

Secrets of the Past

Bernard Irving

CreateSpace (Dec 1, 2012)

Softcover \$9.99 (262pp)

978-1-4802-5632-3

This complex tale with a dark atmosphere traces the ascent of the Nazis with peeks into class division.

Secrets of the Past, by Bernard Irving, weaves a dark tale of lives unraveling at the dawn of World War II.

Albert and Mina Freyberg, a part-Jewish, well-to-do couple in Bremen, Germany, have established themselves and their wealth in the banking business, where they seem to be ideal partners. As the story begins, they have a sense of security, stemming from their position and ancestry, but page by page, their safety erodes. Indeed, their polished life was always crumbling on the inside: “Min always felt that Albert had something spinning through the back of his mind that he was refusing to talk to her about.”

Preying on the Freybergs’ basic human weaknesses, Nazi forces dig up skeletons from the past—infidelity, mysterious death, and more, stretching back to the previous world war—in order to bring down the couple and those around them. The results are chilling, and not just because of the brutality of the Nazi regime: Irving’s most unsettling revelation is that present circumstances can dredge up long-buried history for destructive purposes. One is never safe from the past.

The novel’s supporting cast, including several lower-ranking employees at the bank, offers glimpses of humanity and class division that evoke pity, given the fate in store for them. Even before readers know the ending, the tone of the book and the known history of the era make it clear that the future is not bright. The broad swath of characters Irving explores makes it tough to focus and feel connected to any of them—Mina doesn’t even make an appearance for several chapters.

Irving’s narrative style is thorough, exploring each character from different viewpoints and providing backstories and thoughts within scenes. This thoroughness halts the feeling of urgency and suspense with an overabundance of detail, making it difficult to emotionally invest in the story.

Overuse of adjectives, adverbs, and descriptive dialogue tags make the text feel bogged down with words: “‘Oh, what the hell.’ she [*sic*] flatly stated as she removed the coat that covered her body.” There are also occasional spelling, punctuation, and word use errors: “The wine bottle wavered, then fell over and broke, spilling its bloody scarlet contends everywhere.”

Irving hits crucial themes from the World War II era in Germany—and the literature spawned by that time period—such as the fear that cripples society, prejudice-fueled violence, and isolation from others as a form of protection.

MELISSA WUSKE (March 4, 2014)

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