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Malka

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Media type:

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Recent novels in translation from the European mainland, especially from Germany, have transported young readers into the cattle trucks and to the gas chamber itself. **Malka** offers a journey into another experience of the Jewish persecution - the story of a seven-year-old child, separated from her family, close to the eastern borders of Poland in 1943. The staccato menace of Nazi jackboots is never far away as Malka encounters kindness, cruelty and indifference while she endures acute hunger and feverish illness. She survives, but at a psychological price. The novel is loosely based upon the experiences of a woman the author met some 50 years after the event. For all the fictional expansion of the facts, it may be that the novel suffers from its historical basis. What seems to have preoccupied Pressler was the dilemma which faced the real Malka's mother, who 'chose' to leave her behind in Poland while she escaped with her older daughter to Hungary. The narrative has a dual perspective - we switch frequently between the viewpoints of mother and her younger daughter. The shifts are in fact so rapid, in the early section of the book especially, as to be disconcerting; and difficult demands are made upon the reader's 'activity'. While our sympathies could hardly avoid becoming compassionately engaged by the vulnerable and uncomprehending Malka, we may distance ourselves in judgement of her doctor-mother, Hannah. If this makes for uneasy reading and remains a structural problem throughout the novel, the content of the story is nevertheless horrifyingly fascinating. Malka's time alone in the ghetto, her rapid transition from a comfortable home to a naked struggle for survival, make poignant reading. Hannah's adult complexity and fallibility are treated with an honesty which perceptive teenage readers might find provocative; some problems don't have solutions. There is no sensationalism here; rather, this is a starkly presented facet of the story which must be told to succeeding generations.

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