



The Beast's Garden

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A retelling of *The Beauty and The Beast* set in Nazi Germany

The Grimm Brothers published a beautiful version of the Beauty & the Beast tale called 'The Singing, Springing Lark' in 1819. It combines the well-known story of a daughter who marries a beast in order to save her father with another key fairy tale motif, the search for the lost bridegroom. In 'The Singing, Springing Lark,' the daughter grows to love her beast but unwittingly betrays him and he is turned into a dove. She follows the trail of blood and white feathers he leaves behind him for seven years, and, when she loses the trail, seeks help from the sun, the moon, and the four winds. Eventually she battles an evil enchantress and saves her husband, breaking the enchantment and turning him back into a man.

Kate Forsyth retells this German fairy tale as an historical novel set in Germany during the Nazi regime. A young woman marries a Nazi officer in order to save her father, but hates and fears her new husband. Gradually she comes to realise that he is a good man at heart, and part of an underground resistance movement in Berlin called the Red Orchestra. However, her realisation comes too late. She has unwittingly betrayed him, and must find some way to rescue him and smuggle him out of the country before he is killed.

The Red Orchestra was a real-life organisation in Berlin, made up of artists, writers, diplomats and journalists, who passed on intelligence to the American embassy, distributed leaflets encouraging opposition to Hitler, and helped people in danger from the Nazis to escape the country. They were betrayed in 1942, and many of their number were executed.

The Beast's Garden is a compelling and beautiful love story, filled with drama and intrigue and heartbreak, taking place between 1938 and 1943, in Berlin, Germany.

The Beast's Garden Details

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From Reader Review *The Beast's Garden* for online ebook

Tracy says

This was the first Kate Forsyth novel that I've read (I should probably hang my head in shame at that) and I had high hopes for *The Beast's Garden*. Perhaps it was going into the novel with such high hopes that ultimately lead to my disappointment with it. While there was much I enjoyed, I wasn't completely engaged by it.

I'm someone who loves fairy tale re-tellings – so why didn't I fall head over heels for this?

The relationship development between the Leo and Ava is limited. They almost fall in love instantly – not quiet but almost. Ava is young, just finishing school, when she meets Leo. She is courageous and innocent. However, there were odd little phrases used to describe her feelings for him that jarred with me as being too puerile. They marry out of necessity, though the mutual attraction is there. Once they were married, it seemed the relationship development within the novel took a back seat to the rest of the story.

I sometimes felt the novel was trying to do too much in one book and perhaps this is why the relationship aspect of the story became secondary to the other plot arcs. However, those arcs are great and the secondary characters are wonderful - I loved them. Not all Forsyth's Germans are evil – many do what they can to work against the Nazi regime. Forsyth's research is excellent and she interweaves heart rending stories covering the variety of atrocities committed by the Nazi's.

The writing is of course excellent and there is wonderful use of musical imagery in Ava's POV to describe events around her.

However, it wasn't until the end of the novel, during Ava's rescue of Leo, where the writing actually got me turning the pages rapidly - so much so that I didn't care about the feasibility of the rescue.

Was it a good read – yes? Could it have been more – yes?

3 Stars

Marquise says

This novel is a good example of sacrificing characterisation and storyline for the sake of showing off one's research.

The idea of retelling the German version of the famous fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* published by the Brothers Grimm that goes with the title "The Singing, Springing Lark" in an hitherto never done setting was a good one, but I believe the author simply didn't know how to do it well because she's not familiar with the period and the mentality of the time as she should, nor does she seem to grasp the archetype and metaphors of BatB tales, so she went for:

- a. Sticking too closely to the Grimms' tale without need.
- b. Cramming in every bit of research she found catchy.

You see, one doesn't have to stay too close to the original folktale for it to be good, or even qualify as a retelling. The whole point of it being a "retelling" means an author is free to play with the basic plotline as he or she sees fit, with one caveat: be aware of what the main and overarching metaphor is. If you miss it, don't "get" it, or worse, misunderstand it, then your retelling is nothing but the use of a borrowed title for a whole new idea. I'm afraid I haven't seen Kate Forsyth succeeding in retelling a true Beauty and the Beast-like story, because all she seems to have understood from the tale is "luuuurve conquers it all."

Right. Carry on.

Normally, a blunder as significant as missing a tale's archetype/metaphor in a retelling is an unforgivable one for me, and it'd have been enough to toss this aside. But, there's more than just that: the author does have a story to tell but doesn't know how to tell it competently, and so falls into the trap many HF writers fall into, one that I call "Lemme show you my research skills!"

