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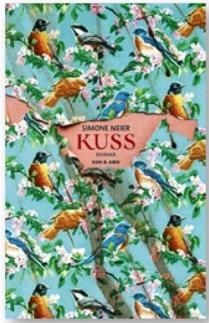
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A fateful kiss



SIMONE MEIER:
"Kuss" Kein & Aber Verlag,
Zurich 2019
256 pages; CHF 28 or
approx. EUR 22

"Yann and Gerda loved watching programmes about emigrants, housewives and other dreamers," writes Simone Meier about the two main characters in her new novel. "Like voyeurs, they loved studying how people with no money would sacrifice everything for the sake of a pipe dream." Yann and Gerda have their own aspirations. The couple are in their mid-thirties and have just moved into a disused worker's cottage on the edge of town. Gerda has lost her job as a graphic designer and is now putting her creative juices into transforming the dilapidated property into something homely. Yann, who works for a think-tank, has no option but to play the traditional role of breadwinner – and is not completely unhappy with this state of affairs. Gerda's thoughts begin to spiral. An imaginary dalliance with Alex culminates in a kiss – more intimated than real – that sends her into a tumult of emotions.

At the same time, we get to know a woman called Valerie – a 50-year-old journalist who is living temporarily next door in the house that she inherited. The two narratives intertwine, ending in a bitter finale.

The story takes place in a Swiss city but could easily be set anywhere in our urban world. It portrays a generation of thirty- to forty-somethings, many of whom still live together in shared spaces. Theirs is a journey with no clear destination, albeit that of laying down roots and starting a family if they can. They are torn between emancipation on the one hand and conservative values on the other. Retro, industrial chic is in, while a well-paid job is an absolute must. Simone Meier's novel steers away from social critique. Nevertheless, the author is a clever interpreter of her urban surroundings, skilfully highlighting the protagonists' personalities in order to weave her observations into the narrative. Valerie cuts a likeable, serene figure who embarks on a new relationship. The book is very readable but also unsettling, straddling a thought-provokingly fine line between imagination and reality. Even when the veneer peels away, the characters prefer to watch television and fantasise.

Simone Meier, born in 1970, grew up in the canton of Aargau. After doing German studies, American studies, and art history at university, she worked as culture editor at the "WochenZeitung WOZ" and the "Tages-Anzeiger". She now writes for the Watson news portal and lives in Zurich. "Kuss" (German for kiss) is her third novel.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

Makala, double meaning rap



MAKALA:
"Radio Suicide"
2019, Colors Records

Genevan rapper Makala is not one to mince his words. "Radio Suicide", the name of his latest studio album, released in June, serves as proof. Neither is the young man of Congolese descent concerned about his music being played on the radio. In this album he has put together 21 titles packed with unmistakable acoustic freedom and poetic licence. The explosion of musical ideas, created alongside producer Varnish La Piscine, makes for an admittedly challenging first listen. Makala's rap follows a chilled funk, even reggae beat, but the instrumentals are distorted, mixed, and interrupted by flashes that are sure to keep listeners alert. The lyrics speak of sweet and bitter sentiment, with each further listening revealing a new element. Founder and member of the Swiss collective SuperWak Clique (see January 2018 edition of "Swiss Review"), Makala tells of his success and its effects on his social relationships. He lyricises about social networks and their vanity. He reveals his fragility, in a world of heavyweights. "La première fois que j'ai fait l'amour, j'ai fait croire que je l'avais déjà fait," chants the rapper in the track Goatier: "The first time I made love, I pretended I had already done it". Money and success? "I've got my hand in my trousers, soon I'll have my hands on the money" he asserts in ICIELAO: "J'ai la main dans le frot (pantalon). Bientôt j'ai les mains dans le fric." The Genevan excels in creating lexical clashes, with his words provoking a multitude of stimulating ideas. The flow of Makala's voice is similar to that of North American rapper, Snoop Dogg: it is smooth, almost a whisper. A heavy presence of slang and 'verlan' (the coded use of language in which syllables are inverted) render the lyrics understandable, but not always accessible. Indeed, it is an album which has piqued the interest of specialist French critics: "I could say that we have here the greatest French-language rap album of the decade, except that it is not quite a rap album," writes Etienne Menu on the rap blog, Musique journal, before continuing: "rather, it is more than a rap album." This is a sign that the Genevan rappers and their independent label, Colors Records, have truly succeeded in establishing themselves outside Switzerland.

STEPHANE HERZOG