Blooms of Darkness: A Novel by Aharon Appelfeld

A new novel from the award-winning, internationally acclaimed Israeli writer (“One of the greatest writers of the age”—The Guardian), a haunting, heartbreaking story of love and loss.

The ghetto in which the Jews have been confined is being liquidated by the Nazis, and eleven-year-old Hugo is brought by his mother to the local brothel, where one of the prostitutes has agreed to hide him. Mariana is a bitterly unhappy woman who hates what she has done to her life, and night after night Hugo sits in her closet and listens uncomprehendingly as she rages at the Nazi soldiers who come and go. When she’s not mired in self-loathing, Mariana is fiercely protective of the bewildered, painfully polite young boy. And Hugo becomes protective of Mariana, too, trying to make her laugh when she is depressed, soothing her physical and mental agony with cold compresses. As the memories of his family and friends grow dim, Hugo falls in love with Mariana. And as her life spirals downward, Mariana reaches out for consolation to the adoring boy who is on the cusp of manhood.

The arrival of the Russian army sends the prostitutes fleeing. But Mariana is too well known, and she is arrested as a Nazi collaborator for having slept with the Germans. As the novel moves toward its heartrending conclusion, Aharon Appelfeld once again crafts out of the depths of unfathomable tragedy a renewal of life and a deeper understanding of what it means to be human.

My Personal Review:
I began with Badenheim 1939 when it first came out and over the years I have read every one of his novels. Sometimes the Holocaust is a central
character and the people are aware, or sometimes not. We, the readers, know what is coming and even where it is going, but the characters are often lost to fear, despair, wild hopes, incredulity, denial. They are history happening and at the same time, they are off to the side of history. Footnotes almost. This distancing, this gap, this chasm is what makes Appelfeld unlike all others who write fiction about the Holocaust.

Blooms of Darkness takes place within a 2-year period so mid-1943 to mid-1945 when the Russians marched westward into central Europe. Hugo is the tall-for-his-age 11-year-old son of pharmacists in Ukraine. They speak German at home but there was a Ukrainian servant girl and he picked up a lot from her--speaking Ukrainian and becoming more fluent later in the novel is considered essential if Hugo is to survive.

The deportation net has shrunk their lives; Papa was picked up for labor. Really? Was it really labor? Mama keeps them going materially and spiritually. They are not religious or observant but consider themselves Jews. A hiding place must be found for Hugo--they cannot postpone it any longer. Mama tells Hugo she has a place for herself but only for herself and not safe for Hugo. Hugo will be better off with Mama's dear friend, Mariana, who works as a whore in a brothel and who has agreed wholeheartedly to protect and care for Hugo. The customers are German military.

The bulk of the novel takes place in the brothel and inside Hugo's head. He dreams, he has visions, he remembers the past, he remembers his mother's words, and he writes to her in his diary to ease his longing. I don't want to detail any more of the story--it should be discovered by the reader. Until the last few pages, we don't know what will become of Hugo. This is a stunning novel.

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