I have no idea if Forsyth has lived in Germany as opposed to just visiting or going as a tourist, and frankly that's not necessarily bad if you know enough of the place to use. The thing is, she doesn't seem to know Germany so well, or maybe this is simply a result of her writing, but to me the setting didn't feel like Germany. Worse than the unfamiliarity of the place was the mentality of the period, because, to put it bluntly, the protagonist, Ava Falkenhorst didn't feel like a German girl from the time, but rather like a foreigner inserted in 1930s Germany with the knowledge of events and consequences only a 21st century person would have. She knows too much, is aware of too many things for someone of her background and age. Simply too unrealistic, all that would be more credible for someone older and more worldly.

The anachronistic psychology is compounded by the author's show-off insertion of useless bits of research, so typical of writers who spend a couple years reading every book and file on a subject they can find and then shoehorn everything they possibly can into their novel. Some do it thinking they will write a more "authentic" historical novel that way, and others simply have no idea of how to convey the feel of an age without cluttering the story with bits and pieces of trivia and curio. Unfortunately, this has exactly the reverse effect: the story feels too unrealistic because a. the characters know too much or are present at every event that marked the period, and b. too many significant events happen.

That, I'm afraid, is Forsyth's big blunder in this novel: she put too much into her characters from what she read in non-fiction books and placed them in too many circumstances to be credible. Like, during research she read the memoirs of a gay Jew in Nazi Germany? Ooooh, let me make my character a Jew and gay! She read a book on the Swing Kids that defied Hitler listening to forbidden Jazz music? Ooooh, let me make my characters Ava and Rupert be Jazz and Swing lovers! She read some books about German resistance to Hitler? Ooooh, let me make my character Leo be part of the Canaris and Bonhoeffer and Von Stauffenberg circle that tried to kill the Führer! She read about female opposition to the Nazis? Oooh, let me make my character Ava be chums with the Black Orchestra and the Red Orchestra civilian resistance groups and meet Libertas Schulze-Boysen, Elisabeth von Thadden and Mildred Harnack! She read about the English Mitford sisters' Nazi sympathies? Ooooh, I'm British too, so let me make Ava meet Unity Mitford in two useless scenes that add nothing to the plot! She read that Adolf was a fanatic Wagner admirer? Ooooh, let me make my character be a Wagnerian opera singer and meet the Führer in Bayreuth . . .

Seriously. I'm not joking.

If all that gives the impression of a gushy and immature writer that reads more like a fangirl than a good author, I wouldn't blame you. It's not just the cramming in of too much historical events and people that makes this story utterly implausible and belief-defying but also how easily the female main character gets

out of scrapes like when Himmler forgives her for not singing Party-approved lyrics under his very own nose without even a reprimand, and when Heydrich tells her she's gypsy on her mother's side so he can blackmail her into his bed. If Forsyth read as much as she claims in her Author's Note, she'd know Himmler sent people to concentration camps for lesser offences, people more intelligent and prudent than a Too Stupid To Live pretty face; and Heydrich . . . He wasn't called the Butcher of Prague for nothing, you know. But Ava escapes because . . . because . . . er, because of what? The goodness of her little anti-Nazi heart of gold?

Sometimes you don't need to include obvious historical inaccuracies to lose your credibility as a HF novelist. Doing as this author has done, i. e. psychological anachronism and too much historical details for one person's age and background and means, is just as bad.

Not a book I am going to recommend, definitely!

C.W. says

Kate Forsyth is doing something remarkable with her adult historical fiction: combining fairy tales with historical eras, weaving the whimsy of magic with the realities of history. It's not an easy combination to pull off, and she succeeded brilliantly with it in her first adult novel "Bitter Greens" - one of my all-time favorite reads.

In "The Beast's Garden", she adapts the original Grimm version of the beloved fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast" and sets her story in Nazi Berlin, opening with Kristallnacht, the dreadful Night of Broken Glass, when Nazi thugs attack Jewish neighborhoods, smashing businesses, homes and lives, initiating the Holocaust. Ava, a young aspiring singer, and her German family, are caught up in the chaos as they try to safeguard their lifelong friends, a Jewish family about to be tested by the anti-Semitic fervor raging in Berlin. Unwittingly, Ava captures the interest of Leo, a Nazi intelligence officer in the Abwehr, who might not be everything he seems. He's engaged in a dangerous gambit, and as Ava starts to fall in love with him, compelled to trust him in order to save those she cares about, she too becomes embroiled in his quest. Other characters include Jutta, the sister of Ava's Jewish gay friend, Rupert, who goes into hiding and works for the resistance, even as Rupert is deported to Buchenwald, one of the Nazis' most notorious concentration camps. The broad cast of secondary characters include many real-life people on both sides of the regime, and Ms Forsyth excels at breathing tense life into them, and into a country careening toward calamity, wracked by paranoia, complacency, murderous righteousness, and defiant anger.

