

Christine Tran

YA Literature Booktalk

T 4:30-7:15

Anna and the Swallow Man by Gavriel Savit

Book details:

Author: Gavriel Savit

Genre: Historical Fiction, Fantasy

Topics: Adventures, Friendship, Great girl role models, History

Book type: Fiction

Publisher: Alfred A. Knopf

Publication date: January 26, 2016

Publisher's recommended age(s): 12-18 years old (from middle school and on)

Number of pages: 240

Available on: Nook, Audiobook (unabridged), Hardback, eBooks, Kindle

I. Quotes/Brief Descriptions:

“Because,” said the swallow man. “A friend is not someone to whom you give the things you need when the world is at war. A friend is someone to whom you give the things that you need when the world is at peace.”

“People are dangerous. And the more people there are in one place, the more dangerous the place becomes... “Human beings are the best hope in the world of other human beings to survive.”

“...the Swallow Man knew well which roots were good to eat, which berries were safe, what fruits yielded a good nut or seed, which leaves left a sweet taste in the mouth and which a bitter...”

As they travel around Poland, the Swallow Man begins to teach Anna how to survive. First he teaches her practical lessons. He also begins to teach Anna a new language which he calls “Road”. In “Road there are more than one way to say everything. It’s very simple to translate something into Road, but it’s very difficult to translate anything back. An example of the language of Road is the Swallow Man’s descriptions of the German and Russian soldiers they meet in their travels. He tells Anna that the soldiers look like young men, but the Germans

are Wolves who are part of a cruel pack while the Russians are Bears who are solitary but proud. Both are determined to harm people. The Swallow Man also teaches Anna how to survive in the forest.

II. Teaching Ideas/Resources:

1. Throughout my reading of *Anna and the Swallow Man*, it makes me wonder if the Swallow Man was a real man who took Anna under his wing or if Anna created him to deal with the loss of her father. I truly think that Savit left the novel open-ended on purpose. I really recommend this novel to all readers of all ages. It is a fun read because we can enter into a world of fantasy while it still being a serious read about history. It is a different take on the usual Holocaust stories. I think that everyone has the potential to interpret this novel differently. This book is an absolute 2016 must-read for teens, kids and adults alike.

2. *Anna and the Swallow Man* is a novel that deals with difficult themes of right and wrong, war and death and justice. With these themes, I feel that it would be great to teach it in a classroom environment. Many essay topics can be compiled together for writing and analyzing.

3. Specifically, I would recommend this book to middle schoolers because the reading level would not be too difficult to read for them. Since one of the theme throughout this book is 'right from wrong', it would make life lesson for students to relate upon. It will teach them a little bit about Holocaust history, but all at the same time it will not bore them since it has elements of fantasy.

Why should you give this book to teens?

It teaches teens a sense of individuality and making critical and important choices in life.

It helps guide teens to take more interest in Holocaust history and the horror the Jews went through during those times.

It teaches teens literary style, deep thoughts, and startling insight.

Teachers, students and even families can talk about the effects of war on children. Some discussion questions can be:

What do you know about kids caught up in the world's conflicts today?

Do you see any way to help them?

Why do you think stories about kids thrown into terrible circumstances and having to survive are so popular? Which other ones do you know?

What do you know about the history of Poland? Does this story make you want to learn more?

III. Favorite passage or excerpt:

Gavriel Savit's novel ponders deep mysteries, ethical dilemmas, death, and survival as a little girl grows up wandering a war-torn world with a mysterious unknown stranger. The unusual, sometimes dreamlike narrative voice will resonate with serious readers, as will its tendency to ponder deep questions, from ethical choices in impossible situations to the role of language in shaping the world. Savit writes strongly about how it feels to constantly change your reality as needed. These same qualities make *Anna and the Swallow Man* an unlikely fit for readers who prefer a more action-oriented style with issues and values clearly defined. But for those willing to engage with its world, it offers glimmers of enduring, unlikely good and beauty even in the darkest moments, as when the two title characters find a murdered friend's body in the woods:

“He put his lips together and called as he had done all those many, many lifetimes ago in Kraków, and sure enough, a bright blue-and-orange swallow flitted down to his finger. Gingerly the Swallow Man lifted the lapel of [the dead man's] jacket and nestled the bird inside the breast pocket, close to his stilled chest.”

“‘He’ll stay there,’ said the Swallow Man, as if to Anna. ‘He’ll protect [our friend] ... keep the crows off. He’ll be all right.’ And then again, ‘He’ll be all right.’”

“Anna’s mind conjured, suddenly, an image of a far-off time when there would be nothing left of [their friend] but a bearded skeleton, a time when the swallow would build himself a nest inside the broad ribs of [the man’s] chest.”

In this scene, I can see the true bond between Anna and the Swallow Man. They need each other. Anna needs the Swallow Man to be there because she is lost, has no idea how to survive or make decisions and she does not have any protection while the Swallow Man needs her to feel like he has a purpose of being real. This is my favorite passage because I can see that these two are not just two strangers using each other, but they are caring for each other to survive throughout their journey. I can witness their friendship development.

IV. Gavriel Savit's other works:

Savit is a writer and an actor. His writing has appeared on the New York Times' bestseller list, and as a performer, he has appeared both on and off Broadway as well as on stages across the world. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a degree in Musical Theatre, Gavriel Savit moved to New York to launch his performing career with shows at places like the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, Goodspeed Musicals in Connecticut, the Westside Theatre, Off-Broadway, and eventually Broadway. Like many actors, Gavriel read many novels like Neil Gaiman's Sandman series, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Adam Levin's *The Instructions*, Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*, Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*, and the stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Due to all the reading he did, it inspired him to write a novel himself. Savit

sprung an idea and he started to write his first novel, *Anna and the Swallow Man*. It was published by Knopf's Books for Young Readers division on January 26th, 2016.

Author biography:

