12 SWISS BOOKS

RECOMMENDED FOR TRANSLATION

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12 SWISS BOOKS

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“12 Swiss Books” – twelve special books by contemporary Swiss authors, which we recommend for translation. In 2013, for the second year, the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia has selected those books we feel are particularly worthy of being translated and for which we are prepared to offer financial support.

It’s well known that Switzerland is a land where languages meet and mix: four regions, four languages; German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romance. And three of the four are just a small part of much widespread languages and cultures. So we Swiss exist ‘on the fringes and frontiers’ – and this frontier mentality also shapes our literature.

With our choice of “12 Swiss Books” and our quest to discover new horizons, we would like to invite you, the publishers, editors and translators, to form your own impressions of our authors. We believe the diversity of the writing will surprise you.

You will find here books in all four languages. It won’t surprise you that some of them have to do with mountains! We Swiss welcome people from all over the world, who come just to climb and walk in our mountains.

In his essay *Hunting Ibex in the Cavrein*, Leo Tuor, a writer from the Rhaeto-Romanic region in the Swiss canton of Graubünden, leads us through the wild Bündner Alps, where they hunt the ibex living in the remotest reaches of the mountains. By contrast, Roman Graf, in *Downfall*, sends the hero and his girlfriend on a mountain trek, which turns out to be unexpectedly challenging and tests their love to its limits.

The unexpected can also happen to those who leave Switzerland. In Felix Phillip Ingold’s novel *Another Life for John Potocki*, the hero’s adventures seem to range at will across the world, knowing no frontiers; whilst Carole Allamand’s first book *The Grizzly Bear’s Pen* is a journey across the whole of North America. Alex Capus, in *The Forger, the Spy and the Bomb-Maker* casts his three characters on a journey through the turbulent history of the last century; Ralph Dutli, on the other hand, relates the last days of the legendary painter Chaim Soutine as he travels clandestinely from the Loire Valley to Paris, in *Soutine’s Last Journey*.

But even the most ordinary of circumstances can produce high drama, as Nicolas Couchevin reveals in his novel *The Mensch Family*. The Mensches are, at the outset, just a normal family; but the very opposite
turns out to be the case! Tommaso Soldini is a writer from the Italian canton of Ticino: in *One by One*, a group of young people find themselves out of their usual surroundings, and in several cases, out of their depth, when they travel to Morocco. Changed circumstances are also the subject of Jonas Lüscher’s novella, *The Barbarians’ Spring*. As a sudden financial crisis overwhelms them, a party of supposedly well-mannered revellers sheds the veneer of civilisation and turns into a pack of predators. Pascale Kramer’s novel *Gloria* is set on the fringes of society, whilst Lisa Elsässer’s collection of short stories, *Fire is a Strange Thing*, illuminates those everyday events, which change people’s lives forever. Last but by no means least, Michael Fehr has written *On the Verge of Salvation* with the subtitle *Seventeen Sentences*, and this unusual work does indeed only contain seventeen sentences, long sentences, composed in the manner of a musical theme and variations.

So, here are twelve newly published books, books which we believe in and are excited by; we hope our enthusiasm will also inspire you. Pro Helvetia can support your interest and your work. Happy reading!

It’s all here, to be discovered in the following pages!

