



Unspeakable Things

Kathleen Spivack

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A wild, erotic novel--a daring debut--from the much-admired, award-winning poet, author of *Flying Inland*, *A History of Yearning*, and *With Robert Lowell and His Circle: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Stanley Kunitz, and Others*. A strange, haunting novel about survival and love in all its forms; about sexual awakenings and dark secrets; about European refugee intellectuals who have fled Hitler's armies with their dreams intact and who have come to an elusive new (American) "can do, will do" world they cannot seem to find. A novel steeped in surreal storytelling and beautiful music that transports its half-broken souls--and us--to another realm of the senses.

The setting: the early 1940s, New York--city of refuge, city of hope, with the specter of a red-hot Europe at war.

At the novel's center: Anna (known as the Rat), an exotic Hungarian countess with the face of an angel, beautiful eyes, and a seraphic smile, with a passionate intelligence, an exquisite ugliness, and the power to enchant . . . Her second cousin Herbert, a former minor Austrian civil servant who believes in Esperanto and the international rights of man, wheeling and dealing in New York, powerful in the social sphere yet under the thumb of his wife, Adeline . . . Michael, their missing homosexual son . . . Felix, a German pediatrician who dabbles in genetic engineering, practicing from his Upper East Side office with his little dachshund, Schatzie, by his side . . . The Tolstoi String Quartet, four men and their instruments, who for twenty years lived as one, playing the great concert halls of Europe, escaping to New York with their money sewn into the silk linings of their instrument cases . . .

And watching them all: Herbert's eight-year-old granddaughter, Maria, who understands from the furtive fear of her mother, and the huddled penury of their lives, and the sense of being in hiding, even in New York, that life is a test of courage and silence, Maria witnessing the family's strange comings and goings, being regaled at night, when most are asleep, with the intoxicating, thrilling stories of their secret pasts . . . of lives lived in Saint Petersburg . . . of husbands being sent to the front and large, dangerous debts owed to the Tsar of imperial Russia, of late-night visits by coach to the palace of the Romanovs to beg for mercy and avoid execution . . . and at the heart of the stories, told through the long nights with no dawn in sight, the strange, electrifying tale of a pact made in desperation with the private adviser to the Tsar and Tsarina--the mystic faith healer Grigory Rasputin (Russian for "debauched one"), a pact of "companionship" between Anna (the Rat) and the scheming Siberian peasant-turned-holy man, called the Devil by some, the self-proclaimed "only true Christ," meeting night after night in Rasputin's apartments, and the spellbinding, unspeakable things done there in the name of penance and pleasure . . .

Unspeakable Things Details

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From Reader Review Unspeakable Things for online ebook

Renata says

I don't even know what to say about this book. I knew the reviews were mixed, but I didn't expect to be this let down. I guess it's a story of the Holocaust and the refugee crisis during WWII told in an allegory? Maybe I'm not smart enough or literary enough, but I didn't like her writing. Maybe poetry is her thing and she should stick with it.

Kate says

Sometimes the title of a book is a review in itself. There are many unspeakable things in this book that I sincerely hope I never have to think about again. At the top of the list –

- the use of the word aureole

“Once again, an aureole of light seemed to life him by his meager hair....”

“And Maria’s grandfather, his white hair an aureole about his head...”

“...her gray hair in a tousled aureole, staring at nothing.”

“His penis flared; a shining aureole surrounded it.”

“...bushy hair stood on end, making an aureole around his head like illustrations in the German children’s book Struwwelpeter.”

“...large ears backlit, his head like an aureole.”

- and also thrumming (used 24 times).

“Herbert’s ears, large and transparent, thrummed to the A sound.”

“...closed her eyes, and her left whisker thrummed. Felix stroked her body gently.”

- Rasputin’s enormous rod

- fingertips with personalities

“Across the city, the fingers were thrumming like mad, calling.”

- string instruments that behave like ponies

“The musicians removed their gloved hands from their instruments’ strings and bowed. Like plunging horses, the instruments also bowed their necks, whinnying slightly.”

- a Nazi doctor in stockings and a birthday party hat

Now let's not speak of this book again.

