



The English Air

D.E. Stevenson

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A gentle, touching romance set against the last months of peace and the first chaotic months of World War II, *The English Air* is one of D.E. Stevenson's most poignant and profound novels. It is the story of Franz von Heiden--son of a high Nazi official and an English mother who died when he was a child--and Wynne Braithwaite, the lovely English girl whose family he visits on the eve of the war.

The English Air Details

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From Reader Review The English Air for online ebook

Miriam says

Interesting to see a novel about the outbreak of WWII written as the events were occurring. Stevenson seems surprisingly sympathetic to the German point of view for an author who is usually rather rah-rah about the British military (understandably, as she was married to an Army officer); I wonder if she had a German correspondent?

Jane says

When Claire wrote 'The English Air by D.E. Stevenson might just be my new favourite DES book' a year or so ago I sat up and took notice, because I knew that she loved the author and that she had read a great many of her books.

The book was out of print, used copies were horrible expensive, but I was delighted when a search of my library catalogue found a copy. And then I was both sad and cross when I clicked on it to find 'no copy available' – experience has taught me that's library-speak for 'we've lost it.'

Fortunately Open Library came to my rescue and now I have read the book. I'm not quite sure its my favourite of her books – I have a weakness for her more sentimental stories – but I can say that it is a book with wonderful qualities, that it is a book without – or at least with less of – her weaknesses, and that it is a book I would love to add to my shelves if only some kind publisher would bring it back into print.

1404706Not long before the outbreak of World War I a bright young Englishwoman met a quiet young German. He took her home as his bride, they had a son, and they named him Franz. Franz's mother lost touch with her friends and family in England during the war and she died not long after it ended, leaving Franz to be brought up by his strict German father, not knowing his English family at all.

The story begins in the summer of 1938. Franz has just turned twenty years old, he is a quiet and serious-minded young man, and he has invited himself to stay with his English relations. He wants to improve his English, and to learn more about the country and his culture.

Franz's relationship with his cousins, and the lessons he learns about the English, are drawn quite beautifully. He was baffled at first by English irony and understatement, and he had no idea what to take seriously and what to take as a joke. But he was quick to learn, and he came to appreciate the strong bonds and the sense of community that underpinned so many seemingly casual ways.

This part of the story was lovely to read. Of course families and village communities are one of the authors greatest strengths, but what I appreciated here was that she told her story through characters without the faintest hint of a stereotype.

Wynne was the same age as Franz, and she was a genuinely nice, warm, bright girl; a true English rose. She drew Franz into her circle of friends without a moment's hesitation, and the friendship between them grew into love. It was a relationship that might echo that of Franz's parents.

Sophie was Wynne's mother; a widow who was a wonderful mixture of scattiness and practicality. She and Franz's mother had been close; she was pleased to see that her son had grown up so well, and she appreciated talking with him and sharing memories as much as he appreciated hearing about his mother and being drawn into her family.

And Dane was Franz's uncle. He had concerns – he worked in military intelligence and he knew that Franz's father had risen high in the Nazi party – but he was prepared to watch and wait. Because he liked the young man, who was respectful, who was interested, who was always prepared to listen and think.

Franz never lost his love for his German homeland, but in time he began to question some of the policies that the leader he respected was putting in place. The Munich agreement came to him as a profound relief, allowing him to continue to love both his countries; but when it was broken he was devastated.

He was relieved that he had taken Dane's advice to wait before acting on his feelings for Wynne.

He knew that he had to act, and act he did.

The story played out beautifully, moving between Franz and his English family. It grew naturally from the characters I had come to like and to care about; it caught the times, the early days of the war, perfectly; and though it wasn't entirely predictable it was entirely right. Even better – maybe because 'The English Air' was written and published while war was still raging – the ending was uncontrived and natural. And that's not always the case with D E Stevenson's novel

I was a little disappointed that Wynne wasn't a stronger presence in the story, but having Franz in the foreground was wonderful. He really was such an interesting character, and it was lovely to watch him learn and grow as he faced challenges big and small. That he, his situation, his divided loyalties were set out with such empathy and understanding are what make this story so special.

And the lightness of touch and the perfectly wrought English backdrop make it so very readable ...

Katharine Winchell says

I like most of D.E. Stevenson's work. This novel of the "reeducation" of a young German man who was born to an English mother and German father in Germany in the years before WWII is not a new story. I have read a few others that were also written close to the dates of the war itself. They seem to all want to show how wonderful England is and how everyone would come to learn how wonderful and kind it is, if only they would spend time getting to know the people. The author tries to make the story suspenseful at a few points. But, it is pretty predictable. A nice way to spend a rainy afternoon, but not a lot more.

