

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Fu Cheuk Yiu Tiffany

Name of School : Diocesan Girls' School

Book Title : *Olga*

Author : Bernhard Schlink

Publisher : Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd.

As a history student studying the local academic curriculum, I have been learning about international relations in the 20th century at school. One of the more enlightening topics covered in class was the German Empire's desire for global dominance during the two World Wars - while studying it, I could not cease to ponder: What other kinds of agonies did the Germans endure? What kind of feelings did they have for their country and its development?

While being so invested in such a question, I happened to come across Olga at a local bookstore. Published in 2021 and written by Bernhard Schlink, a renowned German writer who has written award-winning novels such as *The Reader*, I was immediately drawn to Olga and its multifaceted themes while flipping through some of its first pages. The story is an emotive recount of the adventures of Olga Rinke, an ordinary German living in the early 20th century with a not-so-ordinary life. Her experiences certainly may not seem so ground-breaking nor promising, but reading it from the perspective of a teenager living in the 21st century, I could not help but immerse myself in the sentiment that came with the book and feel encouraged by Olga's long-standing perseverance.

Similar to most Germans, Olga was born into a low social status. Having received maltreatment from her grandmother after becoming orphaned, Olga seeks

companionship from her classmate, Herbert, who happens to be the son of an aristocratic family living nearby. The story follows the journey of Herbert and Olga as their relationship develops into an ill-fated one.

The story is cleverly split into three layers: Part I comprises a third-person narration of Olga's life, focusing more on her experiences in her early days, as well as the place Herbert holds in her heart throughout the story. Following a typical romantic storyline, Olga and Herbert catch feelings for each other as they mature, despite gaining disapproval from Herbert's family. Both enjoy sharing their varying ambitions and dreams: Olga is too impoverished to continue her further studies, so she opts to self-study for an entrance exam to a teaching college, whereas Herbert yearns to embark on adventures and expeditions. One day, Herbert decides to continue his expedition to the Arctic just before the start of World War I - and just like that, he is gone, forever.

Not letting her grieving get the worst out of her, Olga continues her life as an elementary school teacher until she becomes deaf. Her deafness, however, does not stop her from making a living out of her own hands. Olga eventually becomes a regular seamstress to a local German family, befriending one of the children, Ferdinand. Subsequently, the readers are introduced to Part II - a personal, thought provoking retelling of Olga's life from Ferdinand's perspective. Ferdinand recounts the times when he conversed with Olga, who relied on lip-reading for communication. Having shared a warm, familial relationship, Ferdinand is profoundly stricken when Olga passes away and proceeds to learn more about this grandmotherly figure's life. At a post office somewhere outside Germany, Ferdinand miraculously unearths a series of letters written by Olga to Herbert - and these letters form Part III of the story.

Each part only gets more intriguing and intimate to

Olga herself. While Part I involves more narration than storytelling and is rather bland in emotion, in Part II, the readers get to know Olga better from a less detached perspective, and Part III exemplifies the inner dilemma that Olga faces throughout her life. Her letters are visceral in the sense that it depicts how she, on the inside, has changed through time. Having dwelled on her longing for Herbert's arrival for years, Olga gradually succumbs to the hopelessness that Herbert is, indeed, dead. Then, she witnesses Eik, her son born out of wedlock with Herbert, distancing himself from her as he gets released from Russian captivity. Hope as well as her family slowly vanish during the process, and yet Olga still is bold enough to endure the hardships and continue living her life as if nothing has happened.

Moreover, by learning about Olga's political views, I also started to understand how different Germans viewed German aggression during the early 20th century: many,

like Herbert, wanted Germany to prosper and were willing to fight for more land to ensure such prosperity; while some, like Olga, were concerned with the wellbeing of humans and against such an act of aggression. The letter Olga wrote for Herbert during WW1 also provides some insight into how terrified and abhorred Germans were during the war. In the letter, she comments, "Here in the village, there's no enthusiasm. Every call-up is a blow for farm and family." Germans, in modern history textbooks, are mostly portrayed as being ambitious and supportive of war. Here, Olga's letters reveal a different perspective.

The most heart-breaking element in the story, however, is how helpless the strong-willed and perseverant Olga is in the story. In a society where women, especially those that have not grown up in financially able families, are being looked down on, Olga, despite her talents and abilities, can only limit herself to

working as a school teacher for the rest of her life. In addition, Olga loses two of the three most important figures in her life: Herbert, whom she has stayed loyal to until her last breath, and Eik, whom she had to abandon and take care of as a non-motherly figure. She counts on her letters to a deceased Herbert to live through the pain that can never be mended, and you cannot help but feel sorry for Olga - she has not committed any atrocities, and yet she cannot fully grasp the choices she could have been given in life.

While my questions have been answered in this book, upon reading it, I was more impressed by how the book was able to be so soul-stirring in its essence. Its subtle but devastating portrayal of the agonizing reality of women and the impoverished living in the early 20th century also served as a reminder that the aforementioned groups had no bright future ahead of them back in the day. Yet, I felt so inspired by Olga's

perseverance and tenacity in the sense that she rarely complains, despite knowing how her abilities were inhibited by destiny alone. The book has taught me how blessed I am - to have received the opportunities of education and a loving family. We should always analyze the scars of history to secure a better future for ourselves and those around us.