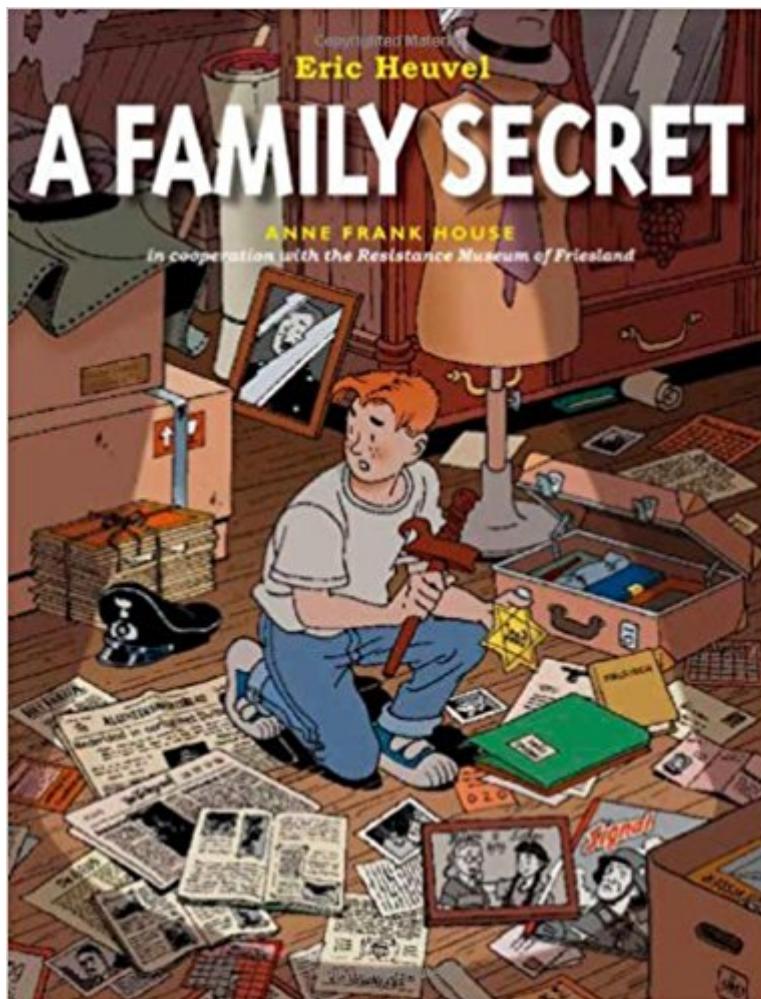


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# A Family Secret



## **Synopsis**

While searching his grandmother's attic for likely items to sell at a yard sale, Jeroen finds a photo album that brings back hard memories for his grandmother, Helena. Helena tells Jeroen for the first time about her experiences during the German occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War, and mourns the loss of her Jewish best friend, Esther. Helena believes that her own father, a policeman and Nazi sympathizer, delivered Esther to the Nazis and that she died in a concentration camp. But after hearing her story, Jeroen makes a discovery and Helena realizes that her father kept an important secret from her.

## **Book Information**

Lexile Measure: 400 (What's this?)

Paperback: 64 pages

Publisher: Square Fish; 1 edition (October 13, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374422656

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Product Dimensions: 8.2 x 0.2 x 272.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #274,294 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #62 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Historical Fiction > Holocaust #75 in Books > Children's Books > Literature & Fiction > Religious Fiction > Jewish #196 in Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Explore the World > Europe

Age Range: 10 - 14 years

Grade Level: 5 - 9

## **Customer Reviews**

Grade 5 Up •These intertwined graphic novels tell the stories of two girls coming of age in Europe during World War II. A Family Secret follows the story of Helena, who survived the war primarily due to her father's decision to collaborate with the Nazis. She recounts her life and those of others, including citizens stranded in the Dutch East Indies at the time. The Search begins in our current era, with Esther arriving in the Netherlands from the U.S. for her grandson's Bar Mitzvah. While there, she catches up with Helena, whom she befriended at age 12 after fleeing Hitler's Germany for the Netherlands. Through flashbacks, Esther and Helena tell their grandsons about the

danger-filled era of their youth. Before she returns to the U.S., Esther learns the final fate of her family and receives a priceless memento that Helena has kept for her. The Search, in particular, would pair well with Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. Heuvel crafts his artwork in the European *ligne claire* style, making the books highly reminiscent of Hergé's work in "Tintin." North American audiences may find the cartoon style somewhat at odds with the often tragic nature of the narratives, but those who try it out will find the books interesting and educational. • Douglas P. Davey, Halton Hills Public Library, Ontario, Canada (c) Copyright 2010. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“Secrets are revealed right up to the present, and in all their complexity, they stay with readers forever. . . . this is a must for the Holocaust curriculum.” • Booklist, starred review

This is a well-told tale of what it was like to live in Holland during the Occupation. It focuses primarily on a Christian family and their trying to come to terms with oppression.

