



## **CAGING SKIES**

by Christine Leunens

Translator: Roberto Muggiati

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### **Summary:**

**A gripping, atmospheric novel about obsession and love.** 'Little by little, Elsa leaked out of her enclosure, strayed out into every corner of the house ...In my bed at night, she switched places with me, she enjoying the softness of my bed, and I finding myself cramped up in her airless niche.' This extraordinary novel is seen through the eyes of Johannes. An avid member of the Hitler Youth in the 1940s, he discovers his parents are hiding a Jewish girl called Elsa behind a false wall in their large house in Vienna. His initial horror turns to interest, then love and obsession. After the disappearance of his parents, Johannes finds he is the only one aware of Elsa's existence in the house, the only one responsible for her survival. Both manipulating and manipulated, Johannes dreads the end of the war- with it will come the prospect of losing Elsa and their relationship, which ranges through passion and obsession, dependence and indifference, love and hate. This gripping, masterful work examines truth and lies at both political and personal levels, laying bare the darkest corners of the human soul.

***The inspiration for JOJO RABBIT, winner of the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, by director Taika Waititi, and nominated for 6 Academy Awards, including Best Picture.***

An avid member of the Hitler Youth in 1940s Vienna, Johannes Betzler discovers his parents are hiding a Jewish girl named Elsa behind a false wall in their home. His initial horror turns to interest—then love and obsession. After his parents disappear, Johannes is the only one aware of Elsa's existence in the house and he alone is responsible for her fate. Drawing strength from his daydreams about Hitler, Johannes plans for the end of the war and what it might mean for him and Elsa.

The inspiration for the major film *Jojo Rabbit* by Taika Waititi, *Caging Skies*, sold in over twenty countries, is a work of rare power; a stylistic and storytelling triumph. Startling, blackly comic, and written in Christine Leunens's gorgeous, muscular prose, this novel, her U.S. debut, is singular and unforgettable.

Source: <https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/25641300-caging-skies>  
<https://www.amazon.com/Caging-Skies-Novel-Christine-Leunens/dp/1419739085>



### **About the Author:**

**Author Christine Leunens** has written about the complex relationships of women with their mothers-in-law; the dangers of lying and secrets spun out of control; the bizarre effects of childrearing.

Besides English, her novels have been published in French, Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Dutch, Czech and Russian.

Her first novel, *Primordial Soup*, was put on the Essential Reading List of Contemporary Literature by the Government Association of UK Libraries in 2004 and the French translation of her second novel, *Caging Skies*, was shortlisted for the **Prix FNAC** and the **Prix MÃ©dicis**. Film rights to *Caging Skies* were sold in late 2010 to Defender Films Ltd. *Jojo Rabbit*, Taika Waititi's adaptation of the book, will be a New Zealand - American – German Production scheduled for early 2013. Her third novel, *A Can of Sunshine*, was published in 2013.

The granddaughter of painter Guillaume Leunens, Christine was born in Hartford, Connecticut, USA to an immigrant Italian mother and Belgian father. At age 19, she moved to France for study and supported her early writing career with fashion modelling. Christine received a BA in French Literature from the University of North Carolina and a Master of Liberal Arts in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard University. In 2012 she became the second person to receive a PhD from Victoria University's Institute of Modern Letters.

Christine and her family moved to Palmerston North from France in 2006.

Source: [www.christineleunens.com](http://www.christineleunens.com)

### **Book Reviews:**

"A bold novel of great fierceness, insight, and emotional savagery. I admire Leunens's refusal to soft-soap anything, even as, while reading, I had to put the book down and pace around the room. But if you stick with *Caging Skies*, you'll get an entire era distilled into two people, a Tolstoyan marvel."

**(Historical Novel Society)**

"*The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, *The Book Thief*, *The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas* - all are brilliant books that give us a glimpse into the Jewish experience during WWII. *Caging Skies* is no exception - and might be the most brilliant of them all... Disturbing, moving, eminently readable, enthralling throughout - this is a story you won't be able to put down."

**(My Weekly)**

"It is a beautiful novel, powerful, different, and ambitious. It's without a doubt in the malaise one feels when reading *Caging Skies* that one recognises the surprising, surprising power of the novel. A profound malaise, which lasts well after the read, sign of a very rare power, that of a truly good book, which knows how to carry the reader into a story. Christine Leunens [. . .] always has the immense merit of surprising and captivating. *Caging Skies* is one of these books that cannot be forgotten."

**(Le Monde)**

"A vivid and deeply compelling novel, *Caging Skies* is an existential battle of moral and ethical extremes. Christine Leunens is an adept and eloquent storyteller."

**(Georgia Hunter, *New York Times* bestselling author of *We Were the Lucky Ones*)**

"Leunens is a strong writer, her prose supple and darkly engaging. Her depiction of wartime Vienna is nearly cinematic and utterly convincing."

**(Kirkus)**

"The best part of this interesting novel is its ability to show parts of our history which others dismiss: why suffering can make some people more sensitive but others more cruel, and how a war, such an outrage to human dignity, blurs the line between the victorious and defeated."

**(Elle)**

"Totally compelling."

**(*Woman's Weekly*)**

"A fine range of psychological relationships going on through this big story. It is a major ambition and significant accomplishment as a book. Leunens does a remarkable job capturing the nature of the two people and the complicated relationships among them. An imaginative novel, daring, singular, adventurous. I'm commending it as much as recommending it."

**(David Hill on *Nine to Noon*, *Radio NZ National*)**

Source: <https://www.amazon.com/Caging-Skies-Novel-Christine-Leunens/dp/1419739085>  
<https://www.christineleunens.com/caging-skies.html>

## **BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. As Hitler increasingly becomes Johannes' father figure, how does this affect his relationship with his own father? And his mother?
2. *Caging Skies* explores individual versus collective responsibility. At what moment do you feel Johannes is fully responsible for his own actions? As a child? A teen? An adult?
3. What laws, acts, lies and terminology compel Johannes to both fear and hate Jews? Does his evolving relationship with Elsa change his views? Or does he only think of her as an exception?

4. Pimmichen, Johannes' grandmother, still lives in another world, longing for the former glory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By being clueless to what is going on around her, she brings an element of comedy to the story. Does not knowing about Elsa exonerate her from her individual responsibility? In other words, does not knowing exempt her in terms of guilt? How does this apply to the Germans who didn't know what was happening at concentration camps, or didn't want to know?
5. The title 'Caging Skies' resonated with me in an abstract, metaphorical way. First, the war situation, then Johannes himself cages Elsa in for several years; and though she is never allowed to leave the house, her mind regularly wanders out of it. A mind, like the sky, cannot be caged. On the other hand, Johannes, though he is free to come and go as he pleases, has had something beautiful and innocent in him, also once like the sky, caged in by his childhood indoctrination. There is an important scene in the book, where Johannes and Elsa argue about whether a bird is protected or kept captive in a cage, each offering different views on the meaning of love, life and freedom. How does this scene add to the meaning of the title?
6. The book often contrasts the imaginative world with reality. How do Elsa's and Johannes' respective imaginations vivify each's own life? How do they at the same time torment each of them? Is the world of the imagination in some way real?

7. At what point does Elsa suspect the truth? Why would she go along with the lie?  
What are the complex feelings and reasons that keep her in?

*Source: <https://www.penguin.co.nz/book-clubs/2469-caging-skies-book-club-guide>*