

Het Parool
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Book of the Month: Horrifying, Daring, and Nearly Impossible to Put Down – Bert Natter’s Fabulous Novel About the Final Days in a Concentration Camp

With *At the End of the War*, Bert Natter has written a fabulous novel about a missing boy in a concentration camp during World War II, told from the perspective of 31 characters. Daring, gripping, horrifying, and nearly impossible to put down.

How do you depict a concentration camp concisely and effectively? In *At the End of the War*, Bert Natter constructs it using a kind of building kit made up of films and books.

Right on the first page, we read: "*There she stood, in a pink bathrobe that he didn't recognize.*" This scene immediately calls to mind the commandant's wife in *The Zone of Interest*, who one day wears a "new" fur coat taken from a Jewish woman deported to Auschwitz.

A page later: "*The other day, Oberscharführer Ranken—seated on a horse!—told us that this Jew supposedly played in the Vienna Philharmonic.*" A man on a horse in a concentration camp—this evokes memories of *Schindler's List*, though in that film it was not the sadistic SS officer Amon Göth on the horse (as I initially thought when I looked it up), but Oskar Schindler.

Perhaps Bert Natter unconsciously included the bathrobe and the horse in his novel's opening, but I doubt it. The bathrobe is worn by the wife of deputy camp commandant Karl Zehlendorf in their home outside the camp, where "normal" life continues.

The Führer's Birthday

It is outside the camp—nameless, but "somewhere north of Berlin"—that the novel's central event takes place: the disappearance of Ernst, the youngest, 11-year-old son of the Zehlendorf couple, who vanishes while fishing with his older brother. This immediately brings to mind John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (I won't say more for those who haven't read it). **But it doesn't matter—Natter has written such a strong novel that these references don't feel intrusive.**

At the End of the War takes place over two days, April 20 and 21, 1945. These dates were not randomly chosen—April 20 was the birthday of Führer Adolf Hitler. And on April 21, Stalin's Second Belorussian Front was approaching, ready to take Berlin (already on the first page, we hear the "constant rumbling in the distance").

31 Characters

A bold and clever choice in this novel is that it unfolds as one continuous narrative, without chapter breaks. Natter introduces 31 characters who each narrate events from their own perspective. The varying lengths of the scenes keep the pacing tight, and the shifting viewpoints create tension that pulls you in from the very first page. You want to follow everyone, to see how their stories end.

We follow, for example, SS-Obersturmführer Zehlendorf, who dreams of a post-war career as a concert pianist while searching for his son. We follow three members of the Sonderkommando who must burn corpses from the gas chamber. We follow Reinhart, Ernst's older brother, who lies about his disappearance. And we also follow Ernst himself.

Among many others, we also follow: Polish resistance fighter Iwona Dudek, imprisoned in the camp; Dr. Lance Weitze, who performs medical experiments on prisoners (yes, he inevitably reminds us of Mengele); ordinary soldiers; Zmitser Sorokin, a scout from the Belorussian army; the brave camp orchestra member Menachem Farkas and his tuba; Rita Gulp, Karl Zehlendorf's secretary; Annemarie Ohler, the maid in the Zehlendorf household; and Johanna Löw, Weitze's assistant—young women whose presence balances out the otherwise male-dominated war story. We also follow Christine Zehlendorf, Karl's somewhat detached wife who dreams of a different life, as well as a few Dutch supporting characters.

Escaped Monkeys

You get to know them, feel sympathy for them—even for the villains—and sometimes, filled with sadness, have to say a goodbye to them. What makes the novel so compelling is that *you*, the reader, are the omniscient observer. You have the full overview, the information the characters themselves lack. More than once, you want to yell: "*Don't do it!*" at a character. No matter how harrowing the story, **this is storytelling at its finest.**

No, this is not a cheerful novel. It once again highlights how thin the line is between good and evil, and how systems can drive people to commit atrocities. But Natter does lighten the narrative with well-placed humor and by introducing three monkeys that escape from an aviary. These monkeys pop up several times throughout the story, reminiscent of the comedic duo Clemens and Weber from Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*.

***At the End of the War* is a phenomenal novel with a dark plot, though the beginning and ending offer a glimmer of hope.** A novel that is nearly impossible to put down.