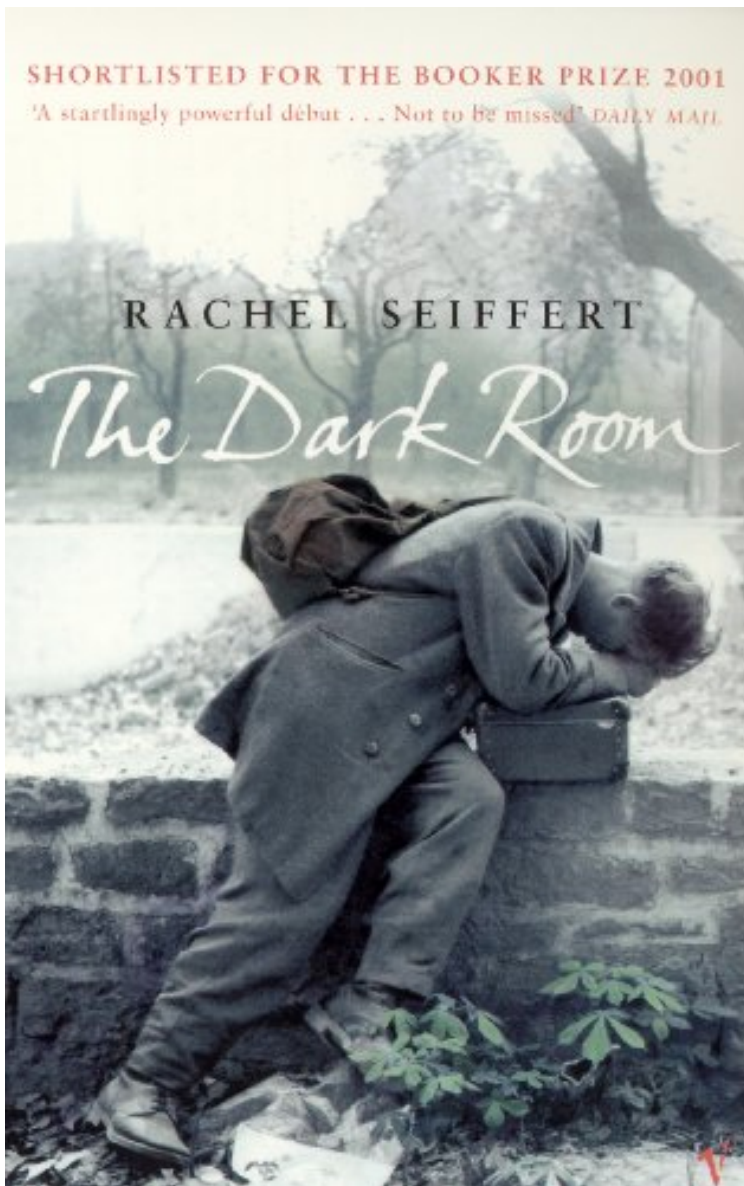


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The Dark Room: World War 2 Fiction



Par Rachel Seiffert
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Description : Description du produit Rachel Seifferts absorbing, internationally acclaimed debut explores the modern German psyche through the experiences of three ordinary people. At the onset of World War II, a young photographers assistant is kept out of the war due to a physical disability, and instead spends his time capturing on film the changing temper of Berlin, the city he loves. Just weeks after Germanys surrender, a teenage girl whose parents have been taken into allied custody leads her siblings on a harrowing journey to find their grandmother. And two generations after the war, a teacher searches for the reason why the Russians imprisoned his beloved grandfather. Evoking the experiences of the individual with astonishing emotional depth and psychological acuity, The Dark Room develops a portrait of the twentieth century in all its drama and complexity.

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Dark Room tells the stories of three ordinary Germans: Helmut, a young photographer in Berlin in the 1930s who uses his craft to express his patriotic fervour; Lore, a twelve-year-old girl who in 1945 guides her young siblings across a devastated Germany after her Nazi parents are seized by the Allies; and, fifty years later, Micha, a young teacher obsessed with what his loving grandfather did in the war, struggling to deal with the past of his family and his country.

ExtraitPart OneHelmutBerlin, april 1921Birth. His mother cuddles him and cradles him and feeds him his first meal. Happy to hold this life she has felt within her all these months. He is a little premature, but not too small, and his miniature fists grip fast to her fingers. She knows him already, and loves him. The midwife takes her husband aside when he arrives home from work. Heads him off before he reaches the bedroom door. Unlike his wife, he never gets to look at his son and feel him perfect, to love him prior to knowing his fault.

