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A shape-shifting narrative



KIM DE L'HORIZON
"Blutbuch"
DuMont Verlag
334 pages, CHF 32

Non-binary author Kim de l'Horizon swept this year's Swiss and German book awards with their debut novel "Blutbuch" (Blood Book). De l'Horizon won both accolades for their audacious yet reflective exploration of social conventions and their own non-binary identity.

"Blood Book" is a work with two fundamental strands. On the one hand, it deals with our intangible heritage – the things we carry without being asked. This is symbolised by the copper beech (or "Blutbuche" in German) that the narrator's great-grandfather once planted in the family garden – at a time when the world still seemed to be a simple place with no more than two human genders.

On the other, De l'Horizon's fluid writing style leaves this linear, monotonous identity behind. The focal point of the story is the grandmother – or "Grossmeier" (literally "great sea" in Bernese dialect) – with whom the book's unnamed protagonist has a close if uneasy relationship. The protagonist, who feels neither male nor female, is prompted by their grandmother's slide into dementia to investigate the past. The more their grandmother forgets, the more they remember – touching upon emotions such as shame, desire and fear as well as the pervasive threat of violence. "I will not kill my parents," they say. "I will give my mothers the gift of life." And be born again. Choosing between paternal and maternal, the protagonist identifies more with their family's female history – a story of neglect, repression, stubbornness and resistance. These "inherited wounds" of the past underpin the protagonist's non-binary existence. But the protagonist is also plagued by a gnawing sense of self-doubt. "How do I begin and where do I end?" they ask. More than once, their narrative voice builds up a head of steam only for their "strong libido", satisfied through self-humiliation, to gain the upper hand all too easily.

This novel is hard to digest. Its shape-shifting narrative challenges the norm and treads a fine line, as the protagonist tries to wrestle their way out of the family and social straitjacket into which they were born. De l'Horizon employs a written style that flits between the vulnerable, the dispassionate and the skittish, building intensity to carry and authenticate the narrative. Their language jars against the fragility of human existence and blurs the lines of convention in remarkable fashion.

BEAT MAZENAUER

Music about the passing of time



SINA
"Zitsammläri"
Muve, 2022

Maybe it's the dialect. We all like the way they speak in Valais, don't we? Or perhaps it's the calm, friendly, down-to-earth manner. Whatever it is, everyone in Switzerland likes Sina.

Some thought that "Där Sohn vom Pfarrer", her take on the Dusty Springfield soul classic "Son Of A Preacher Man", was way too cringy. Others rolled their eyes when she threw marzipan from the stage during her "Marzipan" album tour ("Wänd dir Marzipan?" [Want some marzipan?]). But we all fell for her dialect – the epitome of authenticity and honesty. "Fär wer soll i singu?" (For whom should I sing?), the disarming title of Sina's latest single, is a case in point. Although the song itself is much more than just quaint.

Indeed, Sina's qualities extend far beyond her charming dialectal sounds. The award-winning singer from Visp may sound a little too mainstream at times, but her less-upbeat moments are genuinely tender, poetic and deep.

"Zitsammläri" (Time collector), her 14th album, is no exception. Together with husband Markus Kühne, Sina wrote a collection of new songs during the quiet of the pandemic. Friends from the worlds of literature, slam poetry, and cabaret – including Sibylle Berg, Simone Meier, Bänz Friedli, Jürg Halter and Franz Hohler – provided her with the lyrics, all of which revolve around the universal theme of time. Sina's band, featuring producer and co-composer Adrian Stern, then recorded the tracks at the historic Grandhotel Giessbach near Brienz.

"Zitsammläri" is a concept album combining folk, pop and traditional Swiss music. It is also a romantic and intellectual conversation about getting older. "Hände", with lyrics from the author Bettina Spoerri, is a particularly captivating song. Sina recently referred to it in an interview: "Hands learn to tie shoelaces. Later they're riddled with blue veins. And we realise how quickly life passes us by... Getting older in public is a challenge in my opinion. I would love to say that my double chin or the rings around my eyes don't bother me, but it's natural for me to want to look my best."

The rustic, underlying humour of her lovely Valais lilt is one thing. Yet Sina's new album demands attention in its own right because it is a classic of its genre. Quite inspiring – and astonishing.

MARKO LEHTINEN