1/5

I received my copy of *Unspeakable Things* from the publisher, Knopf Doubleday, via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review.

Angela M says

There definitely are unspeakable things in this book and the problem I had was that they were spoken about in such explicit detail. I found it gruesome and offensive in parts, in particular those depicting abhorrent treatment of children. Did things like this really happen? Certainly there were unspeakable things that happened to those trying to escape Hitler as well as those who didn't escape. Of course, they need to be spoken about so we don't forget BUT I think that the effect would have been so much more powerful if some things were left unspoken. I found myself skimming pages just to get through it. I could say more about what I didn't like but I'll leave them unspoken. Two stars because some of the the writing was really very good, but it wasn't enough for me.

Thanks to NetGalley and Knopf.

Melissa says

I received an advanced review copy from Edelweiss in exchange for an honest review.

Unspeakable Things is a WW2 novel set in New York City. There is literally a ton of unspeakable things that happen to children and adults in this book, so much so, that I couldn't finish. The writing was brilliant, but the subject was a bit too much for me.

Elyse Walters says

Tears were running down my cheeks very early in this novel...my jaw was frozen open...
Mythological in nature..."*Unspeakable Things*", knocked the wind out of me.

I was caught off guard --I had no idea how breathtaking & heartbreaking this novel would feel
...'immediately' from the start!

"New York. New York, City of Hope. The strident avenues streaked across the city, silver: fiery arrows like long, bright sounds, almost too much for the ear to bear. And still the band played. Louder. More volume. New York, and the gleaming saxophones entered in chorus. New York. And now the trumpets rose to a wail, a city of pain, and the saxophones sang of darker things. Sadness. Nostalgia. New York, City of Dreams Left Behind. New York."

"Each week, the ships came into the harbor, disgorging the crippled remains of Europe, already charred, or at least forever marked".

A one legged whore and her stump...a talented contortionist could put more love into a man and any other girl on the coast.

A rat lady, so little, her body without weight, long whiskers curving out of the mole near the Rat's nose... Anna...(the little Rat lady) was so deformed that her spine resembled that of a shrimp, curved and curled onto itself.

Anna, "Rat Lady", was Hungarian, had a passion for intelligence, literature, language and playing chess with her cousin Herbert. She could not stand straight when she walked. She moved painfully slow with the cane. "A Rat with the most beautiful eyes, the most seraphic smile. A Rat with the face of an angel, made more beautiful by the imperfections that called attention to her beauty. This Rat have the power to enchant".

Children...lovely children - a wife gone mad - a loss son - another son works in Washington - a Nazi Doctor-refugees- The Tolstoi Quartet...secrets ... atonement..

This is an irresistible non-stop train ride read!

Rare & precious....."Unspeakable Things", validates the power of fiction to awaken the souls of people damaged by the forces of history.....'Holocaust-Themed'...

.....extraordinary beauty!

Thank You Knopf Doubleday Publishing, Netgalley, and to Kathleen Spivack...(Thank you for this amazing book!!!!)

Roger Brunyate says

Baroque, Bestial, Brilliant

Though not the prime meaning of the title, the Holocaust surely comes into the category of "unspeakable things." Yet it is a subject that must be spoken of, again and again. And when straight words lose their force, you talk of it obliquely, or backwards, or upside down. The horrors are so obscene that they distort language itself, becoming something close to grotesque farce or surreal pornography. It is an approach we have seen quite a lot in the past two decades, for example in *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis, *A Blessing on the Moon* by Joseph Skibell, or *Heidegger's Glasses* by Thaisa Frank. Or, for another strikingly oblique approach, though not in the least comic, *The White Hotel* by D. M. Thomas. I mention these only to mark out some imaginative space within which to site Kathleen Spivack's extraordinary new novel. But hers is wildly original, totally sui generis, and as likely to infuriate some readers as it will delight and disturb others.

Unspeakable Things is more accurately described as a refugee novel, being set in New York City in about 1940; the closest we get to the camps is the departure of a single character from Vienna in a sealed boxcar. But without the Holocaust, none of the characters would have had to flee to New York and live whole families to a single room in cold water flats. No matter how bizarre, how perverse Spivack's action becomes, you know that even more unimaginable things are going on in Auschwitz, Maidanek, and the laboratories of Dr. Mengele. This is the Holocaust reflected in a fun-house mirror, but—unlike the situation in Europe—ultimately offering the hope of emerging from the madhouse and making your garden grow.

