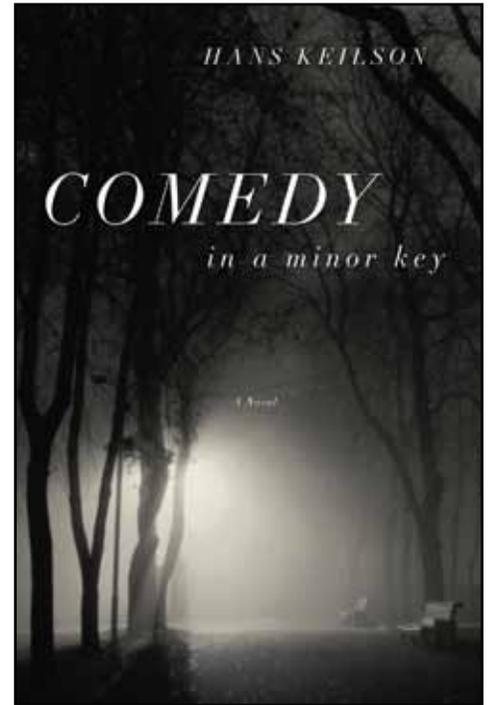


Reading Group Gold

Comedy in a Minor Key by Hans Keilson



ISBN: 978-0-374-12675-9 / 144 pages

Available for the first time in English since its debut in the Netherlands in 1947, *Comedy in a Minor Key* introduces American readers to one of Europe's most brilliant literary talents. Showcasing Hans Keilson's sophisticated, timeless approach to storytelling, this well-honed novel features a

darkly comic premise: a well-intentioned Dutch couple agrees to give refuge to a Jew during World War II, protecting him from certain death at the hands of Nazis. Despite Wim and Marie's noble efforts, their guest dies anyway, of pneumonia. Through this macabre irony, Keilson explores the destruction and desolation left in Hitler's wake, as well as the questions of mortality and its meaning raised by twentieth-century warfare. Republished in honor of the author's one hundredth birthday, *Comedy in a Minor Key* examines the most essential facets of human existence.

The discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Hans Keilson's *Comedy in a Minor Key*. We hope they will enhance your experience as you explore this infinitely rich novel.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What makes *Comedy in a Minor Key* different from other tales of the resistance that you have read? In what ways is fiction (especially wry fiction) sometimes the best means for conveying historical fact?
2. Midway through chapter ten, Hans Keilson describes Marie's disappointment over Nico's death: "She had secretly imagined what it would be like on liberation day, the three of them arm in arm walking out of their house. Everyone would see right away what he was from his pale face . . . It would give them a little sense of satisfaction, and everyone who makes a sacrifice needs a little sense of satisfaction." Is Keilson's satire also realistic? What motivates the benevolent people you know?

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3. How did the novel's timeline affect you? How did your impressions of Nico shift as you learned about him through a series of flashbacks?
4. What makes Nico alluring to Marie? Is he at the mercy of his caregivers, or does he exert power over them in some ways? Are any aspects of his life still in his control?
5. The book's closing line offers an image of life for Wim and Marie without Nico. How was their marriage transformed by him?
6. Keilson's work contains many elements of twentieth-century existentialism, for which Camus and Kafka became well known. What is unique about Keilson's perspective on human existence? What does his book say about our obligations to one another, and the nature of suffering in the world?
7. How might the story have unfolded if it had been told from Nico's point of view? What does he think of Wim and Marie?
8. Born in Germany, Hans Keilson became a physician and was forced to flee to the Netherlands in 1936 after the Nuremberg Laws made it illegal for Jews to practice medicine in Germany. He was active in the Dutch resistance. Does Keilson's biography shape the way you read this work, or is a novelist's biography irrelevant?
9. Much of the tragicomedy in the novel lies in the predicament of how to dispose of Nico's body. How did you react to this? What universal experiences are captured in these images?
10. Discuss the role of Coba, Wim's sister. What does it mean to Marie to have Coba's companionship and support? How is Coba different from her brother?
11. When Keilson's novel *The Death of the Adversary* was named a best book of the year by *Time* in 1962, the magazine's reviewer wrote that Keilson's work examines why there was widespread ambivalence toward the Holocaust while it was unfolding. What portraits of ambivalence are offered in *Comedy in a Minor Key*? As Dr. Nelis fabricates a reason to call on Wim and Marie's house, and the laundry-tag issue is resolved with the help of local police, what message does Keilson give us about ambivalence versus resistance?
12. What impressions of Judaism do the novel's non-Jews offer? How does Marie understand Nico's distinction between a religious identity and a cultural one?
13. The author chose to make Nico a perfumier. What is ironic about this? What do we learn about him in chapter four as he makes suggestions for Marie's ideal scent?
14. What does *Comedy in a Minor Key* say about the time period during which it was written? What is the difference between reading it in 1947 as a new release, and reading it in the twenty-first

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century as a classic? Is there any contemporary equivalent to the genocide Nico faces in the novel?

15. What elements of *Comedy in a Minor Key* echo the persecution described in *The Death of the Adversary*? Read together, do the storylines complement or contradict each other?

PRAISE FOR *COMEDY IN A MINOR KEY*

“*The Death of the Adversary* and *Comedy in a Minor Key* are masterpieces, and Hans Keilson is a genius . . . Rarely has a finer, more closely focused lens been used to study such a broad and brutal panorama, mimetically conveying a failure to come to grips with reality by refusing to call that reality by its proper name . . . Rarely have such harrowing narratives been related with such wry, off-kilter humor, and in so quiet a whisper. Read these books and join me in adding him to the list, which each of us must compose on our own, of the world’s very greatest writers.”

—Francine Prose, *The New York Times Book Review* (cover review)

“This first-ever English translation of Keilson’s gripping 1947 novel about a Dutch couple hiding a Jewish perfume merchant in their home during WWII marks a welcome reintroduction to the author’s unfortunately obscure oeuvre . . . Beautifully nuanced and moving, Keilson’s tale probes the more concealed, subtle forces that annihilate the human spirit.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[*Comedy in a Minor Key*’s] design is so neat, spare, and geometric that to think of it is like tapping a spoon to a crystal glass.”

—Yelena Akhtiorskaya, *The Forward*

“A brisk, engaging work of Holocaust literature that deserves to be better known.”

—Brendan Driscoll, *Booklist*

“What Keilson had experienced, body and soul, went into this precisely composed book, which succeeds in capturing the tragedy of countless anonymous victims alongside the grotesquerie of the individual tragic case.”

—Ulrich Weinzierl, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Germany in 1909 and trained as a physician, **HANS KEILSON** published his first novel in 1933. He fled to the Netherlands in 1936 after the Nuremberg Laws made it illegal for Jews to practice medicine in Germany. During World War II, he joined the Dutch resistance. Later, as a psychotherapist, he pioneered the treatment of war trauma in children. Awarded Germany’s prestigious Welt Literature Prize in 2008, he lives near Amsterdam.

Reading group guide written by Amy Root / Amy Root’s Wordshop, Inc.