



## The Skin of Water

*G.S. Johnston*

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Passions flare and alliances shift in this breathtaking story of survival set during the final days of World War II in Hungary.

Young Zeno dreams of moving to Budapest and becoming a great filmmaker in the Hungarian film studios. But one evening he follows Catherine Steiner, a guest at the exclusive lakeside resort where he works as a bellboy, into the forest. Unknowingly he dives into her life, changing his forever.

Her husband is a wealthy industrialist with the power to create – or crush – Zeno. Despite Catherine’s protests, Zeno moves to Budapest and takes a servant’s job in the Steiner house, shining her husband’s shoes while hearing the family’s secrets.

All Zeno and Catherine have are precious hours in a secret apartment, tucked above the uneasy streets of a city at war, their affair a flimsy wall against a future no one can see or predict. Until it arrives.

## The Skin of Water Details

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## From Reader Review The Skin of Water for online ebook

### Literary Chanteuse says

Having just read both books by this author back to back I found it interesting that I was really caught up in this story and yet the other caught up more in the characters. Regardless they are both very intense dramatic stories. Very well written. This particular book I can say without a doubt is now one of my favorite to date that I have ever read. I'm left somewhat inarticulate and still in awe of this story and yes it is that good. Alas there is only 5 stars here to award but this book merits 6. If you enjoyed such books as Sarah's Key or Atonement you will enjoy this one!

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### Kate's Reads says

"The Skin of Water" by G.S. Johnston is a captivating story of love and deception in Budapest, Hungary during the closing years of World War II. Johnston brilliantly captures the dangers and struggles of a society that allies themselves with Nazis.

Zeno is a young man working at a lakeside hotel during the summer of 1943 when he has a chance encounter at the lake with an older woman, Catherine Steiner. He is instantly captivated by her and can think of nothing else as he repeatedly encounters her throughout the course of his work at the hotel. When her husband, Sandor, a wealthy industrialist, offers Zeno the position of his personal valet at their home in Budapest, he can't refuse.

As Catherine and Zeno embark on a grand love affair the situation in Budapest is deteriorating. The Russian army is closing in on Hungary. Germany is experiencing losses on all fronts and is in dire need of equipment and weaponry. As they spread the fascist ideals of Jew hating, things become more volatile and dangerous.

This story really held my attention. The characters were well-developed, including the more minor ones. There was Tibi, Zeno's one-time friend turned raging Fascist, Gertrude, Zeno's ex-lover who turns to Tibi in revenge, and Sandor the playboy husband trying to make a business deal to improve his standing in the family.

Johnston put many layers into the story and they revealed things about the war that I'd never heard before. I won't mention them here because it would spoil the story for others. A fascinating read!

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### Carrie Hellbusch says

What a beautifully well written book. Many people don't know about Hungary's occupation during WWII and this book was very well researched and gives you a startling look into Hungary during that time. It also has a great "Upstairs/Downstairs" element which you don't see a lot of in WWII books and that is so very popular with the likes of Downton Abbey. This book keeps you engaged and engrossed in the characters! Well worth the price and time!

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## **Ann Major says**

Whoever enjoys a beautifully crafted, intelligently written love story with an historical background, cannot go past G.S. Johnston's *The Skin of Water*.

The author must have spent a considerable time in so thoroughly researching the historical backdrop depicted in this spellbinding novel. As a native Hungarian, who has lived in Budapest and spent her summer holidays on Lake Balaton where the romance of the protagonists unfolds, and who has lived through the dramatic events of the time, I can vouch for the authenticity of even the minutest detail. What is perhaps even more commendable is the way the author has managed to convey the atmosphere pervading Hungary during the last years of World War II.

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## **Patricia O'Sullivan says**

“There’s a skin on water,” she said. She made me look at the surface. It bulged, rose up from the rim of the glass. I touched it. Immediately the skin tore apart, the paperclip fell through the glass of water to the bottom. We live on that skin. With all the security of our lives, we live on that skin. We all live on that surface. Ruffle it and we sink.

