



## The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman

*Andrzej Szczypiorski, Klara Glowczewska (Translator)*

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In the Nazi-occupied Warsaw of 1943, Irma Seidenman, a young Jewish widow, possesses two attributes that can spell the difference between life and death: she has blue eyes and blond hair. With these, and a set of false papers, she has slipped out of the ghetto, passing as the wife of a Polish officer, until one day an informer spots her on the street and drags her off to the Gestapo. At times a dark lament, at others a sly and sardonic thriller, The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman is the story of the thirty-six hours that follow Irma's arrest and the events that lead to her dramatic rescue as the last of Warsaw's Jews are about to meet their deaths in the burning ghetto.

## The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman Details

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Author : Andrzej Szczypiorski , Klara Glowczewska (Translator)

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## From Reader Review The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman for online ebook

### Anne says

Unique writing, beautifully portrays life during 1942-9143 Warsaw. The narrative jumps around between past, present and future and from one character to another. Though not easy to follow at times, this style gives an over-arching view of how lives are lost, saved or changed within the blink of an eye. Very philosophical at times, with beautiful sentences to savor that speak deep truths about life and people.

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### Connie says

Irma Seidenman had been living under a false identity as a Polish officer's widow in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. She is recognized by a former acquaintance, and is arrested for being a Jew. A group of Polish people set up a plan to rescue her.

The interconnected chapters of the book are each devoted to a particular character or incident. Together, the stories give a composite picture of the people in Warsaw during World War II, and a glimpse into the future for them. The well-written book had complex characters thrust into difficult, often tragic, situations.

In many ways, Poland--situated between Germany and Russia--was also a character in this book. "Was this country merely the territory for foreign armies to march across, the land behind the front lines, the strip of ground between them?....The outpost of the free world, squeezed in between tyrannies."

The author lived through that period of history himself. He was educated in the underground university mentioned in the book. After participating in the Warsaw Uprising against the Germans in 1944, he was sent to a concentration camp. After he was released, he was very active politically in the Solidarity movement.

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### Edward says

--The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman

*Translator's Notes*

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### Theresa says

A sometimes dense but beautifully written story of a melange of Poles, Jewish and goy, and the occupying Germans during WWII. Mrs. Seidenman is featured at times, but is really just part of the ensemble cast. It "took a village" to free her from the Nazis, but the ruse of her alter-identity of Mrs. Gostomska worked. So many were captured and killed, but occasionally someone was saved. What an awful way to live, wondering if the next footsteps were your captors. A very worthy read.

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## Roberto says

### Credeva di essere padrone delle proprie scelte. Bisogna perdonarlo

*"La bella signora Seidenman"* è un romanzo corale del polacco Szczypiorski (ma quanto sono difficili questi cognomi!) sulla Polonia e i suoi drammi durante la seconda guerra mondiale.

Attorno alla storia della protagonista Irma Seidenman, l'autore descrive un personaggio differente per ogni capitolo, non limitandosi a fotografare l'attimo, ma mostrando celo anche anni dopo, quando è anziano o sta per morire. Questo salto temporale contribuisce certamente a rendere ancora più tristi vicende che sono già di per sé dolorosissime.

Tutti i vari personaggi hanno i loro comportamenti, le loro peculiarità, il loro ruolo e ciascuno di loro contribuisce a darci una idea, tassello dopo tassello, del dramma generale della Polonia di quegli anni.

Nel romanzo si parla spesso di "polonità":

*"La santa polonità blasfema, che ha osato chiamare la Polonia il Cristo delle nazioni, e ha allevato spie e delatori, carrieristi e ignoranti, torturatori e incassatori di bustarelle, ha innalzato la xenofobia al rango di patriottismo, si è appesa a maniglie straniere, bacia servilmente le mani dei tiranni."*

Guardando alla sfortuna che si è abbattuta nei secoli sulla Polonia e sui Polacchi, non riesco a evitare di domandarmi se le "attitudini" dei popoli non siano figlie di eredità storiche che rendono gli abitanti di alcuni paesi vincitori, altri vinti, altri sottomessi, altri ancora remissivi.

E' terribile leggere queste pagine, piene di dolore, di morti, di sofferenze, di solitudine, di gelo. Forse però per apprezzare la luce c'è bisogno del contrasto, del buio. Ecco, il libro, desolante, senza speranza, è una incessante descrizione di tragedie; ed è proprio questa continuità, questo essere monocorde, che riduce, ahimè, l'efficacia del messaggio.

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## Ally Armistead says

Recommended me to by a professor I greatly admire, "The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman" is a novel I very much wanted to love. All of the ingredients were there for an amazing story: WW II Poland, a Jewish widow in need of rescue, lyrical prose, an esteemed European author. And yet, somehow, I found myself struggling.

