

The Orphan's Tale

By Pam Jenoff

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Author's Note

A few years ago while researching, I came across two remarkable stories in the archives of Yad Vashem. The first was a heartbreaking account of the “Unknown Children”—a boxcar full of babies, ripped from their families and headed for a concentration camp, too young to know their own names.

The second was a story of a German circus that had sheltered Jews during the war. The Circus Althoff had taken in a young Jewish woman, Irene Danner, who herself hailed from another circus family. Several parts of the story were fascinating to me. First, I learned that the circus had sheltered not just Irene Danner, but her sister, mother and father. Her father, Hans Danner, was in fact not Jewish and was a soldier in the German army. When the German army sent him on leave and ordered him to divorce his Jewish wife, he defied the order and instead joined his wife and children in hiding. I also discovered that Irene Danner had fallen in love with a clown who was part of the Circus Althoff, Peter Storm-Bento, and that they had children together.

Another thing that intrigued me as I researched was the rich history of Jewish circus dynasties that spanned centuries, including the Lorch family from which Irene Danner's mother had come. There were other circus families, such as the Blumenfelds, which had ten or more siblings performing and/or running the circus. Sadly they were largely annihilated by the Germans.

Reading the remarkable histories of the Unknown Children and the circuses, I knew that they somehow had to come together. And so I created the story of Noa, a young Dutch girl cast out after becoming pregnant, who despite being alone and penniless nevertheless finds the courage to rescue one of the babies from the train. I had her find an ally in Astrid, a Jewish aerialist whose heart was broken when her husband did not make the same brave choice Hans Danner had in real life, but instead disavowed their marriage.

The Orphan's Tale is not biography; and my story is not that of the remarkable circus folk I researched, but rather fiction. I have taken great liberties with the nature of the circus acts and the ways in which they lived and performed during the war. But I was so inspired by the real people I'd met in my research: the way in which Irene Danner and Peter Bento-Storm persisted in their love despite it being forbidden by the Reich, the courage with which circus owner Adolf Althoff sheltered Jews, and the ingenious ways he would hide them when the Germans came looking.

When Adolf Althoff received the honor of being named Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in 1995, he said, “We circus people see no difference between races or religions.” I consider this book, while fiction, to be a tribute to the courage of these people.

—Pam Jenoff

Questions for Discussion

The Orphan's Tale

- Noa and Astrid's rivalry changes into a close friendship despite significant differences in age and circumstances. How did this evolution happen? What do you think it was that drew them together? Have you ever found yourself in such a close but unlikely friendship?
- Even in WWII-torn Europe, the circus was still allowed to perform. Did this surprise you? How did the setting impact your reading of the novel? What deeper meaning do you think there is behind the circus burning down in the end?
- Who did you initially think was the narrator in the opening chapter? How did the opening chapter shape your reading experience?
- With whom did you identify more closely, Astrid or Noa? Why? What were Noa's and Astrid's greatest strengths and their greatest flaws? Were there choices you wish Astrid and/or Noa had made differently throughout the book?
- Noa is disowned by her family and in turn has her child ripped from her arms. Astrid leaves her family for a husband who abandons her. How do you think Astrid and Noa were each defined by their pasts? What role does the notion of family play throughout the story? What are some of the other themes in the book?
- What do you think drew Astrid and Peter together so powerfully? Noa and Luc? How do these two relationships differ from one another? Do you think either of these relationships could have lasted a lifetime under different circumstances?
- What do you think of Peter's decision to continue with his mocking act toward the Reich? How do you think the story would have differed if Peter had refrained from doing the act?
- How did you feel about the ending? Were you surprised? Satisfied?
- What will you remember the most about *The Orphan's Tale*?



A Conversation with Pam Jenoff

The Orphan's Tale

In your Author's Note, you mention being inspired by the Unknown Children, as well as a German circus that sheltered Jews during WWII. Can you go a little deeper into the personal reasons behind why you wanted to bring these stories to life?

I found both the story about the Unknown Children and the rescuers' circus in the archives of Yad Vashem. They intrigued me in different ways. First, being a mom of three small children colors my view of all things. When I read the story of the Unknown Children, babies ripped from their parents too young to know their own names, I was heartbroken. I wanted to know, what was it like for those families? The notion was unbearable, yet I couldn't look away.

