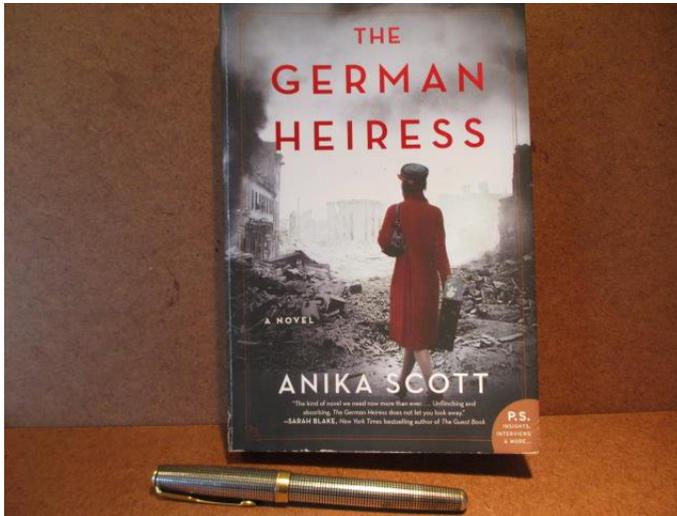


The German Heiress

By Rod Fraser



This book was recommended by a friend, who thought it one of the better books about the Second World War – although to be more precise, it is really a story of the early post-war period. It focusses on the lives of a few individuals – people who were brought low from the collapse of the economy after Germany's surrender.

The main character is a woman by the name of Clara Falkenberg, part of a wealthy family who owned a successful manufacturing company in Germany. During the war, it provided war materials

for the German war effort and had close ties to the Third Reich. A year or two prior to the end of the war, her father began to do political work for the government. He appointed Clara to run the company in his absence, which she did – quite successfully – until the war ended.

When the story opens, we learn that Clara's father is being held in prison awaiting trial as a war criminal, while a British Army captain, Thomas Fenshaw, has been tasked with finding Clara, to arrest her for similar crimes. Little does she know that Fenshaw has a personal interest in this matter. It turns out he met Clara in England before the war and found her attractive and charming.

In this novel, we see a different kind of war story. It is the allied military who now govern this part of Germany, and they do it quite arbitrarily. German citizens are fearful about being arrested and detained by the allied authorities. This is quite a change from most war novels, where allied soldiers are the good guys and all Germans are Nazis.

At this time in the Allied occupation, food and other necessities of life are in short supply and the allies are keen on arresting all Nazi sympathizers. Their work is helped considerably, by collaborators and snitches, who are quite willing to do allied bidding, in exchange for a loaf of bread or cigarettes.

This has prompted Clara to trust no-one. She travels with forged identity papers, and soon decides to return to her home town of Essen by train to seek help from her one true friend from the past, a woman called Elisa Sieland.

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When she finally arrives in Essen, after escaping from British soldiers intent on arresting her, Clara goes to a house where Elisa lived during the war. She finds it bombed out, with the basement occupied by a former employee of her company. He recognizes Clara and offers her accommodation and food.

It is while living at this house that Clara meets Jakob, a former German soldier, who earns a living from the black market. Together they attempt to find Elisa and reunite her with her estranged son, Willy. Much of the novel is a story of the quest for Elisa, and Clara's attempts to avoid arrest by Captain Fenshaw.

But the more captivating aspect of the novel is the moral questions it raises. Was Clara a war criminal, or merely a woman who was trying to do the best she could, while running *Falkenberg Iron Works* during the war years.

It is clear Clara and her company used slave

labour, at least in part. And it is also true these labourers were poorly treated and often without adequate food or clothing.

On the other hand, as the novel shows, Clara had no choice but to accept the slave labour assigned to her by the Nazis, in order to run the factory. That was a given. They ordered her to do so.

But Clara was not a Nazi, had no connection to the party, and did what she could (together with Elisa) to gather food and clothing for the unfortunate people who were sent to work for her. And It was not easy. Food and clothing were generally in short supply. But she did what she could, and many would have died if it weren't for her efforts.

Some people — if they found themselves in Clara's shoes — would do nothing to make the lives of their labourers better. Then there are others, like Clara, who would do what they could to make things bearable. Even if it was not enough. Even if it was inadequate.

Looking back from the vantage point of seventy-five years, I expect many of us think the German people — or at least those in charge — should have stood on principle, and refused to accept slave labourers and to suffer whatever consequences.

This novel asks you to consider, would it be

better to have someone like Clara run the iron works? Or would you prefer those who stood on principle, given they would have been replaced by other – far more ruthless individuals – who would cheerfully have worked the labourers to death.

A good question to ponder? I lean to hoping there will be more Clara's in our world, if evil regimes come to power and chaos is everywhere.

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This novel was written by an American woman, who now lives in Germany with her husband and children. It is an interesting background for an author to take on such an ambitious project. I enjoyed the book and highly recommend it.

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