Part of the issue, as it always is in books we struggle with, is the lack of a coherent story. In all frankness, the book jacket description of the novel is far more amazing than the novel itself, if only because the jacket lends a linearity and a cohesion, a straightforward tale about various Polish characters attempting to rescue an imprisoned Jewish widow (great reading, yes?).

Still, Szczypiorski leaves us with a precise sketch of WW II Warsaw as a city of frightened Jews--in hiding, in disguise, and sometimes, in service of the Nazi regime to save their own skins. Some stick together and

fight the oppression, others rat each other out, and still others suffer a noble death in the name of their faith and identity.

There is much here to be gleaned, but reading this novel is akin to panning for gold: hours of laborious sifting to find a few precious nuggets.

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### **Bill says**

this is a wonderful novel, filled with extremely beautiful writing. it is about jews living in nazi-occupied warsaw in 1943. i have read many books , both novels and non-fiction, about jewish people during the second world war, and this is one of the best i've read.

i can't imagine what it must have been like to spend your life in constant fear of hearing jackboots coming up the stairs to get you and your family, and being sent to almost certain death. **fucking nazis.**

i only have a couple of quibbles with the book. first of all, the title would lead you (at least it did me) to believe that the book was about mrs. seidenman. well, this is only partly true. she is just one of many characters in the book, some pathetic, and some heroic, but all fascinating. mrs.seidenman is mentioned on maybe 20 pages of the 200 in the book. secondly, mrs.seidenman is described as being a blonde with blue eyes (which is why she is able, for the most part, to pass as non-jewish) while the painting on the cover of the book shows a woman with brown hair and brown eyes. however, these are minor details indeed, so i can strongly recommend this book to anybody who likes a good story combined with fine writing.

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### **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

Like God was the storyteller. The setting was 1943 Warsaw, Poland during the Nazi occupation. But it wouldn't have mattered if the setting was in another place or at another time. It was, among others, the brilliant style of narration which did it for this novel, something I had not seen before.

The blurb at the back of the book, and perhaps the title itself, are misleading. This is not just about Irma Seidenman, a young blue-eyed, blond, jewish widow who got a false identity but was betrayed and brought to the Gestapo. She is just one among the many diverse characters here whose lives were made to intersect to create a cohesive novel and not just a tiresome collection of vignettes or short stories. Why like God the storyteller? The "omniscient" type of narration (thanks, again Ms. Jane Yolen) isn't new. But here, Andrezj Szczypiorski (somebody teach me how to pronounce this name!) goes from the present, to the past, back to the future or whenever/ wherever he wants to go, from one character to the next and whoever, with brilliance and ease. A choreography worthy of an Oscar. At one moment, for example, there is this haughty German officer riding his horse, then immediately at the very next sentence you see him now a prisoner of war, dying of sickness and hunger. Or the beautiful Mrs. Seidenman suddenly now in Paris, a smelly old woman. Or from the Holocaust, you're thrown straight to the Vietnam war. Like the author had transformed the whole of human history into a flat map, pasted it on the wall, and just points to you anything he fancies, showing how events, no matter how far apart in places and times, have meaning through memory. He likewise sees through the characters and makes no judgement. Instead, he understands them. When he gets into the motivations of a particular German soldier, for example, he makes you feel like shaking the soldier's hand and saying how do you do. The jews and the christians, the poor and the rich, all the other characters, are

treated no differently.

And the deft, unexpected switches! A scene I found most unforgettable is that where a jewish lawyer sits alone inside his empty room, waiting for the German soldiers to come and get him. Before the soldiers enters his room he hears a voice. The voice tells him to do this very mundane thing: wear his hat. This jarred me. Then when a German soldier is already taking him for a certain death, he saw a "miracle" at the barrel of the soldier's gun. Not really a miracle, you would say, if I tell you what he saw, but it was a miracle because this brilliant Polish writer Andrzej Szczypiorski, born in 1924, and who had this book published in Polish when he was already 52 years old, can make anything a miracle with his pen.

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## El says

I was recently looking through an old journal for something else entirely, yet came across this title and author scribbled on one of the pages. I don't know what the context was because it's literally just there, pretty much all by itself. I have no memory of writing it down, and it's interesting to me that I wrote it there to begin with since I have a separate little notebook I write down titles that I want to read one day.

When this book was nominated and chosen to be a group read for a Goodreads group, I didn't recall the title at all. But apparently, somewhere around 12 years ago or so, I made a plan to read this book.

Well, better late than never.

