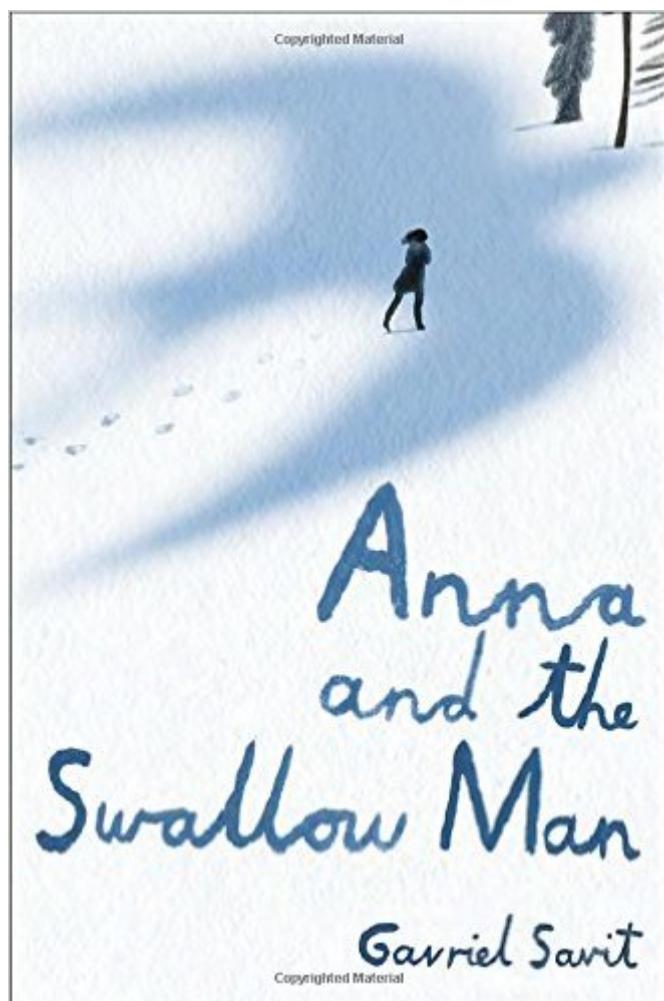


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Anna And The Swallow Man



Synopsis

New York Times® Bestseller "Exquisite." "The Wall Street Journal" "This is masterly storytelling."
"The New York Times Book Review" A stunning, beautiful, and ambitious debut novel set in Poland during the Second World War perfect for readers of All the Light We Cannot See and The Book Thief. Kraków, 1939. A million marching soldiers and a thousand barking dogs. This is no place to grow up. Anna Å•ania is just seven years old when the Germans take her father, a linguistics professor, during their purge of intellectuals in Poland. She's alone. And then Anna meets the Swallow Man. He is a mystery, strange and tall, a skilled deceiver with more than a little magic up his sleeve. And when the soldiers in the streets look at him, they see what he wants them to see. The Swallow Man is not Anna's father "she knows that very well" but she also knows that, like her father, he's in danger of being taken, and like her father, he has a gift for languages: Polish, Russian, German, Yiddish, even Bird. When he summons a bright, beautiful swallow down to his hand to stop her from crying, Anna is entranced. She follows him into the wilderness. Over the course of their travels together, Anna and the Swallow Man will dodge bombs, tame soldiers, and even, despite their better judgment, make a friend. But in a world gone mad, everything can prove dangerous. Even the Swallow Man. Destined to become a classic, Gavriel Savit's stunning debut reveals life's hardest lessons while celebrating its miraculous possibilities.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars See all reviews (120 customer reviews)

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

This is a hard book to review. There is so much I'd like to say about the book, but so little you want to know, at least before you read the book. This would be a great book for a book club. I finished the book nearly a week ago and it has been haunting me every since. I can't even say for sure that I liked it. In some ways I loved it. In some ways I hated it. In some ways, I don't know yet. As I was reading the book, at least most of it, I was just captivated. The book has a certain tone to it that really pulled me in - both distant and immediate, lofty yet brutal. Of course, any book about the horrors of the Nazis is going to be both captivating and challenging, but this book seems to hit the notes perfectly. It's not maudlin, manipulative or unnecessarily prurient - difficult to pull off in a story of a young girl trapped in one of history's greatest atrocities. There are basically only three characters (aside from brief cameo appearances from a handful of other passers-through). Two men, as different as night and day, united by - and in conflict over - the little girl they both love. It's the story of how these three utterly unlikely characters come together and survive, if only barely. There are many details to quibble about, things that are rather difficult to suspend our disbelief about, as they accomplish the small miracles of life - that people could live exclusively outdoors, even in the winter, with little but the clothes on their backs; that this unlikely trio can pass as sufficiently normal to get what they need without arousing suspicion; jokes and word plays that only make sense in English, even though the characters would have been speaking Polish, German or Yiddish; potassium iodine.

This odd little book is a near-fairy tale about real times. It's 1939. Poland has just been invaded, Germans on one side, Russians on the other. A little girl "seven and suddenly an orphan, and nine when we say goodbye to her" wanders across the country, trying to avoid capture, with an odd, driven man whose name she never ever learns but whom she calls the Swallow Man. (He never tells her his name "in his world, names put you at risk around strangers.") Awful things happen around them and their lives grow steadily harder across the course of two years but it's refracted through the lenses of an innocent who moreover is shielded from horror as much as possible by her distant, quiet but ultimately caring protector. In the middle section of the book, Anna comes across a man, Reb Hirschl, in a forest clearing. He's playing his clarinet, his last possession but he isn't really playing "he can't: the reed is broken so he can't play it but he pretends anyway, singing along while he mock fingers it. Besides, he's drunk. From the moment she sees

him, Hirschl is important to Anna. He's a man filled with joy in a joyless time. Anna can't leave him behind. She persuades the Swallow Man to add him to their entourage, no matter the risk of exposure his presence poses for them all. As much as she trusts and depends on the Swallow Man, she misses things she used to have - "moments of joy, lightness of being, smiles and laughs, childlikeness" and these are qualities the Reb possesses in surplus. But he is devoid of the basic life skills needed to keep a low profile and a Jew besides, which is like wearing a sign on one's back that says "Persecute me, so you know in advance it will not end well, and it doesn't." Long after, the novel ends softly in an act of self-effacing sacrifice.

This book was chosen for a mini mother-daughter book club. Our daughters are 12. I have read extensively about the holocaust and believe everyone should learn of its horrors; however, I felt that this book was far too disturbing for sixth graders. My daughter and I read together for about 2/3rds of the book when I finally felt that the book's presentation of the material was just too much for my daughter. Of course the book deals with death, but it also deals with throat-slitting, hanging, and child rape. In my opinion, this is not appropriate for young children. I stopped reading the book with my daughter - and as happy as she had been to start a mother-daughter book club, she was so relieved because she, "Didn't want to hear any more." Along these lines, the book really is not written for a young audience. Our daughters are gifted/highly capable students, and we found that we constantly had to explain the content of the book because of the complexity of the writing and the diction. I am positively baffled that this book is suggested for children 12 and older. The second part of my disappointment has to do with the ending. I decided to finish the book on my own because I wanted to know who the Swallow Man was and what happened to them. I told my daughter I would finish reading it and explain it to her. Unfortunately, the book drags the reader along endlessly on this journey to nowhere (yes, I completely understand that they were merely on the move, trying to survive), and then just abruptly ends with no warning. It was as if the author got bored or hit a deadline and just quit on the book. I hate to spoil it for you, but you never find out who the Swallow Man is, or where he is from, or what he was hiding from.

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