

This Nazi refuses to repent

The Kindly Ones

By Jonathan Littell
McClelland & Stewart
975 pp.; \$37.99

BY TIM JACOBS

Jonathan Littell's second novel, *The Kindly Ones*, has garnered some impressive literary prizes in France (the Prix Goncourt, among them), and has sold more than 800,000 copies in Europe since its release in 2006. Capably translated from the French by Charlotte Mandell, it has now been published in North America.

At 975 pages, it is a cinder block of a book, but the plot is simple. The novel takes the form of the memoir of Dr. Max Aue, particularly of his experiences as an intelligence officer in the German SS. After the war, Aue, a Franco-German, returns to France and becomes the manager of a lace factory, to all appearances, an ordinary family man. That in old age he has responded to the urge to produce a sweeping tale of horror and grotesquerie is just one of the novel's many implausible elements. Other unlikelyhoods include witnessing the massacre of Jews at Babi Yar and elsewhere, being present at the siege of Stalingrad, receiving a decoration from Himmler, escaping death many times and meeting Adolf Hitler in his bunker.

These are tall tales, of course, as is the entire work. The most glaringly implausible is that Max Aue himself never partakes in any of the atrocities and war crimes. Rather, he tells us he silently witnesses these evil deeds, writing intelligence reports while inwardly shuddering at the barbarity around him. He suffers from bizarre bouts of vomiting and diarrhea — presumably the physical manifestations of the disgust he feels toward the Nazi's cruelty. He does nothing to help the victims but neither does he participate. He is simply full

of talk.

Much of the action involves the relentless German march on Russia, interspersed with episodes of graphic violence and ponderous conversations between the narrator and other SS officers — entire conversations are recalled verbatim on a range of artsy topics — literature, philosophy and classical music. These passages read like pretentious digressions — as though Littell himself wanted to sound off on these subjects and decided to use a long-ago German SS officer as his mouthpiece.

There is also a tiresome catalogue of the narrator's sex life — as a young man in a boarding school, his incestuous relationship with his sister, as a blossoming homosexual, in his trysts with other soldiers. As with his pompous expositions, page upon page of narrative about sex becomes irritating.

The novel has seven sections, each of which takes its name from either a dance (courante, for example) or style of music (toccata). Thus, the organization itself echoes the overblown content. The opening section, Toccata, referring to a composition for a keyboard instrument, designed to highlight the performer's touch and technique, features Max Aue explaining the purpose of his memoir, to tell his side of the story — to touch the reader perhaps? — but without offering a justification for his actions: "I have nothing to justify," he explains, because he is "free of any form of contrition."

Thus, the novel's structural metaphor is of a sophisticated dance or passage of music performed by the memoirist for the benefit of his audience. The idea is an interesting one, but it doesn't succeed. Is the reader supposed to feel complicit in this literary dance? Is the memoir intended to be read as a piece of music? The metaphor is confused at best, as the chapters' titles never jibe with their content. That

the novel is structurally out of sync just might be part of Littell's original plan, I'll charitably offer, given that Max Aue's words are themselves out of sync with the historical record. And the accrual of impossibilities simply erodes his dubious first-person account with each passing page.

While not exactly literary comfort food, the book is still strangely compelling. It will surely provoke much chin-scratching in readers — what to make of this large, deeply strange and frequently tiresome book? Many literati will dismiss it as a hybrid rewrite of Raul Hilberg's monumental history *The Destruction of the European Jews* and Vasily Grossman's epic novel *Life and Fate*, both of which are alluded to in *The Kindly Ones*. And in this important regard — the author's monumental ambition to write a contemporary epic war novel on the scale of past masters — it merits praise, even as it falters.

The novel can best be described as a chronicle of the evil doctor's atrocious adventures in Europe during the war. It reads somewhat like a ghost story: Aue's miraculous escapes from harm, his amazing power of recall, his ability to be everywhere significant at once, his shoulder-rubbing with Hitler and others, all contribute to the story's surreal, spooky feel. That Jonathan Littell borrowed his title from Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*, a tale of familial violence in which the central character is haunted by vengeance-seeking spirits (the kindly ones, as they become known), also adds to the novel's ghostly feel: It is Dr. Max Aue himself who is perpetually haunted by the spirits of justice and the past, who would have him confess to the ghastly wrongs that he perpetrated.

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