The clinic is busy, the doctor brisk but sympathetic, recommended by the midwife. The new parents are told it is a congenital condition, but not serious. Put simply, their son is missing a muscle in his chest. Provided he is given regular physical therapy, he will certainly be able to write and do all the tasks required in everyday life. He will never have full use of his right arm, of course, and manual labour will be impossible, but the absence of a pectoral muscle need not be a significant hindrance. He might even be able to play sports in time, though they are not to raise their hopes too high.

At home they watch their baby closely while he gurgles and kicks in his drawer-for-a-cot. His curved limbs and long toes, creases of new skin. He is beautiful, and the new parents smile at each other, each ready to laugh if the other will. They remove their sons little undershirt and inspect his chest and his right armpit as he moves. He is thinner on one side than the other, it is true. But both arms pump just as vigorously when he is fed or tickled, and he is robust and lively.

Mutti cries: Theres nothing wrong. Papi puts his arms around her, still watching his son. They sit together on the bed for a long time, breathing, while the baby sleeps. And they name their tiny boy Helmut, bright nature, because that is how they see him. Perfect enough, and that is just fine.

Life between wars is harsh: food plain, luxuries scarce, living space small.

Helmut's Papi is a veteran, and still coughs in the night and in the autumn, when the weather is damp. He is older than his wife and grateful for his chance at happiness, so he leaves the house early, every day, finds work, again and again. The flat he comes home to is always clean, with at least one of the two rooms kept warm. And since Helmut's Mutti is a clever housewife, there is always something on the table.

Both parents are very happy with their one child, and take precautions against having more, showering their love on Helmut, who laughs much more than he cries. The mattress the three of them share is wide and warm, and though he is now talking and walking, a separate bed for Helmut seems extravagant, uncalled for, a shame. Mutti grows herbs on the windowsill, and flowers, which she lets her son tend; and if Papi is not too tired when he comes home, he will sing a bedtime song or two for the boy.

The morning and evening exercises are a game Helmut plays with his parents. He is to think that all boys do this, to be strong like their fathers. That all families are as happy as this.

In the hot summers of early childhood, Helmut's Mutti takes him on the long journey north to the coast while his father works on in the city, at whatever he can find. Helmut is brown as a nut within a week, and his hair sun-blond. He plays, naked, in the shallows with other children, and Mutti makes friends with other mothers on the beach. She never draws attention to her sons chest, to his arm, and when the other women dont seem to notice, Mutti chats more freely, relaxes, lies back and enjoys the company and sun.

Summer nights in hostel rooms full of whispering mothers. Bedtime stories for sleepless children, confidences and shared cigarettes by a window open to the hot dark sky.

Helmut feels his mother climb into bed, smells the fresh smoke in her hair. Closes his eyes again, falls asleep again. Thumb in his mouth, sand under his fingernails, salt beach taste on his skin.

Helmut's father has found regular work with Herr Gladigau, who owns the photography shop at the station. Three or four days a week of assured income. Papi cleans the darkroom, changes the chemicals, and minds the shop when Herr Gladigau has appointments to attend. Gladigau likes his new employee, trusts him. He is childless, a widower, and enjoys the contact he has gained with a young and happy family. He cant afford to pay as much as he would like, as much as Helmut's family needs. To compensate, he offers to create a photographic record of family life. A portrait sitting every six months is the initial agreement: while the boy is young and growing quickly. Mutti is excited, Papi slightly embarrassed, but also pleased. They arrange the first session for the following week.

The print Papi chooses has Helmut standing on his fathers knee, pointing with his right hand toward Herr Gladigaus decorative palms, which are on the left-hand side of the picture, next to his mother. Both of his parents are looking at him and smiling. A blond boy, growing out of babyhood, his right arm at full stretch, at shoulder height, perhaps just over. A normal pose for an inquisitive, active child, though unconventional for a portrait.

