



The Book of Aron: A novel

By Jim Shepard

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The acclaimed National Book Award finalist—“one of the United States’ finest writers,” according to Joshua Ferris, “full of wit, humanity, and fearless curiosity”—now gives us a novel that will join the short list of classics about children caught up in the Holocaust.

Aron, the narrator, is an engaging if peculiar and unhappy young boy whose family is driven by the German onslaught from the Polish countryside into Warsaw and slowly battered by deprivation, disease, and persecution. He and a handful of boys and girls risk their lives by scuttling around the ghetto to smuggle and trade contraband through the quarantine walls in hopes of keeping their fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters alive, hunted all the while by blackmailers and by Jewish, Polish, and German police, not to mention the Gestapo.

When his family is finally stripped away from him, Aron is rescued by Janusz Korczak, a doctor renowned throughout prewar Europe as an advocate of children’s rights who, once the Nazis swept in, was put in charge of the Warsaw orphanage. Treblinka awaits them all, but does Aron manage to escape—as his mentor suspected he could—to spread word about the atrocities? Jim Shepard has masterfully made this child’s-eye view of the darkest history mesmerizing, sometimes comic despite all odds, truly heartbreaking, and even inspiring. Anyone who hears Aron’s voice will remember it forever.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Shepard tells the story of the Nazi-era Warsaw ghetto through the life of a 13-year-old Jewish boy who fends for his family by joining other boys and girls smuggling needed food and other goods. At first, the adventure is entertaining, but Aron's family members are taken away or die until he is left alone homeless and starving on the street. The boy is rescued by Dr. Janusz Korczak—a real-life figure who was a well-known advocate for children's rights in Europe and worked tirelessly to save the denizens of his orphanage in the ghetto, although he could have departed. After being rescued by the doctor, Aron still suffers, but at least he is not alone. The teen faces a moral dilemma when he is tricked by a Jewish ghetto policeman into cooperating. His attempts to extricate himself should provide thoughtful questions for young and adult readers alike. What could the protagonist have done differently? The further reading list in the back matter includes works that will be especially helpful for teens wanting to know more about the historical details, such as Larry Stillman and Morris Goldner's *A Match Made in Hell* (Univ. of Wisconsin Pr., 2003) and Yehuda Nir's *The Lost Childhood* (Scholastic, 2002). VERDICT The writing is simple and effective. Because of the book's emotional impact, it should prove to be a valuable addition to those studying the Holocaust.—Karlan Sick, Library Consultant, New York City

Review

Winner of the 2016 PEN New England Award

An ALA Notable Book of 2015

Winner of the Sophie Brody Medal for Excellence in Jewish Literature

Finalist for the Jewish Book Award

“Shepard’s harrowing, comic, and deeply human story of a boy in the Warsaw ghetto crushed me. This book needs to be read.” —Anthony Doerr (Favorite Reads of 2015)

“A masterpiece. . . a remarkable novel destined to join the shelf of essential Holocaust literature. . . a story of such startling candor about the complexity of heroism that it challenges each of us to greater courage. . . Shepard has created something transcendent and timeless.” —Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

“Shepard is a flat-out brilliant and deeply empathetic writer [who] puts the reader inside a known enclosure and yet makes us feel anew the bewilderment and horror of that time and place. . . *The Book of Aron* is a worthy, necessary addition to the literature of the Holocaust.” —Rob Spillman, *Guernica*

“In the pantheon of living American writers, [Shepard] has provided a perfectly paced plot [and] by limiting his perspective to a young Polish boy [has] given the story an urgency and immediacy that made this reviewer read the entire book in only two sittings. . . *The Book of Aron* is a tragedy of heroism, exquisitely written and devastating as it progresses. A valuable addition to Holocaust literature, Aron's story will likely linger long in any reader's memory.” —Greg Walkin, *The Lincoln Journal Star*

“This tender, slim novel is so distressing, so moving, so absorbing, so horrible and even so funny (in places and in the saddest ways) that I had to reading it during the daytime because when I read pages before bed, they’d keep me up half the night. Maybe it’s because my own sons are approaching Aron’s age, but I’m not

sure I've ever felt the anguish of the ghetto during the Second World War so acutely. (And the relationship between Aron and his mother is exquisitely built and exquisitely painful.)" —Anthony Doerr, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

