A Conversation with Heather Clark, author of THE SCRAPBOOK: A NOVEL

Tell us about *The Scrapbook*.

The Scrapbook is a novel of love and war that moves between the 1990s and 1940s. It tells the story of Anna, an American, and Christoph, a German, and their grandfathers, who fought on opposite sides during World War Two. Most of the novel is set in Germany and told by Anna, though some chapters follow Anna's and Christoph's grandfathers as they fight in Bavaria and Belarus.

The novel begins in 1996, when Anna, about to graduate from Harvard, meets Christoph, a visiting German student. Captivated by his beauty and intelligence, she falls desperately in love. Over the course of a formative year, she travels back and forth to Germany, where together they visit Nuremberg, Heidelberg, Munich, and Dachau. But their relationship becomes increasingly unsettled as they confront dark family legacies: Anna cannot forget the photos she has seen in her GI grandfather's scrapbook, photos that show the war's horror, while Christoph wrestles with inherited guilt about his grandfather's Nazi past. Despite the gleaming facades of the rebuilt cities, Germany is still full of ghosts.

You have written three nonfiction books about poets. What prompted you to branch out and write a novel?

In 2015, my grandfather passed away at the age of 91. I knew he had been a GI in WWII, and that he had been part of a unit that helped liberate Dachau. But I didn't know much more than that because he never spoke about the war. After his funeral, my grandmother brought his wartime scrapbook down from the attic and there, on the dining room table, I saw the horrific photos he had taken at Dachau.

Those photos, as you can imagine, haunted me. I was in the middle of writing my biography of Sylvia Plath, *Red Comet*, but I couldn't stop thinking about them. Suddenly I had this very personal connection to WWII and the Holocaust. I wanted to understand more about my grandfather's experience, so I began reading books about the war, rather obsessively. I considered writing a nonfiction book, but I didn't know enough details about my grandfather's story. So I decided to make it all up. And I discovered that it was liberating to make things up after writing an 1,100-page biography of Sylvia Plath that required years of footnoting and fact-checking.

***The Scrapbook* has been called a different kind of World War Two novel. How so?**

When I spent time in Germany in the 1990s, I was unnerved by how few memorials I saw of the war and the Holocaust. I remember sitting in these charming German squares, thinking about how the country had been in ruins just fifty years before. How millions of people had died because of a war that Germany started. I felt, then, that there was a suppression, a conspiracy of silence.

Now, in 2025, there are many museums and memorials about the Holocaust in Germany. It's a different landscape. That reckoning began in earnest in the 1990s as Germans learned more about the atrocities the Wehrmacht committed in the East. I wanted to write about that particular historical moment, fifty years after the war, when memories of that time were fading and yet it was still this great shadow. Christoph is caught between two ways of understanding the past—should he look backwards, or forwards? Anna helps him navigate his own inheritance, just as he navigates his country for her. They're learning from each other, bearing witness to a history that will not stay buried. Christoph jokes that he is giving Anna a "German education," but there is some truth to this. His feelings about Germany and the Holocaust make Anna think harder about the atrocities committed against African-Americans in her own country.

Dirty money comes up several times in the novel, in the past and present. Why?

I read a book called *Hitler's Beneficiaries* by Götz Aly that gave me a much greater sense of the wealth stolen from Jews by the Nazis during the war. The book provides an actual accounting and describes the practicalities of the theft—how, for example, Dutch companies showed up with moving vans hours after Jewish families in Amsterdam were rounded up and sent to Westerbork. Neighbors watched. This happened all across Europe. Where did that money go, who did it benefit, and should descendants be compensated? I wanted to explore some of those questions in the novel.

Christoph navigates his country for Anna, but she still "loses" herself to him. How does the theme of a woman losing herself to a man connect with the larger story of Nazi Germany?

