



# **The Flamboyant Tree: Memories of a Family's War Time Courage**

*Clara Olink Kelly*

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## **The Flamboya Tree: Memories of a Family's War Time Courage** Clara Olink Kelly

“**The Flamboya Tree** is a fascinating story that will leave the reader informed about a missing piece of the World War II experience, and in awe of one family’s survival.”

—It is a well-known fact that war, any war, is senseless and degrading. When innocent people are brought into that war because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, it becomes incomprehensible. Java, 1942, was such a place and time, and we were those innocent people.”

Fifty years after the end of World War II, Clara Olink Kelly sat down to write a memoir that is both a fierce and enduring testament to a mother’s courage and a poignant record of an often overlooked chapter of the war.

As the fighting in the Pacific spread, four-year-old Clara Olink and her family found their tranquil, pampered lives on the beautiful island of Java torn apart by the invasion of Japanese troops. Clara’s father was taken away, forced to work on the Burma railroad. For Clara, her mother, and her two brothers, the younger one only six weeks old, an insistent knock on the door ended all hope of escaping internment in a concentration camp. For nearly four years, they endured starvation, filth-ridden living conditions, sickness, and the danger of violence from their prison guards. Clara credits her mother with their survival: Even in the most perilous of situations, Clara’s mother never compromised her beliefs, never admitted defeat, and never lost her courage. Her resilience sustained her three children through their frightening years in the camp.

Told through the eyes of a young Clara, who was eight at the end of her family’s ordeal, **The Flamboya Tree** portrays her mother’s tenacity, the power of hope and humor, and the buoyancy of a child’s spirit. A painting of a flamboya tree—a treasured possession of the family’s former life—miraculously survived the surprise searches by the often brutal Japanese soldiers and every last-minute flight. Just as her mother carried this painting through the years of imprisonment and the life that followed, so Clara carries her mother’s unvanquished spirit through all of her experiences and into the reader’s heart.

## **The Flamboya Tree: Memories of a Family's War Time Courage Details**

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Clara Olink Kelly**

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# From Reader Review The Flamboya Tree: Memories of a Family's War Time Courage for online ebook

## Catherine Gillespie says

In The Flamboya Tree: Memories of a Mother's Wartime Courage Clara Olink Kelly writes a touching and compelling tribute to the astounding ways her mother kept her and her two brothers alive during World War II.

Just weeks after giving birth, Kelly's mother gets a few hours notice that she and the children are being taken to a Japanese concentration camp on Java, where their family—Dutch by nationality—has been living due to Kelly's father's business. Raised in a wealthy family, and used to luxury, Kelly's mother nonetheless acts with incredible presence of mind and determination for the next several years. Conditions in the camps were atrocious—I can't imagine what it must have been like to watch your children slowly starve in front of your eyes, with each person only getting one small handful of dirty rice per day to eat, never enough water, in filthy, diseased conditions, constantly fearing sadistic guards. And yet Kelly's mother taught the children to read, read to them every day from a children's Bible she had packed, and kept hope and kindness alive. What an amazing woman.

Kelly writes that she still has nightmares from her life in the camp, but her writing is suffused with hope. She notes that although her memories are traumatic and full of evil, they are also marked with love and joy. I thought The Flamboya Tree was an excellent memoir—one of the better examples of the genre, and such a worthwhile read.

{Read the rest of my review on A Spirited Mind}

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## Nancy says

An amazing book of survivorship .

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## Graham says

Moving.

As an account of how a Dutch family was torn apart during WW2 in Indonesia, and the way a mum looked after her three children for several years in a Japanese concentration camp. Written by the daughter, this factual account will break your heart with the matter of fact descriptions of the daily degradations. But even after the war ends, there is no respite as the camps they were sent to, albeit without guards, has little food and less medicine. And the voyage back to Holland has its own share of pain and inhumanity. What shines out though is the determination of the mum to make sure her children make it through; a fierceness to protect in the face of cruelty.

You will need to take a minute - or two... or three... - to take time, and hug those precious to you having read this.

It's that kind of book.

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## Louise says

What an amazing story. The author actually came to our book club meeting and spoke about her experiences. She is a charming woman with the grace to tell her story. I am in awe of her mother's courage and determination in such horrible circumstances.

