



AN INTERVIEW WITH THE 2017 CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER RUTA SEPETYS

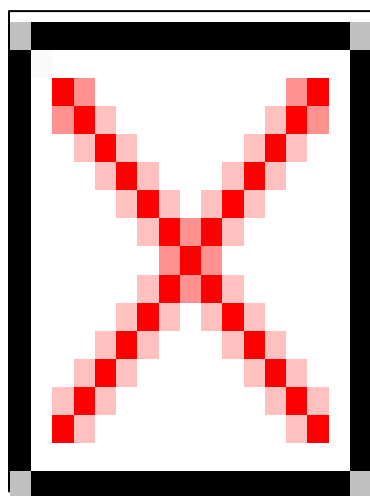
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An exclusive **Books for Keeps** interview



49-year-old music manager turned novelist Ruta Sepetys is the winner of the 2017 CILIP Carnegie Medal for [Salt to the Sea](#) [3] (Puffin). This New York Times-bestselling novel explores the events leading up to the sinking of the **Wilhelm Gustloff**, the worst maritime disaster in history in which over 9,000 people, mainly refugees, perished. The daughter of a Lithuanian refugee, with a family connection to the disaster, Ruta spent three years researching the book, walking the path of some of those refugees who saw the boat as their salvation but who ultimately lost their lives. **Nick Tucker** interviewed her about her book for **Books for Keeps**.

You write that few people still seem to know about the thousands of refugee deaths that followed when the German military transport ship *MV Wilhelm Gustloff* was torpedoed in 1945. Do you think this ignorance, which I previously shared in, reflects a general unwillingness of the victors in World War Two to acknowledge particular instances of the suffering experienced by those who somehow found themselves on the wrong side?

It seems there are several contributing factors as to why the story has remained hidden. Immediately following the disaster, the Nazi regime tried to conceal the story. They were concerned it would affect morale and cause further panic during the ongoing evacuation. On the Soviet side, they did not widely publicize the event because the submarine commander, Alexander Marinesko, was dishonorably discharged for bad personal behavior. In the years following the war, Germany felt it was inappropriate to position themselves as victims in light of the horrors inflicted during the Holocaust. As a result, the sinking, and the story of thousands of refugees from several countries, remained unknown.

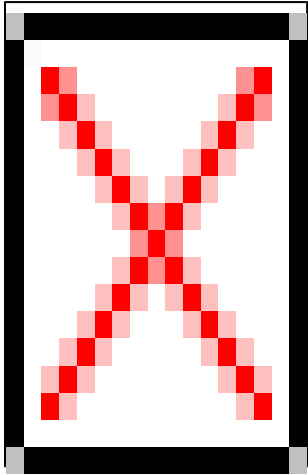
What made you decide to tell your story as if by different characters?

I traveled to several different countries while researching the novel. When I interviewed people, I realized that human beings can experience the same event but have very different interpretations of it, based on their background or country

of origin. So I created four characters to allow readers to look through different cultural lenses.

Why did you make Alfred, the only acknowledged Nazi in the story, into such a pathetic, grimly comic character?

As I researched and read through various testimonies from the time period, I decided that I did not want to portray a



sympathetic Nazi. Instead, I chose to model the character of Alfred after young Adolf Hitler.

As a youth, Hitler was enamored with a girl named Stefanie. He composed rapturous poems and letters to her, but never mailed them. Hitler was in love with Stefanie, but never spoke to her. Their only dialogue was within his imagination. Some historians allege that Stefanie was Jewish. So I decided to weave that into the character of Alfred. Many of Alfred's idiosyncrasies are elements taken from Hitler.

Alfred is also a study of visibility. What happens to a boy who is an outcast, invisible, but then he is given a uniform and suddenly becomes very visible and powerful, if only in his own mind?

There are several references to rape in your story, but always at one step removed from the actual assault. Is this because you are writing for a younger audience, or did you feel that to go into any extra detail was unnecessary and best avoided?

My approach to brutality and violence in [Salt to the Sea](#) [3] was a challenge I set for myself as a writer. The story is told in first person through the eyes of young people so I wanted to capture an honest vulnerability. I tried to accurately describe events in a way that would resonate with readers who experienced the war?like my father and his cousins?but not be unnecessarily disturbing for readers who haven't yet arrived at certain conclusions in their reading. Sometimes the implication of an event is more haunting than a detailed description of it.

There are pitiful images of babies drowning in your closing chapters. It would have been dishonest not to include these, but do you think younger, sensitive readers could have a problem here?

My decision to include descriptions of drowning infants was based on my hope that empathy and sensitivity for those more vulnerable than ourselves can make a lasting impression, a connection that opens our hearts. In this case, a young student reading my book might learn of children younger and more fragile than they are. My hope is that the reader will then be compelled to a protective response and a feeling that inspires compassion.

You write that you made the same journey yourself across East Prussia as part of your research. Your characters did this in the bitter cold and near-starving. Did your own journey give you any extra material or was it also your own tribute to the many brave people undergoing the same thing in such different and terrifying circumstances many years ago?

My exploration of former East Prussia was to gather information on the terrain, a sensory experience that I could then infuse into the setting and the characters' journey. Yes, the trip gave me a lot of extra material, particularly for the character of Emilia. It was through my wanderings that I discovered the beautiful storks and their nests, the abandoned estates of the Junkers, and the notes of hope and hardship that might have punctuated the trek for the refugees.

All your main characters have to live with secrets they find difficult to face up to and share. Do you see them as

traumatic memories of one sort or another?

Sadly, most survivors and family members I interviewed experienced or witnessed very traumatic events. And what's even more heartbreaking is that the survivors I interviewed were recalling their memories as young children. Imagine the children who were forced to leave everything they'd ever known and loved behind. They were innocent victims of war and inherited responsibility for events they had no role in causing.

What gave you the idea of making an elderly cobbler the moral centre of the group?

The character of The Shoe Poet was born on a tiny street in Rome during a book event for my Italian publisher, Garzanti. Perched in a tiny window was a single pair of shoes—shoes so beautiful they seemed to have a voice of their own. I expressed my enthusiasm to my Italian publicist and she told me that the shoemaker was one of the very best in Italy. She said, "Ruta, his shoes are like poetry." In that moment, the character appeared. I ran back to my hotel and sketched out the idea for The Shoe Poet on a piece of hotel stationery.

All your main characters find depths of altruism and empathy within themselves as your story progresses. Does this reflect instances of the same sort of moral growth found at the time that you may have read about in your research?

Yes. Many people I've interviewed over the years who experienced the war have shown an altruistic spirit. War stole their country and their innocence, yet they persevered. Many refused to allow their trauma to define them. It made me realize that we don't choose our hardships, but we can choose how we face our hardships.

This is a wonderful novel Ruta. But at times a necessarily tough one to read. Was it also a tough one to write?

Thank you. Yes, it was a very tough novel to write, especially the character of Emilia. For me, Emilia represents the beauty, courage and sacrifice of children from Eastern Europe that many aren't familiar with. In terms of managing the emotional toll, I try very hard to remain present within it. I hope to transfer the emotional charge to the prose and ultimately to the reader. Although grief and sadness can be completely overwhelming, I try to find bits of beauty that might be hiding amidst the wreckage. That helps me navigate through difficult and sad topics.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

[Salt to the Sea](#) [3] is published by Puffin, £7.99 pbk

Page Number:

70

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