

Talking with ADAM GIDWITZ

BY RONNY KHURI

Max in the Land of Lies is the second installment in Adam Gidwitz's Operation Kinderspion duology, a WWII spy-thriller that began with 2024's *Max in the House of Spies*. Here, 13-year-old Max Bretzfeld, a Jewish German boy previously evacuated to England following Kristallnacht, has returned to Nazi Germany as a British spy. As Max—with the help of the wise-cracking supernatural commentary duo of Berg the kobold and Stein the dybbuk—attempts to infiltrate the heart of Nazi radio propaganda and locate his missing parents, Gidwitz takes readers on a journey, equal parts thrilling and harrowing, through Nazi territory and the powerful, pernicious ideas underpinning their movement. I had the privilege to ask Gidwitz a bit about his latest middle-grade masterpiece.

Ronny Khuri: *My impression of you as an author is that you tend to favor more distant, omniscient modes of storytelling, but you chose to write this story, as epic as it is, from Max's limited third-person POV. Why?*

Adam Gidwitz: In each book or series I write, I try a new experiment with form—usually involving how the story gets told.

In the Max duology, my formal experiment was inspired by John le Carré's masterful, ambitious spy novels. In a Le Carré novel, you frequently begin a chapter and find yourself thinking, "Who are these people? What are they doing? Why are they doing it?" You scramble to understand, until the end of a chapter when it all becomes clear. Then the next chapter starts, and you think, "Who are these people?" It's a cascading feeling of confusion and revelation until the end, when finally the various elements align and you sit there thinking, this is the most brilliant book I've ever read. At least, I do.

I wanted to attempt something similar with the Max books, but I found in early drafts that I was keeping the reader too much in the dark about what Max was up to, and so you ended up feeling distant from him, and not caring for him as you should. So I brought the reader closer, made Max share more—but still, we rarely see inside his head. He does things—like feeding pigeons in book one—that we suspect is some clever trick, but we don't know what it is exactly until it bursts forth in a torrent of wings. I wanted to recreate for my readers that feeling of confusion and euphoric revelation that I get from Le Carré books.

Khuri: *For my money, Stein and Berg are (perhaps) the one element that separates this work from so many other "WWII stories," or*



Lauren Mancina

whatever category folks try to fit Max's story into. Can you speak to their importance, both to the story and to your young readers?

Gidwitz: I knew that I would be putting this boy, Max, into some really harrowing situations, with an altogether uncomfortable amount of Nazis. I also, as I said, was experimenting with keeping his plans and motives somewhat secret from the reader. So I thought the book would benefit mightily from having a source of comedy and also commentary. Stein and Berg begin as a Catskills comedy team, or *The Muppet Show's* Statler and Waldorf. But they evolve, over the course of the two books, into more than that.

Khuri: *In this second volume, Max is operating independently as a spy within Nazi Germany, and as such, he encounters not just several titanic historical figures but also several enormous ideas. You make a point of challenging Max's own beliefs as he swims upriver against a torrent of Nazi propaganda. Why was it important for you to give him the task of trying to make sense of the world on his own?*

Gidwitz: My editor is Julie Strauss-Gabel—too often editors play an outsize role in the creation of novels and receive almost no public credit; Julie played a huge role in the shaping of Max. Julie once told me that my best books are the ones in which I ask a question that I don't know the answer to.

The Max duology was inspired by two questions I don't know the answer to. I remember lying in bed many nights as a child, wondering, "Why did the Nazis hate us so much?" (Us meant Jewish people.) Then, in the early days of the pandemic, I was desperately trying to understand what was true and what was not—as experts gave contradictory advice like "Wear masks!" "Don't wear masks!" "Stay inside!" "Go outside!" "Close schools!" "Keep them open!" "Inject bleach into your veins!" "Oh wait, that'll kill you!" it became clear that some people were lying, and many millions of people were becoming devoted followers of those lies. And I became obsessed with the question, "Why does a nation commit itself to lies?"

Max has a couple of missions: one that the British government knows about (infiltrating the Nazi propaganda machine) and one that they don't (finding his parents). But he has a third mission that I, as the author, assigned him: help me find the answers

to my questions. And, as much as these questions even have answers, Max succeeds in my mission, too.

Khuri: *In Land of Lies, you really plumb the depths of horrors inherent to the setting of Nazi Germany. Research-wise, how did you go about diving into that sea of nightmares and distilling what to use for your story? How did you make those choices in service of entertaining, informing, and most of all, caring for your young readers?*

Gidwitz: I am very touched that you noted the care I tried to take with my readers (young and old). It is such a delicate balance. My first goal in writing a book is to write something that kids enjoy, that makes them want to turn the pages. If they're not turning the pages, they won't even see what I'm trying to show them. And I might try to scare them, but I never want to scar them. So that's the first priority: creating a book that young people will enjoy. But once I have their attention, I want to do something worthwhile with it. There is so much WWII and Holocaust history that most kids have not yet encountered—and, depending on their school, may never encounter. And there is even more history that even I as a well-read Jewish adult never knew. In the Max duology, I am trying to balance revelatory history with a thrilling reading experience.

