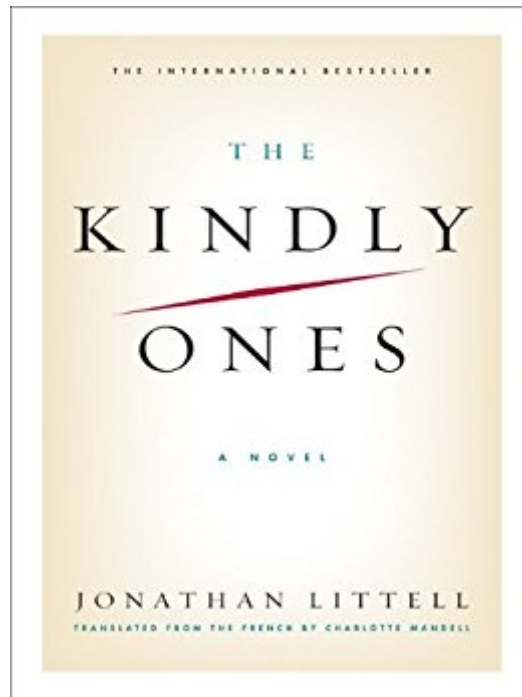


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The Kindly Ones: A Novel



Synopsis

“Simply astounding. . . . The Kindly Ones is unmistakably the work of a profoundly gifted writer.” Time A literary prize-winner that has been an explosive bestseller all over the world, Jonathan Littell’s The Kindly Ones has been called “a brilliant Holocaust novel | a world-class masterpiece of astonishing brutality, originality, and force,” and “relentlessly fascinating, ambitious beyond scope,” by Michael Korda (Ike, With Wings Like Eagles). Destined to join the pantheon of classic epics of war such as Tolstoy’s War and Peace and Vasily Grossman’s Life and Fate, The Kindly Ones offers a profound and gripping experience of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An unknown American writer (even a bilingually educated one) who attempts to write an immense novel in French would usually expect to receive nothing but mockery for his trouble. As if the linguistic effort weren’t audacious enough, then there’s the subject matter: an epic of World War II gore and phantasmagoria from the point of view of a reflective--but largely unrepentant--German SS

officer. It's the sort of literary high-wire act that should have ended in a face plant. Instead, Jonathan Littell's "Les Bienveillants" somehow swept France's top literary prizes when it was published in 2006. Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire? After a brief prologue in which the narrator introduces himself as a war criminal in hiding, the action opens with the Germans' brutal invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and concludes, almost a thousand pages later, with Berlin in ashes in 1945. The protagonist and narrator, Dr. Max Aue, bobs along with the flow and ebb of German fortunes on the Eastern Front like a stormtrooper Candide--except that he inflicts as well as endures enormous suffering. Aue is not only an enthusiastic Nazi, but a first-class catastrophe of misdirected sexuality. Without giving anything away about his issues, let's just say that he gives anyone in Dr. Freud's files--or Greek tragedy--a run for their money. Yet whatever sympathy the narrator may occasionally earn for his tortured personal backstory, sporadic self-awareness and reliable literary flair is quickly squandered by his willing participation in many of the Nazi regime's atrocities, as well as several that are entirely his own.

I became interested in reading "The Kindly Ones" because a review in the Guardian Weekly in March 2009 explained that this massive novel explores an intriguing question: how apparently ordinary people could have become complicit in horrors such as the Nazi Holocaust. I assumed that a book weighing in at just under 1000 pages must have something substantial to say on the matter, so despite some reservations about the lurid content (which I'll come to later), I bought the book. So if you are thinking of buying it for the same reasons, here's my impression: The truth is that although the opening chapter of the book concentrates substantially on the "ordinary men" theme, the rest of the novel seems to largely abandon it. The most telling evidence of this is that having opened with a question, the book has no conclusion. It simply crash-lands where the narrative ends. And in case you're guessing that the book is *deliberately* left open-ended to keep the reader thinking, I must say that I find that hard to credit. The story just ... stops. The moments that I have been able to identify, however, where the narrative *substantially* ponders the issue of "ordinary men" - and the horrors they perpetrate - are as follows: p. 95: Max Aue (the narrator), witnessing the massacres of Jews in the east, realises that his own urge to be "radical", his yearning for "the absolute" has led him to this point; p. 147: Aue muses that the apparent sadism and brutality of the SS is a result of them psychologically reaching for the converse of the pity for "the other" which they recognise in themselves; p. 178/9: Aue realises that he is becoming inured to the horror surrounding him, and attempts to regain that "initial shock"; pp.

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