

FLORIDA WRITERS

A novel for all readers that should become a Young Adult classic

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■ **“My Real Name is Hanna” by Tara Lynn Masih. Mandel Vilar Press. 208 pages. Trade paperback with flap, \$16.95.**

In her brilliant, poetic novel that reads like Holocaust testimony, Tara Masih presents a family’s horrifying journey to escape ultimate victimhood.



MASIH

In her early teens as the narrative begins, Hanna Slivka, as if keeping a diary, takes her future readers through the steps of her family’s struggle with Nazi oppression.

In important ways a coming-of-age story, this novel begins by describing the situation for Jews in the small town (shetele) of Kwasova as Nazi forces cross the border into Soviet-occupied Ukraine. Kwasova is a community that had been Austrian and Polish; its residents can’t be sure of what it will become next. This is especially true of its Jewish community, which before Hitler’s tyranny could at least get along with its non-Jewish neighbors.

The attempt to relocate and/or annihilate the Jews begins with orders to brand

them. Hannah’s father tells the family: “The SS issued orders to the Ukrainian police and the Jewish Council. Jews are now being ordered to register and to make their own armbands, a blue Mogen Dovid, our Jewish star, sewn on to a white background.”

As the status of even substantial Jewish families falls, the father, Abram, realizes that maintaining housing and obtaining food will soon become impossible. It is also clear that hiding in barns, which worked for a while, won’t work anymore: Their fellow townspeople will betray them.

Money and cherished valuables are disappearing. Now the Jewish families of the town must somehow disappear as well. The victims, in public opinion and via effective propaganda, have been transformed into the cause of the war that is threatening all of Europe.

Through her teenage narrator, Ms. Masih shows the material and psychological effects of these circumstance on the members of this family and another family with which they make joint plans for survival. They need to act quickly, before they are marched into ghettos or simply murdered “in plain sight,” to underscore SS power.

One feature of these families’ lives as they face disaster is especially moving. Somehow, they manage to observe their religion’s precepts and holy days and to hide the synagogue’s torah and other important items; as they do so, their dedication to their faith becomes a source of strength.

How does a family hide in a forest? After walking a great distance from Kwasova, the

come across an isolated, run-down forestry station that will become their home. It’s built from logs, and the gaps are filled with moss. They carried with them as much as they could; now Uncle Levi make a round trip to and from the town for much-needed tools and other supplies so they can modify the cabin to fit their needs. A small stream with clear water will serve their need for hygiene and food preparation.

They must arrange their days to avoid detection of their lantern light and smoke from the fire, and of course they must find the wood to feed the fire.

In constant fear, they all support one another and search for sustenance. They obtain nutrition from the wild vegetation. Sometimes they can scrounge a chicken, yet most of the time they are starving.

Abram risks occasional trips to the shetele for flour and kerosene. The snow drifts are a big obstacle, and he must avoid leaving tracks in the snow. Networking with others, he establishes a coded way of leaving messages on a tree. Their silent, secret language helps with a much-needed commodity: news about what’s going on in the world around and beyond them. News of Hitler’s war.

The people in this nomadic entourage of relatives represent a spectrum of age groups, but it is Hanna who holds our attention as she helps take care of her younger

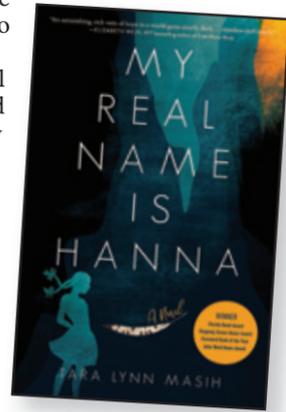
siblings and as muses about building her relationship with Leon Stadnick, who is two years her senior. The young teens pray to make it to their next birthdays.

Fearing that the Germans will eventually find them in the forest, Abram decides to take advantage of news about the gypsum caves of Kwasova, where darkness is even “darker than dark.” Making a safe haven out of the caves is even more difficult and dangerous than living in the forest cabin, but it serves the group’s purposes as

a place to survive the Holocaust, which in this case means until the Russians return to Kwasova and drive the Germans out. However, the eventual allied victory does not promote, politically or psychologically, a vision of returning home. The Slivka family and some of those who hid out with them in the forest and the caves decide to build new identities and lives in the United States.

From beginning to end, Ms. Masih blends diligent research, blazing imagination and sophisticated literary technique in her transformational narrative. Marketed as a Young Adult novel, it can engage and educate readers all across the age spectrum. ■

— Phil Jason, Ph.D., United States Naval Academy professor emeritus of English, is a poet, critic and freelance writer with 20 books to his credit, including several studies of war literature and a creative writing text.



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