Angelika Salvisberg (Pro Helvetia, Head of Literature & Society Division)
Rosie Goldsmith (Journalist & Specialist in international literature, London)
Martin Zingg (Literary Critic, Basel)
On August 6th, 1943, Chaim Soutine is travelling from Chinon, on the river Loire, to occupied Paris, hidden in a hearse. Soutine, the Jewish-Belorussian painter and contemporary of Chagall, Modigliani and Picasso, is gravely ill. He urgently needs an operation for a stomach ulcer, but the journey is taking much too long, 24 hours, because of the need to make detours round German army checkpoints. A blizzard of intense and often bizarre images flash before the eyes of the persecuted artist in his morphine-induced delirium...sometimes historical, sometimes fictional, these episodes tell the story of Soutine’s childhood in Smilovichy, near Minsk; his first steps as a painter in Vilnius; and his unshakeable determination to go to Paris, the centre of the art world. The novel portrays his improbable friendship with Modigliani, his sudden success as an artist and the end of his golden years in Paris. But Soutine – who believes in the power of milk as his only medicine – is journeying through a ‘white paradise’, at once both a clinic and a prison, in which he experiences a series of remarkable meetings and events. A mysterious ‘god in a white cloak’ declares him cured, but forbids him ever again to paint. For an artist, though, a paradise without painting is without value. And so he starts secretly to paint – and is ready to pay whatever the price may be. Soutine’s Last Journey is a novel about childhood, illness and art, about the pain of exile in Paris, the powerlessness of the written word and the overwhelming power of imagery.
If, after reading this passionate novel, we look at Soutine’s paintings, we realise how precisely, yet subtly and imaginatively Dutil understands their secrets.” FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG
When Michel receives a phone call from Gloria, asking him to go and see her, he knows he should say ‘no’: he shouldn’t go. Gloria belongs to his past, he was involved with her years before. He knew her at that time in his life, when he was still married and was working in an advice centre that she occasionally visited, when she was hanging out on the streets. In the meantime, Michel has been sacked by the advice centre: they said at first it was because he was being too sympathetic to clients; then he was accused of having inappropriate relationships with children. In spite of this, Michel goes to see Gloria, who is now living with her three year-old daughter. Gloria is still the childish woman he knew back then: pigheaded and intellectually lazy. But she has matured in the intervening years. So will she thank him for the support he gave her all that time ago? Her attitude towards her daughter, Naïs, very soon begins to worry Michel. He had advised her to keep her child, though her own adoptive parents would have preferred an abortion. And so, within a few months, they become involved again in the same way as before, in the same complicated relationship they had in former times: who is helping whom? Which of them is really reliant on the other? Who has the dominant role?

As always in Pascale Kramer’s books, children are central to the story. They shed light on so many issues: the cracks and rifts of life. In Gloria, Pascale Kramer deals with the ambivalent feelings that mark out human relationships.

Pascale Kramer was born in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1961 and now lives in Paris. She has so far published nine novels, amongst them Les Vivants (The Living, Calmann-Lévy, 2000), L’implacable brutalité du réveil (The Relentless Brutality of Awakening, Mercure de France, 2005), and, more recently, Un homme ébranlé (A Man Shaken, Mercure de France 2011).

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PHOTO David Ignaszewski / Koboy © Flammarion
It was still early for a Sunday. The snow had stopped falling. Along the edges of the pavement, water began eating away at the thin dusting that had fallen during the night. A woman in an old anorak carrying two plaid plastic bags left outlines of her bare feet where they overflowed her silver colored babouche slippers. Michel parked at the corner of the boulevard and watched her walk off as he listened to the end of the news. He tried to slip on his gloves, soaked in the previous day's rain and now as stiff as two shells of papier-mâché, then put them back down. A refuse truck approached from behind, spreading a thick sludge of snow and gravel. Michel waited for it to pass before climbing out of his car.

Both sides of the street were lined with similar buildings, constructed in a U around a concrete esplanade decorated with a few flowerbeds and enclosed by a large gate. They weren't so bad with white oriel windows encased in brick. Michel knew it was a mistake to come but didn't dare turn back, suspecting Gloria might have already seen him. Her phone call had revived so much buried suffering. Still, he distinctly remembered giving her his number. It had been winter then, too, on the day he left the shelter from which he'd been fired after working for years without a single incident. Naïs was only a few weeks old; Gloria had brought her in late that morning. He was clearing his desk of personal items, among them a photo collage he'd received three months earlier as a gift for his fiftieth birthday. Gloria had laughed at his surprise when she appeared in the doorway. Her body had lost none of its miraculous roundness. She had wrapped Naïs in a white shawl from which her small, olive face and sleep-drenched, half-closed eyes barely emerged. Michel had, in a fashion, just compromised the basic legitimacy of his coming into contact with the women at the shelter. He'd been disconcerted by the fact that the scandal hadn't yet shaken Gloria's confidence in him. He had consciously not informed her of the charges against him. He even wondered for a long time after if she had known or understood that day that he was leaving.

“Gloria is a novel for today, a novel which encompasses more than one world (…).” LE TEMPS
ANOTHER LIFE FOR JOHN POTOCKI

NOCH EIN LEBEN FÜR JOHN POTOCKI

GENRE Novel, LANGUAGE German

“Why not a wrecked landing? Why not a ship that runs aground, founders and sinks? A bit of adventure, a bit of romance, a classic shipwreck!”

