



Not Me

Michael Lavigne

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Not Me is a remarkable debut novel that tells the dramatic and surprising stories of two men—father and son—through sixty years of uncertain memory, distorted history, and assumed identity.

When Heshel Rosenheim, apparently suffering from Alzheimer's disease, hands his son, Michael, a box of moldy old journals, an amazing adventure begins—one that takes the reader from the concentration camps of Poland to an improbable love story during the battle for Palestine, from a cancer ward in New Jersey to a hopeless marriage in San Francisco. The journals, which seem to tell the story of Heshel's life, are so harrowing, so riveting, so passionate, and so perplexing that Michael becomes obsessed with discovering the truth about his father.

As Michael struggles to come to grips with his father's elusive past, a world of complex and disturbing possibilities opens up to him—a world in which an accomplice to genocide may have turned into a virtuous Jew and a young man cannot recall murdering the person he loves most; a world in which truth is fiction and fiction is truth and one man's terrible—or triumphant—transformation calls history itself into question. Michael must then solve the biggest riddle of all: Who am I?

Intense, vivid, funny, and entirely original, **Not Me** is an unsparing and unforgettable examination of faith, history, identity, and love.

From the Hardcover edition.

Not Me Details

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From Reader Review Not Me for online ebook

Elyse says

--Tender -- satisfying 4.5 rating!!!!
--Funny at appropriate times -- (a few great laughs)
--Insightful -- heartfelt -powerful

Father-son-Father-son-(old age, middle age, young boy, Alzheimer's, Holocaust, San Francisco -- to Florida...)

Wonderful characters -- (dialogue communications).

I absolutely fell in love with the little old ladies who bought Michael a ticket to attend temple services on Yom Kippur.

Oh MY GOSH, they had a WOMAN Rabbi. :)

The older generation "got use to her".....(I'm still smiling and laughing).and 'loved her'

OH VEY!

Wonderful book!

Good Book Fairy says

this book has been on my TBR pile for 3-4 years and i finally picked it up as my book club chose it as a last minute choice. so glad the dice rolled that way as this was a well told, interesting book that bristled with a touch of mystery while really examining secrets, family relationships, love and loss.
highly recommend.

Dorie says

Interesting story of a Jewish man (Michael) who travels to Florida to care for his dying father. Upon one visit he's given a box of journals written out by his father. He picks up the first and begins to read a story where his father was not Hershel Rosenheim, a Holocaust survivor, but began life as Heinrich Mueller, an SS officer working as an accountant at Majdanek concentration camp who steals a Jewish victim's identity to avoid being charged with war crimes. Michael wonders if this is really his father's story, and who left him the journals? He begins to try to piece together his family's history.

This was an interesting, well told story with just a few minor problems. For one thing, there were a few areas in the story where the author seems to get intentionally crude. These parts took me out of the story because

there didn't seem to be a good reason for their inclusion. For another, the mystery of his family's history is only partially resolved at the end. After all the investigating and angst, there is no big "AHA!" moment. But this book does do something that many others fail at -- offering a different take on the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Three and a half stars.

K says

I'm the first to say it. The Holocaust genre is way oversaturated. When I read "The Boy in the Striped Pajamas," I was filled with rage that this was what it had come to – a cheap, gimmicky, and frankly stupid book written simply to capitalize on the marketability of the Holocaust. But every now and then, I do end up reading a Holocaust-related book that has something interesting and different about it and is worth reading even though it's Holocaust lit. "The Book Thief." "Those Who Save Us." And now, this one which has become my recent favorite – "Not Me."

"Not Me," aside from enjoyable writing and deft characterization, has a gripping premise. Michael Rosenheim is a stand-up comedian who performs under the name Mickey Rose. Like many comics, his personal life is unhappy and desolate – he's divorced from his ex-wife whom he still loves, has difficulty staying connected with his child, has lost his mother and sister, and his father is now dying of Alzheimer's. Michael is also conflicted about his Jewish identity – it makes great comic fodder but not much else, and he resents the excess reminders of his Judaism that fill his father's apartment – knickknacks and honors from a wide array of Jewish organizations. His father, Heschel Rosenheim, is considered one of the all-time great Jews, a Holocaust survivor who has always been unusually devoted and generous with his time when it came to Jewish causes, and Michael just doesn't get it.

