



Book of the Week

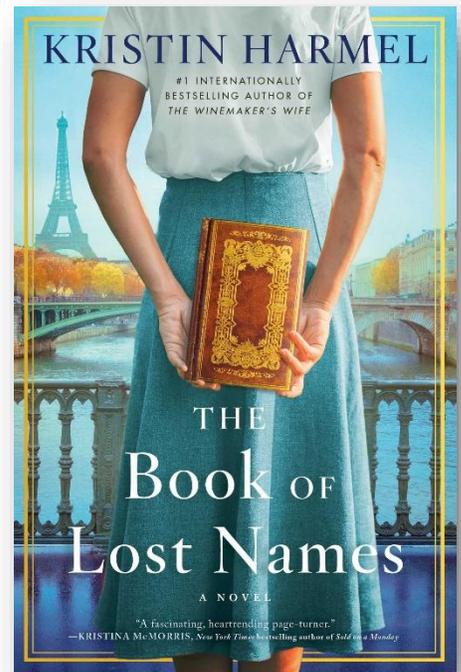
***The Book of Lost Names* by Kristin Harmel**

Book Review by Peggy Bates

Set in Nazi occupied France midway through World War II, *The Book of Lost Names* by Kristin Harmel is a well-documented fictional account of the effort to aid the escape of many thousands of people, particularly young children, to the safety of Switzerland. A necessary tool in doing this was creating new identities for each person, as well as formulating plausible backstories for travel and providing guides to get the children and others past the many roadblocks and train station checks to the Swiss border. Although based on fact, this novel centers in fictional Aurignon, a small French town not too far from the border, and the network of dedicated citizens and resistance fighters who were heroic in their mission to save so many lives.

The story begins 60 years after the end of World War II with the publication of an article by the BBC of a state librarian in Berlin who is trying to reunite books that had been “liberated” by the Nazis back to their rightful owners. The article shows a photo of the librarian holding a very large book and when Eva Traube Abrams, a retired librarian living in Florida, sees it she is flooded with emotion and memories. Although she is quite elderly by then, she knows she must immediately fly to Berlin to claim her book and reclaim the history that she has suppressed for so many years.

As a young Jewish graduate student in Paris in 1942, Eva Traube was alarmed to hear from Joseph, a fellow student, that within a few days there would be a “sweep” of 20,000 Jews previously spared because of the value of their skills. At home, she confirmed the news with her Polish-born father who told her that if anything happened, she was to separate from her parents and that his Parisian boss would help her to escape to Switzerland. When later that evening a neighbor prevailed on the ladies to babysit her children while she took her sick mother to the hospital, the gendarmes pounded on door of the Traube’s next-door apartment and took her father away to join the hundreds of Jews that were



being herded down the street. When the help from her father's boss was too dangerous for him to consider doing it, he supplied her with forms, pens, ink and other materials and assured her that she was talented enough to make forgeries of documents needed to get her Mamusia and herself down to Aurignon, a town he had heard would help Jews escape.

The passes and documents Eva forged overnight were excellent, but on the last leg their journey she became flustered by the harassment of a Nazi inspector and was rescued by Rémy, a handsome stranger who noticing her distress pretended to be her husband, and she and her mother safely arrived in their new haven. They were taken in by the proprietress of a boarding house who immediately spotted the excellent forgeries. Soon Eva found herself followed by, the local priest, who recruited her help to forge documents for the many Jewish children hidden by several citizens for transport to Switzerland. The headquarters for the secret forgeries was the ancient library in the Catholic church.

Of course, this is only the beginning of a historically researched novel and there is much more to tell. Eva Traube transforms to Eva Moreau; Rémy reappears as the other forger who is dedicated to fighting for the French cause on all fronts; Mamusia is inconsolable about the loss of her husband to Auschwitz and angry about Eva's determination to help with the relocation of others; Genevieve joins the forger team; several French matrons are heroic in their participation in this effort; Joseph, now called Gerard, returns to the story as a member of the resistance; and, of course, Père Clément. But the book of lost names is key to this remarkable story. Soon after she creates identities for the first children to be transported across the border, Eva realizes that these children may be too young to remember their heritage or their family names now that she has "erased" their past. It is too dangerous to keep records. She and Rémy devise a mathematical code for cross referencing the old and new identities, hidden in plain sight, and marked in an actual ancient tome, *Epitres et Evangiles*, containing centuries of sermons and prayers. It was their hope that it would serve as a guide to reunite children with surviving family members.

I hope you will find this book as engaging as I did. There is a little of everything to interest the reader: history, suspense, mystery, romance, drama, family, war, good people, and evil ones and told by a consummate storyteller with a clean, crisp style that keeps you turning the pages to find out what happens next. Kristin Harmel uses the story within a story technique to bookend the present with the past. She is the author of several novels with World War II themes including *The Winemaker's Wife*, *When We Meet Again*, and *The Sweetness of Forgetting*.

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