Perhaps due to an abundance of caution to avoid "romanticizing" a Nazi, the love story between Ava and Leo is safer than it could have been. Ms Forsyth has delved into the reality of the Abwehr conspirators with scholarly diligence, taking the risk of making her male lead sympathetic by presenting the historical facts involving the high-level Nazi intelligence unit; but Leo's conflicting emotions are harder to elucidate. Ava, too, is engaging, but upstaged at the start by irascible Jutta, who commands the page as one of the persecuted who finds purpose amidst the hopelessness. Eventually, Ava comes into her own, transforming into a woman of grit and courage, a match for Jutta's zeal. When she does, we're riveted by her journey as Germany begins to flounder.

The ambiance surrounding the characters is impeccable. Ms Forsyth paints Berlin in the ash and frost of life under the Nazis with such a fine-toothed edge, we can hear the jackboots marching down the avenues and anticipate the Gestapo pounding on our door. She also offers something rarely seen in World War II fiction of this caliber: she shows us that not every German was a rabid Nazi adherent, and that a stalwart, if doomed,

movement arose to try and defeat Hitler. Some of the best scenes in the novel involve these resisters, maturing Ava as she's drawn into their plots, fighting to protect herself, her homeland, and her friends from tyranny. Chilling appearances by Hitler and his real-life henchmen demonstrate the hypnotic grip that Nazism had on the country, and the scenes in Buchenwald are particularly harrowing, evoking the despair of imprisonment in a death camp, but also the enduring spirit of survival. Ms Forsyth's sensitive depiction of Rupert is heartbreaking; he shines as a victim of circumstance, who refuses to become a victim.

This is a big book, both in its scope and message, the fruit of intense research, dedicated craftsmanship, and daring - because with everything known about the atrocities committed by the Nazis, it's almost impossible to believe any German stood against them. Herein lies the novel's strength, and, apparently, its controversy. Ms Forsyth does tell a star-crossed love story, but the book is more than that; it's a fictionalized attempt to shine a light on those whom popular history has neglected, the brave few who believed in a better world than the one Hitler mandated. In the end, the theme is less about a conflicted Nazi and his innocent lover - which can be seen as symbols of Germany itself at the time - but rather about how when everything falls apart and none of the choices left are safe, some still choose the right cause, even if it means they could die for it.

Miranda says

Okay, so, while I'm really enjoying Forsyth's *Bitter Greens* so far...

I have Very Serious opinions about the Beauty and the Beast fairytale. It's my One True Fairytale, my heart, my love. It means quite a lot to me. I also have Very Serious opinions about Nazis in fiction, namely: For fuck's sake, don't try to make them sympathetic. And especially don't use a Nazi officer as the "Beast," oh my God.

I realize the husband in question isn't actually a Nazi but a spy, but still, having the Beast character be a Nazi rubs me entirely the wrong way. I'm really starting to worry about this new trend of having Nazi characters be sympathetic or even main characters -- that was the main reason I chose not to read *Prisoner of Night and Fog*, due to the MC being related to Hitler and therefore supporting his ideology.

Can we not, y'all?

Misha Husnain Ali says

60% in and I just give up.

The premise sounded exciting: a retelling of the Beauty and the Beast story set in Germany during the second World War. The execution is sadly so lackluster that despite the reading level being around YA-ish, I genuinely don't care to read any more words in this book.

Meet Ava, a woman so self-centered that her thoughts when her Jewish best friend from practically birth is hauled away to a prison camp by Nazis are to wonder if the attractive young German spy she has the hots for instigated the arrest in a fit of jealousy.

Meet Ava, i.e., every single badly-written YA heroine ever. She is strikingly beautiful but not aware of this fact. She is good at creative things *hand waving*. She lost a parent early in life and therefore has a tinge of melancholy in her life that was distant enough to not interfere with currently having a good life, but deep enough to rise up randomly to give her character depth. She is full of bold and daring ideas that she idiotically spouts to every single German soldier she seems to meet. This is how she meets Leo, a man so devoid of personality that I have a hard time remembering anything about him now except that he is a sensitive young man with a broken nose that only accentuates his manly features. He is so inflamed by Ava's fiery beauty and fiery opinions and fiery vocal talents that he immediately declares that he must bang her.

Poor Rupert, the Jewish best friend who is also gay for some reason (less threatening for the primary heterosexual couple, I assume), spends his time in this book being sad for very obvious reasons and witnessing terrible crimes against other humans. Then we move on to the next chapter where Ava is continuing to think about how attractive she finds her new husband. The contrast gives me emotional whiplash.