Gladigau favors the more sedate pictures taken earlier in the session, in which

all the sitters face the camera and have their hands folded in their laps. But his employee is quietly adamant, and Gladigau can find no reason to refuse his request. He chooses a simple frame from the middle price range and wraps the portrait neatly. The carefully patched clothes and prominent cheekbones in this and the following portraits are painful for Gladigau to see. Papi is with him almost daily, with the same face, same jacket and shoes. But in the photographs, in the darkroom, it is all too plain, sharp, clear: the cabbage-and-potato diet, the mend-and-make-do of the mans life, his wife, his son with the crooked arm. As soon as he can, Gladigau makes Papis job full-time. There is enough money now to move into a better flat. The tenements near the station are well maintained, light and clean, and Helmut, now grown out of his parents bed, can have a box room of his own. Their new neighbors are friendly and house-proud, and there are plenty of local children for Helmut to play with. At first he is shy, preferring to watch the trains pull in and out of the station. Long mornings spent gazing out of the kitchen window, while his mother sings behind him as she cooks and cleans. Soon, though, he takes to watching the trains from the landing, and then the back steps. Before long he has forgotten the trains and runs around the back court with the other children, playing riotous, overlapping games of hide-and-chase and catch. Mutti looks for her son in the flat, on the landing, out on the back steps, sees him running. She spends an afternoon at the kitchen window, watching him play. Mutti can see how her sons right arm lags behind him as he runs. How his right shoulder hangs lower, and the way he introduces a small skip into his gait every so often, to help his right side catch up with the rest of his slight frame. She can also see that Helmut is unaware of this. Shifting her attention to the other children, she sees little feet that limp without shoes as they run over the rough ground. Pale complexions and eyes ringed dark with hunger, bitten nails and straggly pigtails. Of course, shoes can be bought, and so can food. Certainly bad habits can be dropped and hair can be brushed. Helmut cannot be cured by prosperity, by nourishment, or by discipline. But none of the neighborhood children mock him, or even stare. And though she never gives up the habit of watching, checking, Helmut's Mutti does allow herself to feel relieved. With school, though, there comes a change. The sports teacher orders a full inspection of his new charges. Shirts off, they stand to attention in order of height. Those deemed in need of special treatment are pulled out of line and assembled in a raggedy bunch in the corner of the schoolyard. Helmut finds himself among the fat boys and the weak boys with bad teeth, and doesnt know why. Once it is established, in front of the silent eyes of his class, that unlike the others he cannot raise his right arm above his shoulder, Helmut knows there is something wrong with him. At home Mutti cries, and later Papi rages. He goes to the school with Helmut the next day and demands that his son be allowed to take sports with the healthy boys. He has never had problems out in the back court with the neighborhood children, or on the beach in summer. Papi is asked to wait in the wide lobby. There is no chair, so he stands near the door, on the edge of the parquet with its high wax shine. A class ends, another begins, and Papi is now very late for work. In the silence he remembers Helmut's birth. The clinic they took him to, with the same corridors; same wide, swinging doors; same stifled, shameful feeling about his son. He resents the midwife, the doctor she sent them to. Blames them for coming between him and his child. Resents the headmaster, too, though he does not argue when he is finally sent word. The school will not reverse the decision. Helmut will take gymnastics to supplement his daily physical therapy, but no team games unless his condition improves. Papi reads the note, picks up his hat and coat, and leaves. At home that evening, Helmut's father takes him on his knee. He is a strong little man, loved by his Mutti and Papi, and he will work hard to prove himself to the school. They will do it together, all three of them. The strength of the family will prevail. But Helmut is still with the fat boys and the weak boys with bad teeth, and he still cant catch a ball thrown over shoulder height. At home, the twice-daily exercises become more vigorous, less fun, especially when performed with his father. In the toilet down the corridor,...

From Publishers Weekly

Three harrowing stories of people caught in the violent snare of Nazi Germany make up this evenly and unemotionally narrated first novel by an English woman living in Germany. Each of the stories bears its main character's name. The first entry concerns a boy called Helmut growing up in 1930s Berlin who has a birth defect barring him from serving in the army. He learns the trade of photography and chronicles in fascination first the evacuation of his native city, then its gradual destruction. Persistently, even when faced with evidence of the war's dreadful human toll, Helmut continues to spout the Fhrer's rhetoric. The Nazi bravado compensates for his physical shortcomings; at war's end, he is a hollow man. The next tale concerns the flight of a family of five bewildered children, led by Lore, the oldest girl, as they make their way after the Allied victory from Bavaria to their grandmother's house in Hamburg. Dependent on the charity of a fellow refugee (Tomas, a survivor of Buchenwald), the children are always on the verge of starving. After Tomas leads them to safety, Lore's gradual awareness of the

Holocaust ages her beyond her years. Finally, in the last section, set in the late 1990s, a young German teacher named Micha digs into the hidden history of his dead grandfather's wartime activity, travels to Belarus to discover the truth of Opa's SS-Waffen deeds and must grapple with the new, terrifying information he unearths. Together, these three affecting works constitute a portrait of changing Germany and a psychological study of the ramifications of Nazi aggression. Seiffert's deliberately dispassionate narrative works to capture the rigid and self-righteous convictions of Germany's general population. Placed alongside the historical record, the tale gives a more complete, comprehensible picture of incomprehensible evil. 6-city author tour. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.