Zeno dreams of becoming a filmmaker, but his job at an exclusive lakeside retreat serving Nazi officers and Hungary’s elite leaves little time for filming. Zeno begins to sneak off into the nearby forest to practice his craft. And that’s when he meets Catherine Steiner, the wife of a Hungarian businessman who brings his mistresses to the lake whenever he visits. Zeno is drawn to Catherine, though she is twice his age, so he follows her to Budapest, taking a job as her husband’s valet. Drawn into the Steiners’ world, Zeno becomes a keeper of secrets for this powerful family. But when the Germans invade Budapest, Zeno understands the limits of the Steiners’ power, and realizes it is up to him to save Catherine from the Nazis.

What struck me most about *The Skin of Water* was how beautifully constructed it is. Throughout the entire narrative Johnston evokes a feeling of borrowed time, moments savored because they are so fleeting, moments that were not supposed to happen, but they did. Zeno and Catherine live in these moments even as all of Hungary lives on borrowed time, waiting to be invaded either by the Germans or the Russians.

*The Skin of Water* is beautifully written, professionally edited, and a far worthier read than much of what you might pay five times as much for from a traditional publisher.

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## **Meg - A Bookish Affair says**

I love books that take me to new places. This book takes us to Budapest, Hungary, a city that I have romanticized in my head and someplace that I really hope to visit someday. This is a historical fiction book that takes place during World War II. I know what you all are thinking! Oh man, not another World War II historical fiction. But you all want to read this book. We are still fascinated by World War II because so much of what happened in the aftermath still shapes our world almost 70 years later.

This is also a love story. Zeno, as a very young man, has a chance meeting with Catherine, who is hiding secrets of her own. They fall in love under the shadow of the Nazis spreading their hate all across the continent. Catherine's secrets begin to unravel while Zeno seems to have to become wiser than his years really quickly. I really liked all of the twists and turns that Johnston lays down for the reader. A lot of them I didn't see coming (I love a good surprise).

I also thought it was especially interesting to see the choices that Catherine makes. They aren't choices that I would necessarily make but you can see why Catherine chooses to do the things that she does. I liked that her choices seemed so real.

The end definitely surprised me. I don't want to give anything away but I really thought the ending was perfect for this book!

Bottom line: This is a great historical fiction with lots of twists and turns.

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### **Anne says**

This book appealed to me as I'm of Hungarian ancestry and I love historical fiction. I liked the style of writing, though at times it read like a translation even though it's not; there were some odd word choices and phrasing. I'm not sure if this was intentional or not. I liked that the story was romantic without getting too romance novel-ish. I appreciated that the characters acted realistically and appropriately, which some authors seem to abandon in recent fiction I've read. Characters actions have to make sense AND move the plot ahead. Making a character do something out of character simply to move the plot along is one of my pet peeves.

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### **H.M. Flath says**

The Skin of Water by G.S. Johnston

An enjoyable, easy, quick read!!

The Skin of Water, which I received via Goodreads in return for an honest review is a well-written, easy-to-read, historical novel that, once I started, I really did not want to put away. In fact, I did read it in three sittings.

The story is impeccably well researched ..... the information on Budapest and the surrounding outskirts, life in Hungary during the 1940's, the German occupation of Hungary during WWII, the plight of the Jewish population. All of the history was important for me as a reader and it was in that realm that I was truly caught.

The storyline was not unusual for that time and for that place but nevertheless I was entrapped. To begin with, I did not experience any emotional attachment, but later on and then especially in the last few chapters, I would say it was an emotionally charged novel.

The author, very skillfully developed two unique main characters, Zeno and Catherine.

Zeno was a naive young lad of seventeen who was living the life of a carefree youth. He had a summer job, a few friends, loved taking pictures with his camera and had no real responsibilities other than sending some of his paycheck home to help support his mother and sister. He was naive and unconcerned about the German occupation of Hungary and the impact of the war. As the story progressed, he moved to Budapest, fell in love with Catherine and started to question the actions of his so-called friends. Eventually he learned the realities of the war and how it affected many people in Hungary. Zeno is indeed, a 'real' and believable character.

Catherine, having been the victim of an arranged marriage, fell in love with Zeno even though she was more than twice his age. She came across as being a sad, weak, somewhat tragic figure, who was never really in control of her own destiny.

