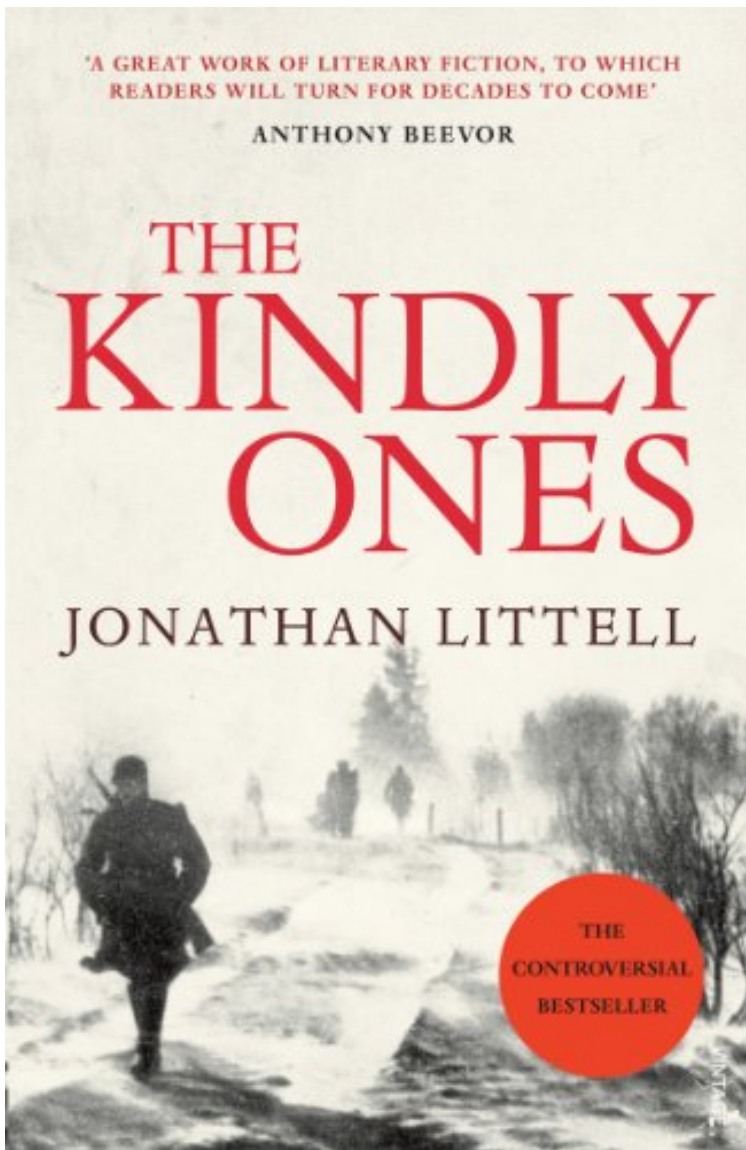


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# The Kindly Ones



*Par Jonathan Littell*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDr Max Aue is a family man and owner of a lace factory in post-war France. He is an intellectual steeped in philosophy, literature, and classical music. He is also a former SS intelligence officer and cold-blooded assassin. He was an observer and then a participant in Nazi atrocities on the Eastern Front, he was present at the siege of Stalingrad, at the death camps, and finally caught up in the overthrow of the Nazis and the nightmarish fall of Berlin. His world was peopled by Eichmann, Himmler, Gring, Speer and, of course, Hitler himself. Max is looking back at his life with cool-eyed precision; he is speaking out now to set the record straight.ExtraitOh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened. I am not your brother, youll retort, and I dont want to know. And it certainly is true that this is a bleak story, but an edifying one

too, a real morality play, I assure you. You might find it a bit long a lot of things happened, after all but perhaps youre not in too much of a hurry; with a little luck youll have some time to spare. And also, this concerns you: youll see that this concerns you. Dont think I am trying to convince you of anything; after all, your opinions are your own business. If after all these years Ive made up my mind to write, its to set the record straight for myself, not for you. For a long time we crawl on this earth like caterpillars, waiting for the splendid, diaphanous butterfly we bear within ourselves. And then time passes and the nymph stage never comes, we remain larvae what do we do with such an appalling realization? Suicide, of course, is always an option. But to tell the truth suicide doesnt tempt me much. Of course I have thought about it over the years; and if I were to resort to it, heres how Id go about it: Id hold a grenade right up against my heart and go out in a bright burst of joy. A little round grenade whose pin Id delicately pluck out before I released the catch, smiling at the little metallic noise of the spring, the last sound Id hear, aside from the heartbeat in my ears. And then at last, happiness, or in any case peace, as the shreds of my flesh slowly dripped off the walls. Let the cleaning women scrub them off, thats what theyre paid for, the poor girls. But as I said, suicide doesnt tempt me. I dont know why, either an old philosophical streak, perhaps, which keeps me thinking that after all were not here to have fun. To do what, then? I have no idea, to endure, probably, to kill time before it finally kills you. And in that case, writing is as good an occupation as anything else, when you have time to spare. Not that I have all that much spare time; I am a busy man, I have what is called a family, a job, hence responsibilities; all that takes time, and it doesnt leave much to recount ones memories. Particularly since memories are what I have quite a lot of. I am a veritable memory factory. I will have spent my whole life manufacturing memories, even though these days Im being paid to manufacture lace. In fact, I could just as easily not write. Its not as if its an obligation. After the war I remained a discreet man; thank God I have never been driven, unlike some of my former colleagues, to write my memoirs for the purpose of self-justification, since I have nothing to justify, or to earn a living, since I have a decent enough income as it is. Once, I found myself in Germany on a business trip; I was meeting the head of a big lingerie company, to sell him some lace. Some old friends had recommended me to him; so, without having to ask any questions, we both knew where we stood with each other. After our discussion, which went quite well, he got up, took a book down from his shelf, and