

# Caught in emotional crossfire

This evocative Second World War tale proves to be a brutal but brilliant debut

## FICTION

### Katie Binns

#### THE UNDERTAKING by AUDREY MAGEE

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Is there anything left to say about the Second World War, given that this dark epoch has been described in so many ways already? The exhaustive amount of literature, film and art inspired by the conflict would suggest all angles have been extensively explored and that we know what happened, from everyone's perspec-

tive. No one expects new ground in yet another Nazi-era novel, so it's a genuine surprise to discover that's exactly what we get from Audrey Magee's debut.

Peter Faber, a German soldier on the Eastern front, and Katharina Spinell, a young woman in Berlin, decide to marry despite having never met. In the opening scene they simultaneously marry each other's photos from a type of bridal catalogue. This marriage of convenience — something that did actually happen in wartime, albeit infrequently — gets him honeymoon leave and a respite from the front line. She is guaranteed the security of a widow's pension if he dies in action.

When they eventually meet

in Berlin they enjoy a brief but intense romantic relationship. They plan a future together and Katharina promises to stay in the same house waiting for him. Shortly after returning to his regiment, Faber learns she is pregnant. He endures unimaginable hardship so that he can return to her and his child.

The undertaking of the title is Katharina's decision to wait for Peter, despite the agony of not knowing if he is dead or alive. She sees the devastating psychological effects of war

when her brother returns on sick leave. Despite suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder he is sent back to the front. As Germany's position weakens, so Katharina's personal fortunes change and she is forced to adapt and make a different life for herself — while still waiting for Peter.

While this is not entirely unfamiliar ground, Magee certainly offers an original take. From the striking opening scene she predominantly uses dialogue, to great effect. The lack of Herr, Frau or other German terms closes the gap one usually feels when reading about the German experience of the Second World War. Magee's characters vividly evoke two completely different

worlds: domestic life in Berlin, where Katharina's family is protected by an influential Nazi family; and the front line of casual violence, rape and numerous other cruelties.

We never really know what the characters are thinking, which makes for an engaging read. Why do the Spinells unquestioningly move into a new home? What are Katharina and her mother thinking as they pick through the clothes and jewellery of its previous Jewish residents? And how do they feel about having so much while others go without?

The Sixth Army is reduced to Peter and his idiosyncratic comrades. Nazi party compliance is shown through the Spinells' total obedience and how that affects Katharina, her parents and brother. In this way we are shown the human effects of historical facts. We think we know what happened during

the Second World War but Magee's novel makes us question how people coexisted alongside the Holocaust, and how they allowed themselves to become complicit in terrible actions. There is a sense that everything is normal and nothing is normal. The book encourages us to explore beyond the official version of "what happened" that we get from history books.

There are some horrifying images, including Katharina's rape, as Magee highlights the day-to-day barbarity to which people became accustomed at the end of the war. We see the huge level of destruction and how it tore apart those in its path. The Undertaking is well written,



full of heart-pounding suspense and will draw in even the most world-weary war expert. Magee offers an insight both into the deprivation experienced by ordinary soldiers and the excesses of those in power. She evokes the terrifying ruthlessness of the Nazi regime as it hunts down Jewish families, and of the rampaging Soviet troops as they enter Berlin. Given that such atrocities continue in Syria and the Congo, Magee's theme is also timely. An impressive, even stunning, debut.



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