies
Richard Alther
Regent Press
Unknown $0.00 (pp)
978-1-58790-204-8
★★★★☆

In 1945, two young boys survive World War II and begin a life-long friendship. Franz, blond and fair-skinned, is an orphan child of Nazi Germany. He finds a nearly dead boy, dark-haired and obviously Jewish, and sneaks him into the linen closet that serves as his sleeping quarters in a women's birthing hospital. They decide to call him "J" for the letter "J" tattooed on his arm. J has no memory of his life or his only possession, an old violin.

In Siegfried Follies, author Richard Alther introduces readers to Germany through these two young orphans. About eight or nine years old, Franz and J have no memories of their parents or their homes. Franz comes from foster care to the hospital and earns his keep by emptying chamber pots and cleaning beds.

Franz has learned the value of his blondness and ears that lay close to his head. He understands the need to hide J and his too apparent Jewish heritage. Franz feels the destiny of leadership in his bones; J feels despair and terror. Each is plagued with nightmares.

After the war, the two boys hide in one abandoned building after another, finally making a home in a bombed-out opera house. Franz roams the streets for food while J recovers at home. Franz reads newspaper and magazines ads in an attempt to learn English: "More for your money buy Mun-sing-wear"; "ABC Al-ways Buy Chest-er-fields." J studies literature.

By 1949, Franz's street smarts land him a job creating marketing campaigns for local shopkeepers. J attends school and excels in his studies. At home he manages the money. Cultures divide them even as they accept each other as brothers. Franz's interest in all things modern and American, combined with his own ambivalence toward Jews, distance him from J's constant need to learn about his Jewish heritage.

Franz goes to America and J to Israel. As they each struggle to find their place in their

new worlds, nightmares of early years and memories of their brotherhood reunite them.

The author develops the two characters with enough clarity that their motivations are evident. Since the focus of the book is the relationship between the two, the road back together can seem too long and strung with secondary stories. With a strong beginning and ending, this drawn-out middle section may provoke some page skimming.

The author brings the boys' past history instantly into focus when they finally reunite. During an awkward moment, Franz asks, "How many years?…Sixteen, seventeen, half our lives?" J answers, "I wouldn't know, I never celebrated a birthday." The reader understands their bond as Franz's smile fades and he answers, "Me neither."

Author Richard Alther is a writer, artist, and master vegetable gardener. Siegfried Follies is his second novel. His use of dialogue is sophisticated, and his characters believable. The real strength of this novel lies in the scene setting and character development demonstrated in the book's early sections; it never quite reaches that intensity again. Although the story drags at times, readers will wait impatiently to see where the hopes, fears, and life searches will take both Franz and J as they grow to manhood.

Pat Avery