handed it to me. It was the posthumous memoirs of Hans Frank, the Generalgouverneur of Poland; it was called Facing the Gallows. I got a letter from Franks widow, he said. She had the manuscript, which he wrote after his trial, published at her own expense; now shes selling the book to provide for her children. Can you imagine that? The widow of the Generalgouverneur! I ordered twenty copies from her, to use as gifts. And I advised all my department chiefs to buy one. She wrote me a moving letter of thanks. Did you know him? I assured him I hadnt, but that I would read the book with interest. Actually I had run into Hans Frank once, briefly, maybe Ill tell you about it later on, if I have the courage or the patience. But just then it would have made no sense talking about it. The book in any case was awful confused, whining, steeped in a curious kind of religious hypocrisy. These notes of mine might be confused and awful too, but Ill do my best to be clear; I can assure you that they will at least be free of any form of contrition. I do not regret anything: I did my work, thats all; as for my family problems, which I might also talk about, they concern no one but me; and as for the rest, I probably did go a little far toward the end, but by that point I was no longer entirely myself, I was off-balance, and anyhow the whole world was toppling around me, I wasnt the only one who lost his head, admit it. Also, Im not writing to feed my widow and children, Im quite capable of providing for them. No, if I have finally decided to write, it really is probably just to pass the time, and also, possibly, to clear up one or two obscure points, for you perhaps and for myself. Whats more I think it will do me good. Its true that I have been in a rather glum mood of late. The constipation, probably. A distressing and painful problem, and a somewhat new one for me; it used to be just the opposite. For a long time I had to go to the toilet three or four times a day; now, once a week would be a blessing. Ive been reduced to taking enemas, a repulsive procedure, albeit effective. Forgive me for wearying you with such sordid details: but I do have a right to complain a little. And if you cant bear this youd better stop right here. Im no Hans Frank, and I cant stand mincing words. I want to be precise, as far as I am able. In spite of my shortcomings, and they have been many, I have remained someone who believes that the only things indispensable to human life are air, food, drink, and excretion, and the search for truth. The rest is optional. Sometime ago, my wife brought home a black cat. She probably thought it would make me happy; of course she never asked my opinion. She must have suspected I would have flatly refused, so presenting me with the fait accompli was safer. And once it was there, nothing could be done about it, the grandchildren would cry, etc. But this was a very unpleasant cat. Whenever I tried to pet it, to show my

goodwill, it would slip away to sit on the windowsill and stare at me with its yellow eyes; if I tried to pick it up and hold it, it would scratch me. At night, on the other hand, it would come and curl up in a ball on my chest, a stifling weight, and in my sleep I would dream I was being smothered beneath a heap of stones. With my memories, its been more or less the same. The first time I decided to set them down in writing, I took a leave of absence. That was probably a mistake. Things were going well, though: I had bought and read quite a few books on the subject, in order to refresh my memory; I had drawn up organizational charts, detailed chronologies, and so on. But with this leave of absence I suddenly had a lot of free time, and I began thinking. Whats more, it was fall, a bitter gray rain was stripping the leaves off the trees, and I was slowly overcome with dread. I realized that thinking is not always a good idea. I