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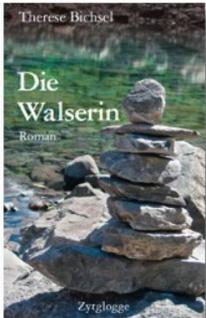
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The agonising question – stay or go?



THERESE BICHSEL:
"Die Walserin".
Zytglogge Verlag, 2015;
292 pages.
CHF 36, EUR 36.

Should we really leave? Is there no other solution than to enter into the unknown? Pregnant Barbara from the canton of Valais and her husband Conrad are faced with this question after narrowly escaping death again in the Lötschental valley following an avalanche. But they also find themselves under pressure for other reasons. Their native valley yields too little economically to feed the growing population. They decide, together with others, to leave. Around 1300 AD they set off on the dangerous and arduous route from Valais over the mountains into the sparsely populated, inhospitable Upper Lauterbrunnental valley in the Bernese Oberland. What today seems like a challenging hike was a journey into the unknown back then.

The natives of Valais founded Weiler Ammerten and later also Gimmelwald and Mürren. In the 18th century the inhabitants of Ammerten headed down into Isenfluh, high above the Lower Lauterbrunnental valley.

With her simple, plain but also powerful language, Therese Bichsel succeeds in making the bleakness of the settlers' lives in the wilderness tangible. This has nothing to do with romanticism – quite the contrary: Bichsel depicts the hard social pecking order of the late High Middle Ages and weaves it into an exciting plot. At its centre is Barbara, who loses her husband soon after arriving at the new settlement and comes to terms with her tough life as a single mother demonstrating bravery and resilience but also fatalism.

While there is no historical evidence of the life of the novel's character Barbara, the "primordial mother" of the people of Ammerten, the emigration of the inhabitants of Ammerten during the 19th century outlined in the middle section of the book is well documented. The all-important and agonising question is raised at the outset here, too: shall we stay or go? The question is not initially posed explicitly, but it gradually pervades the minds of the people suffering from economic hardship. Good news from the Caucasus from a family member who has already emigrated sways the decision. Another family emigrates in 1879. They produce cheese, achieve prosperity and emigrate again after being dispossessed following the Russian Revolution of 1917, this time to Canada.

Therese Bichsel has carried out extensive research of the source material and quotes at length from letters by emigrants in the 19th and 20th centuries. "Die Walserin" is a successful collage of fact and fiction about people who time and time again have to leave everything behind to start from scratch somewhere else – it is a literary memorial to Swiss "economic migrants" sprinkled with local colour from the Bernese Oberland.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

On a journey of discovery through the States



ANNA ROSSINELLI:
"Takes Two To Tango",
Universal Music.

There was great excitement when Anna Rossinelli announced her new project. She was going to spend three months travelling around the US with her band to do some research into the roots of rock music, to gain inspiration from gospel and blues and to finally go into the studio in New York to immortalise the result in a documentary film and an album.

So far, so good. However, the vocalist from Basel wanted to fund the project through crowdfunding and to essentially go on the trip using an advance from her fans. This resulted in

an absolute furore. Why should her fans pay for her journey of self-discovery through the US with tens of thousands of Swiss francs? Almost every newspaper covered the story, and the lead singer, who has become a seasoned pro since her appearance on the Eurovision Song Contest, was forced to think twice.

They nevertheless got the money together, and Rossinelli and her fellow musicians, Manuel Meiser and Georg Dillier, set off on their pilgrimage across the Atlantic. They sang with a gospel choir in Dallas, jammed with a busker in Los Angeles, listened to brass bands in New Orleans, played with Joe Cocker's former keyboard player, met countless other musicians and captured these encounters on tape. They then recorded their new tracks in Wall Street, drawing upon moments from their travels.

An album was produced from the "Takes Two to Tango" project which reveals a more mature Anna Rossinelli – it is the work of a woman who skilfully shifts between alternative pop and singer/songwriter, stands out through her extremely expressive voice and has finally cast off her girlish attitude.

The ten tracks also work well as a single entity, which is no mean feat considering how they arose. The recordings of guest singers, harmonicas, choirs and guitars are subtly blended into the material and do not become an end in themselves. However, "Takes Two To Tango" does not really sound as American or "black" as Rossinelli's previous music. It is an exceedingly Swiss album, albeit a very good one. As to whether the controversial, expensive trip to the US and all the uproar has paid off, this remains to be seen.

MARKO LEHTINEN