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Portrait: Anna Felder



With a cat's eye

I meet Anna Felder on a winter's evening in the pouring rain. As I step out of the train she is already there waiting to meet me. A keen look, few words and we are soon sitting together, opposite each other. I have the feeling I have always known Anna Felder, have always sat in that room, with the wind beating on the window panes and the cat called Figaro which lazily raises its head to peer at me.

We talk about her first book *Tra dove piove e non piove* which the Neue Zürcher Zeitung published in instalments under the title *Quasi Heimweh* (Rodana, 1970). *Heimweh* is homesickness, nostalgia for a world we no longer have, a world of flavours, gestures and scents lost forever. «What's the matter, is it the Po Delta that's making you feel bad?» says Gino, for nostalgia is also a corner in Lombardy and the great plain of the river Po – a pang of longing which clouds the eyes, the gaze.

The title is allegorical: a bow

drawn between sadness and beauty, past and present and between what we have and what we lack.

Ephemerality is the connecting thread between the characters of this novel who seem to live with a return ticket in their pocket, ready to jump on the next departing train. Even today, Anna Felder who was born in the Ticino of an Italian mother and Swiss father is still aware of this feeling of the provisional, in both good and bad. Perhaps this is why she loves cats which anyway abhor the provisional and which cling to their habits and their armchair. And of all narrators it is of course a cat who is the story-teller of her second novel; a mysterious, slightly crazed cat. «She took me for a cat because I played my role so well», is how *Umzug durch die Katzentür* (published by Benziger, 1985) begins. It is the story of a threat of eviction («moving house through the cat-door») which hangs over a house with the number 18 in a street and town without name (it could be Lugano), where oleanders, plane trees and sweet-smelling flowers grow.

The cat keeps a cat's eye on the workaday life of the old house, listens to the arguments of young and old, takes sides, spools off the threads of time and occasionally lifts its eyes – open now in real or pretended hallucination. The subtle humour of these daily occurrences is unable to hide either the bitterness or the hostility towards the rebuilding plans which could snuff out a whole way of life. And, like a cat, Anna Felder also watches. She is an observer of all our quirks, our little lunacies and everyday unkindnesses. Her tales are not great stories but gestures, obsessions, half-sentences, the symptoms of suffering from an affliction which is life itself. This is seen in *Gli stretti congiunti* (Il Pardo, 1982), a series of short stories which she

wrote for the radio; a photograph album of the family and close relatives. The grandfather, the wife, the intelligent daughter, the lover, and the dead pass by in procession in front of our eyes, each on his or her way, brushing against but never encountering each other, irrelatively.

Even *Nozze alte* (Il Pardo, 1981), inspired by the myth of Philemon and Baucis, in which two old cottagers are turned into trees by the gods so that they can die intertwined together, becomes a story of workaday life, little arguments, troubles with the heating. Italo Calvino called *Nozze alte* a book for too-fine palates. In fact it is a difficult book, a book of musical sequences cadenced by rhythmic evening shadows falling on the temple, and by the sighs of the two old people who await the blessing of the gods, fearful that the benediction could prove to be a condemnation and doubtful if it is indeed they themselves who are the gods' elect – with their gaze on to the trees of the opposite hills.

Anna Felder's language is likewise not always easy: sometimes brusque, equivocal, exhausting and yet full of gentleness and permeated with the fragrance of the wind and sweet-smelling flowers. «I want to write simple stories», Anna Felder told me, «Stories everybody understands. Whether I succeed, whether I have succeeded, it is up to you to say». I certainly believe that, basically, she has succeeded but we readers must also do our share: we must approach the reading of her work with impartiality and unfeigned vision.

As I was going back home, her words again came to my mind: «I want to be less of a perfectionist and more easy-going. I want to be fatter, too». I had to laugh to myself. There was a very pleasant feeling in that room. ●

Emanuela Meier-Pozzi