

Song of Freedom, Song of Dreams: A Novel in Verse

Shari Green

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Shari Green's elegant, gripping historical novel-in-verse *Song of Freedom, Song of Dreams* explores the complexities of life in Leipzig in the communist German Democratic Republic.

In East Germany, right before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a pianist, Helena, shares her passion for music with her best friend, Katrin. But then Katrin and her family flee to another Eastern European country, leaving Helena feeling lonely. Her loneliness subsides somewhat when she meets Lucas, a fellow musician. Lucas encourages Helena to pursue her dream of becoming a symphony conductor.

At the same time, both Helena's father and Lucas participate in church services. Here, people gather before marching against the restrictions of the repressive government. Helena finds that she shares her father's impulse toward political activism rather than following her mother's more careful approach to the world.

Unsettling in its timeliness, the story includes instances of rigged elections, travel bans, and self-censorship. Citizens in Leipzig are wary of being spied upon and reported to the authorities for "unpatriotic" conversations or actions. Helena, in fact, is watched by the Stasi, or the secret police. In time, she is forced to decide what—and whom—she should risk in her dealings with them.

Characters, places, and themes are introduced with superb fluidity in the book's verses. While Helena often narrates, some chapters are also told from the perspective of St. Nicholas Church, the gathering place for the protesters. The primacy of prayer gatherings and collective action is central to the novel's progression, though the power of art to move people is even more paramount.

A girl who's passionate about freedom has the chance to pursue her dreams in this hopeful novel that does a beautiful job of illuminating a dark period of history.

DEBORAH TOBOLA (March / April 2024)

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