



Interview with Heather and Lydia Munn, authors of *How Huge the Night*



1. What influence has living in France had on the writing of this book?

Heather: I grew up in France, from two years old to about seventeen. Up to ninth grade I went to French public school. The town I lived in was only about an hour's drive from Le Chambon-sur-Lignon where the true story happened. So when I wrote about Julien living in a small French town, going to school there, and so on, it was almost like writing about my own childhood—except I had to keep asking my dad what it was like forty or fifty years earlier! But it's more than just the school part—the love for the land that I hope comes through in the book is very much rooted in my childhood—that specific landscape, those hills with genêt

bushes on them and pastures and stone farmhouses and little woods—and also the people, the French country people and their culture that's very rooted in the land, that's a side of France that Americans don't get to see a lot, and I love it.

Lydia: When you live in a country for almost thirty years, you grow to love it and its people. I'm glad to be able to write something very positive about France, to counter the mostly negative opinions that I find when I visit the US. Living close to the area where the events happened also made it relatively easy to get a good sense of the context of the story. For instance, I used the actual home of friends of ours who lived in Le Chambon as the model for the Losiers' home in Tanieux.

2. How much research was involved in writing about historical events? How did you know how much historical detail to provide?

Heather: This might be a really good question for Mom; she did almost all the research and my impression is that it was an enormous amount. She made a timeline that went week by week and included major events of the book, events of the war, the passing of repressive or anti-semitic laws by the Vichy government, everything relevant. I would call her up whenever I had a doubt about anything, or even to ask her "This happened on this date, but how soon would they know about it?" I did do some research of my own when I needed some particular detail about the war, especially when trying to get a feel for what it was like to be there at that time, how people were thinking—what people's feelings were about the surrender, how people felt about Marshal Petain and the Vichy government right after it was set up, and whether and how much that changed when they started collaborating with the Nazis. I have always had a sort of fascination for World War II and its stories and what you can learn from them about good and evil.

Lydia: I have always felt that wartime is a fascinating period to study, though difficult at times, because war is so ugly. War brings out the worst in many people. But it brings out the best in others. And that best shines all the brighter for the very dark context in which you find it. My own interest in this period of French history came about because I wanted to tell the Le Chambon story. I read all the primary sources I could find, visited the town and talked with a few people who lived through the events. I also read all that I could about World War II as seen from the French viewpoint. Knowing the details of the Vichy government, the laws put in place, and so on, enabled us to put some of them into the book. We tried to put in details that Julien would have known about and, sometimes, worried over.





3. *How Huge the Night* is written for 14- to 17-year-olds, but your readership can certainly go beyond that. How did you get into the mind of a teenager to write this authentically, and yet manage to pen a book that would be of interest to all ages?

Lydia: Even though the main character is a fifteen-year-old, this book was, from the beginning, more than just his story. It's the story of a family and of a town. The choices that these larger circles were making have an influence on Julien's choices. There are earlier versions of the book in which some of the scenes were written from Mama's viewpoint. These ended up being cut in the final version. But behind the story the reader senses Mama's dread of war which stems from her experiences in World War I. And Papa's sense of history and of what the invasion really means, as well as Pastor Alex's clear sightedness—these all form a very real part of the story. I believe this larger picture is what appeals to older readers.

Heather: When I was writing my initial version (after Mom's initial version) I wasn't even necessarily writing it for teenagers. But of course the book was chiefly about a teenager, and I wanted him to be a real teenager. I think a real teenager confronted by hard realities is interesting to any age. I still remember very vividly being a teenager and I remember it as a time when everything was felt so deeply, everything had huge significance. You know, when a young child starts learning about the world around him, he sees everything with totally fresh eyes and so he really sees it; and the teenager or young adult is at the end of that journey, at the part where he learns for the first time the really hard realities of life. Pain, and war, and necessity, and death, and the fact that there is no guarantee in life that there will always be someone standing between you and the fear. Watching someone learn those things for the first time, really see their significance, is an awesome thing, in the old sense of the word. That'll never be boring, and I think an adult to whom it is boring might've gone too far into adulthood.

4. What do you hope readers take away from reading *How Huge the Night*?

Heather: A lot of things. Maybe I shouldn't say all of them in case I make it too obvious! I think one thing is the huge significance of our daily choices, and how heroism isn't generally glorious or even clear-cut. The choices that people really made during World War II, the early years, the part I'm writing about, were mostly made in the dark. The usual stuff you see in books and movies—"Am I going to risk my life to save these people from certain death?"—that's after 1943. In the early years nobody knew about the death camps, not in France anyhow, and under the Vichy government, especially, nobody knew what was going to happen to the Jews if they got arrested, or to themselves if they protected them—they just knew something might happen, and it might be something bad. So it was easy for a lot of people to think, "Oh, but they wouldn't kill them or anything, right?" because they had enough to worry about already. There was a food shortage, life was hard. The people who did the right thing, a lot of it was just the daily choosing to keep their eyes open, seek out the truth, really take a look at the people in front of them and ask themselves how God was calling them to respond. Julien ends up doing some very good things, but they're very hidden, not a lot of people are ever going to know about them. And the people who do the real, profound good in the world, that's how they do it. In a confusing, terrible, messy situation they keep listening to God; and when they hear, they obey; and what they do changes things. But mostly, no one ever knows.

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