Irma Seidenman is a young Jewish widow in Warsaw, 1943. Warsaw in 1943 was Nazi-occupied, times are fucking shitty, people are even fucking shittier, and there's this beautiful Mrs. Seidenman who, as luck has it, is blond-haired and blue-eyed which, as you can imagine, worked in her favor.

A cast of characters work together to help Irma escape, and therein is really the beauty, to me, of this novel. Their lives come together in unexpected ways and, in a way, it makes me think of the goodness in people that we tend to never really see because the media wants to be all "but people suck!" And generally I believe that. Once in a while you hear about some amazing act of kindness or humanity, like the homeless people who helped all those people in Manchester recently, or just whatever. Reading this book made me think of that sort of thing. It's hard to find goodness sometimes.

But the book didn't blow me away like it did so many other readers. I find it interesting that the person who everyone conspires to save is the woman with blond hair and blue eyes, the "beautiful Mrs. Seidenman". If she had a different complexion, and if she wasn't so beautiful, no one would have given a fuck. And so for all the goodness of these people, now I wonder just how good they really were. People tend to do what is "good" when someone sure is hot, don't they?

I guess what this really brings up is questions about altruism, but that's a little deeper than I am prepared to go into on Friday night.

On one hand, the author's proselytizing was amazing in that it covered so much history and information; on the other hand, it was distracting and caused the story to feel disjointed. Again, some readers appear to really have enjoyed that. The story is told with an interesting structure and that appears to either really work for readers or it doesn't. It didn't work that well for me, the bouncing back and forth in time, though I appreciated Szczypiorski's efforts.

All in all, glad to have read this, but I just didn't love it.

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### **Steven Godin says**

Caught up in the Polish uprising against the Germans and sent a concentration camp, it's little wonder Andrzej Szczypiorski choose to write about the very one thing he knew best, that being a Nazi-occupied Warsaw during the biggest atrocity to hit the 20th century.

The title of 'The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman' is a little misleading, yes there is a Mrs Seidenman (Irma Seidenman), who uses her looks, goes by the name of Maria Magdalena Gostomka, and has a set of false papers as a way to deceive the Germans, until an informer turns her over to the Gestapo.

But she is only part of the story not all of it, as the lives of others are looked at in just as much detail as Mrs Seidenman herself.

The narrative on the whole uses an unconventional approach, the past and future events are blurred in with each characters story and there is not a lot of dialogue, instead Szczypiorski uses recollections and thoughts to tell of the effect the war bought on their shoulders. Henryczek (who would think "Here was the center of the earth, the axis of the universe.") and his family is only one of many tales set down by Andrzej Szczypiorski in his dense, lyrical and heart-wrenching novel. Mr. Szczypiorski creates in these pages a kaleidoscopic portrait of life in a hostile and fearful Warsaw, and at the same time he sets forth a philosophical meditation on God, history and the fate of Poland. A child is smuggled out of the Jewish ghetto to safety, A tailor named Kujawski who inherited a prospering business, a fervent nun, who blames the Jews for crucifying Christ, helps rescue dozens of Jewish children by giving them sanctuary at a convent, and inculcating them in the rudiments of her own crusading faith, and then there is the Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman, who posing as the wife of a Polish officer after her real husband died just before the war.

It comes as no surprise the book is harsh and upsetting, given such events and the terrifying world they inhabit, the characters cry to the heavens where the answers don't exist. Wrestling with the most fundamental religious and moral questions: how could God, if He exists, permit such atrocities to happen? How could He allow those who believe and trust in Him to suffer so unjustly?, it's a cruel, cruel world. But the men and women who survive somehow manage to hang on to at least a vestige of their faith. If not faith in a divine order, then faith in the possibilities of human decency and love. And it's love and compassion that reaches out, holding hands in unity, whilst on the other side of the wall, hell is around the corner.

Mrs. Seidenman, who was bereft of all companionship since her husband's passing, realizes that the brave acts of friends and neighbors have saved her from certain death, forever grateful. Even through moments of total horror, it's at the worst times we need to reflect that good people do good things, all of the time, and can make difference in that monumental thing we call life.

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### **Netta says**

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**Jonathan says**

Ignore the blurb, the insipid front cover and the title (suggestive as it is of the 19thc, and of romance novels).

This book is something other.

A series of events occur to a series of characters in Warsaw. The temporal fulcrum of the text is 1943, and the fate of these men and women pivots here. We slip forward (sometimes right up to the 1980s) and back to comment upon and illuminate action taken or not taken during the darkest days of the war. There is much death, of course, but humour (often of the blackest kind) too. Motivations are complex, behaviours often contradictory.

I felt comparisons could be made to Woolf, McElroy and Kis at times, though the similarities I felt were slight and subtle. There are lyrical meditations on God and Nation and History and all of that, pitch perfect characterisation and uncompromising criticism of post-war Polish politics.

