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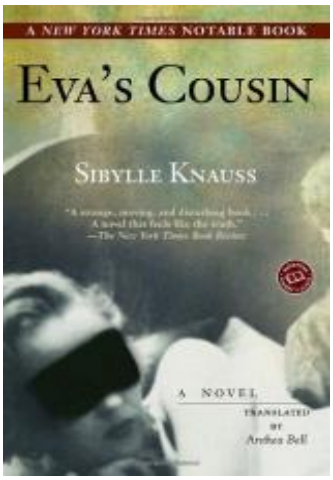
Eva's Cousin

by Sibylle Knauss



About the Book

Berchtesgaden, Germany, is a beautiful place, set among the gentle meadow-clad hills rising to the sheer heights of bare Alpine peaks. It is here where an elderly woman arrives and recollects her past?and her peripheral role in a chapter of world history. She walks along a beaten path, which has come into being because so many tourists have ventured this way . . . to see something that exists only in her memory.

In the summer of 1944, twenty-year-old Marlene is thrilled when her older, more glamorous cousin, Eva Braun, Adolph Hitler's mistress, invites her to come to the Fuhrer's Bavarian mountain retreat. Against her father's wishes, Marlene accepts, and immediately sets forth to Berghof.

There, while Hitler is away desperately trying to turn the tides of war, Marlene finds herself in a strange paradise, a world of opulence and imminent danger, of freedom and surveillance. The two women sneak off and skinny-dip in a nearby-lake, watch films in the Fuhrer's private cinema, and flirt with the SS officers at the dinner table?one of whom will become Marlene's first lover.

Initially delighted by Eva's attentions, Marlene later tries to understand the elusive connection between her cousin and the man she loves.

In quiet defiance, she begins to commit her own acts of subversion, which include listening to BBC radio broadcasts, forbidden by the Fuhrer. But a clandestine mission of mercy will force her to question her allegiance to both her cousin and her country?and to face the chilling reality that exists outside her sheltered world.

Based on the true experiences of Eva Braun's cousin, Gertrude Weisker, who has shared her memories with Sibylle Knauss after more than fifty years of silence, **Eva's Cousin** is a novel that illuminates the banality of the domestic face of evil. It casts a special light on the profound questions of innocence and complicity that still haunt much of the world

today.

Discussion Guide

1. Were you able to relate to Marlene, and if so, how?

2. Would you agree that Marlene, in many ways, seems like a normal girl caught in frighteningly abnormal circumstances? Why or why not?

3. Does reading about Marlene's complicity make you uneasy at all, and if so, why?

4. Should literature please us or make us uncomfortable? How does **Eva's Cousin** do either, neither, or both?

5. How do history and fiction collide in **Eva's Cousin**? Do you find "truth" in stories, in facts, or in both? What does "historically accurate" even mean?

6. Hitler himself famously used the Armenian genocide and Europe's apparent amnesia of it, as an example of how the victors write history. How might Gertrude Weisker's story have been different had Germany won World War II? What does this say about history's relationship to fiction?

7. Why would an author choose to fictionalize a story like Weisker's? How do your expectations change as a reader when you read a novel about an historical event, versus a history book?

8. What constitutes an "historical event"?

9. The Nazis themselves knew that words are dangerous. Do you think Marlene knew this, as well? If so, why?

10. How could Eva Braun love a man like Hitler? What might this suggest about the nature of love, if anything?

11. Would you recommend this book to anyone? Why or why not? Would you recommend it to a German friend? Why or why not?

12. What, if anything, does this book contribute to your understanding of Germany during World War II? Does it confirm or challenge any of your current knowledge about the War?

Author Bio

Sibylle Knauss, born in 1944, is the author of eight novels. She is professor of dramaturgy and scriptwriting at the Baden-Württemberg Academy of Film. This is her first book to be translated into English. She lives near Stuttgart in Germany.

Critical Praise

"An intimate portrait of two women at the center of history and how innocence itself can be a crime against humanity. My book of the year."

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