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A plurality of origins

Social change is breeding a new form of “home literature”, with Switzerland having long metamorphosed from a country of emigrants into a country of immigrants. This is reflected not least in Swiss writing, which no longer focuses on the idylls and traditions of yesteryear but critically engages with the question of origin. In searching for their own roots, authors easily drift off to faraway regions. This internationalism is a key component of Switzerland’s new multicultural literature. Nine years ago, Melinda Nadj Abonji won the Swiss and German book awards for her novel “Fly Away, Pigeon”. This work, which chronicles the hard-won assimilation of a family who have immigrated to Switzerland, hit a raw nerve at the time.

Back in 1970, “Tra dove piove e non piove” (Where it rains and where it doesn’t) by the Ticino author Anna Felder provided an empathetic portrayal of how the “latchkey children” of Italian guest workers coped in unfamiliar surroundings. Felder was followed by



Melinda Nadj Abonji, author of the novel “Fly Away, Pigeon”, was delighted about winning the German book award (archive photo, 2010).

numerous other writers such as Dante Andrea Franzetti and Franco Supino, who would go on to tell the story of the Swiss-born generation of “secondos” (second generation immigrants). In French-speaking Switzerland, Agota Kristof used the language of her new home to reminisce about Hungary, her country of birth. Books by Max Lobe (Cameroon) and Elisa Shua Dusapin (Korea) in French, and Dorian Catalin Florescu (Romania) and Kathy Zarnegin (Iran) in German are indicative of how the search for family roots is truly global. Works such as these have expanded the scope of Swiss literature. New cultures entail new stories and new images that lend colour and plurality.

BEAT MATZENAUER



“Unhaltbare Zustände”

It is 1968, and the world is in uproar in the aftermath of strikes and student protests. The wind of change has swept through Berne too, where Stettler works as a respected window dresser in the city’s largest department store. Just into his 60s, Stettler is assigned a younger colleague with fresh ideas to work with. His window displays, which used to be admired, now feel staid and stuffy. Stettler’s world begins to crumble. Feeling threatened, he succumbs to his own rage and seeks revenge. The story ends in a furious finale, with one of Stettler’s previously unseen window creations sealing his downfall. Reconciling with the new zeitgeist is beyond him. The window dresser also misses the chance of a romance with a female pianist.

Sulzer’s novel is clever, subtle, precisely written and beautifully told. Alain Claude Sulzer was born in 1953 and currently lives in Basel. He has written numerous novels and essays.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

Alain Claude Sulzer, “Unhaltbare Zustände”
(Untenable circumstances) Verlag Galiani, Berlin 2019
267 pages; CHF 33.90
E-book (epub): approx. EUR 19.00

Further recommendations (German)

Arno Camenisch, “Herr Anselm” (Engeler)
Witty, exquisitely melancholic monologue of a straight-talking school janitor.

Ivana Žic, “Die Nachkommende” (Matthes & Seitz)
Brilliant literary debut that tells a stop-start story about identity and belonging.

Ruth Schweikert: “Tage wie Hunde” (S.Fischer)
A moving diary of the author’s fight with breast cancer.



A thriller without a thread

Who killed the journalist working in a small seaside town in the Hamptons? Who is the real culprit behind the quadruple homicide the young woman was investigating? This is the subject of the fourth novel by Joël Dicker from Geneva, an author whose work has been translated into over 40 languages. The seg-

mentation resembles an American series, with recurring flashbacks. It works, but ends up as regimented. In terms of style Dicker avoids being edgy, preferring to fall back on familiar phrasing. His characters are caricatures. The lawyer from New York, for example, the star of the bar, goes by the name of... Starr. Nonetheless, the critics can keep walking. The author makes that clear through a certain Meta Ostrovski. The maxim of this literary critic? "Above all, never love. To love is to be weak." This dismissal of the inevitable detractors of Dicker's work is a reflection of the thriller itself: slightly naïve, slightly comical. Indeed, it is the flashes of this schoolyard humour that save "The Disappearance of Stéphanie Mailer" from becoming dull.