In her poem "Daddy," Sylvia Plath writes, "Every woman adores a Fascist." That line has always fascinated me, and I've spent a lot of time thinking about the connections Plath was making in "Daddy" regarding totalitarianism, patriarchy, and submission. These are big, philosophical ideas that I tried to explore on a smaller canvas in my novel. Anna realizes early on that she is losing herself to Christoph—the week they meet, she focuses on him rather than her exams. Later in the novel she says she will surrender everything that she is or could be "just to be his." It's a dangerous feeling, especially for a woman, and she knows it. But she doesn't care. She's intoxicated and willing to abandon herself—literally exile herself—for Christoph. I was interested in the relationship between seduction and control, and what happens when we allow ourselves to be seduced.

Women writers make cameos in this novel. Why?

There are several Easter eggs in *The Scrapbook*, some obvious, others less so. Sylvia Plath, Emily Brontë, Annie Ernaux, Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin, and Erica Jong leave their mark, in various ways, on this story. I'll leave it to the reader to discover where, and how. They all gave me courage to write about female desire and sexuality.

Anna and Christoph have several conversations about artistic representations of war, whether it's through fiction, poetry, or music. Why do they keep returning to these subjects?

If you choose to write about the Holocaust, the stakes are very high. I've always been interested in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, especially Theodor Adorno's famous quotation that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." My doctoral dissertation, which became my first book, was about the poetry of the civil war ("The Troubles") in Northern Ireland. As an English professor, I taught many classes over the years on the poetry of war.

In one of my favorite Seamus Heaney poems, "The Grauballe Man," Heaney mocks himself for elegizing a murdered person—for aestheticizing the person's death. He metaphorically weighs the beauty of his poem against "the actual weight / of each hooded victim, / slashed and dumped." Which holds the greater weight? The actual or the metaphorical? Heaney is aware of the risk he is taking when he writes poems about violence, but should he stay silent instead? Anna and Christoph's relationship was a way for me to interrogate some of these philosophical questions about how we represent atrocity in art, or whether we should even try. The novel asks whether love and beauty have any redemptive power in a world scarred by war and mass murder.

Tadeusz Borowski's love poem, "Light and Shadow," is at the heart of the novel. Why Borowski?

During the course of my research, I became fascinated by Tadeusz Borowski's love poems to his fiancé, which he wrote when he was a prisoner at Dachau and Auschwitz. These are the only known love poems to have been written at those places. Anna and Christoph are inspired by Borowski's poem, which suggests that love gave him the strength to survive the camps. But Borowski killed himself after the war. Is love enough in the face of atrocity? I wanted to explore this idea in a love story where the characters grow closer as they look deeper into the abyss of German history. Can their relationship survive, or will the war still poison their relationship fifty years later?

Why does photography play such an important role in the novel?

I'm interested in the ethics of war photography and Holocaust photography. What does it mean to take photographs of mass graves and murdered people? What does it mean to look at these photographs? Anna tries to understand what her grandfather was thinking when he took photos at Dachau, whether they were souvenirs, like the flag he took from the Eagle's Nest. Her search for answers leads Christoph to confront his own country's—and family's—dark history. What happens when you look, and what happens when you look away? Christoph has to some extent looked away, until he meets Anna.

I didn't feel I had the authority to recreate Dachau in 1945 on the page. I had no interest in doing that, as a writer. But I have spent a lot of time with my grandfather's scrapbook, and I have read many books about World War Two and the Holocaust. I have visited Dachau and several other war sites in Germany and the Netherlands. I felt I could draw upon those experiences in the novel, and ask questions about how our understanding of the war is mediated through memorials, museums, movies, literature, and, most importantly, photographs.

What does revisiting World War Two teach us about our own historical moment?

I've always felt shock and horror about what happened during World War Two—a sense of disbelief at the scale of the death, the atrocities. I've never been able to shake it. Sixty million people died in Europe alone. Like Christoph, I'm always trying to understand how this could have happened in the most "cultured" nation in Europe.

I've read that it takes three generations for wars to be forgotten. As Christoph says to Anna, "We will be the last ones who remember the stories of our grandparents." I feel that the memory of the war is fading, and I wanted to record, in my own small way, something of my grandfather's experience. There is a reason Anna reads Habermas's *The Past as Future*, which she discusses with Christoph on the train to Hamburg. We should be talking about World War Two every day. But we're not. We're watching cat videos on our phones. We ignore the lessons of World War Two at our peril.