



An Elephant in the Garden

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Morpurgo creates an incident packed story about the bombing of Dresden in 1944, using a favourite theme of an animal's involvement in a war. This time it is Marlene, the elephant, whom Mutti looks after and about whom she is worried so she brings her home for the nights. But when the bombing of Dresden starts, Mutti realises she has to get her children, Karli and Elizabeth, and Marlene out of Dresden to survive. They escape across the snow with very little food, using the icy streams to drink from, making for a relative's farm. But here they find a Canadian airman, Peter, the only survivor of a Lancaster bomber shot down earlier. Peter helps save Karli's life and changes Mutti's opinion of him, and led by his compass they make for the American lines to escape the oncoming Russian Army. Elizabeth, who is 16, and Peter fall in love, and it is Lizzie who tells her story from her bed in an old people's nursing home to another Karl.

The background to the war is convincingly drawn through the falling out of Mutti and Papi with Aunt Lotti and Uncle Manfred over the Nazis, and small incidents told about Jews having to wear yellow stars. These are not played down but seen from the child's perspective, leaving the full impact to sink in as the reader travels through the story. Peter's statement that London too was bombed brings a balance to events, as does the Countess's help for refugees after her husband's execution for his part in the July plot to kill Hitler. There is a moving extract from a letter her husband wrote about the birth of a new Germany out of the ashes of horror. It is not clear whether that is a quote from a real document or not, but it emphasises the impact of war on ordinary people.

Michael Foreman's grey pastel drawings and the double spaced text make this a very accessible novel, marvellous to read aloud to those who might not manage it by themselves. The presence of Marlene makes the fleeing from the atrocities of war somehow bearable both for Karli and Elizabeth and for the reader, not dumbing it down, but somehow adding to the unreal quality of it all, much as it must have been.

Running Order:

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