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Disguised: A Wartime Memoir



Synopsis

Told in her own words, here is the true story of a girl who posed as a boy during World War II and dared to speak up for her fellow prisoners of war. With the Japanese army poised to invade their Indonesian island in 1942, Rita la Fontaine's family knew that they and the other Dutch and Dutch-Indonesian residents would soon become prisoners of war. Fearing that twelve-year-old Rita would be forced to act as a "comfort woman" for the Japanese soldiers, the family launched a desperate plan to turn Rita into "Rick," cutting her hair short and dressing her in boy's clothes. Rita's aptitude for languages earned her a position as translator for the commandant of the prisoner camp, and for the next three years she played a dangerous game of disguise while advocating against poor conditions, injustice, and torture. Sixty-five years later, Rita describes a war experience like no other — a remarkable tale of integrity, fortitude, and honor.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

CHAPTER SEVENTHE Japanese established headquarters all over town. Our home was no longer ours. It was theirs. The local school would become our home away from home, but before going there we had to register at the police station. At the station we joined other Dutch companions in distress. My father looked around and expressed surprise at the number of former Dutch government officials who were in the same situation. I quickly observed that our family was the only one with children. A few single men were in the group, along with some older couples and one single woman — my teacher, Miss Seau. When my mother saw Miss Seau, she immediately

walked up to her and pulled her aside in private conversation. Miss Seau knew that I was a girl! She was the one who encouraged me to play the accordion on Saturdays at singing class. She led the students in song while I accompanied them on my accordion. Just as the two women began to speak in low tones, heads bowed, my father approached to inform my mother that he was being called in for the "registration." I watched the two women from a short distance away. An expression of surprise came on Miss Seau's face; then she walked away from my mother and in my direction. "Hello, Miss Seau. Mom told you?" She returned my greeting with a smile and a rather reserved, "Hello! You're looking good! The change is very becoming." Something in the way she looked at me made me uneasy, so I asked her, "Is anything wrong?" She moved closer to me and whispered, "Your mother told me everything except . . ." She paused for a moment, looking around to assure privacy. "Except what, Miss Seau?" "Except . . . what do I call you, Rita? What is your new name?" Her question caught me totally off guard. We had forgotten to give me a new name! Rita wouldn't do anymore. I needed a boy's name. In our excitement, none of us had thought of it! "Shhh! Excuse me, Miss Seau!" I said in panic. "Please don't talk to anybody about me until I return." I fearfully looked around, afraid that someone might have overheard her call me by my real name. When I whispered our oversight to my mother, she turned pale. "Dear Lord, how could we have overlooked something so important?" She became frantic, realizing that my father was not there to discuss the matter. Tante Suus, noticing the commotion, came closer to see what was wrong. The two whispered and now it was my aunt's turn to be shocked. At the same time, my father emerged from the office. When he approached them, Tante Suus sighed with relief and left my parents to talk. From a distance, it was as if I was viewing a silent movie with the actors involved in a squabble. Then my father gently took my mother's arm and led her toward us. He seemed very much in control, relaxed, and confident, unlike my mother. As they reached us, my father said to me with a big grin on his face, "Hi, Rick!" "Is that my new name, Pop?" I whispered. "Yes! From now on your name is Richard. You may be called Rick." When I heard that, it was as if the little girl named Rita with beautiful long brown hair no longer existed. I felt that this new creation by the name of Rick, with the boy's haircut and dressed in boys' clothing, had completely taken over her life. My father then gathered us around him for a talk. He told my brothers that they had to forget they had a sister. "You now have a brother, and his name is Rick." Renfro, who was much too young to really understand what was going on, took it all in stride. Ronald, on the other hand, seemed annoyed. "I was very lucky that the clerk did not do any crosschecking, especially on Rita's birth certificate," my father continued, addressing my mother and aunt. "I would not have known how to get out from under it if he had. It

would have been disastrous, but . . . all is well. Thank goodness!"I returned to Miss Seau to give her the news about my name. When I rejoined my family, Father Koevoets was there. He gave me two thumbs up and a wink as if to say, "Keep up the good work!"Registration for all prisoners was completed that afternoon. We were ordered to gather up our belongings, line up, and march to the school across the street. Walking through the gate with the group reminded me of cattle being driven into a corral, just like in a western movie. On one side of the school yard, we rested on the grass in the cool shade of the trees. Japanese guards flanked the area, keeping a sharp eye on us.Moments later, food was distributed. We had no idea where it came from or who had prepared it. During the meal, we tossed about many questions regarding our situation, but none of us knew the answers. One of the most crucial questions — "Will we stay together or be segregated?" — was left unanswered. Dread overcame us all.I remembered what my father had said earlier, about how the enemy would have better control over its prisoners if they were all concentrated in one place. It was true, and it was happening now. There was no doubt in my mind that he had been right.After lunch, the sharp sounds of slamming car doors cut through the already tense atmosphere. Voices at the front gate spoke what sounded like an order in Japanese, directed at us. Although none of us understood what was said, each of us instinctively jumped.*****DISGUISED by Rita la Fontaine de Clercq Zubli. Copyright (c) 2007 by Rita la Fontaine de Clercq Zubli. Published by Candlewick Press, Inc., Cambridge, MA.

Rita la Fontaine de Clercq Zubli grew up in Indonesia, where she and her family endured three and a half years in Japanese POW camps. After the war, Rita resumed her life as a young woman and married a Dutch rubber planter. They have four grown children and live in Nashua, New Hampshire.

Top Notch Book really an Inspiration

Disguised: A Wartime MemoirThe book was everything that I expected and then some. I am sending a copies to my family members

Not as good as the 2001 edition by a different publisher. A Disguised: A Teenage Girl's Survival in World War II Japanese Prison CampsA lot was chopped out, making it a bit vague or confusing in places. The biggest chop was at the end, with a chapter about the last camp deleted - that was followed by the word "epilogue" moved to the chapter about resettling after the war. In the older book, that is followed by a brief chapter of what happened to the family during the Indonesian war

for independence from the Dutch, and a chapter titled "epilogue" describing what happened afterward - bridging the gap between the end of World War II and when the author and her husband and son move to the US. I'd suggest getting hold of the older version of you are, say 13 or older.

This book was very well written and it was hard not think that you were there with her. She writes very candidly and vividly when recalling these experiences that happened 50 years ago. I found it hard to put down and read the entire book in three days. Of course, I had to work a couple days so that cut into my reading time. All in all, this is a great freshmen effort and I can't wait for the next installment. It felt like there should be a next chapter to the amazing life. Thanks for the chance to read a private part of your life, Rita!

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