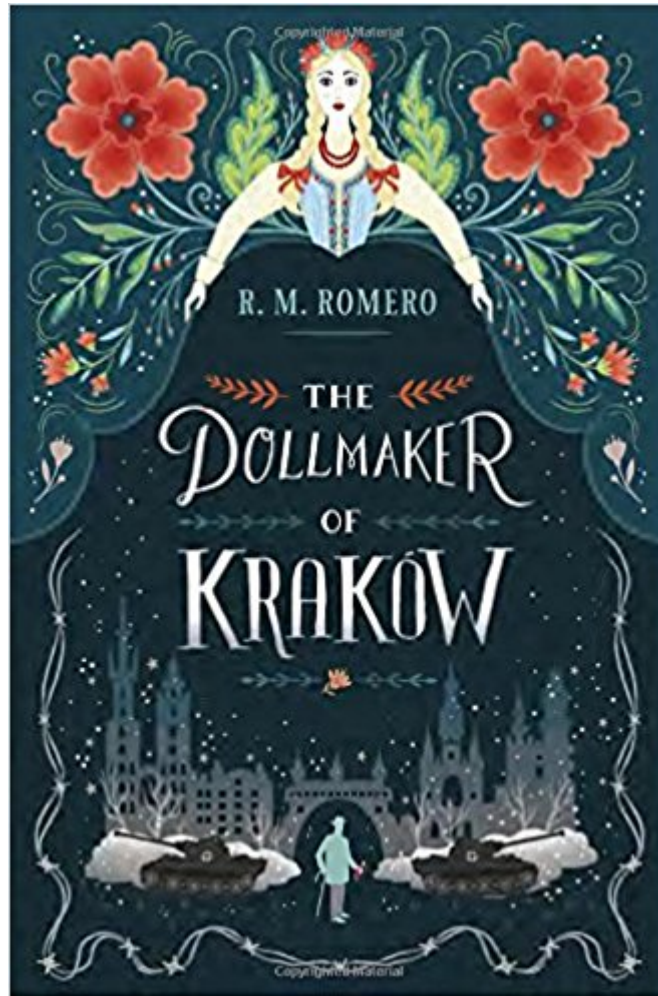




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The Dollmaker Of Krakow



Synopsis

In the vein of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *Number the Stars*, this fusion of fairy tales, folklore, and World War II history eloquently illustrates the power of love and the inherent will to survive even in the darkest of times. In the land of dolls, there is magic. In the land of humans, there is war. Everywhere there is pain. But together there is hope. Karolina is a living doll whose king and queen have been overthrown. But when a strange wind spirits her away from the Land of the Dolls, she finds herself in Kraków, Poland, in the company of the Dollmaker, a man with an unusual power and a marked past. The Dollmaker has learned to keep to himself, but Karolina's courageous and compassionate manner lead him to smile and to even befriend a violin-playing father and his daughter—that is, once the Dollmaker gets over the shock of realizing a doll is speaking to him. But their newfound happiness is dashed when Nazi soldiers descend upon Poland. Karolina and the Dollmaker quickly realize that their Jewish friends are in grave danger, and they are determined to help save them, no matter what the risks.

Book Information

Lexile Measure: 0810 (What's this?)

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: Delacorte Books for Young Readers (September 12, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1524715395

ISBN-13: 978-1524715397

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 1.1 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.5 out of 5 stars 6 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #360,191 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #69 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > Holocaust #380 in Books > Children's Books > Fairy Tales, Folk Tales & Myths > Multicultural #6671 in Books > Children's Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Fantasy & Magic

Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

Customer Reviews

R. M. ROMERO lives with her family and a menagerie of pets in Colorado. *The Dollmaker of Kraków* is her debut middle-grade novel. You can visit her online at RMRomero.com.

