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Is this life?



SIBYLLA BERG:
"GRM.Brainfuck"
Verlag Kiepenheuer &
Witsch, 2019
640 pages; CHF 35
or approx. EUR 25
Also available as an audio
book and e-book

Four teenagers from a suburb of Manchester grow up in complete neglect. Their problem parents are either AWOL or drunk, the people around them full of pent-up aggression or utterly listless. Hatred against minorities and women is commonplace. The four of them experience poverty, sexual violence, drugs and discrimination. They decide to escape this nightmare and manage to reach London, where they ensconce themselves in an abandoned factory and plot revenge on those responsible for their misery. The society into which they have grown is deeply divided. Algorithms, artificial intelligence and a small handful of ageing politicians preside over the people's lives. The teens try to subvert and shield themselves from this undemocratic Big Brother state.

"GRM.Brainfuck" by Sibylle Berg is an oppressive, apocalyptic novel. The book title is a reference firstly to grime (or GRM) – a breakneck, angry contemporary urban music genre from the UK – and secondly to the Brainfuck programming language.

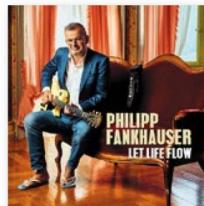
Coarse and unsparing in its language, the first 200 pages make for quite challenging reading. Things don't get easier thereafter, but the young characters become more proactive and less impotent. The scenes often seem cruel and funny at once, while the fluidly structured prose is devoid of chapters. Berg uses a background narrative voice to flit from one character to the next. "GRM.Brainfuck" is not for the faint-hearted. To learn how so many people with zero prospects are consigned to life's scrapheap makes for painful reading.

The book scooped the Swiss book award in November 2019. Explaining its decision, the jury said, "Sibylle Berg has succeeded in writing a novel that is formally avant-garde and that touches the reader's heart." In February, the author was awarded this year's Swiss Grand Prix Literature for her life's work. Anyone wishing to acquaint themselves with Sibylle Berg's writing is best advised to start with her first novel, "Ein paar Leute suchen das Glück und lachen sich tot" (A few people search for happiness and laugh themselves to death).

Sibylle Berg was born in 1962 in Weimar. In 1984, she applied to leave East Germany and managed to emigrate to West Germany. She has lived in Zurich since 1994. The German-Swiss author's 15 novels have been translated into more than 30 languages (read her short profile on page 31).

RUTH VON GUNTEN

Blues from Thun



PHILIPP FANKHAUSER:
"Let Life Flow", Sony
Music

Based purely on appearances, Philipp Fankhauser seems very Swiss. He has the air of an accountant rather than of a blues artist who has been around the block. But this singer and guitarist has indeed been Switzerland's best-known blues musician for years. Thun-born Fankhauser's first album dates back 30 years. "Let Life Flow" is the title of his 16th and latest solo work.

The new album once again showcases the 56-year-old's repertoire, with 15 songs that marry blues with soft soul and pop. Fankhauser's music is imbued with groove, passion, catchy melodies and crowd-pleasing arrangements. His gravelly voice is quintessential to the genre, his gentle guitar masterful and affecting, interspersed with a brass sound that is peak New Orleans. Virtuosos Hendrix Ackle on keyboard and Richard Cousins on bass provide sublime accompaniment, while the wonderful Shoals Sisters lend a hint of gospel on the backing vocals.

"Cold Cold Winter" is a fast shuffle, "Here In My Arms" a down-tempo tour de force, "You've Got To Hurt Before You Heal" a schmaltzy soul ballad, and "Wave You Goodbye" the earthiest blues number on the record. Fankhauser, who partly recorded the album in the southern US states with local musicians, remains true to his tried-and-trusted template. The only departure is "Chasch Mers Gloube", a tribute in Swiss-German to the late musician Hanery Amman – the first-ever time that Fankhauser has sung in Bernese dialect on one of his albums. His version of Lucio Dalla's "Milano", interpreted in the original Italian, is another standout track.

Regardless of language, Fankhauser offers up a lucid collection of impeccably produced songs on "Let Life Flow". There are no rough edges. In that sense, the sound is more Swiss than you might think. That's not bad, it's authentic.

MARKO LEHTINEN