Add in a predictable old girlfriend from the right kind of family to add conflict, some very half-assed information passing from Ava and continued descriptions of everyone suffering around a blandly in love Ava and you have the sum of this book as far as I read it.

I'm sorry, the only reason I would force myself to finish this book was for book club, and I missed book club so if I owned this book in a physical format, I would line my cat's litter box with it so that it would serve some useful function in my life.

Kim Wilkins says

I have read many of Kate's books and loved them all, but this one has got under my skin like no other. I read it in two gulps (over two days), because I was so invested in what would happen to these characters I had come to love. Ava, who is complex and strong and weak sometimes too. Libertas and Jutta: tenacious, wonderful women with strong moral compasses, who refused to give up. Rupert--oh, god, Rupert. I loved him like my own brother and his poetry was sublime. Leo: brilliantly rendered so that he was inscrutable at the start of the book, then given a viewpoint halfway through and unfolded beautifully in all his wonderful, noble dimensions. The craft demonstrated here as Kate weaves real-life characters together with fictional ones, as she takes tropes from fairytale and romance and turns them on their heads, makes it evident that she is a writer at the very height of her powers. What courage it took to write this novel, and to write it her own way; not to flinch from the dark, nor from the light. Well done, my darling friend, Kate. You continue to inspire me.

Isa Lavinia says

I just don't think that some things should be turned into romantic fairytales... like, oh, I don't know... the Holocaust.

Suzanne says

My first foray into this author's work. This isn't a preferred genre for me, and my two star rating doesn't reflect this author's tremendous work on this novel. Her afterward reflects her intense level of interest, and subsequently, research into the subject of Hitler's time. This book is a great reflection of this. Germany is exquisitely visualised in this book, and I learned a lot from this novel.

I will definitely read this author again, but this book was not for me, really only as historical fiction (war) isn't one that I love to read. I highly recommend this to readers who do though.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

The Beast's Garden is set in Berlin from late 1938 until just after the end of the war. A loose retelling of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale, "The Singing, Springing Lark" (itself a variant of the more well-known "The Beauty and the Beast"), the combination of setting and love story makes for an often tense, harrowing reading experience. The main protagonist, Ava Falkenhorst, is a native Berliner, her father a German psychoanalyst and professor, her mother a Spanish singer who died giving birth. She has two older half-sisters, Bertha and Monika, but she was raised by her mother's best friend, Tante Thea, whose son Rupert was born within hours of Ava. Both Ava and Rupert are musicians, Rupert playing trumpet and piano, Ava singing in a low contralto. Their favourite music is jazz and blues - Billie Holiday and other American artists - and the world seems bright and full of promise, and not even the rise of Hitler is taken all that seriously in Ava's artistic, well-educated circle.

Then, *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night), the Night of Broken Glass, when her friend's family is harassed, their apartment destroyed, and they are forced to leave, taking shelter in Ava's family home. It seems, to Ava, like the whole world has suddenly gone mad. It is also on Crystal Night that she meets a young Nazi officer, Leo von Löwenstein, who draws her as a man but repels her as representative of all she considers wrong in Germany. But when her father is arrested for sending letters to warn influential people in other countries about what is happening in Germany, Ava's only recourse is to turn to Leo for help, no matter the cost.

This sets up the remainder of the story, and for a book that lasts the duration of World War II, there's a lot more that happens. Forsyth's Berlin is carefully, authentically recreated, from the glorious old buildings - many commandeered by the Nazis - and Tiergarten (or "Beast's Garden"), to the rubble and ruin it is all reduced to in the air raids. That juxtaposition of glory, grandeur and beauty against the destruction of war is painfully poignant and all too tragic. Knowing, as you do when you start reading, how the war ends, how Hitler survives to the end, and what happens to the political prisoners, the homosexuals, the disabled and the Jews, not to mention neighbouring nations, there were times when this knowledge aided the tense, frightening atmosphere, yet it also made me fear for an unhappy ending for Ava and Leo.

While Ava's perspective dominates, brief scenes from Rupert's point of view within Buchenwald concentration camp - and, later, a few from Leo and Rupert's sister Jutta - flesh out and enhance the narrative while also providing that harrowing, intimate view of the inside of a concentration camp. You only need these scenes to be brief - longer and the impact would be lost - but it also serves to show that side of the war within Germany. Everything in the story takes place within that nation, mostly in Berlin, and the contrasts between the abject poverty, homelessness and violence endured by the Jews, the gypsies and even many Germans, and the opulent wealth and excessive luxuries enjoyed by the upper class, particularly the Nazi

elite, is sickening. So, too, is the waste of human life, the mass exterminations and the sheer cruelty shown to people the Nazis called "sub-human".