Chapter 1 The Dollmaker Karolina awoke in her new world with a glass heart. It felt as if both roses and their thorns grew within that heart, for it held all the happiness and sorrow she had ever experienced in the Land of the Dolls. When she moved, it rattled against the glossy wood of the panel in her chest. Trembling, Karolina raised a hand to her face. It took only a single touch for her to realize that the crack that had raced up her cheek in the Land of the Dolls was gone. When she lowered her arm, her fingers were smudged with blush-pink paint that smelled fresh. The kind wind had told her that someone in this human world had called out to her. So that person--whoever it was--must have been the one who had fixed her face and placed the glass heart inside her. Karolina glanced around and realized that she had been set on top of a high table amid wood shavings and coils of ribbon. While she was not made of glass or porcelain, as some of her friends had been, she did not want to fall from her perch, so she stayed very still to avoid losing her balance. To her right was a huge shape like a mountain, though it was not as big as the ones in her country. A long, rough cloth had been draped over it. Karolina could not imagine what could be underneath it. Across from the table, a large window looked out into the darkness, which was broken only by the faint yellow glow of streetlamps. They were not made of peppermint sticks, as the ones in the Land of the Dolls had been, but instead rose like dark, sturdy trees from the cobblestones. The world outside did not look inviting, but the room around her reminded Karolina of her cottage: warm and friendly. However, this shop--for it was a shop, she realized--was not full of ball gowns and jackets and scarves, as her cottage had been. It was full of toys. There was row upon row of rocking horses whose flanks had been painted with daisy chains and autumn leaves. There were plush animals of many different shapes and sizes on the shelves, their tiny thread mouths smiling. And best of all, there were dolls everywhere. None of them had scratched faces or limbs scorched by fire. They all seemed at peace, ready to love and be loved. They were safe. These other toys weren't like Karolina, though. She did not see any of them walking along their shelves, and none of them greeted her. They weren't alive and had no hearts of their own, and Karolina knew as well as any doll that only a creature who possessed a heart could be truly alive. But Karolina envied the silent toys a little; her glass heart had filled with gray dread. She was so alone, but if the kind wind was to be believed, someone was waiting for her. Where was this person? The clatter of approaching footsteps made Karolina go rigid. A door at the back of the shop opened, and a man appeared. He had a red beard, as if the Morning Star had briefly touched it with her fingertips, and wore a pair of white pajamas. He rubbed his green eyes as he walked toward her, limping. Now that he was closer, Karolina saw that the

stranger was neither a little boy nor an old man, but somewhere in between. Still, Karolina imagined that if he picked her up, she would stand only a little taller than his hand, which was speckled with the same pink paint that now coated Karolina's fingers. He must be the person the wind had told her about, the one who had repaired her face and given her a new heart! The man--the Dollmaker--sat down on the stool beside Karolina, wringing his hands. She could see that his face was streaked with tears that looked fresh. They had turned the pale skin of his cheeks as red and angry as battle cries. "The Great War was twenty years ago," the Dollmaker said to himself. "It's 1939. I'm home in Kraków. The nightmares aren't real. It hadn't occurred to Karolina that there would be war in the human world too. If the Dollmaker had been another toy, the right words to comfort him might have come to her, but she could not think of anything to say. He was so different from anyone Karolina had ever seen. Being able to show one's pain with tears so openly seemed to her like a terrible magic trick, one that humans performed almost without knowing it. His hands trembling, the Dollmaker removed the cloth from the mountain--revealing that it was no mountain at all. It was a grand dollhouse that stood three stories tall, the perfect size for Karolina. Her head would not scrape its ceilings, nor would she have to strain to reach the kitchen table or to open the wardrobe she saw in the high attic bedroom. The flower boxes in each window overflowed with cloth roses, and a sleek black cat sat on the railing of the second-floor balcony. Karolina particularly liked this touch; the cat would gobble up any rats who strayed near. The Dollmaker set to work putting the finishing touches on the roof's trim using a slim knife. His hand moved so quickly that it was as if he could not have stopped even if he had wanted to. He carved a delicate, wavy design that was so smooth it reminded Karolina of cake frosting. As he worked, the Dollmaker's tears stopped, and Karolina thought she understood why. Creating something always made her feel better. It was only when her hands were still that she could not fend off the fears that threatened to overtake her heart. As she watched the Dollmaker, Karolina breathed in deeply. This world, this place. It smelled familiar, like dust and cinnamon and fields of yellow flowers. Had she been here before? There was no precise way to describe the strange feeling that had stolen over her, cutting her as deeply as the Dollmaker's knife would. But the more Karolina tried to grasp at that feeling, the more she felt that she was trying to catch a dream between her small hands. Maybe the Dollmaker would be able to answer her questions. Karolina took a step toward the dollhouse, trying to think of what to say. But in her haste, she tripped over the hem of her long red skirts and gasped loudly. Her arms wheeled at her sides as she struggled to regain her footing. She managed to right herself

before she could tumble over. "This was not how she'd wanted to introduce herself, but it was too late to do anything else." "Hello," Karolina said, and waved.

"I'm Karolina." The Dollmaker dropped the knife, and his face turned whiter than smoke. "Oh no. It's finally happened," he said.

"I've finally lost my mind." Karolina knew that the Dollmaker hadn't lost his mind. "There's nothing wrong with you," she said. The Dollmaker sprang from his stool, backing away. "But dolls can't talk. You can't be real. I must be tired--I'm seeing things." "You do look tired, but I promise, I'm just as real as you are," said Karolina. In truth, it was almost as if the Dollmaker was the strange one, the sole human in the world of the toys, and she, simply a natural extension of the shop.

