

Comedy in a Minor Key

Hans Keilson

About the book

Originally published in 1947, *Comedy in a Minor Key* tells the story of a young Dutch couple who have chosen to hide a Jew in their house during World War Two. At the start of the book we learn that Nico, the Jewish fugitive has died from an illness and the couple, Wim and Marie are attempting to dispose of a body that can't officially exist. The rest of the story is mostly told through a series of flashbacks from the year that Wim, Marie and Nico spent together in their small, suburban house. We see the awkward first meeting between them, their shared dinners and a number of incidents where the secret is nearly uncovered. Despite the extraordinary circumstances, Keilson presents the three central characters as essentially struggling with the relationship of lodger and landlords. There are concerns about the size of portions, jealousy of the possession of cigarettes and ornaments, and a near catastrophe over a crossword. In Nico's anti-climatic death at the start of the novel, we see the extremity of the Holocaust; a normal death is now abnormal – the ironic 'comedy' in the title is Nico's survival of the Nazis, but his death from illness. By exploring the Holocaust through the daily events of suburban life, Keilson demonstrates the harrowing pressure on both those who hid enemies of the Nazis, and those hiding from the Nazis.

About the Author

Hans Keilson was a Jewish physician who fled his native Germany after he was prohibited from working by the Nazis in 1936. Keilson took refuge in the Netherlands and when Germany occupied the country from 1940 he joined the resistance and applied his medical expertise to help children traumatised by the war. As well as *Comedy in a Minor Key* he has also written *The Death of the Adversary*, a novel about Hitler's rise to power.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

1. why has Keilson chosen the title *Comedy in a Minor Key* for this story?

2. during the novel, explicit mention of the extermination of Jews in gas chambers is made only once, and Nazis are not mentioned at all, despite these threats being the reason for Nico, Wim and Marie's situation. What is the effect of this?
3. how are Wim and Marie transformed by everything that happens in the year they share with Nico?
4. how does the novel fit with concepts of good and evil in relation to events like the Holocaust?

You can use HMDT resources to find out more about resistance and rescuers

<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/liberation-resistance-and-rescuers> and view images <http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/image-library/liberation-resistance-and-rescuers>.