

Love and Fascism

A first novel set in World War II Germany.

By LOUISA THOMAS

AUDREY MAGEE'S DEBUT novel is a love story. Or it would be, if deep emotions were allowed to enter into it. Peter Faber is a soldier desperate to escape the fighting. Katharina Spinell is a typist desperate for some financial security. Brought together by an agency, they marry in separate simultaneous ceremonies. He gets honeymoon leave; she gets the promise of a widow's pension if he dies. When they meet, they find that they're attracted to each other — an attraction so intense that it survives years of wartime separation. They also happen to be Nazis.

Katharina's father is a lackey for one of Hitler's henchmen, and when Peter arrives in Berlin he



Audrey Magee

what he can: her stilted letters, a photograph of their boy.

"The Undertaking" is dominated by dialogue — crisp and largely convincing, but more expository than revealing. Neither Katharina nor Peter has much of an inner life. The unspoken desires that drive these characters tend to be material or carnal. He wants her soft body; she wants a fur coat. As the novel progresses, the war — and their roles in it — further dehumanize them, even as their fates diverge. In Berlin, at a grotesquely opulent Christmas party, Katharina "cut into the large roast potato on her plate, its skin crisp and golden, its flesh soft and crumbling." Starving outside Stalingrad, the soldiers find an emaciated horse and can only think of the meat they might pry from its bones. When Peter and Katharina see suffering, they are moved — but only when it touches them personally. And eventually they themselves suffer, repeatedly and unspeakably, when Germany loses the war. But their suffering is not redemptive.

To write a story that doesn't allow for much sympathy, that keeps readers at a remove from the central characters, is one of the greatest challenges an author can undertake. That Magee succeeds as well as she does is impressive. Her terse style, cross-cutting between the narratives of Katharina and Peter, generates its own tension and momentum. Although Magee stays on the surface of things, she gives those surfaces traction and texture: The face of grief, dull and yet affecting. The desperate fear of soldiers. The comfort of a bite of cake. Magee may not capture what it's like for a Nazi soldier to love, but she captures what it's like for him to starve. We can't see inside Peter and Katharina, but, then again, history is partly the story of people who don't look inside themselves. □

THE UNDERTAKING

By Audrey Magee

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joins the nightly marauding. A man who had once thought of his role in the war with a grim nihilism, Peter accepts his new assignment just as he had initially accepted his marriage: It's a matter of convenience that turns out to have some perks. For terrorizing Jews, he's rewarded with more time in Berlin.

For Mr. Spinell's dedication to the Nazi cause, Katharina and her parents are given a luxurious apartment that had until recently — perhaps only hours before — been owned by Jews. They exult in the fine things they find there: the crisp linen sheets, the silk-covered eiderdowns. Mrs. Spinell tries on a red dress, and Katharina urges her to keep it. "You deserve it," Katharina says. Her mother hesitates, then decides to disinfect it first.

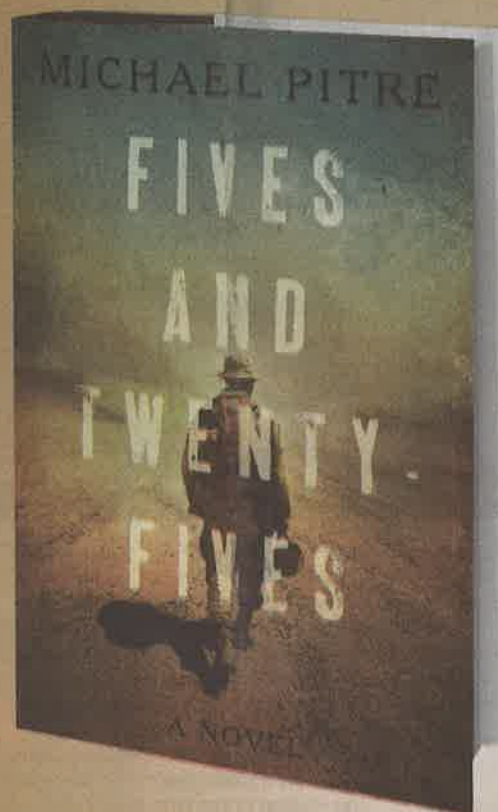
Back on the Eastern Front, Peter repeats the Nazi cant, telling his fellow soldiers he's fighting "for a bigger, stronger Germany free of communist Jews. Those are the facts." His comrades call him an idiot. He tells himself, and Katharina, that he's fighting for her and for their son, whom he's never met. She too is little more than an abstraction. He clings to

LOUISA THOMAS is the author of "Conscience: Two Soldiers, Two Pacifists, One Family — A Test of Will and Faith in World War I."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK REDMOND

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