A favorite of mine of WW2 related graphic novel of a true story.

Great for any age. Very good text, good pictures. All in all I would dare to suggest the book not just as present to kids.

Jeroen wanted to find some unusual items to sell at the Dutch Queen's Day flea market, and his grandmother's attic seemed like the perfect place to look. It did not take long before he found a scrapbook and other memorabilia that his grandmother Helena had saved from World War II. The discovery prompted Helena to tell Jeroen a long story about her best friend Esther, a Jewish girl who fled to the Netherlands with her parents after facing persecution by the Nazis in their German home town. Helena's story became increasingly more complicated and alarming as it reflected the progression of the war and the Nazi occupation. Similar to the deep rifts that grew across the Dutch population, Helena's family became divided in their loyalties as one of her brothers joined the Nazi forces, her other brother joined the Dutch Resistance, and her father cooperated with the Germans in order to save his job. Helena and her mother sided with the Dutch Resistance, but they despaired over the constant arguments within their family and the growing violence, destruction, and shortages

of food and fuel all around them. Ultimately Helena even lost her friend Esther in the events surrounding another round-up of Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators, including Helena's father. Helena never knew what became of her friend or what role her father played in Esther's disappearance. This graphic novel, published in agreement with the Anne Frank House and in cooperation with the Resistance Museum of Friesland, does a remarkable job in communicating to middle grade readers some of the most perplexing and disturbing events in Dutch history. Award-winning Eric Heuvel's contribution will make a valuable addition to curricular materials not only about the Holocaust, but also about the lesser-known events associated with the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and the Dutch Resistance.

This graphic novel was originally published in conjunction with the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam. A Family Secret, written in cooperation with the Resistance Museum of Friesland, gives an overview of the Netherlands during the war, through the story of Helena, a Dutch girl, and her good friend Esther. A Family Secret gives a very detailed overview of the war, from the Dutch point of view. The information could be overwhelming to a young reader without much background knowledge. For example, many children might not understand the discussion of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch colony in Indonesia. Characters in the book represent the spectrum of morality - from innocent victims and heroic resistance fighters, to passive bystanders, collaborators, or evil Nazis. Because of the graphic novel format, there isn't much elaboration as to the nuances of each character's choices. The violence is kept low key in the illustrations; guns are aimed, but there is no blood or dead bodies. This too, however, might mislead young readers, as the worst violence depicted is a Japanese guard whipping a Dutch woman. The illustrations are in a realistic style, very similar to the drawings in the Tintin comics. This gives the book an old-fashioned look, appropriate to the subject matter. The graphic novel medium will lure reluctant readers or students who enjoy this format. Unfortunately, the cartoon format may attract readers who are too young for the subject matter. A Family Secret would be best for someone with some background knowledge of World War II. The book should also appeal to readers interested in Anne Frank's life. For ages 11-14. Hilary Zana

By now, the historical events of the Nazi occupation and subsequent Holocaust, as well as related subjects, have been visited in graphic novel form more times than I can count, probably most notably with Art Spiegelman's epic and effective *Maus*. It's a subject that deserves repetition; so many artists and authors have laid their craft to telling and retelling aspects and subtleties of the

stories that came from there. A Family Secret begins with a teenager's search through an attic for stuff to sell in a tag sale and evolves into his grandmother telling him about her experiences as a "safe" Dutch citizen, and then moves into the tale of her Jewish friend Esther, who suffered through the terror of the Holocaust. The framing device of "teenager finding stuff in an attic" only takes up a few panels in the collective story, and his reactions to his grandmother's tale seem to be almost indifferent and don't add anything to the overall graphic novel. I remain confused as to why they were included at all, but perhaps they provide a relatable point of entry for the intended audience of children. Most comics that deal with the effects of Nazi Germany incorporate historical first- or second-person accounts of actual events and people, but Eric Heuvel's A Family Secret chooses to approach the topic from a fictional, or hypothetical, angle. While it is firmly rooted in history and delivers accurate facts along an accurate timeline, some of the impact of the actual story is mitigated by the fact that it will inevitably be compared to "actual events," which are generally more gripping. Regardless, it was an easy read in one sitting, and it presented history in a way that even I could understand, as someone who is notoriously bewildered when it comes to that type of thing. This artist's work has actually come under fire from the Central Council of Jews in Germany as oversimplifying history, though I doubt it intends to act as an encyclopedia of events. Instead, it's a gateway into further study. The line art is crisp and beautiful, and probably the best part of the book itself, though the style might not complement the subject matter as much as it could. Again, it's another aspect that provides accessibility to the audience. And for a story about the Holocaust, there is very limited violence and no profanity. It should be appropriate for any age reader who is prepared to learn about this portion of history. If you enjoy this, the story and characters are expanded upon in The Search, also by Heuvel. Even if they never move past the world of being just characters on a page, it's a solid read and a good introduction to a far deeper story. -- Collin David

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