STEPHANE HERZOG

Joël Dicker, "The Disappearance of Stéphanie Mailer", Edition De Fallois paperback 840 pages

Further recommendations (French)

Roland Buti, "Grand National" (Zoé)

Concise, affectionate account of a man in a mid-life crisis.

Pascal Janovjak: "Le Zoo de Rome" (Actes Sud)

A retrospective of 20th-century history – through the lens of Rome's city zoo.

Collectif, "Tu es la sœur que je choisis"

(éd. D'En Bas) Various authors from French-speaking Switzerland look back at the Swiss women's strike of 14 June 2019.

"Effetto notte"

Alessandro moderates a night-time radio programme that allows listeners to call in and say anything they want. After a faux pas on air, he is forced to go on holiday. While in America, the beleaguered presenter slowly gets back on an even keel. Chapters skillfully alternate between listener call-ins and the story of his time on the other side of the Atlantic. This short book – earnest and observational one minute, absurd and amusing the next – offers new narrative and musical twists at every corner. The QR codes



at the end of the listener call-ins enhance this effect. Read one of them with your smartphone, and a music video will open up on YouTube.

Pierre Lepori was born in 1968 in Lugano and lives in Lausanne. The author, who works as cultural correspondent on Swiss public radio, translated "Effetto Notte" (Nocturnal effect) into French himself. RUTH VON GUNTEN

Pierre Lepori, "Effetto notte" (Nocturnal effect)
Effigie edizioni, Pavia 2019. 96 pages; EUR 13.–

Further recommendations (Ticino)

Flavio Stroppini, "Comunque. Tell" (Capelli). A bitter and ironically written and illustrated account of the legend of William Tell.

Marco Zappa, "Al Vént Al Bófa ... Ammò" (Dadò). The Ticino musician marks his 70th birthday with a wonderful collection of song lyrics.

"Die Wölfin – La luffa"

They call him the "boy". After his father's suicide, he grows up with his grandparents and great-grandmother in a Graubünden mountain village. His one-armed grandfather – replete with historical references, left-field ideas and philosophical musings – plays a prominent role in his upbringing, as does his silent yet assertive grandmother. Every page in this book provides a complex spin on the boy's family history and development as a person. Leo Tuor's writing is simple, effortless and poetic.

The work, which first appeared in 2002 in the author's native Romansh, has now been republished in a revised, bilingual edition. Peter Egloff has produced an outstanding German translation of Tuor's exquisite prose. Leo Tuor was born in 1959 in Graubünden and lives in the Sumvitg Valley (Surselva, canton of Grisons). RUTH VON GUNTEN

Leo Tuor, "Die Wölfin / La luffa" (The she-wolf)
Limmat Verlag, Zurich 2019, 368 pages; CHF/EUR 38.50

For more recommendations, visit www.revue.ch/en



Vulnerable characters – and a step into the unknown

A young woman stands at the edge of a roof and threatens to jump off. She stays there for almost two days while an entire city watches her every move. Simone Lappert, born in Arau in 1985, uses this situation as a device to present a host of characters from different generations, bringing each one to life and showing how they react to the situation. There are old people with their world weariness, the young with their whole life ahead of them and the middle aged all but consumed by their professional commitments. Manu is the woman who wants to jump, then there is her cool boyfriend Finn, a bicycle courier, and two resigned older people running a grocery store and falling deeper into debt, a homeless man selling questions written on paper to passers-by, a pubescent girl who wants to harm herself to avoid swimming lessons and Roswitha, the owner of the café frequented by the characters. Lappert recounts wonderfully vivid stories about the different characters, but deliberately leaves the conundrum of Manu and her jump unresolved. The jump into a net held by the fire service may come across as somewhat contrived. However, the portrayal of the individual figures and their suffering and joy add substance to the book. It is reminiscent of the Carson McCullers novel "The Heart is a lonely Hunter" written in 1940, which also brings an entire city to life through a raft of memorable characters.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Simone Lappert, "Der Sprung", Novel.
Diogenes-Verlag, Zurich, 330 pages, hardback 30 francs, eBook 24 francs

