



Book Review: *Anna and the Swallow Man*

Written by Gavriel Savit

Penguin Random House, 2016, 232 pp.

ISBN: 978055351334

Anna Lania, the daughter of a linguistics professor, lives in Kraków, Poland when the story opens in 1939. Life with her father is full of interesting people and multiple languages. Everything changes, however, when her father doesn't return one day and is taken with other intellectuals to a concentration camp. Wandering around Kraków, Anna meets the Swallow Man, so named because of his ability to speak to birds, and he summons a swallow to cheer Anna. Drawn to this mysterious tall stranger who, like her father, speaks many languages and appears to be a man of knowledge, Anna begins a life of walking in order to never be found for "To be found is to be gone forever" (p. 16). Carrying very little, avoiding their given names, and living off whatever food they find around them, they travel as father and daughter, enacting whatever roles are necessary to avoid being found. Their journey over several years includes lessons on life and the language of "Road", an unlikely Jewish companion, and journeys amidst the front line battles when Hitler invades the Soviet Union. The identity of linguistically talented Anna, who is brilliantly conscious of personalities and her surrounding contexts, is challenged by the Swallow Man's need to avoid names, his strategy to take on various persona, and their continuous walking to avoid detection.

A unique work of historical fiction, *Anna and the Swallow Man* is a key to discovering knowledge about World War II, as revealed through people whose lives are forever changed when war rips through communities, separates families and disrupts individual lives and dreams. Portrayed through the perspectives of a child, unique but authentic characters develop the themes of relationships, identity, language, and war. Each of these themes reflects a key to unlock potential for the context in which it is found. This book parallels and pairs with the journey during this time period depicted in *The Book Thief* (Markus Zusak, 2005). Of course, it fits well within a text set of books on World War II and the Holocaust. Many of these texts can be found within *WOW Review*, with one issue especially dedicated to this theme: Volume 3, Issue 2, "Holocaust around the World".

Gavriel Savit, author of this compelling story that gives WWII and the Holocaust yet another fictional face in an authentically created context, is also an actor based in New York City. Regarding this, his first book, he says, "*Anna and the Swallow Man* is a book about the magical uncertainties of war and childhood, and it aims to ask more questions than it answers." His web site includes four interconnected essays about Jewishness, ambiguity, and story that form the context for his writing of this book. On his website, he addresses his efforts to maintain historical accuracy of setting and character development.

Janelle Mathis, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

