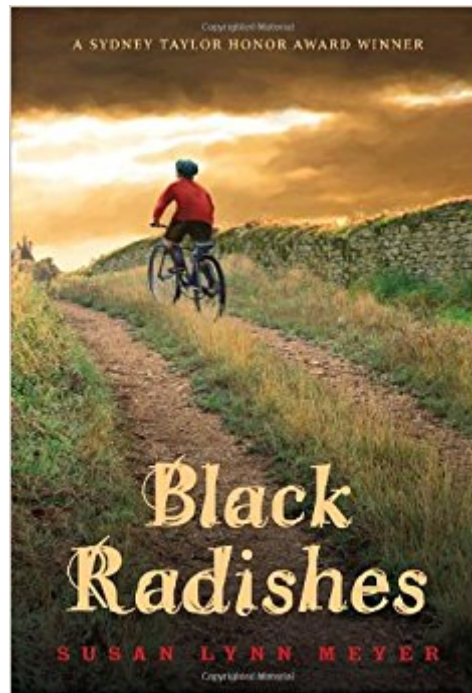




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Black Radishes



Synopsis

Sydney Taylor Honor Award Winner *Black Radishes* is a suspenseful WWII/Holocaust story, in which one boy learns what it means to be Jewish and French at a time when everything is changing. Gustave doesn't want to move from the exciting city to the boring countryside, far from his cousin Jean-Paul and his best friend, the mischievous Marcel. But he has no choice. It is March of 1940, and Paris is not a safe place for Jews. When Paris is captured by the Nazis, Gustave knows that Marcel, Jean-Paul, and their families must make it out of the occupied zone. And when he learns that his new friend Nicole works for the French Resistance, he comes up with a plan that just might work. But going into Occupied France is a risky thing to do when you are Jewish. And coming back alive? That is nearly impossible. And don't miss *Skating with the Statue of Liberty*, the gripping and poignant companion to *Black Radishes*, which follows Gustave as he embarks on new adventures in New York City.

Praise for *Black Radishes*: "Full of tension, this coming-of-age story presents a picture of life during the early days of World War II." -*Bulletin* "An excellent recent novel that can introduce readers to a wider world. . . . Meyer builds the tension by using real-life events (detailed in an author's note) and creates in Gustave a very believable boy who behaves bravely when he must." -*The Horn Book* "Meyer shines light on the bravery of Resistance fighters, and her story...[is] a gripping read comparable to Marilyn Sachs's classic *A Pocket Full of Seeds*, Carol Matas's *Greater Than Angels*, and Norma Fox Mazer's *Good Night, Maman*." -*SLJ* "Partly based on Meyer's father's experiences, the story derives its credibility from the vivid details...[a] fine first novel." -*Booklist* "This debut novel, loosely based on the author's father's experiences,...raises important questions about nationalism, equality and identity and fills a void in Holocaust literature for this age group." -*Kirkus Reviews*

A Sydney Taylor Honor Award Winner
A Bank Street College of Education Best Children's Book of the Year
An Instructor Magazine Best Kids' Historical Fiction Book
A Massachusetts Book Award Must-Read Book

Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

Customer Reviews

Grade 5 • After a somewhat slow beginning, this story of the plight of Jews in France from 1940 to 1942 develops into a dramatic tale of courage and determination. Gustave Becker, 11, lives in Paris, enjoying his time with his friend Marcel and his cousin Jean Paul. Then his parents suddenly announce that the family will be moving to Saint-Georges, which they believe to be safer, until they can get visas to go to America. A more even pace follows as Gustave deals with being in a new place and hiding the fact that he is Jewish. He is taunted by Phillipe, a bully who has a visceral hatred of Jews. Gustave develops a friendship with Nicole, a Catholic girl who turns out to be the daughter of Resistance fighters. The story becomes exciting when Gustave takes over her Resistance task when she is sick. The black radishes of the title refer to bribes his father tries to make with German border guards between the occupied and unoccupied zones. Meyer shines light on the bravery of Resistance fighters, and her story gradually crescendos into a gripping read comparable to Marilyn Sachs's classic *A Pocket Full of Seeds* (Doubleday, 1972), Carol Matas's *Greater Than Angels* (S & S, 1998), and Norma Fox Mazer's *Good Night, Maman* (Harcourt, 1999). • Renee Steinberg, formerly at Fieldstone Middle School, Montvale, NJ (c) Copyright 2011. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

The story begins in Paris in 1940, when discrimination against Jews in France has become more blatant and more dangerous for Gustave and his parents. Hiding their religious identity, they move to a small village, where they wait for their immigration visas. Soon the border of German-occupied France is established near their home. Like his father, Gustave begins to take uncommon risks, crossing over to find food and helping those who want to escape. Partly based on Meyer's

father's experiences, the story derives its credibility from the vivid details of daily life and the depiction of changes slowly taking place within Gustave, who balances the occasional cruelty he endures with the friendship and trust he sometimes finds. The novel's tension builds slowly, reaching its crescendo when Gustave masters his fears in the face of mortal danger. This fine first novel could be read in conjunction with *The Good Liar* (1999), which takes place in occupied France during WWII. Grades 4-7. --Carolyn Phelan --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