I was disappointed that I didn't get to see Zeno as a mature man and his escape out of Hungary. I was also disappointed that I didn't get to see where Catherine went after that traumatic departure from Budapest and what her life was like in the years following. I guess that is the mark of a wonderful storyteller ..... I was so wrapped up into the story that I wanted more ..... To me, the leap to 2010 just seemed too vast.

I did not like the title of the book and I think the author could have made a better choice. I felt that it was a contrived title especially when the author attempted to explain its significance at the end of the book.

Overall, I would recommend this novel to anyone. It is particularly suited for anyone interested in European history during WWII and to anyone who just wants a very 'good' book' to enjoy.

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### **Malika Bourne says**

This is what I wrote on amazon. I hope I can cheat. There are also more detailed rave reviews.

This review is from: The Skin of Water (Kindle Edition)

I was captivated from the beginning as I viewed the scenery through the young film maker's lens. I love historical romance, but I confess that The skin of Water far exceeded my expectations. I was pulled into a part of WWII in Hungary, a country I knew little about.

Mr Johnston so gentlemanly touched the parts of my womanly senses so much the I "O\_O\_O\_o and a-a-a-, sigh" with passion along with the two secret lovers. the only problem with the well written content was that I read it while riding 1,000 miles on a Grey Hound bus. When I made my nearly "orgasmic" sounds along with the characters, OOPS! other passengers turned back to see what I was doing. All I could do was confess, "Good book. Really good Book!"

I hear that men are loving this book , too, maybe its is all the unexpected that appears in a world war, or maybe the romance. Ah, read The skin of Water. So-o-o-o good.

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Skin-of-Wat...>

Merged review:

I was captivated from the moment I looked behind the lens of the young film maker, the main character. He

was awkward, yet passionate about filming.

The Skin of Water took me by surprise that a gentleman could write with such passion which touched a my womanly longings in a gentle way.

Through reading The Skin of Water I was able to grasp the desperateness of survival during the later part of WWII with two secret lovers and a few more that I won't tell on.

So many secrets were artistically woven with in the passionate romance among war equipment all around.

I recommend reading The Skin of Water in a relaxing or peaceful spot instead of while riding the Grey Hound as I did. On my 1,000 mile trip as I read i found other passengers looking back at me. during particle pages, that caught my fancy, I expressed in little moans, if you know what I mean. I confess, all I could do was hold up my Kindle and say, " Good book. Really good book!" then pick up where I left off.

I can truly say that the Skin of Water may now have become my favorite book over my long time favorite, Gone With the Wind.

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### **Ceri Elin Anwen says**

Hungary towards the end of WW2. I was drawn into the the novel immediately and in fact, I found it quite hard to put down. The author has done an excellent job in re-creating what it must have been like during that time, the fear, the uncertainty, the pitting of brother against brother - all tied together with the thread of forbidden love.

I would have been quite happy for the book to have ended in 1946, but the later section, set in 2010, actually gave the story closure and the emotions expressed in this part of the novel were heartbreakng yet satisfying at the same time.

The title is so apt for this book and especially reflects how things must have been during that time. All in all, this is a poignant, beautifully crafted novel.

I received a free copy of this novel in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Wanda says**

I absolutely loved this book! This is a story rich in history, drama, and romance that ropes you in from the get-go and keeps you hanging on throughout.

War was raging across Europe, but Hungary had remained immune. German troops had marched through the streets and roads of Hungary, but no bombs had fallen and Budapest had remained untouched.

It was the summer of 1943, in Hungary, that 17 year old Zeno Czibula first saw Catherine Steiner. He did what he always did - he began filming this beautiful, stunning woman whom he had followed into the deep forest and then into the lake. He approaches her and talks to her briefly, but long enough to realize she was older than he expected, probably in her mid 30s. She was beautiful beyond any face he'd ever seen and spoke with a soft French accent. Zeno was captivated by Catherine early on and could not get her out of his thoughts. He knew immediately that he was out of her league. He was just a bellboy at the Hotel Hungary. It was his day off and he was absolutely forbidden in this part of the forest, reserved for guests only. Zeno and Catherine are linked together by two secrets. Zeno witnessed Catherine's reckless actions at the lake and Catherine witnessed Zeno's trespassing in the forest.

