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Review: A Faraway Island

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Thor, Annika, *A Faraway Island*. Translated by Linda Schenck. Delacorte Press, 2009. ISBN: 9780385736176 (Ages 9-12)

Description:
As the persecution of the Jews escalated at the beginning of World War II, the country of Sweden provided a safe haven for 500 European children allowing them to come and live with Swedish families. Sent by their parents as part of this group, Stephanie and Nelli Steiner were told that their family would immigrate to America as soon as their parents were able to join them. Reassured by this thought, the girls planned to be in Sweden for six months at the most. Taken in by kind Aunt Alma, seven-year-old Nelli adapts quickly to her host family and makes friends easily with the children in her classroom at school. Twelve-year-old Stephanie has a more difficult time feeling at home with the aloof Aunt Marta and the unwelcoming students in her class. Finding herself the brunt of ridicule by the town's most popular girl, Stephanie takes solace in the sparse letters sent by her parents. She feels misunderstood and very much alone in this country so different from the city of Vienna where she was born. Adding to her burden her is her parents admonition to watch out for her little sister. With the encouragement of Uncle Evert, however, Stephanie slowly begins to adapt to her new home and proves herself to be an excellent student. As the war continues, hope fades that Mr. and Mrs. Steiner will ever be able to leave Austria and join their beloved daughters. The girls realize that the country they thought would be a temporary place of safety has become their new home.

Critique:
Stephanie and Nelli are well-developed likable characters. Their courage in the face of distressing circumstances is encouraging. The response of the girls to separation from their parents and the different personalities of their host families is very appropriate to their ages. Though little time is spent in describing Nelli's family in detail, Aunt Marta and Uncle Evert who take in Stephanie are developed in more detail and come across as very real people with their own problems and issues. Aunt Marta's aloofness begins to thaw by the end of the story and as the reason for her conduct is made apparent, she becomes a more sympathetic character. Although the background of World War II and Hitler's attempts to destroy the Jewish population is described, it is not told in gruesome detail. The author shows just enough to give the idea of what drove the girls' evacuation without telling so much that younger children would be overwhelmed. The ending resolution comes about quickly and could have been developed more but this lack does not damage the value of the book. Annika Thor has given a new angle to Holocaust stories. While many stories for young people focus on Germany, little has been written about the 500 Jewish refugee children Sweden accepted just before the start of the war. The translation of the work reads smoothly and hopefully the other three titles in the series about Stephanie and Nelli will also find their way into English.

Subjects: Courage, Family love, Hope, Patience, Resilience,
Austria, Germany, Sweden, Bullies, Immigrants, Jews, Persecution, World War II