Thomas says

I love DE Stevenson. But after having read about 15 of her novels, I have decided they are not all created equal. I just found this one a little boring.

Mela says

A gem.

My first novel by D.E. Stevenson and definitely not last.

One of the most fascinating aspects was that it was written in 1940. So, the IIWW was just started, D.E. Stevenson didn't know how it would go on. It is always priceless to read such voice from the past.

It was another perfect novel. **Completely thought through, poignant and profound.**

It showed (in my opinion) the best sides of the British, their wit, their integrity, all those characteristics that are the reasons for my love for British-ness.

They didn't hate Germany or wish her ill. They were too busy and happy to bother.

They left their comfortable homes... and fought..., and, because this was bread in their bone, they wanted no fuss.

There were also good/apt descriptions of Germany and Germans (especially Nazis).

"Our nation is being kept in a state of fear. It is drilled into uniformity. If this goes on much longer it will destroy Germany's soul. A man needs a little piece of personal life . . . some happiness and security .. without this he becomes an animal, a beast of burden, driven here and there at his masters whim . . . and the masters, Franz!" added Herr Octzen, "The masters, what are they? Small men scrambling for power and preferment and caring little who is trampled underfoot."

And most of all, **the clash between these two cultures was priceless**, Franz/Frank's transformation, the story of his parents and the story of his love...

I was so sad (and I am always when I think of it or read about it in books) reading about the tragic generation that lost its youth in IWW and its children in IIWW. It was simply awful and so unfair...

This book was pure wisdom mixed with British charm and wit (as much as it could while touching such a serious topic).

I like you to be happy and carefree, but... but nobody ought to live in a fool's Paradise.

If we hate people it does not hurt them at all... it hurts ourselves.

I can't think about one thing I didn't like in this novel. Although I would like to know what happened to them later, I feel anxious because of them, but I want to believe they survived the war and lived HEA.

Cera says

A romance novel set on the eve of WW2 almost inevitably turns into propaganda, and this is no exception. There are Evil Germans and Good Germans and of course Pure True Englishwomen. I did actually enjoy it quite a lot, though, because I thought Stevenson captured a lot of the feeling of being on the brink of crisis and the things people cling to in difficult situations. And even though the characters are types, I was happy she provided a lot of different types; I read some WWI era propaganda-romance novels and was stunned at how black & white they were.

Hope says

The novel has Stevenson's usual tributes to country living and home comforts, but it also has much more adventure than her average novel.

Franz has been sent to England by his father (a Nazi official) to learn how the English think. As time goes on, he is faced with the choice to be true to his German heritage or to leave it all for his new country. As WWII breaks out, he is caught in the middle and it makes for a rollicking adventure. I find it fascinating that the book was written in 1940 when no one knew what the outcome of the war would be.

Not a typical Stevenson title, but I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Mo says

When rating books, do you ever compare authors to themselves? Sometimes what would be a 4 star book by any other author becomes a 3 star book compared to the author's other works. Georgette Heyer springs to mind. I have read over 40 of her books, and have rated several of her books as 3 stars, but they would have been rated higher had they been written by someone else. Because I must employ some kind of grading scale so that I know which my favorites are, some good books get bumped down in my ratings. Does that make any sense?

I feel the exact same way about D.E. Stevenson and her novels. Hence the 3 star rating. Which means it was a perfectly fine story, but one that I won't want to re-read.

Tirzah Eleora says

2.5 stars. I found *The English Air* dull and rather interesting at the same time. Dull because it was so cozy and lovely and the sun was always shining (I've never been to England, but by most accounts it's nowhere near as sunny and bright as this book would have us imagine), yet it's a war romance... The fact that there's a war on, and that Franz is German and Wynne is English, was the sole conflict in the book, and even that conflict was smoothed over nicely. Franz is only HALF German, after all, and it takes only one afternoon to turn him against the Reich, in whose law he has been indoctrinated from a young age. And then when he's

gone back into Germany he's conveniently forced to parachute back into England. It was all too easy. In effect, there was no conflict, which makes for practically no story.

But all the same, it was interesting to read a WWII novel that was published in 1940. It was funny reading a book about that war before anything much had actually happened, knowing all that we now do. It certainly had some British propaganda, and in particular I thought reading about the popular British opinion of Lord Neville Chamberlain (if, in fact, this book is representative of the popular opinion) was interesting.

Overall I'm not a fan of the author's writing. She tries to write happy, cute cottagy novels that one imagines one's grandmother reading, but she tries to lace the fluff with weightier stuff and the result just doesn't work. For me anyway.