Spivack pulls together a peculiar set of characters. There is Herbert, known as Herr Hofrat, a former civil servant who even in New York seems to be able to arrange things for his suffering compatriots who pay court to him in an automat or the Public Library. There is his son, David, who works in Washington, translating ads from German papers in case they contain codes. There is his wife Adeline, a former pianist now confined to a mental hospital. There is Herbert's long-time correspondent (in Esperanto, chess notation, and various more normal languages), Anna, known as "the Rat," a diminutive Russian Countess, permanently bent into the shape of a question mark, whose only experience of physical sex was at the sulfurous hands of the mad monk Rasputin. There is the pediatrician Dr. Felix who plays sex games with his juvenile patients, has a shrine to Hitler in his bedroom, and dreams of being able to clone supermen from preserved genetic material. And there is the Tolstoi Quartet, four aging string players whose price for being smuggled to America was the amputation of their little fingers.

Spivack's writing is superb, ranging from poetic descriptions of New York to the pornographic excesses of Rasputin's assault on the hunchbacked Countess. I cannot quote the first without taking too much space, and the second is too rich for general audiences, but it would be wrong to end without offering some samples of the prose. So here are two brief paragraphs, both from near the end of the novel, the first bizarre, the second sadly true. There is a lot more where these came from:

From the closed refrigerator, also, came the sound of A, loud and clear, piercing, as the severed quartet fingers cried out from their concealment. "Aleph. We are Alive!" All of New York was sounding to the tone of A: The skyscrapers, the trumpets, the solemn shafts of sunlight piercing, as in the inside of a cathedral, the dark streets.

Home. A difficult concept in a new world. How to find oneself at home again? Far away, the blanketed cities of Europe huddled, the rust of blood on their stones. All that dark tragic history, that sense of cynicism and fatalism led to a point of view that would be known, in the more dignified sense, as "European Philosophy." All founded on certainty, and fear, and the inability to prevent death. Europe reeked of death. [...] Here hopes rained like gold, promises burned the land to a crisp, and there was no history to be seen in the hastily thrown up houses of the United States of America.

+ + + + +

I originally posted this review on Amazon with a five-star rating. Almost immediately, though, I added a comment giving an alternative point of view, not so much on the quality of Spivack's narrative, but upon the morality of watching it as *voyeurs*:

For the sake of fairness, let me offer an opposing view to what I have written above. I said of the Holocaust, "Yet it is a subject that must be spoken of, again and again." Must it? Why? So that we do not forget. For this reason, books like *The Diary of Anne Frank* or Elie Wiesel's *Night*—the simple narratives of the Holocaust—should continue to be taught in schools. But is there not also a danger that we do not turn this most terrible example of man's inhumanity into a cliché or, worse, a half-forgotten quarry of source material to be mined by clever authors for some delicious frisson?

In giving an enthusiastic five stars to Kathleen Spivack's novel, I was always aware that behind her playfulness there was the murder of an entire people, that behind her pornography lay true events even more obscene. But I felt this because I had already read the simple narratives; I already knew. But supposing I didn't? Can I say that anything in Spivack's book told me about them, or even made me see them in a new light? *The White Hotel* by DM Thomas, to which I

compared her novel, for all the extraordinary weirdness with which it opened, did at the end let me approach the Holocaust through a back door, so to speak; you went through and suddenly there it was, in all its horror. There is no such back door in this novel, no way in which the real events in Europe might be accessed through the fictional ones in America. I responded to Spivack as a clever author—but *should* I have done? Is not the very idea obscene?

Lean says

Charming characters, detailed description of scenes, gentle pace of events, strangely mysterious and rich concepts, all in all an enchanting read...

Katie R. Herring says

I love historical fiction, I love subtle magic, I love family history-- this novel had all of that-- except it was strange. Unspeakably strange. I only finished it because I had a morbid fascination for the characters. I cringed, phalanges curled, I rolled my eyes at the word aureole, I bit my lip as I tried to finish this novel.