The author was, despite being a Roman Catholic, a participant in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and was sent to a concentration camp for his troubles. This, of course, lends his writing of these events a certain amount of credence.

It is also, in a way interestingly similar to the last book I read *The blaze of noon*, traditional enough to appeal to all-comers, but with enough complexity and borderline PostModern technique to appeal to those of us who like our texts a little more unusual.

Regardless, I recommend it without reservation and, having read hundreds of novels on the period in my time, put it up there in or near the top ten.

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### **Lorenzo Berardi says**

The chief problem with Andrzej Szczypiorski for foreign readers is that tongue-twister of a surname he bore.

I wonder how many readers out of Poland have heard of Szczypiorski by word of mouth but cannot spell the author right. And how many non-Polish speaking librarians and booksellers might have been engaged in surreal conversations such as the following one:

R - Good morning, I'm looking for a book by this guy Sshz...Tzip...something like that. You got it?

L - Morning. Well, I'm glad to help you, but it's a bit vague as a hint. Still let me try...Shteyngart?

R - What? That guy who wrote that weird stuff about Azer-something and called it 'Absurdistan'? No, no. The author I'm interested in is someone else.

L - Spiegelman, maybe?

R - Hey, wait! Do I look like I'm interested in comics?

L - Well, actually, 'Maus' is more of a graphic novel than comics and it's rather goo...

R - Whatever. I don't read comics. And Spiegelman is not whom I'm looking for.

L - Ok, then. Fair enough. I had a couple of shots in the dark. Could you please be more specific? Do you remember the nationality of the author, by any chance?

R - Polish, I guess. The friend of mine who told me about the book hails from Poland.

L - Mmh, let me think about that...Ah! Right. Sienkiewicz, perhaps?

R - Not quite. The author's name did start with an S, but then there were plenty of consonants straight after that letter...

L - Szymborska?

R - No, no. Look here, I like Jimb...Zimb...whatever -ska a lot. But the author I'm looking for doesn't write poetry, as far as I know.

L - Szpilman?

R - 'The Pianist', you mean? No. I read that one.

L (looking tired) - It could be Szczygie?, then.

R (pleasantly surprised) - Say that again?

L - Szczygie?. Mariusz Szczygie?.

R - Oh! Shee-gye-aw! Sheegyeaw... Could be the right guy, you know. At any rate, he does sound familiar. Did he write a book with an elegant lady portrayed on the cover?

L (sighing softly) - I don't think so, but let me check for a second (looks into an online catalogue). Socialist monuments, Prague's skyline, lions, crosses. No, I'm afraid there are no elegant ladies here.

R - Pity. I'm afraid I have to give it up, then. Goodbye.

L - (hiding his relief) Goodbye. But please come back once you get more information!

And this is how Andrzej Szczypiorski lost another potential reader.

I was luckier than the unbearable and confused reader above. I've found the Italian edition of 'The Beautiful Mrs Seidenman' midprice and by myself without testing the patience of any bookseller. It was a good and unexpected catch that happened a few days before relocating to Poland.

What did I expect from this novel? I had no idea. But the reputation of its Italian publisher (Adelphi), the synopsis on the inside cover and the somewhat alluring title of the book bought me.

In fact, the title of this novel on the Italian, German, English and French translations doesn't have any resemblance with its original one 'Pocz?tek' that means 'Beginning' (or so I was told) thus not mentioning the beauty of Mrs Seidenman at all.

Now, is this a stratagem thought up by foreign publishers to win over Szczypiorski's tonguetwisting surname? It might well be. Still, I'd have preferred a better rendition of the Polish title.

For Mrs Seidenman part in this novel is not that relevant as you might expect given its foreign title. Well, to some extent. Irma Seidenman is only one of a cast of well-chiselled and convincing characters created by the author and getting by in their own ways in an already Nazi-occupied but not yet Nazi-destroyed Warsaw.

It's the Spring of 1943 and the pre-war state of things has changed dramatically. Thousands of Warsaw born and bred Jews are either confined in the ghetto or hiding somewhere in town. The Polish population is oppressed by the occupying Germans and gets by day after day. Fortunes are made in a week by cold blooded informers, traffickers and art traders who were good for nothings for years. Fortunes which were made over years by doctors, lawyers and entrepreneurs are lost in a week.

And yet, life goes on.

Szczypiorski - who wrote this novel in 1986 - took part in the Warsaw Uprising as a youngster and knew the hard times he depicts here. It's a tough choice writing a work of fiction inspired by events you witnessed forty years earlier, but the author does show plenty of talent and sensibility in doing that.

