



The Kommandant's Mistress

Sherri Szeman (Pseudonym), Alexandria Constantinova Szeman

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This powerful, disturbing, yet utterly compelling first novel tells the story of a Nazi Kommandant and his Jewish prisoner/lover by weaving together three points of view: his, hers, and a supposedly objective view presented through official documents.

The Kommandants Mistress Details

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From Reader Review The Kommandants Mistress for online ebook

Sherron says

DNF Book is all over the place. It's not for me

Will Byrnes says

Alexandria Constantinova Szeman - from her Facebook pages

The Kommandant's mistress is a beautiful, award-winning novel, telling of a Nazi death camp Kommandant who takes a Jewish mistress. The first half is told from his perspective; the second is told from hers, followed by a supposedly objective view. We are shown how each of the characters arrived at the camp situation, their reactions to the situation, how they cope, and justify. Good stuff.

Links to the author's Twitter and FB pages

Valerie says

I wish that GoodReads had a more detailed rating system. I often find it hard to choose between 4 and 5 stars or 3 and 4.

Anyway, my Kindle recommended this book to me and I saw that I could borrow it on Prime so I went for it. When I started to read, I was a bit disappointed that it wasn't a true story - not that I would wish these things on anyone, but I have a hard time with Holocaust fiction, I've always felt like it "cheapens" the real thing. I don't know why. But in the end, I was able to read this without holding anything against it and I see that the Kommandant is symbolic of all evils in the Holocaust and the mistress is symbolic of all Jewish suffering. Many, if not all, of my questions and issues I had with the book were cleared up with reading the author's notes at the end as well as the discussion questions.

I've seen where others have referred to this book as being extremely confusing because of the way it jumps around without warning. But I guess I don't have a problem with the wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey because I got used to it pretty quickly and looking back, it really made for a more interesting read, certainly made for a quicker read as it was hard to put it down - before you know it, you're on a new subject and you just keep reading because you can't find a place to stop. ;-)

I also enjoyed reading her original story she'd written when she was 12 as well as the poem version of the book as they were both included in my Kindle edition. The original story and the final are, of course, vastly different, yet the same. It's almost as if the original is the "nutshell" you would tell to someone. The author gives quite a good encouragement to aspiring writers, as well. I will look forward to reading some of her other work sometime in the future.

Travelling Sunny says

Winner of the strangest writing style ever award. Powerful writing that deserves a higher rating, but was just too confusing at the end for me to thoroughly enjoy. Part I: POV of the Kommandant. Part II: POV of the Jewish girl / prisoner. Part III: Historical (fictional) account of the "official" story for each of them.

I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads, and the author - Alexandria Constantinova Szeman (not Sherri Szeman as on the original cover art) - was kind enough to autograph my copy for me. It's not exactly stream of consciousness; it's more like - "I love the snow. It's white, and cold, and peaceful." Then, flashback to "I touched her face where she lay in the coffin. Pale and cold, but peaceful."

I read the first two chapters and considered abandoning the book - BECAUSE of the writing style. But, then I read a few reviews to figure out the gist. Skipped ahead and read the first chapter of Part II. Decided THAT was interesting enough to make me want to know more. Went back and picked up where I'd left off, and once I got about halfway through Part I, I was hooked.

Truly disturbing. This book will stick with you. Even though (view spoiler)

Ed says

OK, I give up. This is the third time I have tried to read The Kommandant's Mistress and the third time I couldn't get through to the end. Nothing to do with the artistic merits of the book, which are considerable. Szeman uses her training as a poet (widely published, won lots of award) to inform the structure of her prose. She takes one word toward the end of each brief passage and using it to start a new passage, moving from past to present to distant past, from the concentration camp to the Warsaw Ghetto to pre-Nazi central Europe and from character to character, often seemingly minor ones who are no more than:

... an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

such as Rachel's Uncle Jacob.