“No matter where he’s coming from, because he has all the necessary papers, Potocki can go as he pleases, without let or hindrance: for example, he can sail into any one of the Maghreb ports that are so heavily guarded by the local military or merchant marine...go ashore, find quarters, change money, plan his next voyage, buy provisions, sign on porters and scouts and so forth.” Potocki could do it all. Potocki?

Jan Nepomucem Count Potocki (1761 – 1815) was considered during his lifetime to be one of the richest men in Europe. He travelled the world, and left behind a milestone of European literary history, his book The Saragossa Manuscript. In Another Life for John Potocki, Felix Philipp Ingold follows the trail of this legendary Polish nobleman and playfully, fancifully, effortlessly, weaves in biographical detail. Malta, London, Africa, Asia, St Petersburg; encounters with chess-automata, a talking ape, glittering parties, wherever he goes...and then the end of his life, about which there are many conflicting accounts. However it happened, it was a life-story made to be told.

Ingold creates a fascinating and wide-ranging drama from the many episodes of Potocki’s ‘real’ life, and draws on countless historical and fictional characters to create the cast of his ‘other’ life. This story-biography is based partly on Ingold’s own fantasies and experiences, but also on his independent research, typical of his approach to all the characters he writes about.

In a Notch another life for John Potocki

PUBLISHER Matthes & Seitz Verlag, Berlin
PUBLICATION DATE 2013
PAGES 630
ISBN 978-3-88221-075-0
TRANSLATION RIGHTS Richard Stoiber
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FELIX PHILIPP INGOLD lives and works as a writer, journalist and translator in Zürich and in Romainmôtier, in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. He was nominated for the Swiss Book Prize for his novel Alias oder das wahre Leben (Alias or the True Life, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2011), for which he won the Schiller Prize 2012, awarded by the Swiss Schiller Foundation.

PHOTO © privat
After the shipwreck, when the rolling waves carried me into the shallow coastal waters, I saw a gigantic formless thing lying far away on the beach… a giant animal, like a prehistoric whale or elephant – a royal-blue, phosphorescent mountain of flesh, with a dozen tiny people busying themselves about it, trying to satisfy their curiosity or their hunger.

One and all raised their machetes, axes, and spears of all kinds into position against the mighty body, as ferociously as if it were alive… a threat to human civilization, or (since the concept of civilization did not exist at that time) something even worse, a threat to us all, to the human race as such. As the waves brought me closer, and then as I waded and crawled to the sandy beach, I could more and more clearly hear their screams, though without being able to tell the difference between

Ah!
Arrgh!
Aiiii!

Was it a scene of triumph or a sacrifice? Collective incantation or exorcism?

The people gradually grew to life-size and only when they noticed me from the shore did they stop what they were doing with the mountainous corpse and rush with their weapons at me. The idea that they might want to save me seemed, at that moment in my life story, less plausible than that they saw me as an enemy invader, to be kept away from the shore at all costs.

They ran toward me, shrieking… they threw themselves from dry land into the shallow surf, letting their sticks and spears and rakes fall to the ground or throwing them aside, and every one of their leaps made a splash of water spray up in all directions. One after another they rushed toward me, and together they lifted me up into the dusky light as though welcoming back a prodigal son… as though they had to honour a victorious hero.

The fierce, almost violent good-will of these sinister people shocked me more than it would have if they had done what I had expected: fought me off as an enemy invader, driven me back into the sea. Man is what others see him as, I thought to myself, and perhaps I could even hope it was true. If only the others can be partial enough toward me and act doggedly enough in my case! These others, I still think today, is never not an other person.
HUNTING IBEX IN THE CAVREIN

CATSCHA SIL CAPRICORN EN CAVREIN

GENRE Essay, LANGUAGE Rhaeto-Romance

“Hunting is like life itself. It’s hardly begun when it’s over.”

LEO TUOR was born in 1959 in Rabius in the Swiss canton of Graubünden (Grisons). He writes in Rhaeto-Romance, a language only spoken by a few tens of thousands of people in the more remote parts of Switzerland. His main work is the Sursilvan Trilogy (Sursilvan is the Rhaeto-Romance variant spoken in the Surselva area straddling the Italian-Swiss border): Giacumbert Nau (1988), Onna Maria Tumera (2002), and Settembrini (2006).

PHOTO © Yvonne Boehler

“If you want to know everything, every last detail, about a valley, everything about a mountain and its slopes, its rocks, its scree, outcrops and peaks, its ravines, chasms and crannies, then you should go hunting ibex in the high Alps.”