I loved *Black Radishes*. The main character, Gustave, was very much a normal little boy born in extraordinary and tragic circumstances. I really liked how the author wrote Gustave as a kid who doesn't quite see the real picture of what is happening to his country. He slowly realizes the depth of evil that has gripped France. When he is separated from his cousin and best friend, he begins to realize how ugly the war has become. Through his cleverness, he comes up with solutions that seem heroic and yet not overdone at all. I was particularly impressed with how real the setting felt, as well as the characters. This story is unusual in that it looks at one particular setting and situation of the era that is unique and really delves into the life during that time. Gustave is charming and brave and ordinary, but his circumstances and keen understanding of human behavior help him survive. This is a great story for kids just beginning to understand that horrible time in history. Boys and girls will love this book, as will their parents.

Susan Lynn Meyer grew up listening to her dad talk about his childhood in France during World War II, and this excellent debut novel is loosely based on his stories. Good books about the period are emotionally draining; I have to steel myself to begin one. Opening "*Black Radishes*," I clung to the knowledge that Meyer's dad had survived to tell the tale. The book opens in Paris in 1940 with 11-year-old Gustave and his pals on a scavenger hunt with their Boy Scout troop. It's all pretty ordinary with the war far away - except that Uncle David is a soldier, the Eiffel Tower has been painted brown so it won't stand out from the air, and someone has scrawled "Jews Out of France!" on the street. Gustave's family is Jewish, his parents more clear-sighted than most, and they decide to move south to a village they think will be safe should the war come closer. When a few months later Germany invades, the family joins thousands of other people fleeing for Spain. Ultimately, they have to turn back, but not before the jammed road they're on is strafed by Nazi planes. In the aftermath, Gustave sees motionless people lying in a field, then "something large and dark" lying in the road. "It was Jacques, the pony. He had been shot. His beautiful brown head was thrown back,

and a pool of dark blood spread out around him...."The passage is a good measure of how Meyer portrays the horror of war at the appropriate level -- honestly but without inducing nightmares. The pony's dead, and its owner is heartbroken, but when Gustave's family finds a crying toddler alone, he is soon reunited with his uninjured mom. Most of the book concerns Gustave's life in the village as France falls, the Germans come closer, and Gustave worries that people will find out his family is Jewish. In the most suspenseful scenes, Gustave's resourceful father braves German checkpoints and crosses into occupied France to bring back food and, eventually, people. Ultimately, the book's focus is not breathless drama but how life goes on, even with war and its atrocities looming. The detail of the black radishes is particularly telling. Before I started reading, I assumed they were symbolic -- scorched earth, evil, the bitterness of hunger. In fact, they are real radishes - a peppery treat that Gustave likes with bread, and German soldiers like salted with beer. Gustave makes good use of them - and so does the author. Like the wartime experience of refugees in France, the radishes may at first seem strange and foreign, but in the end, Meyer brings them home.

I'm a middle school English teacher. I would recommend this book to boys between the ages of 12 and 14. It's a great read with many historical details that I think young adults would find interesting. Girls who enjoy Anne Frank's story might also enjoy this perspective of events during WWII.

I loved this book. It is beautifully written, persuasively imagined, and completely compelling. I learned a lot from it on a practical level, and I liked it the way I like YA books that obviously also have an adult audience. I was glad for the author's note at the back telling about the sources for parts of the story, since throughout I couldn't help but wonder how the author knew the inside of the experience so very well. I also have to say that I'm glad that this is one of my son's first Holocaust books. The book was completely honest and straightforward, but in a way that he could digest at age 11. He could be presented with the facts and be aware of how horrible things were without being so overwhelmed by the nightmare that he couldn't take the truth in. I know I'm going to be recommending (and giving) this book to a lot of my Jewish friends with children in the upcoming year. Here's my son's book report on the book: "This is a realistic novel about growing up in France in WW2. It has some sad parts, such as when Jean-Paul leaves his friends in Paris, and some terrifying scenes, like when Jean-Paul is travelling and the road he is on is attacked by German planes. This is a suspenseful and exciting read full of mystery and friendship."

I loved the book and it was especially meaningful to me because of my Jewish Heritage. The story

of Gustave and his forced maturation because of the Nazi occupation of France is beautifully and lovingly written. It is especially meaningful because it stems from the author's father's memories as a young Jewish boy at this time. I wish I had read this book when I was coming of age in the 50's. Because I was a precocious reader I read things that were far too explicit and violent. My parents kept the holocaust a secret because they did not know how to talk about it and it was still too fresh. The way the author presents life in France at that time and the fear that was a constant part of life for Jews and sympathizers allows young readers a chance to learn about a horrible and brutal time in history. It could help them begin to want to learn more about this incomprehensible period of genocide or it could help to make them become aware of other places in the world where genocide has happened...and still happens.

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