Book Review


Reviewed by Amy Small-McKinney

At the moment in the book, *Anne Frank and me*, by Cherie Bennett and Jeff Gottesfeld when I found myself crying, my husband and pre-teen daughter were ensconced at the computer playing a Kim Possible computer game. Like the book’s main character, Nicole Burns, my daughter and her daddy often speak different languages with vastly different worldviews. At this exact moment, my husband was railing against the game’s lack of logic, while my daughter rolled off her chair with hilarity, more at her father’s response than the actual game. It was a moment of utter contentment interlaced with surprising grief. It was also July 16, 1942 and Nicole had been hauled to the Vélodrome d’Hiver, an indoor sports arena in Paris with thousands of other Jews. In spite of all the books and films I have devoured about the Holocaust, my own family’s distant involvement, and shared communal sorrow, at this moment, the authors’ juxtaposition of a modern American tenth grader and her Jewish counterpart managed to reopen long sealed emotions.

*Anne Frank and me*, originally an off-Broadway play by Bennett and Gottesfeld, was adapted by the playwrights into novel form. It begins with the sardonic ramblings of a girl who calls herself, Girl X. Girl X’s website is her journal for truth telling to herself and to the world, though the only world who reads it, and the one hit on her website’s counter, is her best friend, Mimi. The truths that she reveals are the stuff of adolescent angst. Nichole, feels as though she is simply an X -- extra, not special, not smart or perfect like her younger sister, Elizabeth, not blond, not even sweet, not pretty like Heather or Suzanne, and of course, too fat, that unrelenting nemesis of all Western girls. What saved this adult reader from boredom with Nicole’s tedious self-absorption is how authentic she remains throughout the book and how smooth her transitions ensue; her speech and her descriptions ring absolutely true. What is both marvelous and difficult to explain are this novel numerous, interwoven layers. There is “Doom” a boy ear-marked by the other students as a disenfranchised and future Columbine copy cat, Chrissy, who is sick to death of having to study about the holocaust and convinced it could never happen again, and David Berg, viewed by his classmates as a strident and paranoid Jewish kid. David also happens to be the boy who is as crazy for Nicole as she is for Jack. David, however, fell for Nicole only after getting to know her and spending hours together discussing issues and problems for a school project. *Anne Frank and me* is multi-textured with many subplots, all of which speak loud and clear to today’s young women.

When Nicole’s English teacher invites an elderly woman, Mrs. Litzger-Gold, to speak to them about her experience in the holocaust, Nicole whose primary interest is getting Jack’s attention, makes a connection with the speaker that resonates throughout the story. Later, during her class’s field trip to the state museum’s Anne Frank exhibit, a frightening commotion culminates in Nicole transition from Nicole Burns to Nicole Bernhardt, a
Jewish Parisian teen trying to survive the Nazi invasion. Her Parisian parents, her friends, even her young love are many of the same characters who populate her American life

What occurs next is a subtle and unstoppable sequence of events that hurls Nicole into the heart of the Nazi abomination. Nicole’s transformation from sarcastic teen to terrified and courageous young woman is so smooth that it is both believable and riveting. By the time Nicole meets Anne Frank, on the September 5, 1944 transport to Birkenau, the reader is re-convinced that all things are possible, monstrous and good.

It is only when Nicole reawakens to her life in modern America that the book stumbles, unless the reader remembers that the novel was originally a play. Here, the scene, reminiscent of Dorothy waking from Oz, distracted from the story’s flow, until the action was imagined as a scene on stage. With the derivative plot structure fully accepted, the story continues to present its gifts. Nicole’s belief in the reality of her life in Paris and her commitment to its lessons have not so much transformed her into an unrealistic teenager, but rather a young woman who has finally allowed the best parts of herself to emerge. She does not have to “dumb down” anymore in the face of Jack’s handsome popularity; nor is she as weighed down with the very ordinary, albeit, painful existential morose of adolescence.

I can not reveal anymore of the story, or its ending, but highly recommend this book. I urge adult women to read, Anne Frank and me, along with their loved adolescent daughters, nieces, or friends. The women will remember. The girls will learn.

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