Hunting ibex is regarded as the supreme speciality of the Bündner Oberland, the high Alps of the canton of Graubünden; and especially so – because it’s so demanding – in the Val Cavrein, a wild side valley off the Val Russein. In this essay, the Rhaeto-Romance writer Leo Tuor leads us into a world where vigilance and patience are the watchwords...a world where only one thing is certain: that man, the hunter, must wait and wait. And wait, until – maybe – an ibex comes by. And wait, until the moment arrives when he has the animal in his sights. Tuor is a passionate reader of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: he even reads philosophy when he’s out hunting and always keeps a copy of Wittgenstein’s legendary work Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus with him...for even hunters encounter things, which are hard to understand and difficult to put into words without help and explanation. And the very process of waiting creates insights, which are otherwise hard to come by. Leo Tuor tells us how hunting is one means to understanding our fellow men. And that a hunter must also be a storyteller. Wittgenstein said: “If a lion could speak, we couldn’t understand him.” Neither could we understand the ibex, if he could speak, writes Tuor. But his essay does give us some idea how a hunter feels, as he moves in on the King of the Alps, the ibex.

TITLE Catscha sil capricorn en Cavrein
PUBLISHER Chasa Editura Rumantscha, Chur
PUBLICATION DATE 2010
PAGES 88
ISBN 978-3-905956-02-3
TRANSLATION RIGHTS Leo Tuor,
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Rhaeto-Romanic original (p. 53-54)


ed Augustin Biscuolm, ils umens ch’el veva mess sin via e tarmess sil cuolm: Nächst dem Fußglätscher westlich stiegen sie über die Mitte der Felsen des Bergs hinauf, lenkten zur Linken, um dessen westlichen beschneiten stiegen sie über die Mitte der Felsen des Bergs hinauf, e tarmess sil cuolm:

Jeu bettel butteglia, victualias e restis, rasai ora entourn la margrita, puspei ei sacados e fetsch vinavon dad ir engiu ella crapperla, nua ch’i li padher ha giu glatscher suttapes. Cul fest diagonal ella costa dil cuolm va ei a scursalond tut agradgiu, scultchanond calzers, dalla morena vi, dil garver neu, nezegiond ora mintga toc neiv per saver ir en palas e schanegiar la schanuglia.


HUNtiNG iBeX iN tHe cavREiN led tuor
Excerpt translated from German into English by Vincent Kling

Having ascended to the ridge under the ‘camel-dogs’, I can look down onto the other side: four hundred metres directly below the Val Pintga. So you can forget making your way around the mountain to shoot ibex. Among the rocks – 2700 metres up – an alpine daisy is looking at me. I sit down beside it, hunker down, unwrap some food and in this unwelcoming wind eat whatever it is. It was on just about this spot, above several glaciers, and in all likelihood also slightly above the dogs’ heads, that Father Spescha stood on September 1, 1824, with tears in his eyes, as he observed through his binoculars the Tödi scaled for the first time, by Placi Curschellas and Augustin Biscuolm, the two men he’d sent out onto the mountain: Next to the glacier at the foot of the mountain the men climbed upward in a westerly direction over the middle of the mountain boulders, then turned left so as to make their way to the opposite side, covered with snow from the west; in this way they reached the peak at 11 o’clock.

I toss back into my pack the bottle, the food and the clothes that were spread out all around the alpine daisy and make haste to climb back down into the stone desert where the reverend father still had the glacier under his feet. With my alpenstock diagonal to the flank I can glide downwards at a steep slope, which is pretty hard on my boots as I skid here and there over moraines and beds of scree and turn every patch of snow to use by sliding across it so I can spare my knees.

Should I give up or try going straight up and going around the Cuolm Tgietschen from the left side? If I don’t run across any animals I’ll at least know the terrain for some other time. Good. Straight ahead for ten minutes, then climb the boulders up to the snow squall. Along a few rock strips on all fours, the weapon, the alpenstock between my legs constantly in the way. Now it’s starting to snow really hard. Damn, I won’t be able to turn back if the snow settles in. I climb upwards along the mountain shoulder, then comes a hollow with large rocks. Here is where I’ll meet "Tutankhamun"-ibex the day after tomorrow. After the scree bed I might be able to make my way far enough to look out onto the plateau, and if I’m lucky, they’ll be there grazing. From that point I ought to be able to make my way down into the Val Gronda if I just pretty much follow a beeline to the Alpine hut at Russein Sura. Suddenly I’m on a shoulder behind a rock, on the other side of the plateau. I keep my head out forward. Snow squall in my nose, snow squall on my neck. Snowflakes are whirling upwards and downwards. All that’s missing is the Christmas tree. The plateau is swept clean.

