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Jill Paton Walsh

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Two teen-age runaways who refuse to be evacuated from London struggle to survive the blitz of 1940.

Fireweed Details

Date : Published 1972 by Penguin Books (first published 1969)

ISBN : 9780140305609

Author : Jill Paton Walsh

Format : Paperback

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Young Adult, War, World War II, Childrens

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From Reader Review Fireweed for online ebook

Katherine says

I loved it. It will stay with me. It's one of the books on the school reading list for my 10 year old and I can totally see why. Top tip - Do not read the foreword as it gives the story away.

Tara Jones says

I so wanted to love this, having discovered it by way of Lucy Mangan's "bookworm". Perhaps it's because I'm reading it now, aged 40, that I like it so much less than I wanted to.

The characters are well drawn. I read it easily and quickly and I desperately wanted to know what was going to happen next but then the ending just happened, poof and it was over. I realised the ending wouldn't be happy from the Lucy Mangan review but actually I'm just irritated that having drawn two likeable characters that the author stopped it so suddenly and in a way that just doesn't really fit with how I could ever imagine it being.

3 stars for the first 90% (I read it on kindle) if it had carried on as well it could have had a 4 or a 4

Cassandra says

This is perhaps 3.75 stars, not quite four. (My opinion has changed, see below.) I love her writing; such beautiful prose, so concrete and direct and carefully measured, and yet it is clearly in her control, for the dialogue sometimes leaps over the lines when the characters are overcome. Her descriptions of London during the war are very good, she captures the confusion of it all, and the strength of people without, I think, undue sentimentalising.

So why not five stars? Hmm, that is a good question. I think I should have thought it better if it had worked on two levels; (view spoiler) So yes, it reads very well, and there is a strand of emotional truth in it, but I think it comes apart a little when one begins to think too much. Also, I think it is quite possible that being an American woman born in the 70s, I miss some nuance around the class/gender lines that was there when Paton Walsh wrote it -- she being a British woman born in the 30s writing in the 60s.

Edited July 2015 -- I added another star, because this book has stayed with me so strongly. So definitely a 4 star work.

Stephen Connor says

A story that feels like smoke and dirt.

Narrated by 'Bill' - we never find out his real name - we learn of life in London during the Blitz. Bill should

be in the Welsh countryside, evacuated as other children were, but makes his way back to London where he meets Julie, another child who has avoided the authorities.

Together, they just about survive, earning money through Bill's opportunism and finding shelter whenever possible. The final two chapters are particularly heart-wrenching.

This is perfect for use with a WWII topic, touching upon evacuation, shelters, vividly described scenes of bombing (both during raids and the aftermath), as well as lots of other smaller pieces of information of which I was ignorant.

Benjamin Duffy says

I was ten when I read this book for the first time. It was recommended for me by my elementary school librarian, who knew I was into military history at the time, and who in hindsight was very clever to use this book's setting during the London Blitz to get me to read a story I otherwise never would have. Smart lady.

For me, this book was the beginning of knowing and appreciating the painful beauty of a sad (not how you might imagine, so I can say that without spoiling anything) ending. It was also the first book that exposed me to the essential unfairness of life, and the way people face it, in a deeper sense than "Travis having to shoot Old Yeller." At first, I hated it. It was the first book I ever read that wasn't wrapped up with a neat little bow at the end, and as such was a shock to the ten year old Ben, whose literary diet of the time mostly consisted of non-fiction and Judy Blume-level kid lit. And oh, how I hated that ending. I writhed, pinned under it. I thought about it for weeks, fantasizing it turning out differently, composing a dozen alternate fanfic endings in my head, until one day I just stopped. Something in my preadolescent mind just clicked, and all of the sudden I was okay with it. In time, I even came to appreciate it.

I've been in love with the bittersweet ever since.

Marian Mayuga says

Much of what I liked in this book was the writing. It was direct, fluid, and felt fresh; it didn't sound pretentious or sentimental, which effectively reflected the atmosphere during wartime. The friendship between Bill and Julie was also nice to read, as it didn't overdose on drama or sappiness. Subtly, the dynamics of their relationship paralleled the ever-changing situation of the country.