Back to the “scaring, not scarring” idea: the world is full of horrors. But hiding those horrors from kids will not help them in the long run. Children must learn to encounter the world as it is, but they must also be given tools, conceptual and emotional, for coping with and fighting the horrors they discover. And there is so much beauty in the world, too. Even in Nazi Germany, there was love and heroism and laughter and friendship. I want to depict the full, infinitely complex range of reality—in the context of a story kids will understand and through characters they'll love.

Khuri: *In the year between the publications of book one and book two, a lot of fresh horror has been unleashed upon the real world—fresh but not unfamiliar. Has your hope for this book, in the hands of readers, changed in that time? What do you hope kids take away from Max's story, now?*

Gidwitz: Hatred and propaganda are more ubiquitous than ever. Just as the radio revolutionized how average folks received news and propaganda in the 1920s, social media has done the same in the 2020s. I hope Max's story helps young people see through the messages of hate that will continue to populate their feeds and algorithms. I hope they will see what motivates it—when someone spreads a hateful lie, they are looking to benefit, financially, politically, maybe even emotionally. I want our kids to be hate- and lie-detectors. And I want them to know that, like Max, they can fight back.

Khuri: *There is so much fear, presently, about the simple power of ideas to influence young minds, which manifests in many ways, including book bans and censorship and erasure and suppression of representation and so on. Meanwhile, Land of Lies is so bold in the way it presents a number of powerful ideas. You take great time and care to lay out the machinations of something like Nazi propaganda (through the character of Joseph Goebbels, no less). Do you feel any danger in sharing those kinds of ideas, especially through such a*

★ **Max in the Land of Lies: A Tale of World War II.**
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In 2024's *Max in the House of Spies*, 13-year-old Jewish German Max was evacuated from Berlin to London via the Kindertransport where he—accompanied by two little, wise-cracking supernatural beings, Berg the kobold and Stein the dybbuk—was taken in by a prominent family and, thanks to his genius with radios, recruited as a spy by British intelligence. In the second volume of this duology, Max returns to Berlin with two missions: infiltrate the Funkhaus, the Nazi center of radio propaganda, and find his missing parents. Gidwitz has managed to add an essential new tale to the canon of WWII fiction, delivering what is at once an engrossing spy-thriller and an appropriately devastating story of a boy coming of age in an impossibly brutal world. As Max enmeshes himself in the Funkhaus, he struggles to make sense of the machinations of Nazi propaganda and the ongoing assault of lies driving the war forward. Several narrative risks—including Berg and Stein (a critical element of emotional support), the on-page appearances of Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler, and a stunning time jump right at Max's emotional climax—pay off tremendously, elevating this from a well-researched piece of entertainment to an exquisite work of craft and a profoundly sensitive guide to the horrors of Nazi Germany. An at-times buoyant, always captivating, and ultimately heartrending masterpiece of middle-grade historical fiction. —*Ronny Khuri*



monstrous mouthpiece? What do you feel your responsibility is, as an author, in that regard?

Gidwitz: My responsibility is to tell stories young people will love that will also make them wiser humans.

And I'm not afraid of sharing the thought processes of evil people. Too often, Nazis are depicted as inhuman monsters, two-dimensional bad guys to be outwitted, escaped, or defeated. But they weren't inhuman monsters. They were very, very human monsters. And if we wish to defeat them—and people like them—we must understand how they thought and why they thought that way. The Nazis of today will try to humanize themselves, will try to convince our young people to join their ranks. They will tell their own versions of their own story. The best antidote to that, I believe, is to tell their story truthfully, with as much realistic complexity as we are able.

Also, I don't think my stories are only for young people. About half of the fan mail I get regarding *The Inquisitor's Tale* is from adults. I've begun to think of some of my work as written for “all ages.” Which isn't strictly true, since the Max books aren't appropriate for a 5-year-old—nor for some 9-year-olds. But I hope they are just as impactful for a 12-year-old as they are for a 42-year-old. The most meaningful experiences reading the Max books, just like with *The Inquisitor's Tale*, are often when an older and a younger person read together, be it a teacher and their students or a parent and their child.

Khuri: *An upsetting thought I had (in a good way) is that, if you strip away the trappings of this duology—the time period, the war, the spy thriller, the Naziism, the countless horrors—you're left with a story about a child, alone and vulnerable, who must rely entirely on himself to make sense of the broken world left to him by adults. I think that's where I found my vulnerability and my in-road as a reader, and it was super powerful. In terms of character—of Max—what does this story mean to you?*

Gidwitz: What a perfect way to encapsulate how we all feel sometimes: like “a child, alone and vulnerable, who must rely entirely on himself to make sense of the broken world left to him by adults.” And yet, Max discovers over the course of these two books that even in the depths of an authoritarian regime built on hatred and lies, he is not as alone as he thought, and he is not as vulnerable as he feared.

And neither are we. Neither are we.