In one of his increasingly sporadic lucid moments, Michael's Alzheimer's-ridden father hands him a box of 24 journals he apparently wrote, although it's the first Michael is hearing of it and it's not even clear where the journals materialized from at this time. When Michael reluctantly decides to read them, he is shocked to find a third-person story in his father's handwriting written about someone with his father's name who was in fact in the camps, but as an SS officer named Heinrich Mueller. Fearing the oncoming liberation, Heinrich Mueller decided to starve himself for three weeks, tattoo a number onto his arm, and steal the uniform and identity of a dead concentration camp victim – Heshel Rosenheim – so as to avoid getting caught on the wrong side by the liberators. In a sequence of events that is almost comic in its irony, this former SS officer then follows a very Jewish trajectory – DP Camp and then Palestine, where he becomes a kibbutz leader (in a passage which cracked me up, this German decides to whisk those disorganized Jews into shape) and later a freedom fighter for the emerging state of Israel. Although Mueller/Rosenheim secretly still dislikes Jews and plots ways to join the Arab side, he ends up digging himself deeper and deeper and escape seems impossible as he becomes further entrenched in his new identity.

But is this man Michael's father? It's hard to tell, because every time Michael tries to confront his father on this, his father slips into an Alzheimer's-induced fugue. The most Michael's father will say about the Heinrich Mueller/Heschel Rosenheim of the journals is, "That was not me," which could mean any number of things – that the journals are fiction, that Michael's father insists on denying their truth despite his having documented it in this form, or that he is simply suffering Alzheimer's and no longer remembers. Naturally, Michael becomes increasingly anxious to learn his father's true identity, and as a reader, I felt swept up in this quest myself. More murky secrets about Michael's past and family gradually come to consciousness, and the complexity increases. Equally gripping, though, was the story taking place in Michael's father's journals of an SS officer posing as a Palmach member, terrified of being recognized by survivors of his camp,

constantly wavering about whether to go over to the Arab side even as he leads his groups in the War of Independence.

The ending is powerful, a bit speculative but not disappointingly so. Overall, my reservations re. Holocaust lit. notwithstanding, I found this book moving and very thought-provoking, and I highly recommend it.

Jane says

This is a complete fairy tale. While the story was interesting, it was completely unbelievable. Anyone who has lived with or been intimately involved with Holocaust survivors knows that no SS member would ever live with or fight for the Jews. The story was plausible during the part where he starved himself and took on the identity of a Jewish inmate. However, once he got out of the Reich territory, he would have found his way to the SS Nazi network and would have been spirited away to a South American country or even the US or Canada with forged papers. He certainly wouldn't have remained in Palestine and fought for statehood for Israel.

Even if I could accept the premise that he fought for Israel, why remain a committed Jew in the US? Not only a committed Jew, but an organizer and supporter of Jewish causes? I like books that have moral ambiguity such as "Those Who Save Us" but those characters were fleshed out and given backgrounds so that you could understand their actions. In this book there was no background for the SS "Heschel". Where was the SS commander's real family? Did he not try to contact them at all during his lifetime? There was no context in this book and therefore no understanding of his motives. I was deeply disappointed and angry after reading this book.

Allison says

Great premise, very disappointing execution. Michael Rosenheim goes to Florida to visit his elderly father, Heschel, who is dying and has Alzheimer's disease. One day, Michael finds a journal suggesting his father may not be a Holocaust survivor, but Heinrich Muller, a former SS officer! This book was a lot different than what I expected, and I mean that in a negative way. Based on the summary, I expected it to be some kind of thriller/family drama. Instead, it was *very* halfbaked literary fiction with dozens of subplots that go nowhere. Hooray!

I did not find Michael a very compelling protagonist. He was whiny, constantly made excuses for himself, and was just generally annoying. I did not want to be inside his head for 250 pages. Many intentionally unlikable characters have been written before, but these can be very hard to pull off. I'm not sure if that's what Lavigne was aiming for or not. He tries to present Michael as this flawed everyman, which I understand and appreciate, except he seemingly has no positive qualities at all. He cheats on his wife not once but *twice* and tries to justify it, and avoids spending time with his son. Who he admits he could have done a better job raising.

I think Lavigne wanted to give him some kind of arc, that much is clear. The book ends with Michael preparing for his father's funeral and implying he'll become more religious. This kind of threw me for a loop, since there really weren't a lot of religious/spiritual themes in this book. But, that aside, I feel like Michael

didn't really change much, if at all. Religious or not, he'll continue to be a terrible person and negligent father/husband.

Then there's Heschel Rosenheim/Heinrich Muller. He's ostensibly our true main character, but we know next to nothing about him. Nothing about his character arc makes *any sense*. An SS officer disguising himself as a Jew would work for a short-term solution, but why pretend for over 50 years? Why didn't he just escape to South America while he had the chance? Furthermore, I really can't believe a former Nazi would fall in love with a Jewish woman and fight in the Israeli army. Did Heinrich secretly sympathize with Jews? Did he never really believe in Nazi ideology? Of course, we don't know!

