

***Chocolate Cake with Hitler* by Emma Craigie**

Chocolate Cake with Hitler is a fascinating read following the last ten days in Hitler's bunker of Helga Goebbels before she was poisoned with the rest of her family. Of course the novel is an imaginative reconstruction because we will never truly know what any of the Goebbels' six children felt in the last hours. Emma Craigie provides information on each of the important characters as well as the last letters from Dr Josef Goebbels and his wife Magda Goebbels to her son, Harald Quandt explaining why they decide to kill themselves in Hitler's bunker with Hitler. Emma Craigie provides a postscript explaining the death of Hitler and Eva Braun as well as the Goebbels family in the last day in the bunker, 1st May 1945. Magda Goebbels made arrangements for the death of her children. Helmut Kunz, a dentist injected them with morphine and then Dr Stumpfegger crushed cyanide capsules into their mouths. All the children seemed to die peacefully except for 12 year old Helga who seemed to have bruising to her face suggesting that she struggled before her death. Perhaps it is this little piece of evidence that prompted Emma Craigie to write the story from Helga's point of view, to imagine that Helga questioned the world around her.

The story traces each day in the bunker but interspersed in this is a year by year account of Helga's life from 1936 up until 1945. The year by year narrative provides a direct contrast with the days in the bunker with images of the idyllic lifestyle of the Goebbels life before the war and during the early days of the war. Always there is an undercurrent that things are not quite right and Helga sometimes has an inkling of this. Typical of stories like *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* we the audience often understand more of what is going on than the child protagonist. The disturbed discussions towards the end of the days in the bunker are obvious to us to be the last desperate days of the Third Reich but the children of course do not understand that. Events happen that the children are not privy too as they try to carry on with as ordinary life as they can. Other aspects of the novel portray a vivid image of Germany under the Third Reich as, for example, the Goebbels holiday house is next door to a Jewish family. Helga tries to make friends with the Jewish girl next door and cannot understand why she does not come anymore. Magda Goebbels' stepfather who raised her and was a good father, was Jewish but he is later denigrated and we find out in the postscript that he was believed to have died in 1939 in the Concentration Camp, Buchenwald.

This is an excellent novel for Year 7/8 and perhaps Year 9 in studying the narrative voice of Helga Goebbels as a female, child protagonist. Students can also study the two different narratives and how they come together to form a logic to the whole plot. Students can study other concepts such as life under oppression, differing perspectives of characters within a text and audience responding to a text. The text could form part of a unit studying life during wartime and be used in combination with other texts and different types of texts.

Gersha Shteyman, Kesser Torah College, New South Wales

I found this novel difficult to put down. Told through first person narrative, it recounts the life of Helga Goebbels, the eldest daughter of Josef Goebbels, the Nazi head of propaganda. A historical fiction, it is set in the final ten days of Helga's life, holed up in Hitler's bunker where she and her younger siblings were eventually poisoned. Between recounts of her days in the bunker are flashbacks of her life growing up as the child of Goebbels. Some of her mother's background is also revealed through her grandmother's stories to Helga.

It is through the eyes of the innocent that the horrors of war are so poignant. As a twelve year old Helga is the ideal narrator as she understands more than her younger siblings; this is true of actual events as the autopsies show that she was the only one that resisted the poison. A lot of students study World War II and Nazi Germany but focus on the key characters. I would think that most people would know that Eva Braun died in the bunker but would not know that Goebbels' children also perished there.

Craigie has researched this novel thoroughly and includes her main sources of information at the end. She also provides a glossary of the factual characters but points out what information has been fabricated e.g. Reggie, (although a real person) "All details about her have been imagined." P.200.

The cover uses contrast well as Helga is younger here and her dress has been coloured pink and she looks stubborn but cute sitting on a bench next to a black and white Hitler who seems to be willing her to pay attention to him. He leans in towards her and seems patient. It would be effective to discuss the cover with your class before reading the novel.

My only criticism is that Helga's character is extremely negative to the evil men of the Nazi regime like Hitler and Goering but seems to like Speers who is believed to have disobeyed orders to exterminate Jews. In hindsight it seems convenient to give Helga this insight and to force sympathy and contempt from the readers.

