

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Orinda Books hosts Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Richard Kluger, Aug. 26



Richard Kluger Photo provided

By Lou Fancher

If waging war is a dangerous, strategic, ultimately violent enterprise, endeavoring to resist an enemy force without violence is equally perilous. The latter involves supreme and shrewd calibrations of risk versus reward and often, sacrifices that mean no clear “winner” can be declared upon resolution of the conflict. This drama forms the centerpiece of a new novel, “Hamlet’s Children,” by Berkeley-based Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Kluger.

Orinda Books on Aug. 26 at 3 p.m. presents Kluger in conversation with New York Times bestselling author and award-winning poet Mary Mackey. The writers will discuss Kluger’s latest historical fiction book released Aug. 15 as an original paperback edition by publisher Lucille Lang Day of Scarlet Tanager Books.

“Hamlet’s Children” is the story of Denmark and its people, culture, and history during the years immediately leading up to, during, and after World War II. Told by protagonist 13-year-old American Terry Sayre and based on chronologically accurate events with attention paid to actual facts, events, and personalities of the era, the story captures timeless coming-of-age themes: parental discord and devotion, adolescent idealism, impulsivity, love, and a young person striving in all ways to find security in place, relationships, and identity. For Terry, whose father is unreliable and mostly absent and whose mother is taken ill in the summer of 1939, the journey from boy to man is fraught. Offered asylum abroad by his mother’s Danish family, he accepts their foster care and begins a new life with his grandparents in a small coastal town one hour’s drive from Copenhagen, Denmark’s capital city.

Within months of his arrival, Nazi German’s monumental power rises and Europe is launched into World War II. Denmark is soon occupied by Germany and clings to the Nazi regime’s nominal, fingers-crossed-behind-their-backs promise of self-governance. Fearing the risk of resistance and having experienced an overwhelming land, sea, and air assault at the hands of the Nazi forces, the Danes believe a peace treaty with Germany previously signed will reduce the threat. Underestimating Hitler’s preoccupation with Denmark’s strategic location that if not controlled might allow the Allies to land and fight the Third Reich military troops, many Danes failed to recognize their homeland has made a deal with a devilish invader. Proud of their humane philosophies that underscore how war is not the solution to global unrest, the Dane’s disbanded military forces are unavailable. Their only defensive tool is resistance through clever



subterfuge, and covert, cunning, but life-threatening operations. The cost for many Danish people is a tragic loss of dignity and pride in their country and its leaders.

In interviews, Kluger has said the title is a deliberate name drop because Hamlet is the most famous Dane and a line from Shakespeare’s famous play finds new meaning as used in the novel. In the play’s Act I, Prince Hamlet’s sidekick Horatio says, “There’s something rotten in the state of Denmark.” He is referring to the seizure of the throne by Hamlet’s uncle Claudius after the suspicious death of the king and to his mother’s scandalous marriage to her brother-in-law. In “Hamlet’s Children,” the same words are used effectively as an act involving “quiet resistance” to Nazis and their rotten anti-Semitism invading their country.

Along the way to telling how Terry fares during his stint in Denmark and the years following the war when he returns to America, Kluger offers intriguing information about the era. Historians familiar with events and people of that time might note license the author is allowed and takes advantage of as a writer of historical fiction, but for indiscriminate lovers of World War II history and readers who know less about it, the narrative remains lively, engaging, and surprisingly relevant in 2023.

Part of that relevancy results from Kluger’s deft hand with character. Without losing the plot’s propulsive energy, Kluger illuminates not only the inner mindset of Terry but of a substantial number of key, secondary characters. Each person emerges as a flawed, unique, admirable or despicable individual. The relationships are sometimes messy and often miraculous in that resentment, forgiveness, love, and hate co-exist – especially between family members or in the power dynamics between the Danes and the German forces.

Several of the book’s most fascinating scenes involving young people who create a grassroots journal of local, protest news and a plan to distribute it are perhaps fabricated in the details, but not in the likelihood of it having happened. In another

example, active resistance to the Nazi regime did in fact position Denmark as one of the few invaded countries to actively plan and rescue Danish Jews. In a matter of just a few weeks in 1943, after being warned the Nazis were about to mount a massive deportation of Danish Jews, just over 7,000 Danish Jews and roughly 700 non-Jewish family members were secretly led by ferry across the sea to safety in neutral Sweden. The action depicted in “Hamlet’s Children” forms the crux of the book’s climax and is the catalyst for much that follows. Despite everyone knowing the final chapter of World War II’s end, Kluger’s tale maintains theatricality and offers a strong addition to World War II literature from a master storyteller.

Kluger wrote for the Wall Street Journal, the New York Post, the New York Herald Tribune, and Forbes, before becoming executive editor at Simon & Schuster and editor in chief at Atheneum. His books of fiction and social history include the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Ashes to Ashes: America’s Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris,” “Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality,” and others.

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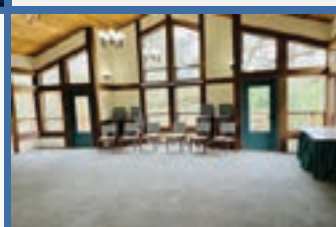


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