

ORPHAN MONSTER SPY



Dear Reader,

This is a book born on a bus, but also deeply interwoven with my childhood.

I grew up in a decade obsessed with the Second World War. It seemed to dominate the books, comics, TV, playground games...everything. However, my mother's best friend was German and after many sparkly, golden summers with her wonderful, warm and rabidly pacifist family, I found myself unable to swallow the idea that Germans were the war-mad, evil monsters depicted. Yet the more I learned of the Holocaust, the less sense any of this made, as I increasingly identified with its victims. I was an endlessly bullied child, in an era when bullying was considered the fault of the victim by the adults who were supposedly there to protect me. Thus began a lifelong appalled and horrified fascination with the Third Reich, its crimes and the war fought to defeat it.

That childhood also created a fierce, committed, if not always well-informed, feminist. My father might have been considered a good role model in a bygone age, but his raging patriarchal brand of masculinity left me with no illusions about men. Some strong and fearless sister-figures in early adolescence, plus a General Leia here and a Simone de Beauvoir there, set the tone for my creative life. I embraced the feminine, fell in love with Anne Shirley and the girls of Malory Towers, sought out my own role models and set out to write something worthy of them.

Living in south London for over a decade, I passed the mural dedicated to local girl and SOE heroine Violette Szabo in Stockwell countless times. I knew her story and that of "Churchill's Secret Army", but I hadn't realised just how young she had been on volunteering. At 21, I had been a mess, barely more mature than I had been at 18...or 15. With that thought, *Orphan Monster Spy's* young protagonist, a Jewish orphan working as a British spy, was born. It turned out the war was full of teenage agents, couriers, partisans and resisters, some barely more than children. Would the Allies have used a 15 year old? In the name of defeating Hitler, they did far worse things...

When I started *Orphan Monster Spy* my concerns were about creeping fascism and institutional racism. I was preoccupied by how genocide had haunted the recent past in Rwanda, Darfur and the former Yugoslavia, while everyone assumed that this time it would never happen again. I saw how nations were using the threat of terrorism to frighten their citizens with propaganda and restrict their freedoms. In passing Szabo's mural in Stockwell, I was also visiting the memorial of Jean Charles de Menezes, a potent symbol of what fear and unchecked "security" can get you.

By the time I finished the final edits, narrow-minded and spiteful nationalism had been normalised, allowing racism and sexism to flourish online, on our streets, in our media and in our politics. We are, right now, looking at the conditions that created the Third Reich and all it will take, to paraphrase Burke, is for good people to do nothing.

As my nephews and eldest son grew up, I was surprised to learn how little they understood the Second World War. They had actually been taught the subject in school, but without those exciting tales of the dauntless so beloved of the 1970s, they hadn't engaged with it. The nineteenth century historian Lord Macaulay said, "History has to be burned into the imagination before it can be received by the reason." This was one of the reasons to write this book.

Through Sarah's fictional adventures I want to illuminate this time and make it real for the reader. I want them to understand that history, to interrogate it and then question the events of today. Nobody should ever say "this couldn't happen now" because it can and it does. As the philosopher George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Right now, history is repeating. The very things for which the teenagers who confronted the Third Reich sacrificed so much are under threat. Resistance has never been so important. I hope that the readers of *Orphan Monster Spy* will be part of that.

Matt Killeen, November 2017

@by_Matt_Killeen

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