

## The Storyteller by Jodi Picoult

Unexpected! This story of historical fiction describing the events of the Holocaust through the survivor's tale was brilliant! This book was amazing in every aspect of the word so my review is a long one! The story was haunting, hopeful, scary and moving. It reminded me of the first book we read together, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. Not only do they have the same historical base but they are stunning in their portrayal of morality and survival.

The Storyteller is a story within a story within another story. The intricacies of the characters was evident from the first page. Sage's character had me invested in her story from the beginning with the mystery of her scar and the mystery surrounding her grief. The introduction of Josef only added to the intrigue with his saintly demeanor and request to die. But to review this book, I feel that I need to address the characters individually because they are each written with substantial, intricate and complicated details. They each deserve our attention.

### MINKA:

Oh Minka! This character really doesn't make her presence known in this book until almost halfway through. But her story is rapturous and beautiful, even at its worst. I imagine her story is more common in this ugly history of our world than we can imagine. A smart and educated young Jewish girl who becomes enveloped in the fight between good and evil, life and death. Minka is the candle that burns brightest and they all follow her lead. She reflects on her survival of the Holocaust in Poland as if it happened to someone else: "When I got here, to America, this is when my life began...Everything before ...well, that happened to a different person. (page 67)" Because really, all of those horrid events happened to a young innocent person. Freedom happened to the starved prisoner who did everything she could to survive.

Two of the best quotes in this book come from Minka and they are two things that should be contemplated. First, she says "It is probably the hardest thing to understand: how even horror can become commonplace. (page 259)" It is in her description of the *Upior* (Polish for vampire), or Nazi regime, that she makes this statement that seems to encompass all bad things...we get used to them. Minka makes this statement as the Polish people begin to see Nazi brutality on a daily basis and begin to no longer be shocked by its existence. The second quote that impacted me was when Minka asks the reader: "If you had to pack your whole life into a suitcase...what would you take? (page 270)" It's a question I cannot answer. I think the obvious things but then I think, my memories are what would carry me through, just like Minka's did.

Minka's tragedies are many. Her family is moved from their home to the Polish ghetto for the Jews. Her mother is taken away and killed. Her brother in law is killed. But there are two scenes that took my breath away. One was when the Nazis are searching for children to kill and she hides her sister and nephew. This sliver of the story was heartbreaking because just as you think that they have dodged death, it comes right back to them. "Majer wasn't coughing anymore. He wasn't screaming. But my sister, looking down at her son's blue lips and empty eyes, was. (page 263)" I did not see this coming at all and it shocked me so much to read the words that I went back several times to make sure I read it correctly. I couldn't believe that this tragic story could get worse, except to have Minka's sister commit

suicide. The second scene that was emotionally charged was when Minka is sorting through the suitcases and finds her father's. She had described him as: "He was tall and strong and invincible. The real joke was that my father was too full of life to ever die. (page 197)" And Minka had believed that after they were separated, that he was still alive until she opened his suitcase and realized he was truly gone. "There is a reason the word history has, at its heart, the narrative of one's life. I buried my face in the wool and started to sob, rocking back and forth, even though I knew I was going to attract the attention of the guards. My father had trusted me with the details of his death, and in the end, I was too late....Do it, I thought. Take me, too. (page 287)" Everyone was gone. It would be hard to imagine a reason to keep living if everything had been taken from you.

#### JOSEF/FRANZ/REINER:

The beginning of the book introduces us to an old German man who has been a pillar of the community. He has given back to his town in America as a Good Samaritan and neighbor. His reputation is virtuous. Then there is the juxtaposition of the Hartman brothers who are growing up in a time of German patriotism and loyalty. They are forced into a world that they cannot avoid, one brother is more accepting of this fate, while the other is reluctant but knows he must comply in order to survive. "Any military man will tell you that the way to pull a divided group together is to give them a common enemy. (page 113). While one brother, Reiner says: "I was only following orders. (page 138)" Franz reminds him: "Don't forget where you came from...you don't have to listen to what they say. Well, maybe that's not true. But, you don't have to believe it. (page 146)"

There are three haunting scenes from the Hartman brothers stories. The first is when Reiner commits his first killing. He is not remorseful or apologetic. He is merely forthright and justified. "Say what you will about the inhumanity of the SS-TV during the invasion of Poland, but I gave that woman her baby before we marched her off. (page 148)" The second scene is a description of the firing squads: "To look down and see your friends and your relatives, dying an instant before you. To take your place between the twitching limbs of the wounded, and wait for your moment. To feel the blast of the bullet, and then the heaviness of a stranger falling on top of you. To think like this was to think that we were killing other humans, and to us, they could not be humans. Because then what did that say about us? (page 156)" The poignant moment is the description of the young man who "lifted his hand and pointed at himself. In perfect German, he said, *neunzehn*. Nineteen. (page 149)" Nothing could be more haunting except for the third scene. When Reiner describes the killing of the mother and child. He tells us that the mother consoles her daughter by singing to her and as they are shot: "That's when I heard the little girl, still singing. (page 160)" Was it his imagination? Was it his guilt? Or was she still alive?

