

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 6

Artikel: "Literature cannot rival history"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051940>

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“Literature cannot rival history”

Novelist Urs Faes digs into his memory.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Read “Alphabet des Abschieds” (The alphabet of farewells), 1991, and you will notice a remark that epitomises the novel’s author Urs Faes, who was born in Aarau in 1947: “The past is all about telling stories and the archaeology of remembrance.” In “Augenblicke im Paradies” (Moments in paradise), 1994, Faes begins delving into his family history to imbue historical events with real-life experience and personal authenticity. His parents’ corner shop is the inspiration behind this bitter-sweet retrospective of the 1914-50 era. After the fall of the Third Reich, confectioners produced “American” chewing gum instead of German caramel: “The era had ended in ruins, rubble and death. Woe betide any sweet that reminded you of this. *Finis germaniae, finis caramellum, finis sucrum.*”

Art, music, medicine

However, Faes has also shown, in “Ombra” (1997), for example, that he can recount life stories without relying on a family narrative. “Als hätte die Stille Türen” (As if the silence had doors), 2005, juxtaposes the fictional love between two protagonists with the real-life romance between Alban Berg and Hanna Fuchs. “Words are like doors. From silence, into silence. They create expanses in which to move. They create space,” the author writes. The theme of music lends “Als hätte die Stille Türen” an added dimension, while medicine does the same in “Paarbildung” (Coupling), 2010 – a book in which the term “coupling” firstly has oncological implications and, secondly, refers to a moving love affair that recalls the social upheaval of 1968. Born of his experience of undergoing cancer therapy, Faes digs into his personal memory bank again in “Halt auf Verlangen” (Stop on request), 2016, to recount a series of happy and less-than-happy romances. Various life stories feature in “Sommer in Brandenburg” (Summer in Brandenburg), 2014, and “Untertags” (During the day), 2020. The latter is a moving novel that deals with dementia and the role of language. The stories are all mysteriously connected to the summer of 1938 in Germany and the exodus of thousands of young Jews to Palestine.

Back in 1994, the author had the following retort for anyone who thought such an abundance of themes, protagonists and locations was a mere smokescreen for reality: “Even if my books are indeed connected to reality and to history, it is certainly not my intention to depict reality. The most I can do is bring things into relief, because literature cannot rival history. It is no substitute for the real thing, even if it masquerades as such.”

A novella masterpiece

Faes perpetuates the great tradition of the German novella writing in “Raunächte” (The twelve nights of Christmas), 2018. A man trudges through the snowy forest, weighed down by dark memories of a dark secret that drove him away from the place he spent his childhood. This densely packed, skilfully written short story is not only filled with great symbolism, but its tone, atmosphere and rhythm are impeccable too. The author’s nod to Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night” lends the narrative a mysterious, almost magical depth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: The works of Urs Faes are available from Suhrkamp.

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“David and Simone looked on silently as the heron waded ever so slowly upstream, gently placing one leg in front of the other into the sandy riverbed, its head nudging forward. Every so often, the bird would stand still for a few seconds, as if seized by the current. It would then exert itself again and continue moving, despite the flow of the river. With tiny steps. The couple stood motionless, watching with bated breath from the riverbank. Then their faces converged.”

From “Als hätte die Stille Türen” (As if the silence had doors); novel; Suhrkamp-Verlag, 2005