The Kommandant, Max von Walther, is one of the most purely evil villains one can imagine. He is the extremely unreliable narrator of the first half of the book so we experience much but by no means all of the action, emotional devastation and physical and mental anguish from his point of view. von Walther joined the Nazi party in 1932; an excellent marksman, he killed Brownshirts during the Night of the Long Knives; he attended the Wannsee Conference where the implementation of the Final Solution was determined; he researched and recommended the use of Zyklon B for large scale killing and was an exemplary leader of the mobile killing units in Poland.

Walther is a fictional example of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil". He commits indecent, inhuman acts of both mass slaughter and individual cruelty. It is (at least for me) very difficult to read. HOWEVER, he is also presented in a different light--an ambitious bureaucrat, a cheating husband, a loving father--whose

family happens to live in the Kommandant's quarters on the edge of a concentration camp where the furnaces run 24 hours a day and the smokestacks belch the awful greasy black soot that settles on everything, clinging to hair and clothes.

Szeman imagines and presents him so well that each time I tried to read the book I had to stop because I was responding to von Walther as if he was just another careerist trying to juggle too many responsibilities and not doing any of them well. And each time I realized I was thinking of the fictional von Walther as a "normal" protagonist with "normal" problems--Arthur Dimmesdale, Jude Fawley, John Jardyce--character that one might be interested in getting to know, who may have significant faults and sins but who could be redeemed by some combination of luck, happenstance, their own efforts or the love of others.

When I started to relate to von Walther like a non-mass murdering, non-genocidal, non- unredeemable wretch I simply had to stop reading. That is reason for the lack of stars--I simply can't finish the book and will stop trying.

Carolyn says

Not my thing.

I don't mind stories that use flashbacks, or change perspective.

But give me some clue - an extra blank line, a new paragraph.

This author changes time frame from line to line - characters are going in and out of the frame. I am struggling to follow what's happening.

Chris says

When Band of Brothers first ran on HBO, one viewer expressed outrage that American troops were seen taking items from German houses. It reminded me of someone who said that all those guards who worked with the Sheriff of Nottingham deserved getting killed. Who cares if they had to eat, they shouldn't have been working for the guy in the first place.

As humans we like out morality to be clear. We like strict right and wrong . Yet, we know that very few things are so clear cut. A woman is a slut if she uses her body to ensure her survival (or the survival of her family); she is a cold bitch if she doesn't use her body.

This book looks at that idea of morality. Of the unfairness of being judged and condemned from both sides as well as the harm that Holocaust caused. Though the story of the Kommandant and the Jewish woman he takes, ideas of right, wrong, and perspective are examined. The book jumps around in time, and yet this makes it far more readable than being strictly chronically sequence would.

The story is told from three different viewpoints and this also makes a comment on storytelling and truth. It should be noted that this kindle edition, includes several bits, very interesting bits, by the author of the book. I can see how the book won so many awards.

Denise says

I loved this novel. It was written in a different fashion with various 'scenes' mixed together, one leading to

another. I really enjoyed it after I got used to the 'format.' It is the story of the commandant of a concentration camp and the beautiful young Jewish woman he made his mistress. It is extremely intense; I could barely put it down.

The novel was written in three parts: the first part was written from the Kommandant's perspective; the second part was written from the Jewish slave-woman's perspective; and the third part was their obituaries.

In addition to 'Those Who Save Us' by Jenna Blum, this is one of my favorite works of historical fiction concerning the Third Reich.

Aviva says

This book confused me. I wanted to see how this writer managed to deal with this kind of relationship. Well, mainly she didn't. The book is told in two perspectives. The first half is the Kommandant's told in flashback after the war (he's on the run as a war criminal) and the second half is the mistress's, also told in flashback after the war. The two halves are so distinctly different that it's almost like they're remembering totally separate events. Also, and interestingly enough, I felt the author was trying to pack in a little too much information. In her quest to be sure that we the reader didn't sympathize with the Kommandant at all she had him doing things that just didn't mesh with the character. I mean...if a man loves a woman so much he's willing to carve things into his own skin, to house that woman with his family against the express wishes of his wife, to chance public humiliation because this woman is off limits to him, then I don't really see that man giving said woman to his best friend simply because it's his best friend's birthday, you know? Little inconsistencies like that made this book an interesting read, but not a particularly good one.