The characters here are faced with moral dilemmas and have to make important choices in the span of a few minutes. They all have either a strengthful motivation (for good or for bad) or a carefully pondered resignation which makes their decisions believable to me.

Furthermore, Andrzej Szczypiorski knew when and how to use a subtle bitter irony and is able to give an out of time grace to this novel by the means of a refined language.

At a first glance 'The Beautiful Mrs Seidenman' could look like a belated old-style novel dealing with places and people which are no more. But the fact that Mr Szczypiorski discloses what will happen to each character of the novel in the following years stretching as far as the 1970s tells you something about how modern and innovative this book actually is.

What you find here are indeed beginnings.

New beginnings of fictionalised individual lives which - just like the ones of millions of actual people - were very much influenced by the choices and the decisions made in that crucial Spring of 1943.

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## **Elizabeth (Alaska) says**

Mr. Szczypiorski, you had tears rolling down my cheeks so many times. They were not tears of sadness, rather more empathetic/sympathetic. Your book is about special friendships, the goodness of people, and selflessness. It is about a love of country and the feeling of unity and brotherhood among its citizens.

Warsaw, 1943. Jews were being literally slaughtered when they didn't just disappear. Sometimes wars are fought by soldiers, and sometimes by a civilian resistance. In WWII people also just tried to look out for others, risking their lives in doing so. They made false documents for small children or smuggled food into the ghetto. Mrs. Seidenman was able to change her documentation and live openly, only to be betrayed and imprisoned. A small network of individuals, most of whom knew nothing of her Jewishness but to whom her Jewishness would have meant nothing anyway, came to her aid.

Not just the story of Mrs. Seidenman, this is the story of each of those individuals in that network. Szczypiorski deftly tells both their history and their future. Some don't survive the war, some go to jail, some live to old age. In doing so, he makes a story that is somehow greater than the story of any one of those individuals. It is a work of fiction, but I have no doubt the war in Poland was fought just this way.

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## **Katie says**

I thought I was going to love this. It begins so brilliantly. The stories of the individual interconnected lives he focuses on are initially deeply compelling. It's 1943 in Warsaw. The first thing he shows us is how the social hierarchy of Warsaw has changed under the Nazi occupation. Ideally, civilisation is a social order founded on a hierarchy of spirit, sensibility, acumen. A police state enables the uncouth to lord it over their spiritual superiors. Here a former judge is at the mercy of a benign profiteer who has benefitted from the theft of all Jewish property. Power has shifted from the well-educated to the streetwise and unscrupulous. This was brilliantly achieved. We are then shown the close friendship of two young boys, one a Jew, the other a Catholic. Equals in every sense except in the eyes of the Nazis. Again this is brilliantly and poignantly done. The Catholic boy is in love with a neighbour's wife. This is the beautiful Mrs Seidenman. She is Jewish but pretending to be Catholic and is betrayed to the Gestapo by a fellow Jew. The Nazi is another example of the triumph of mediocrity. He has no special gift except a willingness to unquestioningly follow orders. It's often overlooked in the face of their innumerable crimes that the Nazis also sought to annihilate intellect and sensibility.

I suspect Anthony Marra is a fan of this novel as he copies (and improves) Szczypiorski's tactic of linking disparate characters with a single hidden thread and also telling us early on how their lives will pan out in the future. Thus we learn how each character will die early on in their narrative. This didn't bother me so much as Szczypiorski's penchant for abandoning the personal in favour of the philosophical and political. It soon becomes a novel of ideas. And for me the ideas began sucking all drama from the narrative. I grew less and less impressed with his narrative skills. For me too much attention was paid to the post war political convulsions Poland suffers and the novel began at times to read like an essay. Five stars for the first hundred pages but, though it was very wise and brilliantly written, it all ended up a bit lifeless for me. You could call it a disenchanted love letter to Poland. 3.5 stars.

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## Laura says

Wow. For this book, that one-word review would also work.

I picked up this novel after reading about it on NPR - <http://www.npr.org/2013/05/12/1823723...>

If you can believe it, I don't think that even review does this book justice. In 2010, I stopped buying books. This is one of those books that makes me deeply regret that choice. Returning it to the library was painful. I want to read it again, and underline and mark and study and cry.

The book is a tapestry of Warsaw in summer 1943, on the eve of the ghetto uprising. It has become more than posh, almost common to structure novels via a series of inter-related stories. Remind yourself that this book was written in Polish 25 years ago to really appreciate what Szczypiorski's accomplished. Beyond that, the nature of these linkages, the image they create together and the specific ways in which the linkages propel the story forward is incredible.