However, I found the characterization of Bill and Julie unsatisfactory, and sometimes they seemed like kids without common sense. Julie wasn't a particularly interesting or consistent character either. The side-characters were bland and had unclear roles, such as Dickie; most of the time it felt like they just randomly popped up and disappeared. However, the author may have meant to show how short-lived and impermanent relationships can be in a realistic war setting.

Although Fireweed painted a vivid, convincing picture of life during the war, I couldn't engage in the people involved in its story.

Sarah says

A good concept for an interesting story and generally well told. The ending is very anti-climactic, disappointing and limp.

Rachel Brand says

This was one of my favourite books when I was about nine, and I still love it. I think this is possibly down to all the descriptions, and the idea of people moving somewhere new - in this case, Bill and Julie move into a basement and turn it into a home. I was also really interested in the World Wars as a child (an interest which I probably got from my dad).

This book is rather unusual for a children's book, as it has a fairly sad ending. I can't think of any other books which I've read which have a sad ending, least not one which still makes the book enjoyable.

Bonnie says

My friend Barbara introduced me to Jill Paton Walsh at a CLNE Institute (Children's Literature New England). I've read many of Jill's books and admire her greatly. Finding Fireweed in the Negril Branch Library was an unexpected surprise. This YA book was published in 1969.

It's set in London during the blitz. Two homeless teenagers, Bill and Julie, become friends as they cope with changes in a once familiar landscape. Jill writes beautifully:

We walked for hours the next morning. We didn't want to cross Hungerford Bridge back into the part of London we knew. There were lots of poor little streets over there, all knocked to blazes. Clouds of thick dust hung over the crushed buildings and made a haze in the air everywhere. And it was all horrifying. The houses weren't abandoned and boarded up; there were people everywhere. They scrambled around on piles of rubble or came in and out of battered houses, carrying things. There were piles of furniture on the pavements; women sat on doorsteps, dabbing swollen eyes with the hems of their aprons; puzzled and frightened children clung to them. We saw two women come staggering out of their house through a great hole in the wall, one carrying a dusty aspidistra in a pot, the other carrying a mantelpiece clock. They were smiling. (p. 65)

A woman came out of the van. She was wearing a blue overall cap. Seeing us standing staring at it, she called out, "You can have a bath in five minutes, dearie!"

A bath! The very thought of it! We waited. She went off down the road and knocked on doors there. Soon more people were waiting, and women came up with buckets and were given hot water from a tap. When the cubicles were ready, they gave us towels and soap, and we had showers to bathe under. It felt marvelous to be clean again. I put on my last clean shirt, but it was horrible putting the other clothes back on, all gritty with dirt....(p. 66)

I wanted the houses I knew to be back up again; I wanted grown-ups to be there. I wanted to be told what to do; I wanted to be worried about. I didn't want to have anyone else to care for; I didn't want anyone to need

me at all. I wanted to be back in Wales being yattered at and given hot buns for tea; I wanted to be safe. I wanted my own father; I wanted my father, my dad. (p. 70)

Ellie Labbett says

Easily one of the best war time stories that I have read, whether this be aimed for adults or children, this was a superb book that I would love to use in school. Walsh tells story of two children trying to survive during the Blitz in London. Originally alone, the pair work together to stay alive amidst the dangers of bombs, as well as evading the threat of being evacuated to the countryside. Although this friendship was first one of convenience, it strengthens as the story progresses, and it is clear that the two characters begin to mean more to each other.

It cannot be unstated how perfectly Walsh captures the sense of chaos and loss tightly tied to living during the war time period. Survival comes in many forms, for some through continuation and maintaining control and order over their lives, no matter how small. For others, the weight of responsibility can be crushing, and it was very striking to see how such pressure impacts the protagonist. Hope quickly turns stale, merging into anger and desperation at having little support to turn to. There is a lot to be said about societal expectation when contrasts are drawn between responses from adults and children.

For both the characters and the reader, this is an emotional inner journey, which would genuinely be very rewarding to use within school. There are chapters that I felt burned out of the page and have hovered in the back of my mind since reading. Walsh has embedded some intriguing themes within the narrative, particularly social class and absent parents, which would allow for excellent discussion in terms of how the two main characters progress according to these themes.

