



The Big Lie

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Media type:

Book

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August 2012. Jessika Keller is 17, and her closest friend, next-door neighbour Clementine, is much the same age. The girls are taking turns on a childhood swing at the end of Jessika's Buckinghamshire garden, chatting about Clementine's recent holiday. 'I watched as she threw herself back on the swing,' remembers Jessika, 'her t-shirt rising up, her flat, white belly exposed to the air....She made these grunts of effort that stirred something strange inside me.' Clementine is relishing the memory of a particularly exotic banana split when suddenly, Jessika tells us, 'I rolled forward and without deciding or meaning to, I kissed her on the mouth.' Both girls are confused, unsure of one another and themselves. 'At the time,' Jessika confides, 'I couldn't have said what it was, or even if there was truly anything at all. It just felt like I had been nudged in my sleep, but instead of waking up I had incorporated the nudge into my dream.' That disconcerting nudge is the first of many.

She lives in a Britain 'liberated' by Hitler 70 years earlier, where every corner of society is shaped by the regime. Herr Keller is an influential figure in the Party, and Jessika has conscientiously fulfilled her role as his daughter. She is a prominent leader in the uniformed Bund Deutscher Madel (BDM), preparing to become a mother of healthy children. Her education has been regimented, her thinking controlled. Even her figure skating - the one area where she feels utterly free and where she shows potential to compete at international level - will be terminated as soon as she is judged fit to marry and breed.

Except moments such as that shared kiss are not isolated. Clementine is far less conformist than Jessika. Her disabled brother has been euthanized. Her parents use hidden technology to communicate illegally with overseas contacts, even in decadent America. Clementine thinks for herself, challenging the Party orthodoxy; she shares her thoughts with Jessika and, dangerously, explores them on paper. Reluctantly, Jessika finds herself 'nudged' towards disturbing questions. Things become even more troubling when she is also attracted to Gabi Gubbins, an altogether more comforting classmate and neighbour; she even has to admit to some basic physical magnetism towards Herr Fisher, the young instructor of her BDM class, despite his crude advances and vacuous mind.

Meanwhile, Jay Acker, the first American superstar to be invited to Britain since the liberation, is due to perform in Trafalgar Square. Jessika's BDM group has been chosen to march and sing before Acker's show. Clementine, her deviance now discovered and facing sterilisation, sets fire to herself on stage. Jessika - standing nearby - must decide

how she will respond. The rest of the novel plays out the consequences of that response.

This is brave, demanding writing. The structure is at first sequential over a year, but after the concert Mayhew employs a series of alternating time shifts, testing a reader's agility while reflecting Jessika's fragmented mind and emotions. She is incarcerated in a reform programme, betrayed by those she trusted most. There is no room for personal loyalty in Nazi Britain. No democratic use of social media or the internet is allowed. The superiority of all things German/British is beyond doubt. Males are unquestionably superior and once females' usefulness has expired, they are cast aside. The country is bilingual, since language, spoken or written, is control.

There are echoes of Orwell, perhaps; and in her 'Historical Notes', Mayhew mentions that she drew directly on factual sources from 1930s Germany. But this Britain is also of our own times - it is no fictional exercise. The narrative is charged with the writer's anger: that in many countries it is still a crime to be gay, that in the UK immigrants are mindlessly blamed for so many social ills, our education system perpetuates division, and women and men are judged by different social criteria. She urges quiet revolution from within rather than on the barricades, hoping her YA readers will always ask, 'Is this right?'; and when it isn't, they'll do something about it.

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