It's the characters created here who really make this book special. Americans are so fond of black-and-white WW2 stories. After all, isn't that what makes this war so great, the sacrifices so great? The war to defeat evil. Of course, it's impossible to keep those binaries so easily on the continent. Every character in this novel - German, Pole, or Jew - is three dimensional in the most human, relateable, and disturbing ways.

(And yes, I am aware of the problematic categorization I just employed. Mr. Szczypiorski would chew me out for it.)

I could go on. The politics and historical context of this book's publication warrant more time and attention. And the exquisite, lyrical translation as well. This is an elegy for Poland, a treatise on history and philosophy and God. It moved me tremendously.

This review from the Times archive captures my feelings better than the NPR piece:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/23/boo...>

Anyone with any interest in the war needs to read this book. Succinctly, very few books this good on this topic exist in English.

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## Margaret says

What an astonishing book *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman* is. Published in 1986 in Polish (entitled *Pozatek*) and beautifully translated into English by Klara Glowczewska in 1988, this book offers a portrait of Warsaw in 1942-43. The eponymous heroine is a Jewish widow who manages to pass for two years as not Jewish because her hair is blonde and her eyes are blue and because she tells the police her name is Maria Magdalena Gostomska and that she is the widow of an officer. This book tells the story of her capture and her eventual rescue and escape on the eve of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Really, the title of the book in Polish means "the beginning," and that would have been a better title in English as Irma Seidenman's story is only one of twenty-one stories that Szczypiorski tells us in this compact (200 pages) yet incredibly full

novel.

The views Szczypiorski takes of this time of history, of good and evil, and of individual responsibility for that good and evil are incredibly complex. No one is only good or only evil; everyone is autonomous. The truth is not simple, but complicated. Irma is turned into the police by a Jew, who makes his money by turning in other Jews, who use disguises to escape the Nazis. After she is imprisoned and in quite an exciting series of events, she is saved by a series of non-Jews. They each have their own reasons for engaging in this risky behavior. Everyone is an individual. Each chooses his or her own path. Virtue is earned, not granted by identity. Even the Nazis, who are clearly in the wrong as they murder millions of Jews, Poles, Gypsies, and many others, are portrayed as individuals.

Twenty-one characters in twenty-one chapters, but if you are thinking this book might be a collection of short stories, you would be wrong. We do hear about one or two (or more) characters in each chapter. We learn a few things about them, then move to the next chapter, which probably focuses on one or two other characters. And if you are looking for a straight-forward plot, this is not the book for you. What we have is a complicated tangle of vignettes. Rather than a plot that moves from A to B to C and so on, we weave back and forth as we move from character to character. Each chapter reveals some bits, and then we meet someone else. The plot reveals itself to us slowly as one bit layers over or connects to another until, by the middle of the novel, we are getting a clearer and clearer sense of who all these people are and what they are doing during the course of the novel. I see this kind of plotting as more like real life than linear plots. After all, we don't learn everything all at once or even one step at a time. We end up piecing together different bits of knowledge about people and their actions, bits we receive from a variety of sources over a long period of time. But this novel is short; we don't have years to put it all together. Instead, Szczypiorski circles back again and again until our vision of this world becomes clearer. In doing this he breaks all rules of chronology. We can read about a character and all of a sudden, in a few short sentences, Szczypiorski hurls us back and forward in time. And so we learn what happened to Irma in 1938 and what happens to her in the 1980's. He does this in a few short sentences of most beautiful language, filled with details referring us backward or forward in time. Here is a passage about Irma Seidenman, who is in her 30s or 40s in 1942:

It seemed to her sometime, to her own surprise, that she has within herself a strange instrument that somehow resonated improperly, like a cracked fiddle. Perhaps, she was wont to think many years later when she was already a very old woman, perhaps that fiddle of hers had cracked precisely during the war, on the night she spent in the cell on Szucha Avenue, or even earlier, in the summer of 1938, when she had learned that her husband, Dr. Ignacy Seidenman, had just died. Something in that instrument sounded false, and Irma knew it, because she had a very musical existential sense. When she brushed her gray, slightly dirty-looking hair (it often happens to light blond hair with age) and looked at her wrinkled face in the mirror, sitting in a pretty, sunny room near the Avenue de la Motte-Picquet or when she looked through the newspapers on the terrace of a café near Avenue Bosquet, where nearly every day she drank a *citron pressé*, a lonely old Jewish woman on the streets of Paris. (101)

Not only does this passage take Irma back to 1938, when her husband died, and then ahead decades to when she is an old woman alone in Paris, it also uses the metaphor of the internal fiddle as a way to talk about how the death of her husband broke something deep inside of her, and how that break now tunes her in to her own self-knowledge. Indeed, huge parts of the book are written almost as poetry. Szczypiorski uses long, swirling sentences with lists of a world of significant objects, and repetition, as if another verse is starting over. Here is the first third of a passage about this spot of ground in Warsaw where this novel takes place:

Here was the center of the earth; through here passed the axis of the universe. Not only because the careening, frenzied wagon of fate on which Henryczek Fichtelbaum was heading toward extinction had paused here, not only because Henryczek was here, with his newly awakened hope. Here was the center of the earth, the axis of the universe, because here God Himself had established the core of creation, had placed His index finger centuries ago and with it had drawn the circle encompassing all meaning of human lives. Here, where the blue flame from the gas stove roared once, flowed the stream at which a Tatar mercenary watered his horses; here ran the track along which a gangster with a tether around his neck went into Polish captivity, and on both side of the track Jewish and German merchants set up their stalls. Here and nowhere else on the whole earth Sabbath candles were reflected with a faint yellow glow on the sheath of a Russian sword, and Polish hands broke a communion wafer in the shadow of a Prussian Christmas tree. (37)

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The passage goes on like this for more than a page. And there are many other such passages throughout the novel: tumbling lists of images that create a most powerful view of this place and time. They echo character and plot information as well as telling us our place in the universe coming into this time, at this time, and going on ahead of this time. They are the reason the reader is left breathless and astonished. They are the reason I hope to read this book a few more times in this lifetime.

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### **Tony says**

THE BEAUTIFUL MRS. SEIDENMAN. (1989). Andrzej Szczypiorski. \*\*\*1/2.

The author – I'll refer to him as AS when I have to – is well known in Europe – especially in Poland, and has a respectable list of books to his credit. This book is basically an attempt to describe the life in a Polish ghetto in Warsaw during WW II. There seems to be some disagreement over the title. Alternate titles do not convey any sense of the contents of the book. The use of the "Mrs. Seidenman" title at least brings out one of the key characters that the reader encounters in a couple of the chapters. This is not really a novel in the usual sense of the word. Each segment of the book describes the events surrounding each character when it was his/her turn to appear. They all deal with daily events in the ghetto and how the Jews relate to the Nazis. Mrs. Seidenman appears near the middle of the book. She has taken on an assumed name, and claims to be the widow of a killed Polish officer. This was part of the ruse she used to try and save herself from the ovens. We know that the ruse worked because the author always provides us with the fate of each of his characters in the future. That doesn't represent closure for each, however, it is just a way of completing the incident. You can't call the segments short stories, either, since in many ways they are interdependent of each other. In spite of not being able to describe how the story is put together, you should know that the final product provides a vivid picture of ghetto life and of the relationships between the German soldiers and the Jewish citizens. I'd recommend you give this one a try. The closest I could come to a comparative reference was "Our Town," except that it is set in a different time and a different place, with a different group of people with a very different point of view.

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## Agnieszka says

The action of Andrzej Szczypiorski's novel *The beginning* takes place in Nazi occupied Warsaw at the turn of 1942-1943 but in the flashbacks we get a glimpse of other historical events like liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, Warsaw uprising in August 1944, events of March 1968 and the wave of anti-Semitic hate campaign, street demonstrations and protests in December 1970, election of Pole as a pope in October 1978, martial law in 1981. And such device helps the writer not only to complete all the threads but also to present the fate of the characters.

The beginning starts obviously with the figure of a beautiful, blonde-haired and blue-eyed Irma Seidenman, the widow after Jewish doctor. Denunciation her by prewar acquaintance and subsequent imprisonment launches series of events aimed at her release and forms a circle, the whole chain of people of good will who because of her or of the memory of her late husband are doing everything possible to get her released.

Novel, pregnant with meanings, is very rich and complex. Szczypiorski discusses issues of national identity, presents an uncomfortable thesis that not every Polish and not every Jew was always a victim like not every German was an executioner as well. He mercilessly disposes of the myth of our uniqueness, of this Polish suffering that was always pure, righteous and noble. Showing examples of meanness and wickedness deprives us of illusions and self-glorification, this belief of our sanctity and sense of importance in the history.

It's a required reading, not only beautifully written, alternately brutal and lyrical, sardonic and compassionate, with musings on time and life, doom and hope but also disillusioned statements on human nature. But considering the whole course of events Szczypiorski shows that it is worth to be honest though it not always pays while it pays to be dishonest though it's not worth. And it is reassuring message.

And I will end this review with some excerpts from the poem written by Czesław Miłosz in 1943, to illustrate cruel irony that while on the one side of the ghetto wall people were fighting and dying on the other side carousel was standing and on an April day Warsaw citizens enjoyed good day.