The circus fascinated me in a different way. Although I have spent decades working on and researching issues surrounding World War II and the Holocaust, I had never before heard of a circus that had rescued Jews. And when I started researching, I learned an equally interesting piece of information about Jewish circus dynasties that had flourished for centuries before being extinguished by the Nazis. I knew that these two stories would somehow come together.

Told from the dual points of view of Astrid and Noa, *The Orphan's Tale* follows their poignant and timeless friendship. Was there one perspective that was easier to write? Do you have a favorite character in the story?

Trying to choose between characters is like picking a favorite among my children—I can't do it. I love them equally but in different ways. Astrid is closer to my own age and she felt like the sister I never had. I was also fascinated by the fact that her Nazi husband had divorced her after being ordered to do so by the Reich (which was inspired by real events).

Noa is more like one of my own children and I just felt so sorry for her after everything she went through at such a young age. I would describe it as almost protectiveness. But not too protective, because then you take these characters you love and start doing awful things to them. And that's where the fun begins in the twisted mind of a writer...

Your novels typically center on relationships that unfold during a specific era in history—war-torn Europe. What attracts you to this setting and period?

My interest in World War II dates back more than twenty years ago when I was sent to Kraków, Poland, as a diplomat for the US State Department. I found myself working on issues from the war and became very close to some of the Holocaust survivors. These experiences profoundly affected me and moved me to write.

I also believe the time period is fertile ground for storytelling. My goal as an author is to take my reader and put her in the shoes of my protagonist and have her ask, "What would I have done?" The war, with its dire circumstances and stark choices, is perfect for doing just that.

When you began the novel, did you have Astrid and Noa’s friendship mapped out? How did their stories surprise you and evolve along the way, if at all?

With The Orphan’s Tale as well as my earlier books, I know where I am starting and generally where the book will end up, but it is usually the middle that surprises me. For example, in the beginning of the book, Noa is dependent on Astrid, but there comes a point where that changes and Astrid looks to Noa for strength. There may have also been a few things about the end of the book that surprised me, but I don’t want to spoil them here!

What was your toughest challenge writing *The Orphan’s Tale*? Your greatest pleasure?

I refer to The Orphan’s Tale as “the book that broke me.” I am only half joking. I would say there were two major challenges. First, learning about the circus and aerial arts took a great deal of time. (I am biting my nails, hoping I did it justice!)

Second, writing about the train full of Unknown Children was unbearable. I knew the scene (in fact, the opening scene) needed to be written, since it was the very thing that inspired the book. At the same time, I avoided it forever. Finally, I realized that to write it deeply enough, I was going to have to figuratively put my own children on that train. It’s actually too painful to think about it beyond that.

Can you describe your writing process? Do you write scenes consecutively or jump around? Do you have a schedule or routine? A lucky charm?

I start with an image or scene in my mind. I turn on the computer and throw down whatever comes out, in whatever order, for three or four months. (Someone once referred to this as vomiting on the page—sorry!) Then when I have about 60,000 words or so, the document becomes unwieldy, and I start breaking it into chapters and an outline. This is the very worst kind of writing process (the time it takes to edit is insane) and I recommend it to no one. But I don’t know how to do it any other way.

*The other thing I would say is that I like to write every day. I’m a short-burst writer, so if you give me forty-five minutes, I can use that, but more than three hours and I’m spent. Last year, I gave myself a hundred days of writing challenge to see if I could write for a hundred consecutive days. I did it, through bad weather and illness and the like. At the end of the hundred days, it felt so good I just kept going. I finished *The Orphan’s Tale* on the 299th day.*



About the Author:

Pam Jenoff is a highly acclaimed and international bestselling author of historical fiction, including *THE KOMMANDANT’S GIRL*, which also earned her a Quill Award nomination. Jenoff’s last novel, *THE LAST SUMMER AT CHELSEA BEACH*, received numerous endorsements from major bestselling authors, including Kristin Hannah, Beatriz Williams and Karen White. She is also a top-requested author in the Jewish Book Network. Pam lives with her husband and three children near Philadelphia where, in addition to writing, she teaches law school.