Anne says

A complex and sometimes hard to understand story of a German Kommandant of a concentration camp and the Jewish prisoner he chooses to be his mistress. Written in an unusual style, it goes between people by the use of one word in a previous statement. Once you understand how it is written you are more able to understand what is going on.

Written in three sections, The Kommandant, the Girl and the History of both, it is a heart wrenching story of a Jewish girl in the concentration camp who is chosen by the Kommandant, Max to be his mistress. kept in his office where she sleeps on a palate, she is hated by his wife and the other jewish prisoners who view her as a traitor.

Max is a complex character who has personal problems, yet I found him hard to hate, even though I realized he was essentially evil. Both survive the Holocaust, but in the 3rd section, we read about their "true" lives. Although it was sometimes painful to read, I found it compelling and an excellent read. At the end there is a long, drawn out explanation of why the book was written.

Recommended.

Kiessa says

This book's title implies a consensual relationship between a Nazi Kommandant and a Jewish woman, not his wife. In contrast to the insinuation of the title, the book's pages are devoted to the nuances of this relationship and the illusion that it is, in fact, consensual. While any book about the Holocaust is difficult, this one is unique in capturing moments of sheer delusion on the part of the Kommandant. I found that aspect pathetically difficult to stomach, which I am sure is just what the author intended.

Willow says

Intense. One of the more violent WWII fictions I've read. What makes Szeman's book different is her writing style. She flows from scene to scene and subject to subject without breaking stride. In the space of one page, Szeman places you in four or five different scenarios which all blend together coherently, seamlessly, and with obvious skill.

Sheri says

My grade: A. This is a compelling book I know I will think about for days. The first half of the book is told from the Kommandant's POV, in 1st person. The second half in Rachel's POV, in 1st person. It mostly takes place during the final months of WWII in a concentration camp. To borrow the words of a reviewer, it reads like a psychic collage, running forwards and backwards in time. Even mid-sentence we jump around. At first disruptive and confusing, I quickly found myself seamlessly following the mid-sentence jumps in time. Often the same events are told in each character's POV.

Rachel and Von Walther's voices were so real, they drew me in and completely absorbed me. By the end of the book, with the help of a cunning author, I actually believed them to be real and googled both of them, finally accepting them as fictional characters when Google failed to reveal them. They felt real. Sometimes I knew too much, other times I wanted to know more and felt ashamed to want more revealed.

Szeman manages to give you a view into the soul of a Nazi and into a Jewish woman whose will to survive is so intrinsically a part of her, it's never even acknowledged.

Ronald Magnuson says

Szeman used the interesting technique of using a key word from a paragraph uttered by one protagonist to set off an association with another character who used the same word in a completely different context. In so doing, she moved from the present to the past or the future involving one or more of the characters. This technique lost much of its interest as the constant changes interrupted the flow of the narrative.

The tale is often harrowing and compelling but the reader never really gets to know or understand either of the two main protagonists as we are only given glimpses of them in these sporadic episodes.

I also found the treatment of the Kommandant rather heavy handed and overplayed.

In spite of this objections I found the writing interesting and the narrative compelling.

Oana says

Unbelievable what an astounding piece of work this is! Wish I had the time to rave about it.

Sarah says

Really interesting. It's a little confusing at the beginning because of how it goes so quickly between scenes, but once you get used to it, it's not difficult to figure out what's happening. The characterization could be a little rough - I wanted to know the characters a little more than you get to in the book. And there were a few scenes that stuck out a little in the book that I wish had been more fully explained - like the Star of David scene - but generally I really liked this book and I read it very quickly.

If you like these kinds of novels, I'd say this one is definitely worth reading.

