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She wrote with all her senses

Anne-Lise Grobéty's debut novel "Pour mourir en février" was a subtle rebellion against the complacent Switzerland of the 1960s.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

"Pour mourir en février" (To die in February) was the Swiss literary sensation of 1969, winning the Prix Georges Nicole and then appearing in the Cahiers de la Renaissance Vaudoise as a book in 1970. Its author, Anne-Lise Grobéty, was born in La Chaux-de-Fonds on 21 December 1949. Grobéty had written the novel at the age of 18 while studying literature at the University of Neuchâtel. The press and public were euphoric. "This novel makes me look like an amateur," poet Maurice Chappaz freely admitted.

A friendship falls apart

Grobéty's novel is the story of a friendship between Aude, a sensitive 18-year-old girl, and an older woman called Gabrielle. Told from Aude's perspective, it details how uncomprehending, strait-laced attitudes in society condemn the friendship to failure, despite the wisdom that the older Gabrielle could have given her younger ally in how to lead her life – a life that can otherwise only find fulfilment in death, as the title of the book implies. The novel's attraction lies less in its plot and more in one person's pushback against society's unrealistic norms and conventions – a rebellion that reaches a crescendo but ultimately ends in capitulation. When Aude's mother complains that her daughter has a rebellious nature, the teenager counters: "Do I? Good! I am sick of the whispering, the wretched bourgeois petty-mindedness, the Saturday errands, the football on television, the lovely Strauss concertos. I want to be able to breathe!"

Female stories

It was another five years until Grobéty – now a wife, a mother of three daughters, and a political activist – published her second novel. Its title "Zéro positif" refers to the blood type that Laurence, 28 and unhappily married, wants to avoid passing on to any fu-

"Today, 17 February,
I would like to sink into
the snow. I want to lie
on the road and stay
there. Melt and disap-
pear. Cold and insolu-
ble. Mixed into the
asphalt.

I want to leave an
imprint on my way into
the centre of the blis-
teringly hot iron. To find
you, my burn mark!"

Excerpt from the novel "Pour mourir en février",
by Anne-Lise Grobéty

ture child. Laurence escapes from her husband. Following an unedifying extra-marital fling in Amsterdam, she realises, however, that what she was running away from was less her marriage and more her alcoholism. She actually wants to have a child after all. Female stories – and not exclusively ones with feminist overtones – dominated the 12 remaining novels and narratives that Anne-Lise Grobéty published in addition to countless critiques and columns before her early death on 5 October 2010. The surreal, grotesque and often puzzling nature of her works was reminiscent of the avant-garde nouveau roman (New Novel) movement of the mid-20th century. However: "I write not only with my brain but with all my senses," she once remarked. "With my eyes and my ears." Her novel "La Corde de mi" (The C string), 2006, provides the most emphatic example – not only through its sensitive description of the countryside between Neuchâtel and La Chaux-de-Fonds, but, above all, in the manner in which the protagonist, a daughter in the last weeks of her life, finally gets to meet her long-lost father, learns of his tragic life, and takes with her the memory of a person who loved music with all their heart and soul.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: "Pour mourir en février" is available from Payot, Lausanne. The German translation by Andreas Grosz, "Um an einem Februar zu sterben" (2016), is available from Edition pudelundpinscher, 6682 Linescio.

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Anne-Lise Grobéty
(1949–2010).
Photo: Yvonne Böhler