Early on, Ava reads her niece - Bertha's young daughter - the fairy tale "The Singing, Springing Lark" and remembers her father reading it to her. When he first asked her what she thought it was about, she told him it was about never giving up. Later, she told him it was about being brave, and when she was older she thought it was about true love. This captures the essence of *The Beast's Garden* well: it is definitely about never giving up, about being brave and about true love, and makes you ponder the idea that these must surely be some of the most important things in life. You could add, though, that it is also about being compassionate (caring for and about others) and about standing up for what is right (which, granted, looks different to different people).

That last one is tricky, because from Hitler's perspective, he was doing what was right - just as Donald Trump (who has often been compared to Hitler, including by Holocaust survivors) also believes in what he is standing up for (or, at least, his supporters do - I'm never entirely sure whether Trump believes anything he says or is just too far-gone in the well of Spin). Forsyth provides balanced insights into the ideological and psychological aspects of Germany's people at this time, presenting the different attitudes and showing just how lacking in unity they really were. A great many of the characters in the novel, according to Forsyth's very interesting Afterword, were real people involved in the underground resistance movement. I knew of the White Rose already, from using the film *Sophie Scholl* in one of my English classes a couple of years ago, and I have long been curious about the German perspective and what else was going on. The French Resistance is well-known, but the German one has long fallen into obscurity - which is a shame. Ava is representative of the many who helped shelter and help Jews, and wanted to stop the war, though they were indeed too few to do all that much against the well-oiled Nazi machine. The obstacles, the price of resistance, the despair and the horror are all captured by Forsyth - she has done a wonderful job of humanising the Germans (even those who supported the Nazis) as well as the Jews, and creating a true ethical and moral crisis. It's this aspect of the story that really gives it depth, clarity and realism.

While I was worried, at first, that Ava's character seemed a little too similar to cliched heroines that I've read before, and that the romance would devolve into formulaic lines, I was pleased (and relieved) when it shifted to focus more on the war, on resisting the Nazis and trying to save their loved ones. The Ava and Leo relationship becomes an anchor throughout, a smoldering, banked fire simply waiting for peace in order to shine to its fullest extent. It is this 'true love' they feel for each other - and the love and loyalty that so many other characters show for each other - that emphasises the horrors of this particular war. Towards the end, Forsyth's experience writing Fantasy novels stands her in good stead: the final scenes (before the epilogue), when Ava attempts a seemingly impossible rescue, are full of tension, brilliantly paced and carefully plotted.

The elements of romance, historical fiction, adventure (that ending) and a responsibility to honour all those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis are all beautifully balanced here in Forsyth's capable hands. She mentions, at the end of her Afterword, the fear she felt at being able to do it justice, that "I was afraid to fail all those people who suffered so terribly during the seven years of my story. It felt like some kind of responsibility ... to do my best to bring their suffering and their heroism to life. To, somehow, bear witness." (p.437) This is one of the powers of literature, of art in general, and a reason why we should privilege the Arts in all its forms. I would also say that, for someone who wasn't even born at the time, Kate Forsyth has done a wonderful job at bearing witness, and allowing me the opportunity to feel like I was there, living it. I'm not sure what more I could want from this book.

S.B. Wright says

Very well known for The Witches of Eileanan Series, Kate Forsyth continues to establish a foothold as a writer of historical fiction for adults.

It began (at least in my reading of her work) with Bitter Greens, which managed to blend historical fiction with myth and fairytale; to give the reader a set of tales that inhabited a narrative borderlands where the fiction and non-fiction elements were separated only by a thin veil.

Then with The Wild Girl, (Forsyth's tale based on the life of Gretchen Wild), the fairytale element formed part of the backdrop, informing the story or perhaps underlining it. Readers were given a well researched and imagined historical.

The Beast's Garden, is slightly different again. It's a reimagining of one of the early Grimm tales, The Singing, Springing Lark. So if you know the tale then the plot might not present too many surprises. Then again part of the fun in reading fairytale remakes is seeing what the author does with the story. I must stress though, while based on the plot of The Singing Springing Lark, The Beast's Garden is not in the least bit fantastical. Indeed in the afterword, Forsyth informs us, that apart from the central characters and their families, all the other major players are historical figures.

While ostensibly a love story, there's tension and action reminiscent of the World War II thrillers I grew up reading and watching. The setting is Berlin 1938-45, covering the rise to prominence of the Nazi's and the effect of the regime not only on the Jewish-German Berliner's but on those who saw their beloved country torn apart by an ideology of hate.

