



Ashes

By Kathryn Lasky

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Berlin, 1932. Thirteen-year-old Gabriella Schramm's world is slowly, but steadily, crumbling as Adolf Hitler rises to power. The only thing that soothes Gabriella is her favorite pastime-reading. But then her country's tensions rise, the streets fill with soldiers, Gaby's sister's boyfriend raises his arm in a *heil Hitler* salute, and a family friend-Albert Einstein-flees the country. And her only solace-her books-come under attack. Will Gaby have to leave behind the stories-and the life-that she has always loved?

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Q&A with Kathryn Lasky, Author of *Ashes*

Award-winning author Kathryn Lasky has written many fiction and nonfiction books for children, including the Newbery Honor Book *Sugaring Time*. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Q: How did you come to write *Ashes*?

A: I have never had a great desire to write a Holocaust novel. There have been so many and so many great ones—Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*. But what fascinated me most was what led up to the all-time catastrophe, the tragedy of modern times. What lethal combination of elements combined in a critical mass to allow a nation to go mad. Then I came across the Heinrich Heine’s blood chilling words, “Where they burn books, they will end by burning people.” The book burning seemed the exclamation point that marked this pre-Holocaust time. It was the point of no return. So I realized the early thirties was the period I wanted to delve into. And then I thought, I do not want the perspective of a Jewish person, but a gentile—in other words not a girl whose life was threatened, but whose sense of humanity was threatened; where she begins on some level—most likely a subconscious level—to question what it means to be human.



Q: *Ashes*' protagonist, Gaby, loves to read, but she's also very interested in physics, astronomy, and politics. Growing up, how were you like Gaby? To what extent is she based on you?

A: Gaby is based on me to no extent. I was terrible in math and I nearly flunked physics in high school, but I did love to read. So reading is my only common ground with Gaby.

Q: *Ashes* takes place in pre-World War II Germany. Previously, you have also written books set in ancient Rome (*The Last Girls of Pompeii*), 17th Century American colonies (*Two Bad Pilgrims*), 19th Century Russia (*The Night Journey*), and elsewhere. What do you like about writing historical fiction? Which have been your favorite time periods to write about? Are there historical eras that you haven't written about yet that you want to?

A: Well the period in *Ashes* is certainly not my favorite time, but it is a fascinating one. Writing historical fiction is like time travel. It requires that I slip into another time, discard my 21st century prejudices and mannerisms and try to experience life from a different perspective. Considering the Earth is over 4 billion years old, it is safe to say that there are many eras I haven't written about as yet. I must admit that I probably won't write about a novel on blue algae or green algae or whatever the first life form was that took hold when the Earth finally cooled off a bit. I don't see much room for character development, and I love writing about clothes and food—so that's kind of out of the question with algae, obviously. The only food they “eat” is sunlight and photosynthesis, although fascinating, does not a novel make.

Q: Which scenes in *Ashes* were most difficult to write? Which scenes did you most enjoy writing?

A: I think the most difficult scene to write was the book burning itself. I had made three trips to the

Holocaust Museum where I saw photographs and actual news film footage of the burning, and I have a lot of books in my own library. You know the old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”? Well, I had to find those thousand words that would make the book burning as compelling, as horrifying, as it was in the pictures. It was a multi-dimensional scene to write. In one sense I wanted the reader to feel as if he or she were watching this as they would a film. But there was also the dimension of Gaby’s viewpoint—she, too, was watching, at first from an office window looking down on the scene, and then she finally enters the scene. While I was writing this, I was trying to weave together what a camera operator on a movie would call different depths of field. The one thing that the photographs and the film footage could not convey was the smell—the smell of the fuel used to burn the books, as well as the smoke and the lost scent of the linden trees. So in this way, I felt I had an advantage over the visual representations I had studied as I could convey what these odors were like using language.

Q: What is the most interesting and surprising fact that you discovered about the Weimar Republic as you did your research?

A: I’m not sure if there was one fact per se. But it is curious that during the era of the Weimar republic—a rather short era at that—art and decadence mingled in a fascinating way. Berlin was a magnet for some of the most creative people of that era including W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Josephine Baker, and countless others. There was an amazing art exhibit that I saw at the Metropolitan Museum around the time I was starting the book called *Glitter & Doom, The Art of The Weimar Republic* and it perfectly captured this tango of art and decadence.

Discussion Questions for *Ashes*

- 1) Each chapter of *Ashes* starts with an epigraph—a quote from a famous poem or novel. How do these epigraphs relate to the chapters that follow them? What does each quote contribute to the story? Can you think of other quotes, from songs or movies that you like, that could work as epigraphs for some of these chapters?
- 2) Why does Gaby keep her Diary of Shame? Why do the events that she lists make her feel ashamed, and how does writing them down help her work through that feeling? Do you think Gaby overcomes her feelings of shame by the end of the book?
- 3) How does Gaby’s opinion of Hertha change over the course of the book? What do you think of Hertha? Is she a Nazi; is she one of the story’s “bad guys”? Does she have a good side? Find evidence in the text to support your argument.
- 4) What’s Gaby’s relationship with Einstein like? Does she seem impressed by his acclaim and scientific genius? If you were Gaby, and could have a conversation with Albert Einstein, what would you ask him?
- 5) How does witnessing the book burning change Gaby’s perspective on herself and on Germany? What impact does it have on her actions in the last chapter?
- 6) At the end of the book, Ulla makes a very difficult decision. Why do you think she makes the choice that she does? If you were Gaby, would you support Ulla’s decision? If not, what else would you say to try to make her change her mind?
- 7) Why do you think this book is called *Ashes*? What else would have been a good title for it?

8) What German words did you learn from reading *Ashes*?

9) What other books does *Ashes* remind you of? If a friend told you he/she liked *Ashes*, what would you recommend that he/she read next?

10) *Ashes* takes place in Germany, more than 75 years ago. In what ways is it still relevant to readers today? Do you still relate to the characters and the things they go through? Do the social and political events of this book give you contest for understanding present-day America?

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review In 1932 Berlin, blond 13-year-old Gabriella looks like the Aryan purists' ideal, but her strongly anti-Fascist family members are derisively called "white Jews," and her astrophysicist father is friends with Einstein, whose theory of relativity is termed "Jewish physics" by the Nazis. From Gabriella's viewpoint, Lasky tells a gripping story about Hitler's early rise to power, including the Germans' bitterness about their suffering after World War I. Though the filling in of background history sometimes feels slightly contrived, the story is strengthened by the complex, individual characters, such as the pro-Hitler maid who is tired of being poor; the beloved teacher, who wants Gabriella to be a Hitler Youth leader; and Gabriella's sister, who becomes pregnant while dating an ardent Nazi. Like Anne Frank, Gabriella loves American movie stars. She is also a big reader, and at the start of each chapter, there is a quote from authors such as Hemingway, Heine, London, Remarque, and Twain, whose books are among those publicly destroyed in the wild, historic book burning that is the climax of this story. From the opening quote, by Heine—"Where they burn books, they will end by burning human beings"—the personal and the political history will haunt readers. Grades 6-12. --Hazel Rochman

Review

-A good read for all middle school students.+ -VOYA

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sandy Gonsalves:

What do you ponder on book? It is just for students since they're still students or it for all people in the world, the particular best subject for that? Just you can be answered for that query above. Every person has distinct personality and hobby per other. Don't to be compelled someone or something that they don't want do that. You must know how great as well as important the book *Ashes*. All type of book can you see on many resources. You can look for the internet resources or other social media.

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Judith Duncan:

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Bessie Scudder:

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