If you are looking for a new class text for years 8-9 or a top year 7 class, I wouldn't go past *Chocolate Cake with Hitler*; it is engaging, interesting and allows students to see the wider impact of war. It is vital that today's youth know about this time but unfortunately not all students will study it in History; this text provides this opportunity. While focusing on Helga and her life, we see the brainwashing that went on, the mass deportations and exterminations of Jews and other 'undesirables'; early on her grandmother divorces her Jewish husband as things got too hard. It shows the blind devotion to the Fuhrer by the Goebbels, even to the point of sacrificing their own children to have the honour of dying with him. What is more tragic and telling is the final letters that Josef and his wife send her eldest son who was a POW in England.

While there are many novels written that are set in this time of history this is one of the best. I would have this as a class text and use others as supplementary texts to engage students in wider reading. However, if you have something equally well written and engaging like *Once*, I would invest in numerous copies of this text as well.

Dianne Bond, English teacher, Broulee, NSW

Nazi Germany is seen through the eyes of a high-spirited, perceptive, very likeable 12 year old. Whilst told with childhood naivety and innocence, the undertone is dark and mysterious invoking the reader to ask real questions of this time in history. Yes it is fiction, but there is no doubt these are real events, likewise, there is no escaping the documentary, factual feel of the book.

A well crafted style of mixing happier times and memories with the bleak present day, ensures we are aware of the downfall of the Goebbels family. We are also clear of the fervent support Hitler demanded and garnered, and of course, propaganda. It is a family destroyed by fanaticism and the staunch support of a cause. Could they live in a world not ruled by Hitler and controlled by Nazis?

Author Emma Craigie subliminally weaves a history lesson. Contained in Hitler's private bunker we are exposed to, and live the family's fear; we note the deterioration of their situation and surroundings; all amidst an impending doom. In the end, almost ironically, it is not the Russians that signal the family's termination, but the evil nature of war and extremism. It raises a raft of questions around genocide, martyrdom, and a mother's love.

Adolescent readers will clearly engage with this short read – it will successfully springboard learning in Society and History and/or contextualise current and new understandings.

History's notorious Nazis, Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler, play the characters of an eccentric but loving father, and a somewhat strange but powerful and revered Uncle Leader. Their portrayal in *Chocolate Cake with Hitler* will whet the appetite for further enquiry around the themes: ideology, war, the Nazi dogma, suicide and more. An outstanding emotive, historical novel.

Trudy Pearce, Tasmania

Given the subject matter, the last days of the six young children of Josef and Magda Goebbels leading up to their murders by their mother, this could have been a dreadfully grim book. It isn't. Told from the point of view of Helga Goebbels, the eldest of the children, we get an intriguing and increasingly chilling picture of life in Hitler's bunker in the final days of the Nazi Reich.

There are flashbacks to earlier, happier family times before the children were called to join the Fuhrer in Berlin. We see the truths of the disintegrating family dynamics through childish eyes and can appreciate the irony in Helga's innocent words. For example:

"Lida loved going out in Papa's yacht and Mummy would always make me and Hilde go too to keep her company because she thought Lida would get bored with only Papa to talk to. I don't think it was true because Papa and Lida would always go off for one more sail after they dropped us back home," (p. 26).

Or, "Uncle Leader is completely against divorce. Mummy says that is because he has never been married," (p.49).

There's a strong sense of increasing despair and irrationality in the close prison of the bunker despite the attempts of the adults to appear 'normal' when the children are present. Helga, however, with the unerring aim of children, is honing in on the truth and we are made aware of her growing unease and alarm. With the clarity of hindsight that the reader inevitably brings to the story, there is a chilling sense of foreboding as events move towards their inevitable conclusion.

The inclusion of a photograph of a smiling Goebbels family taken in 1942, the transcript of letters to Helga's half-brother written by his mother and step-father from the Fuhrer's bunker in April 1945 and a comprehensive "Who's Who" section at the end of the book remind the reader that this is not just another work of historical fiction.

This is not an 'enjoyable' novel but it is well researched, well written and well worth reading. It would be an excellent accompaniment for students studying *I am David* or *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and good background too for Modern History students.

Highly recommended.

Julie Davies, Sutherland Shire Christian School, NSW