Supposedly, Heinrich/Heschel is so driven by guilt and remorse he spends the next 60 years as a pillar of the Jewish community. But why didn't he admit the truth and stand trial for his past crimes? That would have been the morally-right thing to do. And supposedly he had a family. What happened to them? Did they try looking for him over the years, did he let them know he was still alive? This was never explored, much to my extreme frustration.

As I mentioned earlier, there are a number of subplots that simply go nowhere and are left unresolved. They include:

- *What happened to the real Heschel Rosenheim's son? Is he alive or dead?
- *Are the journals really true, or is Michael's father just suffering from dementia?
- *Is his father saner than he lets on?
- *Michael's relationship with his estranged son
- *The mysterious death of his sister, Karen

This last plot point is particularly stupid. (view spoiler) I can't believe he could just repress something so important for so long, and create these elaborate false memories about the situation. That's just so STUPID I can't put it into words. Actually that's a good descriptor for this book as a whole.

Besides our two protagonists, I didn't like *any* of the characters in this book. They were all one or two-dimensional and lacking in depth. Michael's wife and son, for instance, have no impact on the overall story. Neither do any of the other secondary characters, for that matter. In particular, I couldn't stand Moskovitz. She only existed to be a love interest. Again, characters as plot devices can actually work. But Moskovitz had no depth and very little personality; and I was annoyed whenever she threw herself at Heinrich. (view spoiler) Had this been any other character, maybe I would have felt sad. But Moskovitz was fucking annoying, and a Satellite Love Interest at that.

Then it's implied Michael's mother, Lily, knew the truth of her husband's past but never told anyone. Infuriatingly, this revelation only happens right before the end of the book, far too late for it to have any impact. In conclusion, Not Me was one big wasted opportunity. Another reviewer suggested Michael (and the book itself) was morally-bankrupt for suggesting his father was somehow absolved of his crimes. Why? Because he pretended to be a Jew for several decades! I fucking hated this book. Morally-bankrupt is a fitting yet also way too nice descriptor.

Kathy says

I liked the idea of this novel, but unfortunately I wasn't as impressed with the actual storytelling. Michael

Rosenheim is a stand up comedian who is suffering through the breakup of his marriage, the strained relationship with his son, and the deterioration of his father. He comes to Florida to care for his father, who vacillates between lucidity and dementia, and discovers his father's long buried secret about his past. Through detailed journals, his father tells the story of being an SS officer in Germany who, anticipating the end of the war, steals the identity of a Jew and ends up living the rest of his life as Heshel Rosenheim, model Jew and citizen in the United States. It just doesn't work as well as I hoped it would - but it still was a quick and easy read, perfect for a snowstorm like yesterday.

Leslie says

read this book after reading Jodi P's The Storyteller.
very similar themes in that the main characters are/were Nazi SS who live out there lives as americans... in this book it goes so far that he is an american jew.

how many germans are/were there who escaped german persecution after the war?
pick this book up.

Jenny says

At first I wasnt taken by Michaels character but as the novel progresses he is growing on me.
I am liking the flow of this story. and the journals are interesting and thought provoking.
The premise that Heinrich/Heshel could have hidden his past from his family is intriguing. The journals disturbing details bring to mind many issues that his son must now deal with in order to work out who his father really is.
So I finished reading tonight (01112015) and was a bit disappointed with the ending
I feel it was built up and then not brought to a realistic logical end..3.5 stars...

Lorri says

Not Me is a compelling novel on so many levels. For me it was a metaphor for self identity, sin and change, and the superficial roles that one plays in order to move on with their life and flee from the consequences of their actions.

Heshel learned that fleeing only negates the truth, which followed him everywhere he went. Within the context of the self identity are the themes of love, loss, forgiveness and redemption. The blur between forgiveness and redemption is obvious in the way Lavigne writes. Michael is torn between his new found knowledge and his love for his father. He is a man who is floundering. He is torn between the truth and the superficiality of his childhood. He is torn between who he truly is and what he is.

It is also a study in the father-son relationship, and is a unique Holocaust story. It is a book that is fascinating, compelling, insightful, poignant and comical, and one that I highly recommend.

Sarah says

Sometimes beautiful, sometimes harrowing, but always intriguing, this novel asks questions that can't be easily answered: Can sixty years of good deeds atone for a past in which a person committed the worst crimes imaginable? Can people truly change who they are, and if they do, does it matter anymore who they were? Can a person be excused from wrongdoing if they really believed it was right? Is there anything you wouldn't forgive the people you love the most?

Lauren says

This book is a curious mix of funny (narrator is a comedian) and serious (his father is a supposed Holocaust survivor). I'm not sure how I'm going to like that juxtaposition, but so far I'm intrigued enough to continue reading...