should have known. My colleagues consider me a calm, collected, thoughtful man. Calm, certainly; but often during the day my head begins to rage, with the dull roar of a crematorium. I talk, I hold conversations, I make decisions, just like everyone else; but standing at a bar with my glass of Cognac, I imagine a man coming in with a shotgun and opening fire; at the movies or at the theater, I picture a live grenade rolling under the seats; in a town square on a public holiday I see a car packed with explosives blowing up, the afternoon festivities turned into carnage, blood filling the cracks between the cobblestones, gobbets of flesh splattered on the walls or smashing through the windows to land in the Sunday soup, I hear cries, the groans of people with their limbs torn off like the legs of an insect plucked by a curious little boy, the bewilderment of the survivors, a strange, earsplitting silence, the beginning of a long fear. Calm? Yes, I remain calm, whatever happens, I dont let anything show, I stay quiet, impassive, like the empty windows of burned-out cities, like the little old men on park benches with their canes and their medals, like the faces of the drowned just beneath the surface of the water, never to be found. I couldnt break this terrifying calm even if I wanted to. Im not the sort of man who loses his nerve at the drop of a hat, I know how to behave. But it weighs on me too. The worst thing is not necessarily those images Ive just described; fantasies like these have lived in me for a long time, ever since my childhood probably, or in any case long before I actually ended up in the heart of the slaughterhouse. The war, in that sense, was only a confirmation, and I have gotten used to these little scenarios, I take them as a pertinent commentary on the vanity of things. No, what turned out to be so disturbing, so oppressive, was to have nothing to do but sit around and think. Ask yourselves: You, yourselves, what do you think of, through the course of a day? Very few things, actually. Drawing up a systematic classification of your everyday thoughts would be easy: practical or mechanical thoughts, planning your actions and your time (example: setting the coffee to drip before brushing your teeth, but toasting the bread afterward, since it doesnt take as long); work preoccupations; financial anxieties; domestic problems; sexual fantasies. Ill spare you the details. At dinner, you contemplate the aging face of your wife, so much less exciting than your mistress, but a fine woman otherwise, what can you do, thats life, so you talk about the latest government scandal. Actually you couldnt care less about the latest government scandal, but what else is there to talk about? Eliminate those kinds of thoughts, and youll agree theres not much left. There are ...Revue de presseThe force and clarity with which Littell renders the physical realities of war and mass murder are simply astounding. . . . The Kindly Ones is unmistakably the work of a profoundly gifted writer. (Time magazine)An alternately fascinating and impressively researched novel. . . . Its feverish voice is weirdly mesmerizing, the scope awesome. (Newark Star Ledger)A world-class masterpiece of astonishing brutality, originality, and force. (The Daily Beast)A great work of literary fiction, to which readers and scholars will turn for decades to come. (Antony Beevor, The Times (London))The meticulously realistic main plot of The Kindly Ones is brilliantly organized and written (BookForum)Unquestionably brilliantLittell is a gifted writer and what he achieves is unparalleledThe novel [is] scrupulous in its period details and generous in its scope (The Nation)An extraordinarily powerful novel. Above all, it is a sophisticated exploration of issues of morality, evil and luck The novel as a whole brilliantly shows how ordinary men become killers. (The Observer (London))