In The Beast's Garden we have Ava (the Beauty) the third daughter of a previously prominent Professor of Psychiatry, she's inherited her mother's Spanish looks and talent for singing. Her family is close with the Feidlers, a Jewish family whose father worked with hers and whose mother practically raised Ava after her own mother's early death. We have Graf Leo von Löwenstein.(The Beast) an officer in the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence) who is smitten by Ava's beauty and her forthright spirit in the face of the regime. What follows is chiefly Ava's and Leo's story as they struggle against the fear and the regime, each in their own way.

Writing an historical fiction set during World War II is a daunting prospect – it's a period that's been worked over considerably in non-fiction, fiction and by Hollywood and countless other entertainment industries. Indeed some 75 years on and it isn't hard to find a contemporary project based on this era of conflict. Then the writer must consider the Holocaust, how to handle a reality that still effects so many.

So the bar is set high, I think for a writer who wants to write fiction that entertains but is also true, not only to the written history but the emotional one. I think in this case Forsyth has done well. The holocaust is not glossed over and it's not played on to manipulate our emotions. There are scenes set in Buchenwald, but Forsyth keeps the emotional focus tight on particular characters and their attempts to survive. The enormity of the holocaust (hard to envision on a personal level) is revealed through juxtaposing reports received by Leo of the mass exterminations with what the reader knows from the prisoners point of view – a personal response magnified by numbers on a page, large numbers.

I also felt that Forsyth captured particularly well the state of fear brought to bear by the Nazi's not only on the Jews but on other Germans who didn't support the regime - fear of being reported to the Gestapo by your

own servants or family members. Much of what propelled me through the novel was Forsyth's ability to sustain tension, fear of the authorities, fear of being discovered engaged in subversive activities, fear of those you love.

There are many stories in war and with 75 years of storytelling the action adventure angle has been done with varying degrees of success. *The Beast's Garden* is not about strikes and counter strikes, hero's storming the beaches but it's every bit as engaging. It's a very human story, about what small groups of people can do, what we hope people would do when faced by an evil that is unacceptable.

This review is based on an uncorrected proof.

RitaSkeeter says

This book is being promoted as a *Beauty and the Beast* re-telling, but that it not completely accurate. It is more a re-telling of *The Singing, Springing Lark*, a variant of the *Beauty and the Beast* tale, though the second half of the story is quite different and is more in line with *East of the Moon, West of the Sun*. Having said that, Forsyth incorporates motifs, such as roses, from the more familiar *Beauty and the Beast*.

Being unfamiliar with *The Singing, Springing Lark*, I set down Forsyth's book to pull out my copy of Grimm's tales to read it. This was a bit of a mistake, as the book follows the structure of the fairytale so foreshadowed events to come. If you prefer not to have key points of novels spoiled, it is also best to avoid the 'about this book' page the publisher has included at the start. It gives away something rather key, with the impact being that the book was robbed of tension for me (view spoiler)

Forsyth has attempted a sophisticated approach to her book. She encompasses viewpoints of many characters, who are all part of the resistance in Germany. **We see people from all different walks of life attempting to bring down the Nazi party and Hitler;** from the Jewish resistance, to those in government departments, to hausfraus. Interspersed are sections set in a concentration camp. These sections were horrific, though short. They are important to the book because they demonstrate the horrors occurring and why many were participating in resistance activities. There are few books I've come across (in English; I'm sure it would be different if I read German), that detail the experience of Germans during WW2. *The Book Thief* (another Aussie, woo!) is obviously an exception to that, as is one of Ursula's lives in *Life After Life*. This is an important story to be told. **Not all Germans were Nazis. Not all Germans supported Hitler. Not all Germans were anti-Semites. Some Germans were actively trying to bring down the Nazi party and assassinate Hitler.**

I love Forsyth's work. *Bitter Greens* is, no exaggeration, possibly in my top 5 of contemporarily published books of all time. I also enjoyed *The Wild Girl*, though perhaps didn't love it as much as the former. The issue for me with *The Wild Girl* was how much I hated the Grimms. I spent most of the book wanting to punch Wilhelm in the nose. Even though he frustrated the hell out of me, I could simultaneously respect how much Forsyth made me feel her characters. Not many authors can write a character that infuriates me so much I want to commit violence.

This was missing for me in this book. Not the need to travel back in time to commit violence against Wilhelm Grimm, but rather to experience characters I felt so strongly about. **I wanted to love Ava and Leo**

but, although I had empathy for them at some points, on the whole I felt ambivalent toward them. I didn't like the insta-love (god, I hate that word) or Leo's repetitive whining that he wanted screw Ava. I would have kicked him in the nuts and walked away. Instead, we are meant to believe that Ava (who has Jewish friends that are basically family), allows herself to fall in love with a Nazi. Not buying it.