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## Liralen says

Note: Untagged spoilers below the fold.

*August 1945, and most of the world was celebrating the end of the war. Not so the concentration camps. We knew nothing.* (151)

Clara Olink Kelly was four when she and her mother and two brothers—one a bit older and the other only an infant—were put in a concentration camp. Her father was sent off to do hard physical labour, and they wouldn't see him until four years later, when they were released. Previously they had lived the privileged lives of white colonists on Java; Kelly's mother, in particular, had been raised with expectations of *being served* rather than *serving*. A photo near the beginning of the book shows, more directly than text can, her mother's background: taken in 1921, it shows Kelly's mother and *her* sisters and mother. They wear lace dresses and bows in their hair, stockings and pretty little shoes; it's the picture of upper-class whiteness in India, which is to say that the family had transplanted their ideals of European class to a country where so many had so little.

I say this not to take them to task for their colonialist background (that belongs somewhere other than a review of a memoir) but to illustrate, as Kelly intends, the gulf between her mother's background and the situation in which she found herself. *I wrote this book as a tribute to my beloved mother, Says Kelly, who never gave up on her family and the ultimate struggle to survive. Though she battled daily to keep us fed and clean, I never heard her complain about or curse those who made our lives so miserable* (199). And that's just what the book is: a tribute, and a beautiful one. Some of the titles reference 'a *family's* wartime courage', but the ones that reference 'a *mother's* wartime courage' seem more to the point. Probably there were hundreds, thousands of women (in concentration camps for the Dutch and for the Jews and for the Japanese and so on and so forth—why did/do so many countries imprison civilian-enemies this way?) who did just what Kelly's mother did—dug deep to find reserves of strength and street-smarts that they didn't know they had.

This works so well, I think, because Kelly is able to convey the difficulties of camp life for adults while staying true to her own childhood understanding of the camp. She was there from four to eight, young enough and long enough to forget the details of the outside world. To the children, for example, the monsoon season was more fun because there were always games to play; to the adult women in the camp, of course, monsoons made life more difficult.

The war ended, and eventually Kelly and her family were reunited with her father and temporarily housed in Bangkok while waiting for transport home to Holland. Here we see just how much things had fallen apart for

the family. Conditions were better (and certainly safer) in Bangkok, but food and medicine were still inadequate, and the children were sometimes critically ill. Yet the wait for passage home was longer than they might have expected: *I was an adult with grown children of my own when I learned the reason behind our extended stay in Bangkok. Most of our family members and friends who had been in camps like us were already back in Holland. ... [A business acquaintance] told our family there [in Holland] that he had seen our father visiting plantations all over Java, following up on leads to purchase tea, coffee, and other products for his business. My mother was used to his frequent and extended trips away from camp, but she hadn't realized that he had not yet applied for passage home. Ever the businessman, my father was more concerned with making deals than with fighting for those hard-to-acquire transportation passes for his family.* (173–174)

How utterly sad. How does a family, a marriage, recover from that? Kelly makes few excuses for her father (she does note at the end that her parents later divorced and neither she nor her siblings stayed close enough with their father to inform him of things like weddings), but she is more forgiving of her grandmother, who was in Holland during the war. She's a wonderfully complex character, somebody who Does Not Understand why the children can't eat normally after years of semi-starvation and a very limited diet, who Does Not Understand why they are still afraid, who Does Not Understand why they don't like the Dutch food she prepares—yet who, Kelly says, cared deeply about their health and happiness and was, through listening and encouraging them to talk about their experiences, instrumental in helping them heal emotionally from their experience in the camp.

Close to five stars. As a war/concentration-camp memoir, it's lovely; as a tribute to a strong mother, it's powerful.

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## **Tara says**

I bought this book at a library sale because the cover was so lovely, and the story sounded interesting. Little did I know how interesting this book would be, or how the cover actually factors into the story.

