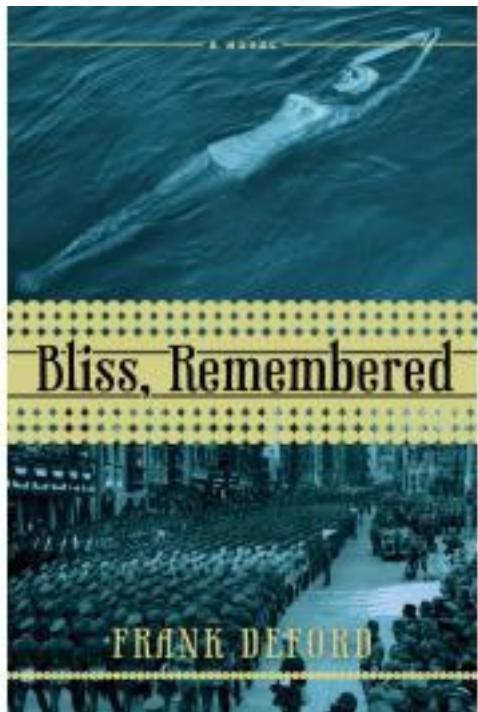


Bliss, Remembered



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著者:Deford, Frank

出版者:

出版时间:

装帧:

isbn:9781590203590

It's 1936 and the U.S. Olympic team is sailing off to the games in Berlin when its top young female swimmer — the glamorous and high-spirited Eleanor Holm — is tossed off the team for drinking a bit too much champagne. That's where *Bliss, Remembered*, a new historical novel by sportswriter Frank Deford, picks up. The Olympic team sends for a replacement: an 18-year-old champion backstroker from Maryland's Eastern Shore named Sydney Stringfellow.

While in Berlin, Sydney doesn't do much swimming, but she does fall in love with a dashing blond German boy named Horst. The story is mostly fictional, but, as Deford

tells NPR's Scott Simon, it is grounded in historical fact.

"I wanted to write a love story," Deford explains. "And I wanted to put it in [the 1936] Olympics, because they're the most notorious Olympics. If you've heard nothing about the Olympics you've heard about Hitler and Jesse Owens."

Hitler inherited the 1936 Olympics and didn't see much value in them — until Nazi propaganda minister Josef Goebbels convinced him that the games could be used for maximum publicity advantage, cleaning up Berlin and putting "kind of a fresh window onto the Nazi regime," Deford says. It's a publicity tradition that has echoes in the present-day games. "The Olympics are today what they are because the Germans figured it out in 1936," Deford says.

The year 1936 was also a historical "tipping point," Deford explains — a time when international observers weren't fully aware of Hitler's intentions. "They had a pretty good idea he was a bad guy, but nobody had [any idea of] the horrors that he had in mind, or that he was going to try to take over the world," Deford says.

Set aside its momentous historical context, and *Bliss, Remembered* is, at its heart, simply a love story. Deford says 1936 Berlin was simply "a fascinating time for a young girl to meet a young boy in a spectacular setting."

[Enlarge Frank Deford](#)

Frank Deford is a senior contributing writer for Sports Illustrated and an NPR commentator. *Bliss, Remembered* is his 16th book.

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But the best romances have impediments, Deford says: "[Sydney] is a little small-town girl from America and [Horst] is this German sophisticate ... but that's what makes the good love story: the hurdle."

The novel is written from Sydney's perspective — as an elderly woman recounting the story to her son, Teddy. It was a gender-swapping narrative strategy that Deford says was not part of the original plan, but ended up making the most sense. "I didn't intend to write the book as a woman," he says. "I just sort of drifted into it, and all of a sudden I'm Sydney, instead of being Sam or Harry."

Deford insists that writing from a woman's viewpoint wasn't as difficult as you might expect. "I don't think it's that hard," he says. "I've known women all my life. ... My mother was a woman and she was born about the same time as Sydney. ... It's a lot easier writing, for me, about an American woman, than it was writing about a German boy in the 1930s — that was a much harder task."

And at the end of the day, Deford says, "I'm writing about a woman in love — and I think we all love the same."

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