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Reading Claudius: A Memoir in Two Parts

Caroline Heller

Review

By *Suri Boiangiu* – May 20, 2015

This compelling memoir opens in Chicago, 1954. Caroline and her brother have no idea that they are Jewish. They attend church with their parents and celebrate Christmas joyously. One day in school, Caroline finds herself passionately defending the Israelis, and raising her hand when the class is asked, “Is anyone Jewish?” Although she has acted merely on instinct and her dislike of discrimination, Caroline soon becomes determined to uncover more about her ancestry. Part I of the memoir takes the reader to Prague, where Caroline’s mother, Liese, is a student in 1933.

Life in Prague is carefree for Liese and her friends. Liese is enrolled in medical school and lives an intellectual’s café life at night. She is particularly taken with Erich Heller and his brother Paul; one is an intellectual, the other a medical student. Although cryptic notes arrive from her parents in Germany—“Today was a good day,” or “not so good this week”—the horrors that Hitler is beginning to perpetrate on Germany are unreal to this group of lighthearted young people.

However, once their own safety becomes endangered, the friends are wise enough to fight to escape. Erich ends up in Oxford, fulfilling his dreams. Paul, not so lucky, spends six years in Buchenwald. His letters to Liese and his brother comprise the centerpiece of the book. Part II of the memoir details the story of the characters in America. Paul finds Liese, whom he has always loved, and marries her. The couple have two children, Caroline and Tom.

The details of Paul and Liese’s wartime experiences and heritage emerges in the last part of the memoir. Caroline struggles to understand her parents in relation to the historical events and tragedies that shaped them. As part of this attempt, she sets out to read their early inspirations, including Claudius, an obscure German poet and philosopher important to both Heller boys. It becomes clear that Eric was able to abandon his Judaism by following Claudius’ example of noninvolvement. However, the question as to why Paul and Liese hid the truth from Caroline is left unanswered.

The strength the characters found to reconstruct their lives—as well as to simply survive—is remarkable. *Reading Claudius* is a must for all readers. It sheds light on the times before Hitler destroyed a world, and it demonstrates how some of his victims rebuilt their lives on the ashes he left behind.

Suri Boiangiu recently semi-retired from the position of assistant principal at an all-girls high school. She has either been an administrator or taught English at Yeshivah of

Flatbush and Magen David High School. She loves reading modern fiction, or any fiction, and Amazon knows her by her first name.