“**If you have the courage to go into these bleak valleys, then go. You will meet new people and fantastic animals.”**
Preising is a Swiss factory owner, in his mid-50s and somewhat lazy. He’s on a business trip, staying in a luxurious oasis hotel in Tunisia, the ‘Thousand and One Nights Resort’, where he watches the lavish preparations for a wedding. Rich young Englishmen from London’s financial sector have invited friends and family to a huge, riotous celebration. “Young people in their late 20s and early 30s...noisy and self-confident...slim and in the peak of condition.” But even as this extravaganza is taking place, there are signs of a growing economic crisis, which will end in catastrophe. Sterling collapses, shortly afterwards the UK goes bankrupt, with unforeseeable consequences, which also affect Tunisia. The morning after the luxury wedding, all their credit cards are cancelled and the horde of pampered hotel guests suddenly becomes a leper colony. They can’t have breakfast, they can’t even take a shower. The elegant resort turns into a battlefield. Even Preising isn’t spared. As a Swiss citizen, he escapes the worst effects of the developing financial crisis; but he has to witness just how thin is the veneer of civilisation. He learns his own personal lesson in globalisation, because his company has a project running in Tunisia. Preising ends up in a clinic; “People” he declares, “People turn into animals when it comes to losing their life-savings.”
Die Wüste an sich ist vielleicht die Landschaft, die mir am meisten entspricht. Die Leere, die Weite, die schnurgerade Straße, auf der wir dahinschossen. Sowohl die hügelige Hinterland hinter uns ließen und vor uns die ersten Ausläufer der mächtigen Sandwüste liegen hatten, ließ auch ich alles hinter mir, den Lärm der Stadt, die unablässig schmeichelnden Reden Slim Malouchs, das immer sorgenvolle Gesicht Prodanovics.

Jäh rissen mich die toten Kamele aus meiner kontemplativen Betrachtung der vorbeiziehenden Dünen. Die Szenerie, die sich uns keine dreißig Meter entfernt bot, schien uns allen für einen Moment die Sprache zu verschlagen und veranlasste unseren Fahrer, scharf abzubremsen und den Wagen zum Stehen zu bringen. Ein silbernes Monstrum von einem Reisebus mit Seitenspiegeln, die wie Elefantenohren beidseitig auf die Fahrbahn hinausragten, stand regungslos, die Wüstensonne reflektierend, auf dem dunklen Asphaltband. Zehn, vielleicht fünfzehn Kamele lagen, teils einzeln, teils zu einem wilden Haufen aus knochigen Gliedern und erschlafften Höckern um den stehenden Bus ausgebreitet. Ihre verdrehten Hälse, aus denen jede Kraft gewichen war, boten einen obszönen Anblick. Eines der Tiere hatte sich buchstäblich um die eng stehenden doppelten Räder, bei der die Kamele angeknickt hatten, ließ sich nicht aufhalten, und die Eingeweide ergossen sich auf die Straße.

Ein kleiner menschenleerer Raum hatte sich rings um die toten Kamele aus meiner kontemplativen Betrachtung der vorbeiziehenden Dünen gemalt. Die Leere, die Weite, die schnurgerade Straße, auf der wir dahinschossen. Sowohl die hügelige Hinterland hinter uns ließen und vor uns die ersten Ausläufer der mächtigen Sandwüste liegen hatten, ließ auch ich alles hinter mir, den Lärm der Stadt, die unablässig schmeichelnden Reden Slim Malouchs, das immer sorgenvolle Gesicht Prodanovics.

The desert per se is the landscape that perhaps suits me best. The emptiness, the vastness, the arrow-straight road we went racing along. As soon as we left the hilly hinterland behind us and saw the mighty desert stretch out in front of us, I too left everything behind, the noise of the town, the incessant flattery of Slim Malouch, the ever-anxious face of Prodanovic.