I LOVED this little memoir. I'm sorry that the new edition changed the cover and the subtitle. The new subtitle is: *Memories of a Family's War-Time Courage*. However, this book is an incredible portrait of an unforgettable mother. Really, it's a daughter's ode to her mother's courage, and I think the better subtitle reflects this wonderful honor Clara bestowed on her mother.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in women's issues, history, war, humanity, and memoirs of people who triumph over incredible odds. The bulk of the memoir takes place in a Japanese concentration camp during WWII, in Java. Olink's family is Dutch, and her mother and her three children are taken hostage for four years. It's one of the most harrowing four years I've ever read about. But how the family perseveres, with the help of the painting featured on the cover of the Flamboya Tree, is magical. You will *never* forget this mother.

This is a very special book, beautifully written, and one I hope more will pick up and read and take on in book clubs. Finding little gems like this makes me determined to search my library sales more carefully....

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## Edward Sullivan says

A vivid, insightful memoir about life in a Japanese concentration camp during World War II. When the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia) fell to the Japanese, Dutch nationals like the Olinks were interned in prison camps. The family was separated as Kelly's father was sent to a labor camp where he worked on the Burma railroad. Kelly's mother and two brothers were sent to the notorious Kamp Tjideng on Java for women and children. With over 10,000 prisoners, the camp's living conditions were frequently horrific. In addition to her vivid descriptions of life in the camp, Kelly's memoir is a loving tribute to the courage and resilience of her mother.

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## Dolceluna says

Un improvviso e curioso fuori programma fra le mie letture, voluto ardentemente dopo averlo visto acquistato da un'amica, preso in prestito in biblioteca e silurato in pochi giorni. Uno di quei libri dei quali non immagini nemmeno l'esistenza ma che, una volta scoperti, ti attraggono come una calamita per svariate ragioni, una delle quali, in questo caso, era la curiosità di scoprire qualcosa su una pagina di storia a mio avviso ignorata perché poco conosciuta: quella della prigionia dei coloni europei nei campi di concentramento dell'Asia Orientale ad opera dei giapponesi, durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale. Una delle varie parentesi tristi e dolorose su uno dei periodi più cupi della storia e della quale, ahimè, nonostante il mio immenso interesse per quello stesso periodo storico, sapevo poco o nulla. Il libro si apre nell'idilliaca e colorata cornice della casa giavanese della protagonista Clara, benestante, opulenta, circondata da verde e da devoti servitori. Poi, improvvisamente, l'abisso, e lo smantellamento della famiglia: il padre viene spedito in Birmania a lavorare in ferrovia, mentre Clara, la madre e i due fratellini vengono arrestati dai giapponesi e rinchiusi nel campo di concentramento di Kamp Tjideng. E qui seguiranno tre lunghi anni di sevizie, fame, maltrattamenti, lavori forzati e malattie. E tanta, tanta sofferenza, nonostante la quale, tuttavia, la famiglia non smetterà mai di sperare nella liberazione, speranza infusa dalla figura cardine del romanzo, quella della madre di Clara: una donna forte e fiera, che accetta il suo destino senza ribellarsi ma senza mai perdere la fiducia nel prossimo e soprattutto dignità, dignità per se stessa e per i figli. Sì, è indubbiamente questa grande donna dignitosa la vera protagonista del romanzo, è lei che trasmette speranza nei figli, è lei che insegna loro a mantenere rispetto ed educazione per se stessi e gli altri anche nei momenti più tragici e difficili della prigionia, quando l'istinto di sopravvivenza sembra prendere il sopravvento sulla razionalità. E tutta la sua fierezza è incarnata da quel passaggio in cui obbedisce ad un aguzzino giapponese guardandolo però negli occhi, con sottomissione ma anche con fierezza e coraggio. Un gran bel personaggio femminile per un importante libro- testimonianza, scritto con uno stile commosso e drammatico, utile a non dimenticare che il dolore umano non conosce limiti di epoche e nazionalità e merita di essere conosciuto e compreso in tutte le sue forme...e in tutti i suoi orrori. Concludo con un elogio alla splendida edizione Adelphi con un foto delle truppe giapponesi su una copertina rossa, rossa come i fiori di quell'albero dipinto sul quadro che la famiglia Kelly si portò sempre con sé, perfino nel campo di prigionia, come simbolo della sua unità ma anche della sua casa e della speranza di farvi ritorno.

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## Kaylee Warren says

I literally couldn't put this book down or read it fast enough. I sobbed while reading it and loved every minute of it, even through all the devastation.