"[Shepard's] narrow perspective creates an uncanny tension and lets us feel the horror in a way that feels fresh and freshly devastating. . . . *The Book of Aron* doesn't let you put it down, doesn't let you stop reading until you get to the end [and] you've lived a lifetime with Aron—for better and for worse, you've done what he's done and thought what he's thinking." —Tony Perez, *Tin House*

"It is the relationship between Aron and Korczak that sits at the heart of the novel [and] it is in the orbit of this entirely good man that Aron's scarred heart begins to heal and expand. . . . Shepard is well known for his *media res* endings; there is some small mercy in the fact that he employs such an ending here." —Geraldine Brooks, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Surrounded by filth, fear, disease, and danger, Aron—an unpromising child—finds his vocation and his voice. In straightforward and unsparing words, he tells his story, drawing the reader into the war as an inexplicable event that sweeps Aron and his gang of fellow smugglers into a daring mix of childhood bravado, ingenuity, and courage. . . . Shepard tells a heartbreaking and horrific story; he was also inspired by Aron's story, and the story of all children stripped of their lives by uncontrollable forces they cannot understand." —Maron L. Waxman, *The Jewish Book Council*

"A testament to Shepard's storytelling powers [with] vitality, compassion and sardonic humour. . . . *The Book of Aron* carries the burden of its subject with a mordant frankness at once heartbreaking, refreshing and—hardest won of all—enchanting. Jim Shepard's novel enters a crowded canon and it stands there, head and shoulders, with the best." —Toby Lichtig, *The Jewish Quarterly*

"A work of art [and] moving masterpiece. . . . Shepard turns hell into a testament of love and sacrifice. . . . What better way to rebuke the Nazi piety that all Jewish life was utterly worthless than by bringing to full and empathetic life a perfect nobody of a kid, historically irrelevant as anything but a number, one of a countless horde?" —Joshua Ferris, *The Guardian* [U.K.]

"One of America's very finest writers [has] not only created something shocking, haunting and truly special, but captures the essence of humanity and its opposite, compassion as well as cruelty. An unforgettable book." —Billy O'Callaghan, *The Irish Examiner*

"Extraordinary. . . utterly shattering. *The Book of Aron* is a masterpiece [about] the possibilities of love and heroism—and their limits." —Antonia Senior, *The Times* [U.K.]

"A transcendent fictional experience [that] reminds us of the infinite varieties of good and evil, and of the many paradoxical places in between. . . . The book's enormous power comes from its stylistic restraint [and its] dignity flows from its utter lack of pretension." —Dan Cryer, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

"Remarkable. . . Shepard has distilled his meticulous research into a swift, savage narrative. . . . So rigorous and adroit in its handling of its horrific subject matter, it makes you want to investigate everything else Shepard has written." —Michael Upchurch, *The Seattle Times*

"A breathtaking, heartbreaking account not only of one child's experience of terror and brutality, but a stark reminder of our own limitations and complicity. It will rightly join the masterworks of Holocaust literature,

but as with the best of those books the larger truth, the fundamental humanity, emerges from the narrow specificity of the individual to embrace the universal.” – Robert J. Wiersema, *The National Post*

“Shepard's novel joins a heartbreaking group including *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Number the Stars* and other child's-eye perspectives on the Holocaust.” —*Time*

“An immensely rewarding, shocking and beautiful book. . . . Shepard, who for years has been one of this country's greatest fiction writers, is as original here as he has ever been. . . . Aron himself becomes an unforgettable character almost instantly.” —Michael Schaub, NPR

“Brilliant work. . . simultaneously the easiest book to read this summer and the most heartbreaking [with] characters you'll never forget. . . . We are propelled into the real grit, sweat, labor, and spark of humans caught in history's circumstance.” —Steve Yates, *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*

“Written in spare prose, with compassion, touches of dark humor, and a profound understanding of human complexity, *The Book of Aron* provides a powerful and poignant reminder of the stark moral choices the Jews of Warsaw were forced to make.”—Glenn C. Altschuler, *The Jerusalem Post*

“Haunting. . . . [with] a matter-of-fact voice that can describe horrific evening with chilling precision.” —*The New Yorker*

“We're in the hands of a master storyteller. . . . *The Book of Aron* suggests that literature still can be a serious business. Molding events from the Holocaust into a story form—well, that's the art.” —Aaron Howard, *The Jewish Herald-Voice*

“Remarkable, heartrending and hopeful.” —Debra M. Rosser-Hogben, *LancasterOnline*