Nancy says

I love these old comfortable books. Lovely characters, beautiful settings, happy endings. There are troubles, but they can be overcome. Everyone works together for friends and family. A wonderful escape read.

Katrina says

This is one of my favourites - so far.
<https://piningforthewest.co.uk/2017/0...>

Susan says

review to follow

Alana/MiaTheReader says

Not my favorite D.E. Stevenson , but still a great comfort read. 3.5 stars.

Theresa says

Character-driven rather than plot driven (the plot often moves slowly), there are many things to like in this novel of pre-and-during-WW2 England.

The main character, Franz Heiden, has a dilemma. Half English, half German, throughout this book he tries to reconcile his belief system between what he has been taught from the country of his birth, and what he experiences for himself.

The book starts out with his stay in England over the course of a year. Franz has decided, with the support of

his Nazi-officer father (who hopes that Franz will dig up information for him while Franz vacations in England), to visit his English mother's country. Franz is staying with friends of his mother's family and finds it very difficult to adjust to English humor and lifestyles at first. He tells his English host family what it was like to be in the Hitler Youth:

"It all sounded very idyllic, and Franz was vaguely aware that he was making it sound a great deal more idyllic than it was. He was giving a slightly distorted impression of the Wandervogel Outings, an impression seen through rose-colored spectacles. He had said nothing of the sordid side, of the intrigues, and jealousies and promiscuous love affairs which flourished like weeds in the hotbed of Nazi Youth. Franz had enjoyed the Outings until he began to discover what lay beneath the surface, but before he left home he had grown tired of them and faintly disgusted, and on several occasions he had made excuses to remain behind. He had grown a little tired of the youth songs, too, and had sometimes wished that they could sing some of the songs which had been loved and prized long before the Youth Songs were invented - the songs that Tant' Anna sang when she thought that nobody was listening - songs by Schubert and Brahms and Strauss, lovely melodies and words which touched the heart..."

Franz was a great character and I thought very realistically done, as he is pulled in his loyalties from one country to the other. How he surmounts his difficulties and becomes stronger through them makes for a very interesting story.

However there were some quibbles that really bothered me. One of them was Sophie, Franz's mother's best friend. She was so wishy-washy I almost threw the book across the room! I realize the author was trying to portray why Sophie gets along with everyone and why she is so well-liked in the neighborhood, but her personality just, for me, didn't ring true.

Wynne, Sophie's daughter, unfortunately is cut from the same cloth. Very little to like or dislike here (I prefer my characters to be more realistically portrayed), and I just never came to know Wynne as a person with tangible, original motives or feelings.

But!!! There was **so** much pathos in Franz's aunt Anna. I simply could not get her out of my head, and the scene of her looking out the window, wishing for better days, living her life in a 'shadow', in fear that she will be turned in for expressing an opinion that was not in sync with the Third Reich, was so sympathetically drawn that I could not help but wonder what life was like for those German women with sons and husbands caught up in a war they did not want...

"The only thing that Tant' Anna could give Franz was these memories, and perhaps a little of her hard-bought wisdom which might be of service to him in the dark days that lay ahead.

"Life goes on," she told him. "Life never stands still. We are blind creatures, Franz, and we do not know where we are going. There are long dark tunnels and then we come out of them suddenly when we are not expecting it, and there is light all round us again. Remember this, Franz, the darkness is only a tunnel after all... Sometimes we hate and suffer, as we did in the war, and then we find that this was a tunnel too, and that the hatred was based on falseness and the suffering arose from mistakes. It is hatred that is the matter with the poor world today. Remember that, Franz. Hatred is deadly and kills all good things. Hatred blinds us to all that is beautiful...and so it is with the Fatherland which was full of so much goodness and beauty. People are being taught to hate. Jesus Christ taught us to love... to love even our enemies. It is for our own sakes we must do this, Franz, because hatred is bad for ourselves..."

Franz (who later changes his name to Frank as his identity becomes more sympathetic to England), goes

through some wartime escapades and very nearly loses his life.

Not my favorite of D.E. Stevenson's novels, this was still a very thought-provoking read!

Rose Humphreys says

As others have said, this may not be DES's best book but I am always fascinated by stories written before and during one of the world wars. She had no idea how the war was going to pan out, nor the years of struggle afterward, yet she chose to write set in real time for her. I think that is brave and more real than a historical novel. This story of a young man, half German and half English but purely German in upbringing and thinking is thoughtful and satisfying, albeit somewhat cliched in its propaganda. I didn't really have a problem with that as at the time that must've been almost a necessary way to think to survive emotionally. A sweet but rather unrealistic story.