I love fairy tale re-tellings. Not just Forsyth's, though hers are of a standard far higher than any others I've read. But I'm just not sure the fairy tale sat comfortably with Nazi Germany for me. The fairy tale elements were a distraction and forced a level of superficiality into the book that was disappointing. The choice of *which* fairy tale possibly compounded this. **Surely the Beast is Hitler, and not Leo?**

I was disappointed by the ending. I understand the author was following the structure of the fairy tale, but it felt (view spoiler)

My final rating: 3 stars. What puts me at a 3? The second half of the book, where the fairytale motifs were not so strong, was infinitely stronger than the first. The first half was 2 stars; the second half was 4 stars.

Eugenia (Genie In A Book) says

This review also appears on my blog [Genie In A Book](#)

*The Beast's Garden took me on an emotional journey from beginning to end, with a suite of dynamic characters and a series of events which left me reeling. I'm no stranger to Kate Forsyth's retellings, and after loving both *Bitter Greens* and *The Wild Girl* - the bar was set high. However, in this case she has once again accomplished what she does best in producing a beautifully crafted novel which explores the both the horrors and inner circle of the Nazi regime with a romance that is complex and believable. There's both a charm and a provoking insight into humanity which comes through in this novel, making it one anyone could enjoy.*

I feel sure that there is goodness in the world, and it's not murder and brutality and force, it's not boots stamping and fists smashing and laughing at people's pain. It's...oh it's kindness and gentleness and trying to understand.

Though the links with fairytales such as the typical 'Beauty and the Beast' story and of course 'The Singing, Springing Lark' original are quite subtle, they still came through. The excerpts from the Grimm Brothers' story in places gave poignant meaning to the already tense drama unfolding as Ava battles to straddle the line between keeping her own family safe and helping her Jewish family friends too. Leo is the Nazi officer who is not out for blood or vengeance like the others, and instead is part of the resistance movement. This is no conventional love story, and the vivid setting provided ample opportunity to explore how, even in a regime characterized by repression and terror - people still fought back.

We are approaching the end with a sense of community, which is possible only in the face of death. Without sorrow, without bitterness. I also know now about the last things of faith, and I know that you are strong and joyful in the awareness of eternal solidarity.

The multiple perspectives and strong cast of secondary characters gave this story even more depth. From seeing what it was like in a concentration camp to the upper echelons of Nazi German society where not everybody is as they seem, I felt like this multifaceted novel had both characterisation and historical detail brilliantly done. Most of all though, I admired Ava's character. Her strength throughout and ability to accomplish the seeming impossible was inspiring. She wasn't just a singer, but an advocate of hope and made the best out of the most difficult situations. There is so much more to be said about The Red Orchestra and how everything ended up, but of course that is for you to find out when you read this masterpiece.

You have to live with honour...you have to have courage...' He compressed one side of his mouth into a half-smile, more rueful than bitter. 'You of all people know that, my brave Ava.'

FINAL THOUGHTS

Intensely emotional and stunningly written, *The Beast's Garden* is a must-read for 2015. It has definitely made an impact on me, and I couldn't stop thinking about it for days afterwards, If you're a historical fiction fan and love an enthralling story, then this is for you. You won't regret it.

Tien says

I loved *Beauty* by Robin McKinley and I adore *Kate Forsyth* so I thought that *The Beast's Garden* would be a wonderful magical retelling. Despite the horribleness of the setting (I meant the nasty gruesome war rather than the actual place), I thought that this would be an excellent foil for *Beauty's* courage and generosity. In the end, whilst I have very much enjoyed the story, I'd say that *The Beast's Garden* is **inspired** by (rather than a retelling of) 'The Singing, Springing Lark', the Grimm Brothers' version of *Beauty and The Beast*.

'The Singing, Springing Lark' is quite a bit different than the well-known tale of *Beauty and The Beast* and if you know your literature, you'd know that Grimm Brothers' version will be much darker. This means that our heroine must be very determined, intelligent, brave, and persistent in order to win a life with her love. Ava was young but bounteous in courage. Her courage carried her to Leo, sustained her through turbulent times, and brought her to her destined future.

It's very clear that *Kate Forsyth* has done her research and I loved knowing that most characters are real historically (the exception being Ava & Leo and their family). The novel was just intricately woven together into a seamlessly stunning love story amidst destruction. It's just like how that red rose on the cover stands out! My only grievance was the lack of magic. I've always associated *Kate Forsyth* with magic and I kept expecting something magical to pop up but aside from some hint of the gypsy, I drew a complete blank.

