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Trinidad and Aargau



MARTIN R. DEAN:
«Tabak und Schokolade»
Novel. Atlantis Verlag,
Zurich 2024. 224 pages.
CHF 30.
Also available as an
e-book.

Basel-based author Martin R. Dean (born in 1955) has Swiss-Trinidadian roots. His 2003 novel “Meine Väter” (My fathers) deals with the West Indian past of both his father and stepfather. In “Tabak und Schokolade” (Tobacco and chocolate), Dean now focuses on his Swiss mother Erna, who, like Dean, was born in the canton of Aargau. Erna met Ralph, the writer’s father, in London at the age of 18. Ralph came from Trinidad. Erna and Ralph moved to the Caribbean island following Martin’s birth. But domestic bliss proved short-lived. Mother and son returned to Switzerland in 1960. A young Trinidadian doctor – Dean’s stepfather – soon joined them in Switzerland.

“Tabak und Schokolade” is an autobiographical work that sees Dean explore three distinct elements in his personal jigsaw: his mother, his childhood, and the origins and history of his family. With old black-and-white photos providing him with clues about those years in Trinidad, Dean visits the island himself to discover a sizeable family tree. The author grew up in Aargau – in an era when Switzerland became an increasingly reluctant host of Italian guest workers.

Dean not only uncovers big family trees on both sides of the Atlantic, but also comes across varied colonial connections that heavily influenced his own life. Dean’s grandmother immigrated to Switzerland from Rügen in Germany. She strove to maintain medium-class decorum in Aargau, keeping well away from the Italian migrants who worked in the local cigar factories. Meanwhile, Dean learns that his father Ralph was the offspring of two rival families in Trinidad – the Sinanans and the Ramkeesoons. Ralph’s ancestors were originally from India and came to Trinidad to work on the plantations. Although Trinidad’s ethnic Indian population has long been part of the island’s fabric, Dean senses that the stigma of colonialism remains below the surface. He puts the violence perpetrated by his biological father down to being that of a “person who had no moral compass in a society robbed of its traditions”.

Dean has always been particularly alert to racial discrimination and xenophobia, which he himself experienced as the child of a black father. “Tabak und Schokolade” is a lucid and cleverly crafted personal account of his own family experience within the colonial paradigm.

BEAT MAZENAUER

www.mrdean.ch

New versions of his own songs



BLIGG:
“Tavolata”
2024

This time last year, Bligg seemed to be talking an awful lot about growing old and being a dad. He said his priorities had changed. Withdrawing from the limelight, he had apparently developed a taste for travel – and for kicking back on the sofa. When the “Tradition” album dropped, it was rumoured that it was probably the final LP of the Zurich rapper’s long career. But no sooner had the dust settled than Bligg’s next record was out this autumn. And this one is different. On “Tavolata”, the rapper looks back on his own music, presenting a body of work that spans over two decades. But “Tavolata” is not your usual best-of album. All the tracks are new versions of his old songs.

Bligg has covered his hits in collaboration with folk music combo Helen Maier & The Folks. Favourites like “Rosalie”, “Musigg i dä Schwiiz” and “Legändä & Heldä” have now been put to accordion, keyboard and strings. They suddenly sound like tunes from Ireland, Scandinavia or the Balkans.

“Weisch no euses erschte Mol Sex zu Barry White?” [“Remember the first time we made out to Barry White?”] Bligg sings raspily in his remake of the 2008 song “Signal”, sipping a glass of red wine in the video. Acoustic instruments give a tastefully stripped down, direct feel to the composition. Bligg’s reworking of 2001 dance rap single “Alles scho mal ghört” [Heard it all before] features a drum machine but is again inspired by folk music. The same applies to the erstwhile hip-hop of “Mosaik” with unplugged sound replacing the airy keyboard arrangements of the original. Violins, mandolins, double bass, and more violins – this is the essence of “Tavolata”.

Bligg’s old hits work really well as folk songs, you have to give the 48-year-old vocalist that. But it is probably not the most original album. It would be more interesting to know whether Bligg has now hung up his microphone for good. As a playful retrospective, “Tavolata” is actually a fitting way to round off an impressive career and say farewell.

MARKO LEHTINEN

www.bligg.ch