The dead camels roused me abruptly from my contemplation of the dunes flying past. The scene we saw less than thirty metres ahead seemed to silence us momentarily as the driver braked sharply and brought the vehicle to a stop. A silver monster of a coach stood on the black ribbon of asphalt, reflecting the desert sun, its side-mirrors sticking out into the road like elephant’s ears. Ten, maybe fifteen, camels were spread about the stationary bus, some lying there on their own, others enmeshed in a ferocious tangle of bony limbs and flaccid humps. The sight of their twisted necks with all the strength drained out of them was obscene. One of the beasts had literally wrapped itself round the twin front axle of the bus. Its unnaturally elongated neck dangled over the hot rubber of the giant tyre, tongue lolling from its mouth between bared yellow teeth, one stiff leg projecting heavenwards between the wheel and the body, its calloused foot bent at a sharp angle. The pressure had proved too much for the beast’s body, which was wedged between the two wheels, and intestines were dribbling out onto the road.

A small crowd had gathered round the lifeless bodies. The mood was more than tense. A few green-bereted soldiers in camouflage were trying to calm down five or six agitated Bedouins, several of whom sported weapons likewise. Behind the soldiers stood the driver of the coach, sweating, dressed in a blue short-sleeved shirt, a gaping wound on his forehead, and he was subjecting the camel drivers to a loud stream of invective. Behind the mirrored windows of the bus tourists’ faces were visible in outline, some pale and open-mouthed as they stared at the scene, others pressing their faces up to the panes and trying to capture on their memory cards as much of the fiasco as possible so they could provide pictures when telling the story to the folks back home.
“Fire is a strange thing” was written on a piece of paper left by a man on a woman’s kitchen table. And because it wasn’t just any woman, but of all people his wife’s friend, the charged atmosphere this creates could soon become dangerous.

It develops into a love affair…but not a simple one: “After that night, we parted at a traffic lights; it was early morning and they were just flashing on amber. Red or green would have only one meaning, I said. He laid his finger against my lips.”

A man, who was once a handsome man, is admitted to hospital as an emergency – and the night nurse, who has to care for him, is suddenly confronted with her past.

In another of Elsässer’s stories, two women land in an old people’s home: they’ve forgotten that they are mother and daughter.

Or there’s this tale: a visit to a dying aunt leads us into a world both familiar and unfamiliar: “Emma, whispered the aunt. That was my mother’s name. I only ever called her ‘mother’, the name Emma alienated me. Emma, or mother, sat down at her bedside.”

Lisa Elsässer’s short stories are taken from life – and life doesn’t always turn out successfully. Whether in a cramped room in a farmhouse in the Schächental or at a desk down on the plains, whether in a cemetery or in Italy, ghosts and hidden dangers lurk. And these force out memories, drag the unsaid and the repressed into the light. Lisa Elsässer’s blunt and individualistic prose crystallises the two great themes of literature: life and death.

LISA ELSÄSSER was born in 1951 in Bürglen in the Swiss canton of Uri. She has trained in various professions, amongst others as a librarian and a bookseller. She has achieved a number of distinctions in her literary work; her most recent publications are Die Finten der Liebe (Love’s Deceptions, short stories, 2011) and Da war doch was (There Really Was Something There, poems, 2013).

PHOTO © Helen Bauer-Rigendinger


Anders konnte ich mir das Fehlen eines von ihm an mich geschriebenen Liebesbriefs nicht erklären. Wenigstens eine Reaktion, ein Zeichen, dass er ihn erhalten hatte, erwartete ich.

Meine Liebe glühte am Straßenrand. Mittags, auf dem langen Schulweg, mit dem Fahrrad unterwegs, stieg ich kurz vor der Steigung der Straße ab und wartete auf meine Freundin, die schon von der flachen Straße überfordert war und früher als ich das Fahrrad schob.

Josef war mit dem Moped unterwegs. Das Warten auf die Freundin war mir die liebste Zeit, denn regelmäßig fuhr Josef um diese Zeit auf seinem Moped an mir vorbei, lachte, hob seine Hand zum Gruß. Manchmal machte er einen kurzen Schlenker auf mich zu, und es kam mir vor wie ein flüchtiger Kuss, der an meiner Wange vorbeirauschte. Ich war einen Tag lang glücklich, beseelt von seinem Schlenker, seinem Lachen, seinem Gruß, und wusste, dass sich das jeden Tag, bis zu den Sommerferien, wiederholen würde.