Raya Fagg says

Deeply satisfied is how I describe my time spent reading The Kommandant's Mistress.

This isn't a book for casual reading. Rather, the reader must pay attention because the story is written in a way that an image, a thought, a sound can transport the speaker to another scene. It's engaging, and engrossing, deserving all the praise that it has received.

The story is about the life of a ranking Nazi officer and his mistress told in their voice with their thoughts and feelings. It's not graphic although some parts are described so vivid, it's a challenge NOT to feel sympathy for each person despite how dastardly their actions appear.

The book begins with part one, The Kommandant, and immediately it's a challenge to find sympathy for this man given what history has taught us about the Holocaust. As the story unfolds, we see his rise to power, his ambition, and a small portion of his heart. The reader is offered a glimpse in his thoughts and although his crimes are heinous, we can see that this man is just doing his "job."

Part two is in the voice of the Mistress. Here we are seen how a person tries to survive in a world that she has no control over because of both her sex and her culture. When she does things that will allow her to survive, she is shunned by others in a less 'appealing' captivity. She is also hurt by those who are 'protecting' her. She is tortured with her desire for survival while living in an artificial existence.

Part three serves as a wrap up to the book, offering readers an opportunity to have closure while still having some things to ponder long after the book is completed.

The version I read also included a guide for readers who want to follow the story in a linear way as well as the thoughts of Alexandria Szeman. This was another bonus because this type of story is one that BEGS to know what the author was thinking.

While difficult to read for those not accustomed to the scene shifts, I recommend that you stick with this story. The ride is worth it.

Disclosure ***This post contains affiliate links.

Alexandria Constantinova Szeman

Currie Underwood says

A bit confusing to read at first (flashbacks and flashforwards without any warning) but loved this book! the first half is the point of view of the nazi kommandant..the second part is that point of view of his jewish slave/mistress. all the same events happen in each part. very interesting, especially to see the point of view from the kommandant

somewhat of a spoiler alert?

at the end, short biographies are given about the 2 main characters. so they were both real people and the events were (most likely) true. very creepy!

Sabrina says

If this were a movie, it would show smash cut after smash cut of 2-5 min. scenes, leaving the viewer to think, "What the....?"

The author writes, "People often ask if I write the novel in chronological order, cut the scenes apart, then throw them up in the air and picked them up randomly."

Although she says that she didn't, I don't believe her. After reading this book, all I can say is, "What the....?"

John Dolan says

Many books have been written about the Holocaust and there is a danger that at some point desensitisation sets in. But not with this work.

The structure of the novel is unconventional and the narrative flows back and forward over time without any break in the stream of consciousness of the two central characters.

The writing has a 'European' feel to it, and stylistically the book read to me like a concatenation of Sartre's 'Roads to Freedom' and Camus' 'The Fall'.

Human, Frighteningly Human

At the heart of 'The Kommandant's Mistress' is the relationship between Maximilian Ernst von Walther, the officer in charge of a World War II extermination camp and Rachel, a young Jewish woman selected by the German to gratify his baser instincts. Along the way Alexandria Szeman explores the hysteria of Nazism and peels back the layers of the phenomenon that turned ordinary people into murderous and inhuman fanatics.

The writing is brutal and unsentimental. Rachel's humiliations and abuses are described with forensic objectivity, but so is the Kommandant's moral disintegration and self-delusion. Even the most evil acts are balanced with an underlying sense of human anguish. Scenes of domesticity are set alongside horrific portrayals of degeneracy. In places, Szeman's detachment is both terrifying and moving at the same time.

A sense of moral ambiguity permeates the book so thoroughly that even the ending is ambivalent, and the reader is left with choosing for himself what is 'true' from the different viewpoints presented. Von Walther is monstrous, certainly, but he is not an alien monster, and it says much for Szeman's skill that there are times when one feels genuine sympathy for him.

'The Kommandant's Mistress' is not an easy book, but it most certainly a worthwhile one. For this reason, it gets my vote as the best work of fiction I have read this year.
