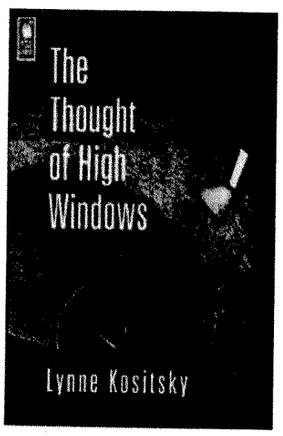
KIDS CAN PRESS

# REVIEWS

## From the Kids Can Marketing Team




*The Thought of High Windows.*

**Lynne Kositsky.**
**Toronto, ON: Kids Can, 2004.**
**175 pp., pbk. & cl., $7.95 (pbk.), $16.95 (cl.).**
**ISBN 1-55337-622-6 (pbk.), ISBN 1-55337-621-8 (cl.).**

**Subject Headings:**
**Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)-Juvenile fiction.**
**Escapes-Juvenile fiction.**
**First loves-Juvenile fiction.**

**Grade 6-9 / Ages 11-14.**

**Review by Harriet Zaidman.**

****** /4**

**excerpt:**

> *Now I know why I'm here. The buildings appear far away, unreal, lit by sun and turning their roofs, like flower faces, to the sky. I want to float, suspended in air, forget. Closing my eyes, I imagine I'm the re-and-green kite I had as a small child. In my memory, it is still adrift on the wind.*

Even though people fight to preserve their lives in times of war, suicide is a choice for those who can no longer endure the unending terror, uncertainty and starvation. Conversations with survivors of World War II or refugees who come to Canada from the many war-torn countries today leave one in awe that more did not choose that route.

High windows provide a sure escape from life, and yet they are also openings of opportunity in this excellent novel by the noted Toronto poet and writer, Lynne Kositsky. The narrator of the story is Esther Wilinsky, a 16-year-old Jewish girl who has escaped the Nazis in Germany. Her parents and brother have been deported, and she is part of a Red Cross group of protected children who have been herded from Belgium to France. She has to endure not only the daily threat of being scooped up for the concentration camps by jack-booted monsters, but she must also survive within the social order of children and teenagers who come from different backgrounds and social classes and who are vying for friendship and love from each other. Their area of commonality is their Jewish religion and their vulnerability.

> *Horrid spoiled girls ridiculous and mean. They hate me because I'm fat. Because I'm Old Jewish. Because I'm a baker's daughter, and their fathers were all doctors and dentists and professors, or so they claim. Greta even refused to pass me the bread at breakfast, saying I don't need as much food as the rest of them. And horrid, treacherous Walter, with his horrid crushes. Even he can't see through to the real me. If there is a real me.*

Esther thinks she is the lowest in the pecking order. She comes from an "Old Jewish" family that practices traditions and lives in the older part of the city. She is plump; even meagre rations can't reduce her to the hourglass figure she longs for. She presumes she is ugly and unattractive. She falls in love with Walter, a quiet boy who treats her like a sister, while he has eyes for the catty, manipulative girls from the more cosmopolitan class, some of whom do not even speak Yiddish and deride those who do. They sneer at Esther; her non-existent self-esteem is battered further, causing her to commit a jealous act of rage and damaging her friendship with Walter. In the midst of this ordinary teenage angst, the group is arrested and transported by the Nazis, only to be saved by a determined Red Cross official.

Taking flight from windows breaks their bones and also saves both Esther's and Walter's lives. They are separated; Esther gets involved in the Underground and is then reunited with Walter. The culmination of events is entirely believable. Anything can happen in wartime. Random acts of kindness or cruelty create results that are both good and bad. One of my own family members masqueraded as a Pole and had to work for the Germans when they took over a house in which she was hiding. She confessed to a German soldier that she was Jewish, succumbing to the pressure to trust in someone, anyone. Luckily, the man was an ordinary person and gave her some assistance. Later, she was arrested and was supposed to be shot, but another soldier, assigned to the duty but repelled by the task, told her to run away. She was the only survivor from her family. Her fate could have been different any moment.

Esther's narrative offers a first-person reaction to the events, the group dynamics, the loss of her family and her identity, and to the prospect of a constantly changing and dangerous situation. Her thought processes are typical back and forth, anger and regret, resentment and longing. Her thoughts of high windows are also a logical result of her experiences.

Lynne Kositsky based her story on the true story of children who were rescued from Germany and Austria and who lived for a time in a French castle. The result is an authentic representation of a person trying to grow up in terrible times. Adolescents will worry about Esther and empathize with her as she faces many different challenges.

**Highly Recommended.**