Catherine was born in France, but has lived in Hungary for twenty five years, trapped in a loveless marriage. She rarely sees her husband, Sandor. Her life is one big facade - hidden by a web of lies and deceit. She very often stays at a secret apartment where she and Zeno begin an affair.

Sandor Steiner, a Hungarian businessman, is not exactly the son the Steiner family was proud of. He is incredibly lazy and is known as being a womanizer, with a long list of women. One day Sandor calls Zeno to his suite. He was losing his personal valet and offers the job to Zeno. It would mean moving to Budapest, living in the same house as Catherine. While he worked for Sandor, with an unbelievable generous wage, he'd be able to explore the possibility of work in the film studios, a longtime dream of Zeno.

And then it happened - the Germans, vicious fanatics, were invading Budapest and taking control. The madness of the world had come upon Hungary. And the story unfolds ---

Other characters -

Peter Kresz is married to Erzsebet, Sandor's sister. He has worked in the Steiner family's business for years, elevating himself to high management. He worked with a zest that Sandor lacked and the staff maintained that he was the "better son" despite the lack of a blood line.

Tibi is 25 years old, with a film star's looks, who lived in Budapest, but each summer came down to the lake to work. Tibi was a rather ruthless character.

Gertrud was an interesting character who worked for Catherine and was in love with Zeno. It was difficult to know if she could be trusted.

The Skin of Water is a book to be savored and a great read for historical fiction fans with a storyline full of interesting revelations. It has a well constructed plot, compelling characters, and a satisfying conclusion. Don't miss this one. I highly recommend with 4.5 stars.

You can also follow my reviews on <http://www.bookreviewsbywanda.blogspot.com> and Twitter @ghmstudio.

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### **Laura says**

I would give 4 stars to this book if the author haven't decided to take a short cut into the plot, by suppressing the second part of the story - what really happened to Catherine after her escape from Budapest.

In my humble opinion, this break into the plot really compromised the possible success of this book. We learn in some way in a flashback point of view when the plot jumped from 1944 to 2010. What a pity.

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### **Betty says**

Wow!! This is an amazing book by a fairly new author, who I think we are going to hear a lot more about.

The novel tells the story of a young Hungarian waiter, Zeno who meets Catherine, a beautiful, older married woman, at the lake shore resort where he works. They have an affair and fall madly in love.

World War II is raging in the European countries around them but Hungary is still neutral and has not yet been invaded by Germany. While the couple is in the midst of their affair, Zeno is hired by Catherine's

husband as his valet. Further complicating the plot is the fact that Catherine's maid is attracted to the handsome Zeno.

Zeno eventually learns that the Steiner family has a Jewish background and when the German army finally invades there are grave consequences for the couple.

The plot is marvelously crafted and the characters beautifully drawn. I loved everything about this book and the ending will leave you astonished.

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### **Karen S. says**

The Skin of Water is a beautifully written book about an ambitious young Hungarian boy and his first love, a more sophisticated woman trapped in a loveless arranged marriage. War-torn Hungary becomes almost another character in the book, as its submission to Nazi control poisons all that is beautiful in the country: its music, its food, romance, family loyalty, and friendship. Although this is a book that demonstrates the devastation of World War II, it accomplishes that goal without referring to battles or to the complications of political allegiances. The devastation it discusses is the effect of causeless hatred on the human heart.

Each of the characters was multifaceted. Even the most villainous betrayed vulnerability or the capacity to make better choices. The plot was intriguing through the end of the book and I couldn't stop reading it! Although I finished it in a couple of days, I will remember the main characters, Eva and Zeno for a long time!

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### **Colleen Kabat says**

I loved "The Skin of Water." The author paints vivid pictures of Hungary. I wish there would have been more written "in the middle" of the book...i.e. more about Catherine's escape, etc. (Don't want to give the plot away!). Also, it ended too quickly. This could have been written more like one of my favorite books, "The Bronze Horseman," with many, many more page for the reader to devour. Otherwise, excellent book!

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