“If Aron owns the rights to the book's seductive narrative voice, it is Korczak who embodies its enveloping humanity. With affecting teamwork, a feckless boy with little conscience and an aging man with a surfeit of humility walk into the fire, lifting *The Book of Aron* into a realm with the finest Holocaust fiction.” —Jan Stuart, *The Boston Globe*

“Shepard succeeds because he never wavers from his novel's moral focus. This is a book about annihilation, and the human spirit that somehow lives on, in slivers and cracks. This is the truth that Shepard siphons away from a history otherwise filled with the chill of encroaching brutality, the truth that renders a work of extraordinary fiction.” —Nicholas Miriello, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

“This magnificent tour de force will hold a prominent place in the literature of compassionate outrage. . . . Shepard, a writer of extraordinary historical vision, psychological acuity, and searing irony, presents a profoundly moving portrait of Korczak; explores, with awe, our instinct to adapt and survive; and through the evolving consciousness of his phenomenally commanding young narrator, exposes the catastrophic impact of war and genocide on children.” —Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review)

“Remarkable, heartrending and hopeful.” —Debra M. Rosser-Hogben, *LancasterOnline*

“Shepard's gift for drawing out the most elemental, human narratives against a backdrop of tremendous scale reaches its apex in *The Book of Aron*.” —Benjamin Rybeck, *Kirkus Reviews*

“*The Book of Aron* ennobles unimaginable suffering through the gift of art.” —Harvey Freedenberg, *Shelf-*

Awareness

“Beautiful, harrowing. . . The words fall like thunderclaps.” —Marcia Menter, *More* magazine

“Shepard has created a stark masterpiece. His brilliant, iconic book ranks with the best literature that explores the dark side of the human soul.” —Linda Diebel, *The Toronto Star*

“Understated and devastating. . . an exhaustively researched, pitch-perfect novel exploring the moral ambiguities of survival [in which] ordinary people reveal dimensions that are extraordinarily cruel or kind.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

“Nothing less than a small masterpiece. . . . Anyone who gets spellbound by Jim Shepard’s incomparable prose might be tempted to conclude that the essentials have not been said until now, in this book. . . . The narrative is imbued with death-defying humor and unsentimental, with an almost defiant tone that feels both authentic and paradoxically comforting.” —Eva Johansson, *Svenska Dagbladet*

“Moving and powerful. . . . Shepard shows how, even in the worst circumstances, some people maintained their dignity and humanity. That message resonates even after the horrific ending.” —Rabbi Rachel Esserman, *The Reporter* (Jewish Federation of Greater Binghamton)

“The story of what happened to children in the Holocaust is not for the faint-hearted. A fictional, first-person narrative from the point of view of a Jewish child in Warsaw—in fact, a child in Dr. Janusz Korczak’s well-known orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto—is very brave. And a heartbreaking historical novel that ends in Treblinka may not be what many readers are expecting from a novelist and short-story writer whose ironic touch is often comedic. But Jim Shepard has written a Holocaust novel that stands with the most powerful writing on that terrible subject.” —John Irving

“Heartbreaking but never sentimental, comic but never unserious, terrifying but always engrossing, *The Book of Aron* brings us face to face with the unimaginable, actual truth.” —Daniel Handler

“Heart-breaking, shattering, charming and brilliant—there isn’t one word that isn’t the young boy’s. Jim Shepard has written some of the best books I’ve read and *The Book of Aron* is his best.” —Roddy Doyle

“*The Book of Aron* is a novel of profound and delicate simplicity—passivity, almost—but one which calmly and indelibly delivers the bluntest of impacts. In other words, it’s a knock-out (though you never saw it coming.)” —Jim Crace

“This moving novel bears witness to human complexity with an uncompromising compassion. It is a testament not only to Janusz Korczak and the children in the Warsaw Ghetto but to every child abandoned in war. History must open our hearts to the present and this is Jim Shepard’s powerful achievement.” —Anne Michaels, author of *Fugitive Pieces*

About the Author

JIM SHEPARD is the author of six previous novels and four story collections, including *Like You’d Understand, Anyway*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and won The Story Prize. His short fiction has appeared in, among other magazines, *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *McSweeney’s*, *The Paris Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Tin House*, *Granta*, *Zoetrope*, *Electric Literature*, and *Vice*, and has often been selected for *The Best American Short Stories* and *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*. He lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts, with his wife and three children, and teaches at Williams College.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Yael Whitehead:

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