“Is my dream really my own dream? Or am I dreaming only what others want me to dream?”
GLITTERING PRIZES

THE GLITTERING JUDGE: AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM PARKS
Tim Parks is a renowned British author and translator. He’s lived for 3 decades in Italy but was in London earlier this year as a judge of the Man Booker International Prize for Fiction. This major prize is awarded every 2 years to a living ‘foreign writer’ writing in, or translated into, English. The 2013 winner was Lydia Davis from the US but the Swiss novelist Peter Stamm was shortlisted – a first for Switzerland. In London Tim Parks spoke with Rosie Goldsmith.

ROSIE GOLDSMITH Describe the MBIP judging experience.
Tim PARKS Having 5 judges with English as their mother-tongue reading international fiction was a potential problem, but I think we did a wonderful job choosing the final 10 from over 50 writers from vastly different cultures. The winner Lydia Davis is very, very extraordinary. She has reinvented what it means to write short pieces. Yes, she’s American and writes in English, but it’s hard to get consensus on translated books because they always come from ‘somewhere else’, intersecting with our culture in a way we have to work at. If a book’s written first in English, then the material gets inside us more quickly. It was simply less likely that a translated book would win.

RG What does a Prize like this tell us about the status of international literature?
TP We live in interesting times. Everything is changing. Very few writers today are public figures or deeply engaged in society. If you think back to Grass, Böll and Sartre, they were intimately engaged in a fierce local and national debate, and that gave their writing an intensity. That is pretty much over now. Today the only social standing a writer has is how many copies he sells or if he wins prizes. We are losing out as a result because we are losing this intensity of engagement with language and society. Why does a book have to sell a million copies to be a great book? If somebody writes a wonderful book that really means something to a community, let it be so. Why do we constantly have to imagine that ‘the good’ is always universal? Or has to be a commercial success? I firmly believe there are wonderful pieces of writing which don’t travel. However, we have moved from a period of strong national literatures, where only major works or obviously commercial works were translated, to today where pretty much anything is up for translation. An international literature is being constructed at the expense of a national literature tradition. It is actually changing the way people are writing in their different countries. Countries which had a strong literary tradition are still producing ambitious writers but have no market, or such a small market, or a market so completely invaded by international fiction that the notion of being a writer, writing for a community, becomes meaningless.

RG This prize is ambitious – it covers an author’s whole body of work and a huge global sweep of cultures – including Switzerland!
TP We all recognized that Peter Stamm is a very serious author. His books are very quiet and austere, not located in any particular place.
They are not necessarily very ‘Swiss’. He ploughs a small territory and does that perfectly. The novel Seven Years is fantastic, a fascinating take on the split between mind and body, the middle-class career path and a sort of animal sexuality. It’s about fear - not having the right job, social status - and a more atavistic fear of “not having somebody next to me who would die for me”. On a Day Like This is even more extraordinary: again it’s about managing the fear of the humdrum. Stamm does not feel the need for a major plot or a final showdown.

RG Peter Stamm has a wonderful translator, Michael Hofmann. And like most of us, you are reading the translation.

TP Stamm is translatable in a way that many other writers who put more into their texts are not. Beckett started writing in French because it forced him to be simple. Stamm’s native language is a Swiss dialect but he writes in German, which is a literary construct for him. This helps him to be lean. One of the things clearly happening in this period of globalization is that we are getting a lot more writers writing in very lean styles.

RG One theory I’ve heard is that some writers are deliberately writing books that are easier to translate, in a more ‘global’ style.

TP It’s not a theory; it’s happening. Kazuo Ishiguro already said in the 80s: “I write my books in that style because I feel it’s very translatable.” This is also a problem when judging an international prize. Remember we are judging it in English, and not pretending – like the Nobel Prize – that we are taking in all the languages of the whole world. This means we are only considering books that already exist in the international space. Maybe there are wonderful books in China as yet un-translated, but we are not looking at them. So in this creation of an international tradition today writers are influencing each other across countries more immediately than in the past but at the expense of the local situation.

RG If we focus specifically on translation into English, are the US and UK markets very different?

TP They operate a lot together, frankly, because one way of paying for the translation is to get a co-edition with an English or American publisher. The overlap is huge. If a German author is published in the USA he will probably be published in the UK. But a lot less gets translated in the UK and US than in Europe. In Italy, translations amount to about 50% of titles, but probably 70% of sales. How good is that for the national literature? I don’t know. It depends how much is being read. And what. A lot of translated literature is detective fiction and 90% of people stay reading detective novels. It is not a gateway to more translated literature.