The Beast's Garden has a lot to offer the readers. The friendships cultivated by Ava were true and lasting. Both Ava and Leo were bound by a force neither could fight off and by embracing love, they found a little safe haven in a dark world. As with all war fiction, you'd always wonder how you yourself will act and we are shown just how courageous some can be in fighting for humanity whilst others sought only to destroy. A smashing read and highly recommended to historical fiction fans.

Thanks to Random House Australia via NetGalley for eARC in exchange of honest review

Kathy says

I must say, I am in awe of Kate Forsyth. I cannot fathom how her writing just keeps getting better and better. To put it in one sentence – *The Beast's Garden* is amazing. Set in Berlin in WWII *The Beast's Garden* is a retelling of *The Singing, Springing Lark* (a Grimm Brothers' variant of *Beauty & the Beast*) but this is more than a retelling and varies a little from Kate's previous work as the historical research into this time period, bringing it to life as she has, is compelling and incredible. The characters were amazing and their tale of love and fortitude, resistance and courage will stay with me and take pride of place in my all time favourite books for sure. I feel I cannot give this review the accolade that it truly deserves, but know that I highly recommend this book 5+++

Amanda - Mrs B's Book Reviews says

A haunting portrait of life during Nazi occupied Germany, with gentle undertones of a Grimm Brothers fairy tale, 'The Singing, Springing Lark' or an offshoot of *Beauty and The Beast*, is Australian author Kate Forsyth's 2015 release, *The Beast's Garden*. I felt compelled to read *The Beast's Garden*, as Forsyth is a novelist who comes highly recommended by many readers. I was also intrigued as to how her fairytale retelling would work under a wartime backdrop. For me, any literature that stands out from the crowd on World War II, is sure to gain my attention. *The Beast's Garden* did this with ease.

The Beast's Garden begins in 1938, Hitler has already started his removal of the Jewish population in Germany. These events signal a time of great change and danger for many. When nineteen year old Ava Falkenhorst, a beautiful and talented singer meets Leo von Lowenstein, their attraction is immediate, though Ava tries her hardest to deny it. For Ava, Leo is someone to detest, a Nazi officer. However, Ava has to put her feelings for the regime Leo works for aside, in order to rescue her family from certain death. Entering into a marriage with Leo, guarantees both her and her family's safety at a time of great danger. Forsyth's novel covers many harrowing experiences of this time, from Ava's day to day survival as a young German woman during violent Berlin, to her close Jewish friend's fight for his life in a concentration camp. *The Beast's Garden* also covers the resistance movement active in Berlin, driven by brave people such as writers and artists. These brave souls risked their lives over and over again, to uncover key intelligence, or save people from the wrath of the Nazis. When Leo becomes involved in a direct plot to assassinate Hitler, Ava must summon all the strength and bravery she can to rescue her husband. This dramatic tale of love, duty and sacrifice, demonstrates the strength of the human spirit in the face of war.

Forsyth presents one of the most compelling, as well as vivid portraits of life in Berlin under the Nazi rule I have read. Over the years I have read many books, both fiction and nonfiction on this era but there was something so authentic about *The Beast's Garden*. It is one of those novels that I will not forget in a hurry.

What I appreciated about Forsyth's angle in *The Beast's Garden* was an aspect of the war which is hardly ever touched or mentioned. Forsyth draws our attention to the many German citizens who would they could, risking their lives to help many during this turbulent time, through the underground resistance movement. Adding to the authenticity of a book that I feel sets the bar extremely high in World War II fiction, is Forsyth's employ of real life characters from this time, such as high ranking Nazi officers and Hitler's entourage. These aspects of *The Beast's Garden* made it all the more fascinating, as well as realistic.

Ava and Leo are such a romantic couple, it is hard to resist their individual charms. Ava's musical talents and naturally caring nature, makes her an enduring character. Ava is paired with Leo, an extremely handsome young man, who loves deeply and passionately but has his secrets. I loved the way Ava and Leo's romance progressed, from the first spark, to the deep love that later developed. I liked how Ava showed much resistance to Leo and eventually gave into his charms, their love story held me captive. My only complaint was I wanted more build up and tension in the early stages of their courtship. Those who appreciate fairy tales will love the sections in the book on Ava and Leo's relationship, it beautifully echoes 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Singing, Springing Lark'. There is plenty of rich characterisation, as well as tragic moments, to keep the reader enthralled. The latter parts of the novel had me turning the pages at a frantic pace, I was desperate to discover the final fate of the characters I began to care so deeply about.

The Beast's Garden is a highly skilful novel that demonstrates Forsyth's craft in the art of weaving together historical events, with an unforgettable romance, which harks back to a traditional fairytale. *The Beast's Garden* is a book I would recommend over and over again, it is a true testament of love and the will to survive in a time of war.

*<https://mrsbbookreviews.wordpress.com>
