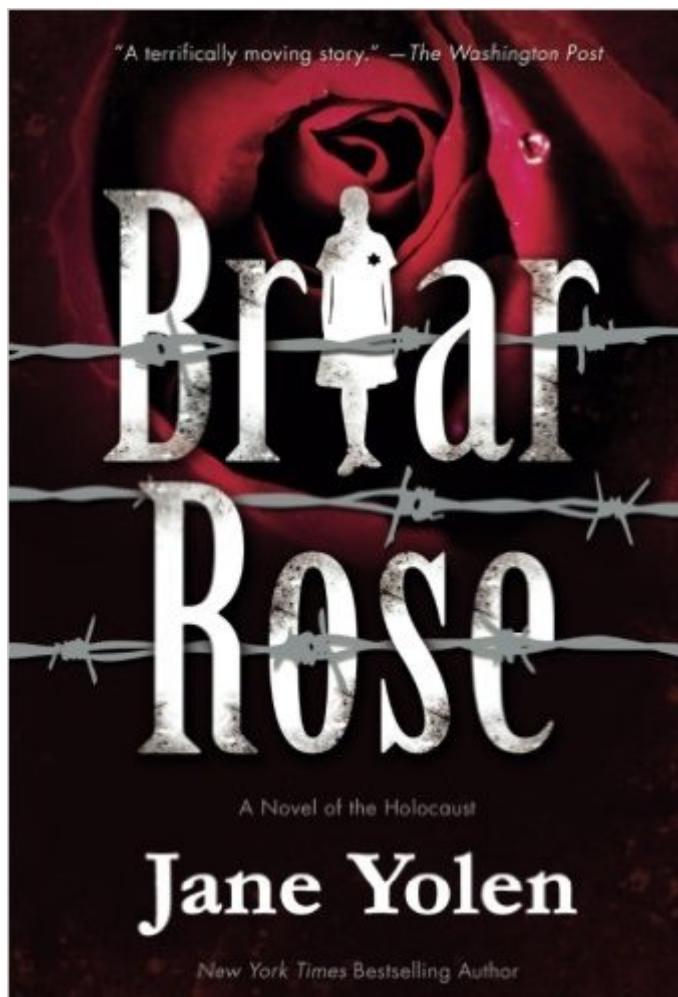


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Briar Rose (Fairy Tales)



Synopsis

Briar Rose is a historically sensitive retelling of Sleeping Beauty set amid forests patrolled by the German army during World War II. In the heat of midsummer 1942, deep in a forest in the heart of Poland, Briar Rose arrives at a castle that has fallen into the hands of an evil army. Corrupted by dark deeds and choked by a poisonous mist, the castle will soon come to be known as Chelmno extermination camp. And in that place of death, Briar Rose is plunged into a deep sleep....Ever since she was a child, Rebecca has been enchanted by her grandmother Gemma's stories of Briar Rose. Becca would have sworn the stories were made up, but on her deathbed Gemma extracts from Becca a promise to fulfill three impossible requests: find the castle, find the prince, and find the spell-maker. Her vow sends Becca on a remarkable journey to uncover the truth of Gemma's astonishing claim: I am Briar Rose. Yolen's graceful retelling of the German folktale of "Briar Rose" known to some as "Sleeping Beauty" sets the story amid forests patrolled by the German army during World War II. Yolen confronts the deeply tragic events of the Holocaust with lyrical prose and rich characterizations that tell a tale of good and evil, hope and despair. The Washington Post called Briar Rose "a terrifically moving story."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I tend to disagree with the reviewers who say this book is unsuitable for readers under 14. I was 9 or 10 when I first read it 15 years ago and though I may not have grasped everything in it with quite the same degree of understanding that I bring to it nowadays, it certainly wasn't unsuitable. Children are

far more capable of handling dark subject matter than most adults will admit. As for the 'homosexual themes' I've seen some reviewers mention... The Nazis persecuted homosexuals nearly as zealously as they persecuted the Jews. This is historical fact, and one that tends to be overlooked. Kudos to Jane Yolen for addressing it. I wouldn't necessarily hand this book to a child under 10, but it's definitely appropriate for 6th graders and up. As for the book itself, Yolen does a lovely job of interweaving past and present, fairy tale and reality. "Gemma's" version of Briar Rose has long been one of my favorite modern retellings. There are some issues with the book--the shallowness of the minor characters, the inordinate convenience of Josef Potocki's appearance in the story--but these are easily brushed aside due to the cruel beauty of the fairy tale, which is indisputably the highlight of the novel. The only major problem is this: Granted, the characters believed Gemma came to the US before the war. But. Are we truly to believe that a Jewish family descended from an Eastern European immigrant never made the connection between the details in Gemma's unique telling of Briar Rose and the Nazis? Big black boots, shiny silver eagles, deadly "mist", and no one but the heroine lives happily ever after, yet none of them picked up on the Nazi references?

Gemma's last wish is that grand-daughter Becca find the castle; her dying words are that she is Briar Rose. However, the truth is entangled in the single fairy tale that Gemma tells her three grand-daughters throughout their lives. The tale she tells is not standard fare. This tale is elusive. What does it mean that Gemma is Briar Rose? How could a castle be part of Gemma's past? The French gave us the word plot through "plait," which refers to the unraveling the reader must do as she reads. Imagine a plait of cloth lying horizontally with the loose part on the left (reading occurs left to right) as a closed book. Open the book, read and unravel, read and unravel. This is the task Gemma has given Becca: Unravel the past. The family knows nothing of Gemma's past. Her only clue is the fairy tale: Briar Rose, a new telling of Sleeping Beauty. The audience knows the power of fairy tales to hide universal truths, that sometimes an external force, in the form of a handsome prince, defeats evil characters and their spells, and sometimes the inner power of the character is the impetus. Jane Yolen's brilliant retelling of Sleeping Beauty through Gemma's tale, is one novel in the Fairy Tales series begun by Terry Windling, in which writers retell a fairy tale in a modern setting. In this tale is hidden the evil of the Holocaust in one hideous castle run by Nazis, and one princess, Briar Rose, awakened by the power of a kiss. No more than that will I tell. Yolen employs a favorite literary device in Gemma's telling of the tale. In the beginning chapters the reader is supposedly given the finished plait of the story.

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