

The Dogs and the Wolves by Irène Némirovsky.
Chatto and Windus 2009.

It is impossible to read Irène Némirovsky's writings without an awareness of the environment in which she wrote and the fate to which she came at the hands of the remorseless Nazi machine.

The Dogs and the Wolves is a short novel but one with great power and passion: published in 1940 it is set in the Jewish quarter of an un-named Ukrainian city in the tumultuous first three decades of the twentieth century. The principle characters are a young girl, Ada, born into the poverty of the Jewish quarter of the lower city, beset by pogroms and other deprivation, and Harry, the gilded scion of a wealthy family from the prosperous and secluded upper city.

Their paths cross at various times during their early years because the two are related, being part of the same Jewish family, the Sinners, albeit separated in all but the name they share by circumstance and opportunity. Eventually, Harry's family move to Paris, and Ada follows, sent by her father to grow as an artist; the lives of the two develop separately, but inevitably their paths cross with predictably destructive consequences.

The Dogs and the Wolves is a tale of hopeless passion, the blessing and curse of aspiration – both frustrated and fulfilled – and an eloquent reminder of the towering career that Irène Némirovsky might have enjoyed, had it not been so cruelly cut short.

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