Some people will like this-- the writing was lovely when referring to the settings and emotions-- about New York, about home, about passion; but overall it wasn't enough. There were no likable characters and no realism. I'm not quite sure if the appendages actually spoke, or if we were supposed to believe the doctor was insane. And the dead brother! Was he murdered? Was he taken? I'm actually not quite sure. All I know is he vicariously lived through his brother as he made love to his wife, and phantomly watched his insane (or so we're led to believe) mother play the piano.

There is also a retelling of The Hunchback of Notre Dame (my boyfriend pointed that out when I explained what I was reading), molested children, a crossdressing, mad scientist pedophile, many games of chess, a dead girl and a real dead brother, and most interestingly, breathing instruments that shared a bed with their musicians.

It was strange. And it'll float around in my head because it was strange, but I didn't like it.

From the first chapter, it could have gone much differently. I would have liked more historical, realistic, fiction.

nikkia neil says

Thanks Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group and netgalley for this ARC.

I've read a few negative reviews of this book, and i think those people are missing the point. This is meant to be whimsy and funny while making us cry and laugh. Kathleen Spivack hits all the right notes on a hard subject to write and read about.

Jean says

Author Kathleen Spivack, in her episodic novel, *Unspeakable Things*, takes the reader from the dark precipice of the old world during the war-torn 1940s, to the new life which is being created, haltingly and painfully, by the intelligentsia who have escaped to New York. Refugees from Europe, they attempt to continue their lives in New York City. It is a moment in time which is suspended. There is little direction. Memories hold as much import and reality as actions for the family to whom the reader is introduced. There is Herbert, now a grandfather, who is struggling to accept his position as this small community's man with the answers. His wife has gone mad with the loss of their son Michael. Their other son, David, works in Washington as a decoder or cipher. His grandchildren are still young. Only Ilse, David's wife, who works, seems to have adapted to the new way of life they are living in New York.

When the little Countess, Anna (also known as "the Rat", for her ugliness and beauty combined) arrives to live with the family, other forces begin to affect each member. Her powerful presence is a physical as well as intellectual signal for change.

Additionally playing a critical part in this novel is Felix, a Nazi doctor who is a scientist attempting to realize the dream of the master race from specimens he collects and cultures. In fact, he has specimens from the Tolstoi Quartet. They too arrive in New York during the course of *Unspeakable Things*. Each one of them is missing something essential without which they will be unable to play pieces as they once did in Vienna.

What are the "Unspeakable Things" which are brought to light by this novel? They could be construed as the unspeakable things which the little Countess, Anna, brings up to the child Maria. These concern the physical and sexual brutality she underwent at the hands of Rasputin in order to pay off a debt owed by her husband, a debauched count. The passion and depravity she experienced changed her forever.

Even more however, the unspeakable things concern the horror and brutality brought upon Europe by Hitler and the Nazis. The loss and the darkness which swept away whole civilizations and peoples is portrayed within this novel frighteningly and horrifyingly, yet from one step removed.

The author, with vivid and powerful writing, plunges the reader into this time period in New York. The balance of things is beginning to turn from old to new. However, for many within this tiny cadre of refugees, memories hold them and keep them from taking action as if they are trapped within specimen jars, hopeless in a collection kept barely alive by a mad scientist. Only the little Countess make an ultimate sacrifice.

Finally, from the haunting and horrible depths comes the unquenchable urge for a new Spring, and a new life. To accomplish this, values of beauty and refinement must be left behind, like photographs of strangers, in silver frames. Were they real? What significance did they have? Many things which represent the arts and beauty, and all that we embrace and cleave to in our humanity, are lost during this time of transition.

