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The Toymaker

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~~Not a Choice:~~

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

In a secret corner of Menschenmacher's famous toyshop, a beating heart is deftly slit from a sparrow's breast by a blade 'as cruel as frost'. It is inserted into a toy which, in a moment or two, stirs and opens its eyes. Where might *that* lead?

Until the closing pages of this remarkable debut novel, there's no knowing how the dark, breakneck tale will end, with its travelling shows, contortionists and conjurers, knives flashing in the shadows and Marguerite, the chillingly pretty automaton who, by a finger-tap on a playing card, can show her cruel master whether his victim is telling truth or lie. It's set in 'well, Somewhere Else. Probably Germany in the days of pistols and smuggling, of dark arts practised with malign intent. Enough to know it's a time of nervy danger, where young Mathias, with neither home nor parent, guards a secret which others will kill to obtain. He has no sure friend but Katta, a damaged serving-girl he meets in a wayside inn, as he flees his violent enemies. For protection, they have Koenig, strong and clever, a skilled horseman and fighter, but also a man who makes his life outside the law. Can they trust him?

Their travels take them by lonely forest tracks to a seaport riddled with risky streets where a boy could be kicked to death and no questions asked. Hunting them through every page is the dwarf Valter, servant to sinister Doctor Leiter. For Valter it's all a game 'breaking fingers like so many twigs offers exquisite sport. De Quidt, or his editor, may have been anxious about linking 'dwarf' to such malevolence; quite often the text prefers 'small man'. For me, in this literary genre and period, and given Valter's final secret, which absolutely cannot be disclosed, the usage seemed without offence.

Comparisons with Philip Reeve's Victorian high adventures come to mind, but they are tempered by humour. No such relief here. This is a new, strong and distinctive voice. More please.

Running Order:

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