Mathew says

One of the most honest and bravest books that I have read for children about the blitz. Written during what Townsend calls 'The Second Age of Children's Books', those post war years which saw the development of quality of literature rise due to library buying and high expectations with regards to quality, Fireweed (1969) was one of the first of those swathe of excellent war-themed books from that time with Carrie's War (1973) and The Machine-Gunners (1975) coming a little while later. Extraordinary really that such an accomplished writer does not have the same space or place in our canon.

As with all of Paton Walsh's works, she has high expectations of her readers in terms of content, action, vocabulary and themes but they will surface from a far richer and rewarding reading experience for doing so. The closing two chapters of Fireweed are highly charged, emotionally, and will stay with me for a long time with her making some strong comments of both class and tenderness.

James Lark says

I last read this as a young teenager and I remember how grown up it seemed: a little younger at the time than the story's narrator Bill, he radiated confidence, using words like 'bitch', shaving like an adult, setting up home with a girl in a relationship that hinted at another kind of self-awareness. This was a much more 'teenage' novel than the second world war fiction I'd grown up with ('Dawn of Fear' and 'The Machine

Gunners' and the like).

It reads very differently through adult eyes. This is a tough story that is most heartbreaking because it is about two children, struggling to convince themselves that they're coping on their own but failing to cope. It is about loss of innocence and yet the protagonists remain innocent, naïvely seeing the people who can most help them as their enemies, too young to realise how much they are floundering, or what they might be sacrificing. The scene in which Bill sees his father from a playground has haunted me since I first read it and for good reason: the sense of regret, a tiny moment of life-changing significance, hangs heavy over the book, and although the brief epilogue has a conciliatory tone, there is a bleak lack of resolution to all but the central relationship, which is itself ultimately symbolic of a wider futility.

In that sense, I was quite right to remember this as a grown up book: its depiction of harsh realities in a harsh world is as vivid as its unflinching depiction of the blitz. But the voices that reach out of the story are nothing if not childlike, and the book is all the more powerful for that.

Sam Pope says

A powerful book about London during the Blitz and two teenagers - Bill and Julie - trying to survive amongst daily bombings and threats of evacuation either to the English countryside or overseas. This is a story about friendship, loyalty, bravery and also about fear, not just about Hitler's air force dropping bombs but also worry that their existence will be discovered and they will be forcibly separated. The story was marvelous, but I dropped a star because at times the beautifully poetic and philosophical narration seemed out of place with the character's age and predicament. A little too artistically created rather than realistically portrayed. The ending will seem unsatisfactory to many people, and particularly younger children, I imagine - my daughter felt sad the book ended the way it had and wanted a sequel! But overall a gripping and emotional read.

Maureen Milton says

After a slowish start, this story of two young people who have, for different reasons, fled the arrangements their families have made for them during the blitz in WWII London. The idyll of two unsupervised teens ("Yet all around us death and ruin rained out of the sky. We saw it everywhere, and we were afraid like everybody else, and yet it cast no shadow in our hearts.") is short-lived. They each make decisions that change the course of their lives and, especially that of a young child orphaned by a bomb near the basement where they hide.

Walsh evokes the smells and sights and shocks of wartime London all the while developing the characters and providing unpredictable but believable plot twists.

I will recommend this title to my readers of WWII fiction. It's a worthy, intimate balance to battle stories and triumphant tales of heroes.

Andrea says

This book I picked up on a whim at the library book sale, it had an interesting cover that piqued my interest of two black silhouetted face standing before a city in flames. The very first page gripped me into the story of refugees emerging from an underground shelter where a teenage boy is lurking by himself and notices a young girl doing just the same. It follows their story of rebellion to ship out of their home city during the war and of their attempt to survive as London is bombed. Despite the demise of their homeland, the characters relish in their freedom from concerned adults and sort of play house together as the city falls around them. The engaging narration style kept me very invested through out the quick read and although the ending was a little unsatisfying I still thoroughly enjoyed the novel.