#### THE *UPIOR*:

In Polish, *Upior* means vampire or ghost. The *Upior* is Minka's tale about a vampire who doesn't want to kill contrary to his brother who needs to kill. It is a metaphor for what is happening Minka's world. Could it be that Minka has been describing Franz and Reiner in her tale? She calls the *Upior*: "A monster with remorse. (page 317)" Isn't that what Franz is to Minka? Doesn't he treat her with kindness in a relationship where she is the prisoner and he is her guard? He imprisons her and others but also

rescues her on two occasions from being killed. Is it for his own sake? Yes, but also I think that he is intrigued by her and she reminds him of when he was a young, normal, and educated German boy. And Minka states that she also must remind herself that he is the bad guy. "Sometimes all it takes to become human again is someone who can see you that way, no matter how you present on the surface. (page 350)" Both Minka and Franz are in this conundrum. Minka is the victim and Franz is the trapped antagonist.

SAGE:

Sage is a person trapped in her own self-effacing world. She is introverted in the beginning but her relationship with Josef brings her courage out just in time to discover a history and truth that lived within her own family. This story of good versus evil encompasses her family and includes Josef, whether by coincidence or by design. As Minka begins to tell her story, Sage becomes an empowered protagonist and ally to her grandmother. She seeks to protect her and understand her. "When a freedom is taken away from you, I suppose, you recognize it as a privilege, not a right. (page 366)" Through Minka's story, Sage is able to recall her grandmothers actions in the past and she can now reconcile them to actions of a survivor.

Sage has a profound choice to make in this book. She becomes her grandmother's protector but she is also Josef's confidante. She has an inner struggle to keep the two separated despite their obvious conjoined history. When Josef confesses to Sage that "I knew you would be upset...But you were not my first choice. (page 408)" It seems that Josef has pursued Sage's family to seek forgiveness and peace. But, the question becomes: is Sage qualified or willing to give Josef/Franz the forgiveness he seeks? Sage's boss gives the best rationale for forgiveness when she states: "What he did was wrong. He doesn't deserve your love. But he does deserve your forgiveness, because otherwise he will grow like a weed in your heart until it's choked and overrun. The only person who suffers, when you squirrel away all that hate, is you....I don't know what this person did to you, and I am not sure I want to. But forgiving isn't something you do for someone else. It's something you do for yourself. It's saying, you're not important enough to have a stranglehold on me. It's saying, you don't get to trap me in the past. I am worthy of a future. (page 451)" Forgiveness is not something to withhold unless we want it to bind us forever.

The book begins with these two lost people who need each other to move forward. "Loneliness is a mirror, and recognizes itself. (page 37)" Josef has no one left in his life and neither does Sage. They are two humans who are truly alone even though they still seem to maintain their façades. Loneliness is what binds them and brings them together but it is history and forgiveness that set them free. "Nobody who looks at a shard of flint lying beneath a rock ledge, or who finds a splintered log by the side of the road would ever find magic in their solitude. But in the right circumstances, if you bring them together, you can start a fire that consumes the world. (page 434)" Minka says it best when she explains why she has kept this secret and never published her story: "I know how powerful a story can be. It can save a life. But it can also be a sinkhole, a quick-sand in which you become stuck, unable to write yourself free...Truth is so much harder than fiction. (page 357)" The story was never published but how many

people did it save as she retold it during the war? “Sometimes all you need to live one more day is a good reason to stick around. (page 299)” And, a reason to ask “WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?”

Who is the “Storyteller”? Minka? Sage? Josef? Why?

Who was Josef? Did you think he was Franz or Reiner or both? Were you convinced in the end?

Why did Josef choose to be Reiner instead of Franz?

There is a point in the book where Minka says she never saw Franz again after he shipped her away from Auschwitz, do you think he looked for her so he would know how the *Uprior* story ends?

Is it really possible that Josef kept his true identity from his wife? Is it possible to keep a secret this great from your family? Do you equivocate Josef keeping his past hidden to Minka keeping hers hidden? Why or why not?

Do we try to reinvent ourselves after catastrophic events in our lives? Why?

Why do you think that Josef chose Sage to confess to and to ask for help in dying? Was it coincidence?

What do you think is the symbolism in Sage baking God into a loaf of bread?

Is Minka’s turning point the kiss with Josef at the café right before the SS soldiers take him away? Or was it before that?

What did you think when Josef presented his SS photo to Sage? Is this his dramatic explanation for why he should be dead? Did you believe him?

How devastating was it that Minka finds Darija in Auschwitz only to have her killed in front of her?

Did learning fluent German help or hinder Minka’s survival?

What was the purpose of Minka’s boots given to her by her father and what was the purpose of the Christian papers from Josef? Why didn’t she use them?

The deaths of Minka’s mother and sister are incredibly dramatic, why? Why was her father’s death so lackluster? Was Minka immune to the devastation or had he been preparing her for it inevitability?

What do you think was the purpose of the story of the *Uprior*? What was it mirroring?

So, if you had to pack your whole life into a suitcase, what would you take?