"I made you," the Dollmaker said. "I can't make something that comes to life." "Gardeners do it all the time with flowers," said Karolina. "And you didn't really make me. My soul already existed--you just called out to me, and the wind brought me to you. I thought you already knew that. You did make me this body, didn't you?" "Yes, but I don't remember calling to anyone. I was trying to re-create a doll my mother had made, and . . ."

The Dollmaker shook his head rapidly. "Oh, why am I talking to a figment of my imagination? This is all too much." He slumped against the side of the table, the movement causing the hem of his pajama pants to hike up several inches. Karolina saw that his leg was made from the same pale wood she had been carved from.

"I didn't think humans could be made out of wood," said Karolina, cocking her head to the side so that she could study the Dollmaker's leg from a different angle. He seemed so flustered that she thought he might not respond. But after a long moment filled only with the weighty ticking of a nearby clock, he did.

"Only this leg is made of wood," the Dollmaker said. "The rest of me is made of something a bit softer." "Can I see your leg?" Karolina said. The Dollmaker averted his gaze. "It isn't very pretty," he said. "Most people don't like to look at it for long." "Why?" asked Karolina. "People don't like seeing broken things," the Dollmaker said. "You're not broken," said Karolina, planting her hands on her hips. "I'm made of all wood, and you don't think I'm broken, do you?" "No one has ever put it like that before," said the Dollmaker. He rolled his pants up to reveal four straps holding a

wooden leg to what remained of his original leg, which was encased in a leather slip. "Apparently, things weren't as different here as Karolina had originally feared. "I like your leg," she said. "You're one of the few who do," said the Dollmaker. Then he asked, "You're . . . ?" "You're not someone who was turned into a doll, are you? You're actually a living doll?" His hair had fallen over his temples, partially obscuring his eyes, and now he pushed it back impatiently. "I think I would remember being human," Karolina said. "But I only remember being a doll." "Amazing," the Dollmaker said softly. He sat back down on his stool and leaned forward, as if he intended to snatch every one of Karolina's words with his callused hands. Seeing that he was growing more comfortable with her, Karolina said, "You said your mother made a doll like me. What did you mean by that?" "My mother loved making things. She made a doll that looked just like you and told me that one day, I should give it to my own child. When my mother died after the war, I looked for that doll, but I never could find her. So I tried to remake her." The Dollmaker's voice gave way to a pause that somehow seemed louder than any word he had spoken yet. Then he said, "And I made you." Had Karolina known the Dollmaker's mother? Was that why everything here felt so familiar? "Is that why you make toys? Because your mother did?" "In a way. It only started when I couldn't sleep in the field hospital after I lost my leg." The Dollmaker patted his knee. "It gave me something to do when everyone else was asleep. It still does. My dreams can be . . . unsettling. Wars are hard to forget." "I have dreams like that too," said Karolina. "Sometimes I close my eyes and I see every awful thing that happened in the Land of the Dolls." "The Land of the Dolls?" "It's where I used to live before you called to me and I came here," Karolina explained. "Just like you live in . . . ?" "She tapped her chin, considering. Had the Dollmaker mentioned exactly where this was?" "Kraków," the Dollmaker told her. "This is the city of Kraków in the Republic of Poland." "Kraków." The city's name felt fresh and crisp on Karolina's tongue like an apple slice. "What's it like? It is a good place?" "I believe so. I love it here very much." The Dollmaker motioned toward the window. "I made a model of the city, if you'd like to see it." Karolina bounced from one boot-clad foot to the other. "Yes, please," she said. The Dollmaker went to pick her up, then stopped, his hands hovering

above her. "May I move you?" he asked. "I don't want to be rude by carrying you if you don't want me to." "I don't mind being carried. Your legs are so much longer than mine. It would take me forever to walk across the room," said Karolina. She raised her arms, and the Dollmaker took her off the table. As he walked over to the window, Karolina caught a glimpse of her reflection in the glass pane and a little more of her anxiety left her. The Dollmaker had captured her likeness perfectly: she had the same golden hair and large cornflower-blue eyes she possessed in the Land of the Dolls. "You did a very good job making me," Karolina told the Dollmaker. "Thank you." "You're welcome," the Dollmaker said. He seemed eager to move past the subject, however, and pointed downward. "This is Little Kraków. The model of the Dollmaker's city had been placed in the shop window. A building with two golden towers and a huge statue of a stern-faced man stood in its center. Pigeons and people gathered around it in equal numbers, while small figures made their way toward the stocky houses and shops surrounding the square. The Dollmaker himself was part of the little Kraków, standing in front of his shop with a doll in one hand and a cane in the other. It was the two figures in the corner--a young knight with a golden sword, and the dragon slinking toward him--that took Karolina's breath away, however. "The knight--where does he live?" she asked. "That's Prince Krakus, and his home was the Wawel Castle," the Dollmaker said. He tapped a small building whose facade had been painted to resemble red bricks. A blue river curled around it like a cat. "I want to meet him," said Karolina. "How long would it take me to get there? It doesn't look too far away." "The real Kraków is a bit bigger than the parts of it I put in the model. I'm afraid it would take you a very long time to walk to Wawel Castle," said the Dollmaker. "And I hate to disappoint you, but the prince and the dragon are part of Kraków's history, not its present. I only put them in the model because I liked their story so much." "The news broke over Karolina like a gust of winter wind, chilly and unwelcome. "If the knight doesn't protect the people in this city, who does?" "Well," said the Dollmaker, "right now, we have an army and a navy who can help us. But I'm afraid for my country. There are storm clouds gathering around us." "Thinking of the soldiers in their brilliant silver uniforms who had served the queen, Karolina said, "But armies don't always win the battles they fight. I thought this world would be safe."

The story is understandably very sad, it talks about hard times, even so it uses language of magic. There are two parallel stories told - Karolina's life in the doll world before she comes to live in Krakov, and Karolina's life in Poland starting just before the beginning of World War 2. In the Land of dolls, there is a war - rats occupied their land and burn and destroy everything in sight. In Krakov, she lives with the Dollmaker, who is half German but wholeheartedly Polish and a humanist. They meet a Jewish family and befriend them. They watch in horror how Germans and even their neighbors turn against Jewish people, and we all know what follows. The book does not talk directly of what happened to the Jews there, they use words like "gone" to describe it, and there is no direct talk of death and torture. No children characters were killed in the story, as the Dollmaker saves them and more, using his magic, even though he shares his fate with the other Jews in Auschwitz. There are some Polish, Yiddish and German words sprinkled throughout the book, and there were no side notes for kids to know what those mean, but maybe it is because I had unfinished book. There is also a space for historical notes at the end of the book, but again, they did not include that part in the galley, unfortunately. I hope they include translation and pronunciation guide for the foreign words.

So, I have read my fair share of books about the Holocaust. A few great, some good, some not so great. The Dollmaker of Krakow sort of fell between the good and not so good line for me. The Good: I loved Karolina. I thought she was feisty, spunky, and so great. I also really liked the dollmaker and all the rest of the supporting characters. The Dollmaker of Krakow also gave me tons of feels. So much that I spent the last third of it bawling my eyes out. The Eh: The world-building isn't all that elaborate. I get that it's middle grade and a lot of authors don't seem to want to make the world-building the focal point of their stories, but I wanted to know more. Like how exactly did the Dollmaker get his powers, where does it come from? I also thought that the first half of this book moved incredibly slow. It doesn't really start to get good until the middle. I also wasn't a huge fan of the Land of the Dolls aspect of this book. It just wasn't as interesting to me as the historical fiction aspect of it. In the end, I did enjoy The Dollmaker of Krakow. A lot of it was interesting, it made me cry, and I thought it was a pretty solid read.

This story had a sweet sadness to it, and it certainly had a message about love, war, and loss. Nonetheless, there was something missing and I wasn't hooked. For one thing, the world building in the Land of the Dolls felt contrived and the magical aspects in the human world felt too convenient. For me, the dollmaker was a powerful character but I never quite connected to

many of the others, particularly Karolina. Reading a book is a subjective process.

I'm sure The Dollmaker of Krakow will find a fan base. It just wasn't for me.

I work in a middle school media center. Our 6th grade teachers have an entire lesson plan from ELA to Social Studies to Math to Science based on the Holocaust. The book of choice has been The Boy in the Striped Pajamas which reads almost too quickly but has a powerful ending. The Diary of Anne Frank, of course, is another book they read. However this book reminds me of The Devil's Arithmetic if that had married Pinocchio. This has the same historical based fantasy book as Jane Yolen's tome but with a realistic Disney movie. There could be a dozen different lessons sprouted from this. Off the top of my head, this could be adapted to an Art lesson (dioramas) or even a business class (The Dollmaker's Shop). The possibilities are endless. A very brief synopsis: Karolina is a doll living in the Land of Dolls. She is transported to Krakow, Poland (coincidentally the birthplace of Pope St. John Paul II) to the residence of a dollmaker. Then she is the midst of the Holocaust and Nazism. The ending still has me crying. It's a beautiful fairy tale with love, loyalty and friendship at its very "heart".

A serious subject dealt with in a sensitive way. I am a pretty protective mother and feel like this is better for the upper end of the target age range.

I have been trying to read this book for a couple of weeks and I just can't get hooked. The writing starts out in a manner that is appropriate for teens, probably even younger. But the subject matter is dark. Back to the days of the 1939 War on Poland. This is a good history lesson but it is also very sad, because this is something that happened and very much like other wars, it is not easy that man can be so cruel to other men. I want to finish this book but I just can't wrap my mind around a war with the status of what is going on in the world today. It makes it more real.

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