*... The bright melody drowned  
the salvos from the ghetto wall,  
and couples were flying  
high in the cloudless sky.*

*At times wind from the burning  
would drift dark kites along  
and riders on the carousel  
caught petals in midair.  
That same hot wind  
blew open the skirts of the girls  
and the crowds were laughing  
on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday ...*

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**•Karen• says**

### **A curious brilliance**

On Both Sides of the Warsaw Ghetto by Israel Bernbaum

There. See it? A carousel. A carousel right up against the wall surrounding the Warsaw ghetto. Crashing cymbals and the taratata of drums, singing violins and dragging, mournful bass drown out the ominous onslaught of the four horses of the apocalypse, unleashed on the other side. The absurdity of such a thing is enough not just to knock Professor Winiar off his feet, but to knock his heart out of rhythm entirely. Heart-stopping absurdity. A ridiculous death.

It is this deep sense of the absurd, the comical, the laughable arbitrariness of life and death that runs through the whole of Szczypiorski's novel, which in the original is titled *Pocz?tek - The Beginning*, a title which removes Mrs Seidenman from the centre. And indeed, this is not her story alone. She forms the centre of one tangled skein of connections that make possible her rescue from imprisonment after a fellow Jew denounces her, and threads from that skein run over to another tangle around the family of the lawyer, Fichtelbaum and his son Henryk, his daughter Josaia.

Those who help Jews out of the ghetto are often flawed, their motives less than pure. The bandit Suchoviak aggrandizes his people-smuggling, deeming it noble to extort money (view spoiler) as long as you are doing it in order to rescue people beleaguered by a foreign power. Sister Veronica gains smug self-satisfaction in counting the number of young children coerced into adopting the "true" faith in order to provide them with a new, less perilous identity. Müller, an ethnic German who has lived in Poland all his life and feels as Polish as the next man, feels compelled to help Mrs Seidenman out of a desire to prove something about Germans, out of loyalty to an old comrade-in-arms in the anti-Russian revolution of 1904, to prove his Polish credentials even if he is German. He bristles and baulks and protests - why her? Why this one? If she were just some poor Ryfka from Novolipie Street, no-one would lift a finger! Ah yes, it's true. She is indeed *beautiful* Mrs Seidenman, and Dr Korda, the man who first picks up the phone to set the process in motion, what, exactly, is his motivation? He looks like the perfect candidate for the compassionate humanist, with his classical background, his Lucian and Tacitus, but on the other hand, he finds Mrs Seidenman extremely attractive. Self-deception along the line.

Then Henryk, who first escapes from the ghetto, hides for one winter, and then decides to go back and face his fate with head held high, he suffers the consequences of the worst kind of self-delusion, surely - the idea that this is his fate, that he is fulfilling his destiny and that his death will be dignified by an aura of sacrifice. But for what? The world went on turning even after the obscenity of the holocaust, and totalitarianism found different, more pernicious, if less perfectionist ways of persuasion by force. Mrs Seidenman, the beautiful Mrs Seidenman was saved from a death that would have been due to the wrong initials on her cigarette case, an absurd death that would have been indeed, only, oh Poland, for her then to be exiled in the anti-Zionist purges of 1968. Jews, Christians, Poles, Germans, those who showed humanity, those who showed none, all of them died later, some sooner, some later. Did it make any difference?

This may sound nihilist and bleak, but it's not, it's not. God may have turned his eyes away, there is no plan, how could this obscenity be part of a plan? No divine retribution for wrong, no heavenly reward for right. Everyone dies. In the end, Szczypiorski, in an appealingly wry, ironic tone, takes a long, long view. This is

about far more than the Warsaw ghetto, as if that weren't hard tack enough. It is about Poland, and history and identity, and totalitarianism, and human cruelty. And as you might expect from an author who fought against repression by the Nazis, by the Red Army, by Communism, who recalls the history of Poland as a nation born out of the struggle for independence from the foreign yoke, his profound and (as he admits) rather banal credo is that a life spent fighting for independence and self-autonomy is a life well led. Go back to the beginning: the judge, surely one who knows, the judge - another paradox - who loves the twilight, who shuns the clear light of day, but who holds the key: basically, we human beings, we all know the difference between right and wrong. But sometimes we doubt ourselves, and then those demiurges come creeping out of the wainscoting ("Demiurges", the tailor muses, "Never heard of them. Are they anything like plumbers?") No, they are the ones who hold themselves responsible for the redemption of mankind. Each of them is convinced that he has the philosopher's stone in his pocket, but the trouble is that every one has a different stone, and they start throwing the stones at each other, but mostly they only manage to hit the head of decent folk like you and me.

Watch out for the stones.

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