

LoveReading Reader reviews of The Death's Head Chess Club by John Donoghue

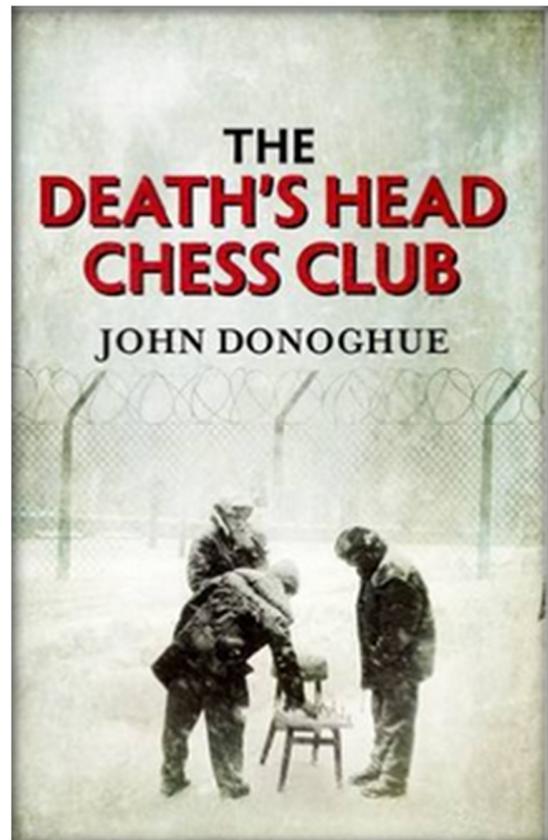
Below are the complete reviews, written by LoveReading members.

Deborah Mika

There is a chess competition taking place in Amsterdam where 2 former Nazis and a Jew meet. The story is beautifully told and I think a must read.

The story revolves around two former Nazis, one now a priest, the other a Chess Champion and a Jew. There is a chess competition taking place in Amsterdam where they all meet. The chess champion and the Jew as competitors and the priest (met in the local chess café), as the peacemaker between them both. The story is beautifully told and you can see how gently the priest moves them towards an acceptance of each other. I found the ending especially touching. This is a must read.

I came to this book with an interest in the Concentration camps and far less of an interest in the words 'Chess Club'. I found the description of Auschwitz true to what I have read elsewhere. A comment at the back of the book makes clear that 'most of the chapter headings are related to chess moves and also what is happening in the storyline itself. Although there is a description of the moves taking place there is no real need to understand chess to enjoy the novel. Despite being told these are not actual events, people or places there is a large measure of reality which is acknowledged at the end of the novel. This is a very enjoyable book and written in a time frame when these events might have taken place.



Janette Skinner

One of the best books I have read all year. Very emotive plot and authentic characters. There is no way not to get totally involved in this story.

This is one of the best book I have read this year, and I read a lot.

It is flawlessly written and perfectly paced with constant changes of scene, time and perspective which keeps it all very interesting. You don't need to have an interest in chess to enjoy the book, but as a player I was fascinated by the details of the play in some very tense games.

In the end the book is about acceptance and forgiveness for things that happened during the second world war, at one of the worst times in our history. The writer manages to portray this time without being overly sentimental or bitter and this makes for a very balanced book.

I would have no problem recommending this book to others.

www.best-book-review.co.uk

Anne Rhodes

A story told of incredible, heart-rending emotions suffered silently for over two decades by two completely different people.

We are the silent audience as these two men, Paul Meissner and Emil Clements, meet unexpectedly, and are soon joined by a third man, Willi Schweninger.

These three men, who find it difficult to bond initially, are drawn inevitably into discussing, explaining, re-living their experiences during the war.

The first two are, on face value, such poles apart that it is understandable they find it so difficult to reveal their innermost thoughts, their emotional pain. By doing so, however, they gradually learn to accept each others feelings, to become friends, to understand how each of them thinks and believes – and in doing so they also help the third member of this group to see inside himself, to help him see the others as the imperfect, courageous, deserving people they are.

In reading of these men, we the readers are also taught how other people think, believe, suffer – and are hopefully turned into more thoughtful considerate people ourselves.

Definitely, quite definitely, a book to be read from cover to cover...and then to be read again.

A book to talk about, to share with other booklovers, to discuss.

Kathy Howell

This is a very thought provoking book which has been well written and well researched.

The story moves between Auschwitz in 1944 and Amsterdam in 1962.

In Auschwitz the Jewish prisoner known as the Watchmaker is found to be a brilliant chess player, but to the SS and Gestapo he is just a Jew who cannot be seen to be better than the Germans. He is, therefore, forced to play against Nazis but beats them every time. Some of those in charge at the camps are beginning to question the way that prisoners are being treated. They are beginning to realise that the war is coming to an end and they are able to save the Watchmaker and his wife

In Amsterdam a chess tournament is being held and the Watchmaker, Emil, is taking part. He is "reunited" with two Germans he met in Auschwitz and who helped him. One is now a Catholic priest and he is dying. The three men each tell their stories, mixing them together showing how each is linked. All three men are looking for forgiveness and closure.

This book has been very well researched as the conditions are well described. I feel a glossary would have been useful as the footnotes bring a stop to the narrative.

Despite this the book is a compelling read which I do not hesitate to recommend.

Mary Gibson

'The Death's Head Chess Club' is set in the concentration camp of Auschwitz in 1944 shortly before the D-Day landings. Emil Clement is a French Jewish watchmaker struggling to survive the gruelling conditions of the death camp and avoid selection to the gas chambers. He has one talent that sets him apart from his fellow prisoners and that is his brilliance at the game of chess. To Auschwitz comes Paul Meissner, an SS officer wounded fighting on the Russian front and now fit only for administrative duties. Asked by his superiors to improve morale amongst the officers and ncos, he sets up a chess club. Meissner discovers by chance that a Jewish prisoner, the 'Watchmaker' is unbeatable and Meissner strives to discover more.

In 1962 the pair meet again in Amsterdam where Clement having survived

Auschwitz by luck but losing his family to the holocaust is competing in a prestigious chess championship. Meissner is now a Roman Catholic priest, dying from leukaemia and the story of their first meeting in the death camp and how their lives unfolded is told.

This novel is a disturbing but enthralling, impeccably researched, a tale of an unlikely friendship between two men meant to be enemies.

Farah Alam

*This book is one of those great reads. **It's engaging and stays with you long after you've finished it. It is probably one of the best of the books I've read on WW2 fiction so far.***

Lee Ruddin

'The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas' was warmly welcomed by the majority of critics when it was published. David Cesarani was in the minority who did not welcome it, though, describing the friendship between the son of the Kommandant of a concentration camp and a Jewish inmate as 'utterly implausible' in a chilling review. The release of 'The Death's Head Chess Club' will indubitably garner similar criticism because John Donoghue, like John Boyne, allows his primary protagonists to become friends. Yet such a development would be unfair since the blossoming of this relationship occurs eighteen years after the seed was planted, rendering it perfectly plausible if not utterly unputdownable. Allow me to elaborate after an overview of the plot.

*It is 1962 and a chess tournament in Amsterdam has drawn Holocaust survivor Emil Clément with Nazi propagandist Wilhelm Schweninger. The former is further traumatised when he is sought out in the capital by an officer from Auschwitz but nevertheless embarks, together with the latter, on a journey to grant (SS-Obersturmführer Paul Meissner) his last wish. The number of footnotes included in the novel is novel, to be sure, which might prove unforgiveable – even for readers who forgive the near-constant need to reference the glossary of SS ranks. Yet **those who do not consider the author's exhaustive research exhausting will find his tale of tolerance triumphing over intolerance, peppered as it is with poetic prose, a life-affirming one.***

The book of 2015 is – like Boyne's – a movie script-in-waiting.

Emily Curnow

This is a compulsive novel of redemption and forgiveness. Set between Auschwitz 1944 and Amsterdam 1962, two men meet unexpectedly once again under the shadow of their history together in the concentration camp – one an SS officer and the other a Jew.

Under the guise of a chess competition the two men unravel and dissect their common history with the German abuse of Jews.

The characters are fleshed out beautifully and are completely believable. Donoghue's research of the German concentration camps is obviously comprehensive and his prose drags the reader uncomfortably close into his world of Auschwitz.

The novel opens the reader's eyes to the horrors of the abuse suffered by the prisoners of the camp. It is interesting to read of the war from two different points of view, from two men who should be on opposing sides, and yet are actually on the same side.

Although it makes for uncomfortable reading, you cannot help but read it entirely to the conclusion, learning as you read about the usually brushed over details of world war two.

Alli Batten

What a fantastic book! It's always a joy to pick up a book by a new author and to love every page of it.

*Moving and poignant, it certainly makes you think of the horrors suffered by a great many people during WWII. I thoroughly recommend this book and was very sorry to get to the last page. **I really hope there are more novels to look forward to from such a talented writer.** Read it and like it as much as I did!*

Gary Simkins

A truly captivating yet heart-wrenching story of cruelty, hatred and the ultimate forgiveness.

This is a story that alternates between events in 1940s Auschwitz and a 1962 chess tournament in Amsterdam, with the two main protagonists a French Jew, Emil Clément and an injured Waffen SS Obersturmführer, Paul Meissner.

Emil Clément arrives at the infamous concentration camp along with his wife and family but they are then subsequently separated. He has no idea if they have survived but his trade as a watchmaker means that he is spared the immediate fate of so many others as his skill is valuable to the Nazis. However, it is his remarkable skill as a chess player that brings him to the attention of Obersturmführer, Paul Meissner.

Paul Meissner who has been sent to Auschwitz to oversee its satellite industrial labour camps has also been tasked to improve the morale of the German SS staff by increasing their interest in culture. His answer is to set up a chess club.

The chess club becomes increasingly popular with the officers, then the enlisted men, the criminal inmates and finally "The Watchmaker" Emil bribes his way in and turns out to be unbeatable. The story follows the development of Emil's chess progress against SS Officers and the Gestapo's attempts either to defeat him or exploit him fairly or unfairly.

In 1962 Emil is attending the Chess World Championships in Amsterdam where fate reunites him with Paul Meissner. As the story alternates between time periods, the author cleverly makes the reader explore the interchange between surviving Auschwitz and winning chess. In order to succeed at both a person must have the compulsion to not make mistakes and if made never to make the same mistake twice.

The book explores the guilt felt during and following the war period and how they come to finally confront these emotions.

I found the book totally enthralling and great read and recommend it highly.

I look forward to Mr Donoghue's next novel.