In the end, *Unspeakable Things* turns and faces renewal and change. A choice is made. The old is left behind. What unfolds and adapts may be prosaic, however it promises a future for the next generation.

switterbug (Betsey) says

Unspeakable things refer to the shattered lives of Holocaust survivors, as well as the harrowing acts that happen to certain refugees and their loved ones living in New York City. Herbert, a Viennese government official, has relocated to NYC and is putting all his money and energy into helping other refugees from the war. His wife, Adeline, a former pianist, lost her mind after their oldest son, a homosexual, was captured by the Nazis and taken to an extermination camp. Their other son, David, is living in Washington D.C. as a

cryptologist. Herbert's second cousin, Anna, a Hungarian known as the Rat, is a woman with an "exquisite ugliness," a deformed spine and three whiskers growing from the mole on her face, but she has a beautiful face, a seraphic smile, deep, penetrating eyes, and a gentle heart, and is the unlikely hero of the story.

Then there is Dr. Felix, an insane Mengele-esque doctor who performs unspeakable acts, as well as dabbling in a menacing form of genetic engineering. His relationship to the Tolstoi String Quartet, a group of older male musicians, is a form of specimen collection and monstrous science, which eventually incite Herbert and the Rat. And then there is Rasputin, who changes the Rat forever. Herbert and company form the foreground, while in the background, Hitler's Germany rages on, yet between Herbert and Hitler is a surreal space of remove, a daub of magical realism that adds a touch of grace and a twisted beauty. It is a dark, eerie, bleak and depraved place that also resonates with hope. Art, literature, language, music, and poetry survive within the most horrifying events.

What makes this novel so *sui generis* is the prose, which creates the touches of magical realism that penetrate the story or swirl the reality with a fantastical lift. For example: "The instruments in their cases began to throb, their nose swelling next to their owners. From the dark cases came discordant deaf-mute sounds, a cacophony of scrapes, the meaningless tonalities of deserted music. The violins sobbed like sick women; the viola and violoncello howled."

This is such an aslant Holocaust/not Holocaust story--mixing fairy tales with human horror-- that I don't recommend it for everyone. Without the Holocaust in the background, this story wouldn't be as meaningful, yet it occurs at a distance, in America, and with individuals fighting different struggles, for the most part. As long as the reader isn't looking for something customary, and can look so far outside the box that the box has changed shape, then it surely may be a rare and bittersweet experience. Unspeakably so.

Esil says

2 1/2 stars. As I read it, my reaction to *Unspeakable Things* swung wildly between loving the cleverness of some of the writing to feeling that the weirdness was over the top. Based on that, I don't suppose it will be surprising that it seems impossible for me to describe what *Unspeakable Things* is about. It's mostly set in New York City during WWII, focusing on a group of European immigrants escaping the war. There is a very surreal quality to the writing and the story. It's at times horrifying and at times humorous. There's a grandfather, Herbert, who sees himself as burdened with having to help the other newly arrived Europeans, with his secret complex web of knowledge and connections. There are his family members -- wife, living son, dead son, daughter in law and granddaughter -- all living their complicated burdened lives. There's a brilliant scene in the middle describing a Viennese music quartet, how they ignored their wives to dote on their instruments, and how this ultimately led to their expulsion from Vienna. There's a deformed aunt who refers to herself as The Rat, who has a complicated sad history including marriage to a Russian count and some nasty entanglement with Rasputin. There's a perverse doctor, who treats children abominably and has ties back to Hitler's eugenics projects. And so on... And the lives of these characters are intertwined and intersect in various ways. While parts seemed brilliant and beautifully written, at other times I felt completely lost, a bit repulsed and underwhelmed. This may well be due to my concrete brain and others will no doubt get far more out of *Unspeakable Things* than I did. Although I must add a note of caution: there are in fact a few unspeakable things that happen in this book, which means that it is definitely not a book for the squeamish. To be honest, I'm still shaking my head trying to figure out what I think of the whole experience.

Thanks to Netgalley and the publisher for a chance to read an advance copy.

Suzanne says

I saw this book likened to *All the Light We Cannot See* on a book blog somewhere, so I had to give it a try. Honestly, I'm not sure why I stuck with it to the end. The title is at least appropriate, many of the characters in this book are guilty of Unspeakable Things... and that's about the most I can say for it. That, and sometimes there's a pretty turn of phrase.

But I found this appalling, and it's not often I feel that way. I'm not a very sensitive person, so it takes a lot to get under my skin in that way. But when a character like Felix, an expatriate Nazi doctor who does awful things to small children, and a myriad of other awful things on top of that, is written in a somewhat sympathetic light despite the gravity of his extremely graphic inexcusable actions, it's hard to feel anything else.