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## **Jeanette says**

This precious memoir I was going to give 4 stars most of the way through. But then it was post-war voyage and finale which nailed that 5th star. Clara Olink Kelly's Mom is this dynamic, interesting, competent, nurturing person- far beyond my use of adjectives. And her daughter has learned well from her.

Having watched Tenko on PBS (my favorite series of all time) and then read numerous first person or group accounts for women's prisoner of war or concentration camp living barracks under the Japanese occupations in Singapore, or Bangkok, or parts of Indonesia or places in between all of those locations during WWII, this is still a special, special book. Because this is primarily cored in a women who did it with babies. Lived and survived, as well, for 3 years when so many others did not.

But what puts it into a superlative category for the genre is the voice. The voice is a child's. And that looks, and it feels, and it sounds, completely different. Who knew the rainy season of nothing but mud, cold, and hunger could be FUN! It's 5 year old "eyes".

Having this small girl give this kind of detail to her witness! The minutia of the levels of fear, for instance! And the terror of calling attention to yourself! And yet the fortitude of the Mother who takes it all on herself, never failing to block even more dire news or provisional reversal from her children's psyches and ultimate awareness? It's a phenomenal book for the Mother's "good intent" projection to her kids' futures, that alone.

Wonderful, wonderful written memory and photographs galore. But even more for the solid strength of hope that one woman supported against immense evil and negativity completely surrounding her for years.

Never self-pity under such adversity and neglect! Endless kudos to her memory.

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## **Elizabeth says**

"Thank You Mum, I love you."

That alone sums up why this book was written. It is exactly as it says it is, the memories of a Mother's Wartime Courage. The memories are shared by her daughter and many of them are, of course, devastatingly sad. The writing isn't magical, the words don't dance across the page calling you to join in. On the contrary, sometimes the stories are a little dry. I don't think the way it is written is the point. It isn't a story that is meant to entertain you. Just plain language simply stating events as they happened. So, how do I rate this book? At first I wasn't certain.

Then I read the section "A Most Special Christmas".

"Behind that blanket, our Mother was preparing Christmas!"

Suddenly, there's the magic. The mother. She doesn't have to be dolled up with fancy synonyms and catchy cliches. I began to read to learn from her, to note her steadfast faith, her patience, her ability to endure with honor and not simply survive. I started to pay close attention to the life lessons she taught her children just by being who she was inside, no matter what was happening to her on the outside.



While my son slept soundly next to me I read and was forced to reevaluate some of the things I have the audacity to complain about in my life. I started to look at myself through his eyes. In our plush 4 bedroom home stocked with food and so many simple luxuries, does he see his mother smile more than frown?

I underlined, I took a few notes and I know that this book will sit in my bookcase and call me back from time to time, just to set me straight.

So yes, this book gets 5 stars. Any book that makes me a better mother does.

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### **Emma Coleman says**

The perfect memoir of life inside a concentration camp and a clear inside of how cruel they were treated.

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### **Elizabeth says**

I just finished this book. It is a daughter's memories of her mother's wartime courage in a concentration camp in Java. The family was Dutch and had lived in Java many years, the children were born there. When the Japanese invaded first her father was sent off to a work camp. Then soon after the children and their mother were rounded up and taken to the concentration camp. They spent 4 hellish years there, with starvation, filth, illness, and brutal treatment by the Japanese soldiers the norm. It was a difficult to read book but one all should read. They were eventually transported to Bangkok, where they spent many months awaiting transport to Holland. They returned to Holland on a steamer that took over a month to arrive in Holland. There were daily deaths aboard ship, including a well liked young man who was an only son very anxious to get home to his parents. Mostly this story shows the unconditional love mothers have for their children, even in the harshest environment.

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### **Kylie Barton says**

A proper page turner - quickest I have ever read a book! It has made me want to read the real history behind these events. A very sad story but also reminds us just how strong and good humans can be, as well as how evil and weak.

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### **Dee Caggiano says**

What a courageous, strong, and loving mother! She never gave up and no matter how bad things were, she helped cultivate and preserve your health and family values. It was sad to hear about your Dad... Well written and shared.

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