

HONEY CAKE

Joan Betty Stuchner. Illustrated by Cynthia Nugent. 91 pages. Tradewind Books, Vancouver, 2007

Reviewed by Dvoira Yanovsky

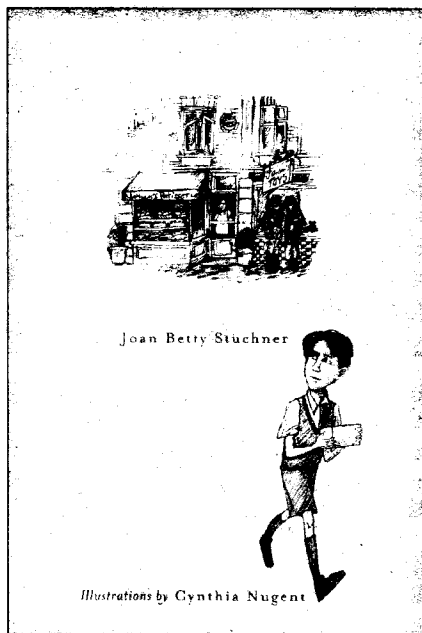
Honey Cake, a recent entry into the children's Holocaust literature genre, is a lovely little book. Aimed at eight to ten year olds, Joan Betty Stuchner's *Honey Cake* is a sweet but unsentimental story about nine-year-old David Nathan, a Danish Jew living in Copenhagen just prior to the attempted deportation of the Danish Jews in October 1943.

Written from David's perspective, *Honey Cake* begins with David and his older sister Rachel drinking dreadful wartime chicory coffee while Mama announces, "I'll bake a honey cake for Rosh Hashanah to make the New Year sweet." No one, not even David's father—baker and owner of Nathan's Patisserie—can bake a tastier honey cake. Thus begins the slice of life that Stuchner captures with detail, sensitivity, and humour.

David's concerns are both ordinary and extraordinary. Like any young boy, David has a best friend: neighbour and classmate Elsa Jensen, whose mother works for the Nathan bakery and whose father owns Jensen's Toys. He has little dreams—to receive the wonderful train set in the toy store window for his tenth birthday—and big dreams: to be a writer just like Hans Christian Andersen. Even though math problems might make his head spin, David's writing is good enough to be selected for the school magazine and he can't wait to see his story published. Like Mama's honey cake, life is sweet.

However, there is bitter mixed

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in with the sweet. David must learn to accept Nazi soldiers patrolling the streets and to guard his speech because, as Papa warns, "walls have ears. And sometimes trees do too." He discovers that his sister is in the Resistance, risking her life to commit acts of sabotage. David also has to live through the terror of air raids and even deliver a message for the Resistance.

Nevertheless, David's life is really no different from the average Dane's—until the morning of September 29, when Rabbi Melchior steps up in the synagogue and says, "Friends, I have bad news. The Nazis plan to round up Denmark's Jews tonight. We must go home and prepare our escape." As happened with most of Denmark's 8,000 Jews, David's family is assisted in escaping by their neighbours, the Jensens. Within hours David and his family are on a train speeding for the coast, leaving him lost and bewildered: "I was leaving Copenhagen—my home. Everything in my life was going too fast, just like the train."

Stuchner paints a realistic picture of occupation life from a

child's perspective, accurately capturing in David's voice a young boy's natural rhythms and speech patterns. You never have the sense that David is a puppet, mouthing impossibly adult observations and ideas. Stuchner's language is rich and descriptive while retaining a child-like quality, as seen in David's opening remarks: "I had hoped that by the time Jewish New Year came around the leaves would form a crunchy brown carpet covering the streets of Copenhagen." A Vancouver librarian and part-time teacher, Stuchner has also acted and performed as a storyteller, which may account for the strong sense of voice that infuses the narrative.

Although the subject matter might lend itself to high drama, *Honey Cake* remains fairly low key. While creating moments of genuine tension, suspense, and introspection, Stuchner's writing is never exploitive or sensationalistic. A gentle young soul reading this story would find David's tale absorbing and thrilling, but never terrifying or overwhelming.

Nor is Stuchner afraid to tackle the awkward questions that children ask and adults struggle to answer honestly. David pon-

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ders the meaning of bravery, asking Papa, "If King Christian loves us, why did he surrender to the Nazis? That wasn't very brave, was it?" Wise Papa responds, "There are so many ways of being brave, David," as he explains that the Danes were "outnumbered and unprepared." Or, when Elsa complains about the Allied bombing raids that bring death to those they are trying to help, Mr. Jensen honestly replies, "Sometimes innocent people are the ones who suffer most in war." And when Elsa shoots back, "That's not fair," Mr. Jensen responds simply, "No, you're right. It isn't fair."

Although the protagonist is male, this is not a "boy's" story. There are many strong female characters, including Mama, Rachel, David's defiant teacher Miss Kiersted who refuses to return the hated Nazi salute, and

feisty Elsa. When David is shocked that his sister—a girl—is involved in blowing up building and railroad tracks, it is Elsa who informs him that "Girls can fight too. If the Nazis are still here when I'm older, I'll join the Resistance too."

Cynthia Nugent's exquisite illustrations are an integral part of *Honey Cake*. Her finely detailed black and white sketches capture the vitality, warmth, and personality of each character. Nugent, a Canadian award-winning illustrator and author, travelled to Copenhagen to research her drawings, contributing an historical air of time and place.

The motif of Mama's honey cake ties the story and reader together. David's anticipation of the annual treat becomes ours—will Mama make the cake? Will she have the right ingredients? Will they even get to eat the cake?

Symbolic of a sweet life, it also signifies hope for the future and faith in humanity. Yet, as the honey is tempered by strong black coffee and spices, so David is tempered by the reality of life under the Nazis. Fittingly, the story ends with a tempting honey cake recipe that readers will no doubt clamour for his or her significant adult to make.

Honey Cake is about family, friendship, and courage, rather than persecution and misery. Stuchner's story uplifts the reader, teaching—but not preaching—about an important moment, not just in Jewish history, but in the history of a people that acted with honour and righteousness. It is refreshing to read a story in which oppressed people work together instead of against each other. As David's mother says of that time, "Everyone in Denmark is family."♦