Hated Felix, hated the obliviousness and stupidity of many of the characters, hated how "The Rat" Anna had zero character growth and was never allowed happiness, hated how poor Maria was always left on her own despite the presence of a ghost which may or may not have existed, hated the convenience of many things which made it all feel too tidy and laughable ... and the list goes on. I have literally nothing good to say about this one. Spare yourself.

Jill says

If ever there were unspeakable things done to humanity, it was during the years of the Holocaust. But does that mean we do not speak of them? And if we do dare to speak of them, what tone should we use?

Last year, I read Martin Amis' audacious *Zone of Interest*, a book that used the novelist's art to convey the absurdity and senselessness of the Holocaust. At that time, I noted that the story was about the death of the collective souls of virtually everyone even marginally involved.

I might say the same thing for Kathleen Spivack's book. The biggest difference – and it is a major one – is that the action is removed from the concentration camps and plays out in post World War II New York City.

Here, we meet Herbert – a former Austrian official – and his hunchback second cousin Anna, “a Rat with the face of an angel, made more beautiful by the imperfections that called attention to her beauty. This Rat had the power to enchant.” In the wings is Herbert's deceased son Michael, his son David and defiled granddaughter Maria, and the Tolstoi Quartet, who sacrificed their four pinky fingers in order to leave Vienna. And front and center is the soulmate of Dr. Mengele, Dr. Felix, who does unspeakable things to his young patients.

There are many adjectives that come to mind in trying to describe this novel: daring, haunting, dark, creepy, and surreal are just five of them. Certainly Ms. Spivack succeeds in casting a spell and one of her themes appears to be the pervasiveness of evil—the fact that evil is never truly contained but does become

collective. “So maybe it is like the laws of continuous conservative of energy. Nothing ever goes away; it just changes. So evil stays in the world, perhaps only lying dormant for a moment, in a heap, its black wings folded.”

And yet, in comparing her work to Martin Amis’ book – which also is Holocaust-themed and pushes the envelope in its attempt to illuminate existing evil – *Unspeakable Things* came up wanting. From time to time – particularly in the portrayal of the reprehensible Dr. Felix – I could sense the author’s disdain for her character (for instance, having him cross-dress and passionately kiss a photo of the Fuhrer.) I wanted to build up that disdain (not hard to do) by myself. Often, she uses adverbs (“he said, beseechingly”) as if to give the reader stage directions on how to interpret what’s going on.

There are other small fault lines as well: we are teased with the story of Michael yet we never get a sense as to why his family survived and he did not. The Rat’s two weeks with the mystical advisor Rasputin skirt are elusive and vaguely pornographic. I assume Rasputin represents Hitler himself – a Satan character who casts his spell over an entire country. But what does that say about Anna? That part of her fell under Hitler’s spell? I was never quite sure.

All in all, I applaud Kathleen Spivack’s flights of imagination. But I can’t say I was totally satisfied.

Katie says

This novel has an average rating here of 2.83. I don't think I've ever seen a book with a lower average rating. I'm baffled why. True, it's acid trip magical realism alienated me a bit at times but on the whole it's a beautifully written novel with lots of humour and insight into the human condition, especially regarding bereavement, displacement and female struggles with self-esteem.

It's a poetic novel about a family of refugees who have escaped from war torn Vienna to New York. They have left a dead son behind who was killed by the Nazis. The author is especially good at imbuing the present with the past. The past is what everyone is struggling to overcome in their new alien environment. The family are joined by three bizarre characters. There's a deformed character called The Rat whose lover, Rasputin, has left his handprints on her thighs; a Nazi doctor who is a quintessence of Nazi scientific delusion and mania. He keeps animate body parts in jars, including the pinkies of the Tolstoi Quartet, four elderly musicians who lost their fingers for playing inappropriate music in Nazi occupied Vienna.

A comic fable about the Holocaust is perhaps going to alienate some readers. Add to that, it broaches paedophilia in a sometimes discomfoting manner. But I often found it illuminating and stirringly mischievous and it's very wise about the struggle to achieve mental health.