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Okay, couldn't do it. This ended up being too strange a juxtaposition for me. As revealed quickly in the book (and in the book description, I believe), the narrator grows up in a Jewish household and believes his father was a Jewish Holocaust survivor, only to discover -- through his father's journals -- that his father was a Nazi who posed as a Jew during the liberation of the camps and spent the rest of his life as a Jew.

To give you an idea of the strange juxtaposition of casual, funny, not-always-eloquent narrator and serious subject material, here is how the narrator responded to his first reading of the journal:

"I literally jumped up from La-Z-Boy, as if suddenly I was on fire... I could not put the journal down. It was glued to my fingers, like when you touch something really cold, like an ice cube or a metal pole that sticks to your skin--and it burns like hell, but you can't let go... What in God's name is he talking about? I cried. What, what, what? It was like pressure inside me rising, like a wave of vomit. What? I cried. What?"

I found the idea of the book compelling, but not the way in which the book was written... For a different subject matter, fine.

p.s. What is up with those terrible similes? "As if I was on fire???" "an ice cube or a metal pole that sticks to your skin???" That sounds like a bad email I'd send to a friend.

Jill says

My advice: Don't be witty about the holocaust. It's not a subject to link with humor.

And, this reads like a first novel... the transitions are very rough, making the "journal" not quite fit the narrator's story.

Neither the journal writer or the narrator are likable, particularly, but maybe it's that they are both very flat

characters.

I thought the writing improved in the last 50 pages, but the twist didn't ring true with what the reader knew about the narrator.

I finished it because it was assigned.

Jennifer Zimny says

“For tempered by the gas and the crematoria, the starvation, the humiliation, pain and filth, they would surely have become angels.”

By far, this was my favorite sentence in all of Michael Lavigne’s poignant and moving story *Not Me*. It’s rare that I read a sentence in a book over and over again, but this was one of those perfectly constructed simple sentences that struck me as I contemplated the fate of Heshel Rosenheim and his after life.

A couple of years ago I took my very first trip to Europe and included in that whirlwind two week trip was a very moving trip to Dachau. I remember what struck me more than anything as I walked around what had once been this concentration camp the thing I was struck by with every building and every section of the camp was the sheer size of it. My mom caught a picture of me as we’re walking around on this rainy day standing where roll call was taken everyday, a place where prisoners stood for hours on end in all kinds of weather to have every single name in the camp called. I have this look on my face I didn’t even know I had while walking around there. It’s part confusion, part frustration, part awe, and part sadness. How in the world were there people on the face of the earth that not only promoted this mind-numbing tragedy but also those that stood alongside and didn’t raise a finger to help?

In *Not Me*, Lavigne tells the story of Heshel Rosenheim, a man dying of Alzheimer’s who give his son, Michael, a set of journals revealing that he may not be who his son has always believed he was. All his life, Heshel has been nothing but the most devoted Jew and exemplary man, but in this journals, he revels himself not to be Heshel Rosenheim at all but actually a Nazi who stole the identity of one of the prisoners when the camps were being liberated to escape prosecution. He may in fact have been one of those that stood alongside and did nothing to help. His son must then piece together the clues his father has left behind to find out who he father actually is, and ultimately, who he is.

Lavigne does a fantastic job painting not only the picture of Michael’s imperfect life but that of Heshel Rosenheim’s past life as well. He does a nice job creating two very distinct voices as the book switches from Michael’s contemporary point and view and Rosenheim’s journal entries. He keeps the plot in both worlds going at a brisk pace that will have the reading flying through this book wanting to piece together the story.

I only had a few places where I thought editing choices could have been made to make the book a little tighter. I felt the character of April really wasn’t necessarily needed. Yes, we as the reader come to connect April with Israel eventually but I felt Michael could have made the discovery without her in the picture. I also felt the letter from his mother in the end wasn’t needed. We, as the reader, pieced together that Heshel Rosenheim was the man he wrote about in his journals just fine without that letter. The letter helped to prove that he was indeed a devout Jew, but, again, we could piece that together without the letter. I wished the book would have ended at his death with a small conversation between Josh and Michael at the end.

The small gripes are just that. . .very small. In comparison to the rest of the book, there are little gripes I think any reader can live with.

This book will stay with me for a while and will definitely be one in which I pass along to fellow lovers of reading!

Lisa Nienhaus says

I read a lot of WWII books and the description of this book really caught my attention. The Father in this book is an accountant basically in a concentration camp and fearing the end is near, shaves his head, tattoos himself and pretends he is one of the Jews needing saving from this camp. What an interesting story line.....I just wish the rest of the book could have been as interesting. The book had no likeable characters in it and ended with too many unresolved issues for my liking. All in all it was "OK" book at best. I will likely not seek out more books by this author.