RG The issue is how little the English market is reading and publishing in translation. Today it’s still only about 4.5 percent of all fiction.

TP Let’s get this clear and this is much more interesting than the usual shrill protests: the UK publishes an extravagant number of titles, many more than the USA. Percentages may be small but the markets are big. We are talking about thousands of titles - certainly more foreign literature than anybody could read in any year. So is it too little? I don’t think so. Whether they are getting the right books, is another question. Good authors are published and hardly read at all. Peter Stamm is fortunate to come from a small country, where he stood out fairly rapidly. It is much more difficult to stand out in the UK or US.

PHOTO © Basso Cannarsa

Was a bird a bird?

DOROTHEE ELMIGER, AUTHOR

In January of this year, when I boarded the plane that first left Switzerland and then flew ever eastwards, over Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan hours later, and finally, approaching from the dark Arabian Sea, landed in brightly lit Mumbai, my text had long since arrived in the country, in India; it had gone on ahead of me. What happened to a text when it crossed borders, when it left the continent? Where did it end up? I stepped out of the airport building, hearing and seeing everything predicted to me all at once, the air a warm fug around my head. What meaning did the words have here? What did it mean to speak English in this country, to read a book in English? Was a bird a bird, what happened to the word Fluss, which was present on every page of my book, in its translation – what was it here, a river? (A ship crossed the Hooghly River; on it, pilgrims arrived and commuters left the city; the old professor in Hyderabad said they tell a story here too of a vanished river, like in my book. Sarasvati, I noted down. Using magnets on long strings, our companion told us, the children fish coins out of the river.) What, then, had my text announced here in my absence about the rivers, about the horse (driving past the Maidan, the large, empty field in the middle of Kolkata, I saw a white horse standing there, like in my book), about the fire in the tunnels (outside the building where the publishing house was, a small fire burned by the wayside, as indeed little piles of rubbish smouldered all over the city). Into what space had the text entered? As I moved across India, the text appeared occasionally in its new form and language, with its new tone: in Kolkata, a librarian took me aside and showed me the shelf where it stood. A young woman in New Delhi opened up her bag with a conspiratorial look to show me the book, and on Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Road in Kolkata, I found a whole pile of them. Every individual book was not a copy but a continuation of the text
THE GLITTERING WRITER: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER STAMM

Peter Stamm is one of Switzerland’s most successful writers. Born 50 years ago, he’s published journalism, novels, short stories and radio dramas. Renowned for his spare prose and sharp psychological insight, Stamm has won many prizes both at home and abroad. He writes in German but is widely translated. His complete works in English were shortlisted for the prestigious Man Booker International Prize For Fiction 2013. Rosie Goldsmith met Peter Stamm in London.

ROSIE GOLDSMITH You are the first Swiss writer to be shortlisted for the Man Booker International Fiction Prize: how significant is that?

PETER STAMM It’s significant for English readers. It takes longer for translated literature to be recognized in Britain. It’s so closed in many ways culturally. Britain is not so interested in other countries. It seems to prefer what it produces itself. When I lived in London for half a year I had a feeling that nothing was happening anywhere else in the world.

RG Is it better in the USA?

PS That’s hard to say. I have 2 different editors, 2 different publishers, one here, one there. I’m very lucky as they are not typically American or English. But I think the average publisher in the US and UK is not very interested in foreign literature. It’s mostly small specialist houses.

RG How important is it for you to be translated into English?

PS I don’t sell many books in the UK or US but it is really important for me to have those sales, as literature is about exchange. You miss something if you don’t read us. Literature is a kind of communication. If you stop communicating you cut yourself off from a broader outlook.

RG Your work has been translated by one of the greatest translators from German into English, Michael Hofmann. How closely do you work with him?

PS Not that closely. He’s such a great translator that he has few questions. I’m friends with him, he is a wonderful person, but he doesn’t need me. We each have our own language. With my first book I made the mistake of suggesting lots of things to him. He just ignored them! It was the perfect way to tell me: “look, this is my job, that’s yours.” I always wanted him to translate all my books because readers become familiar with that voice. In a foreign market the translator is like an actor’s voiceover in a synchronized film. When they work well together, why change that voice?

RG What are the main obstacles for foreign writers in the UK and US market?

PS In the US and UK it’s not just about the books but the whole culture around the books. You do interviews, you go on TV and so on. Writers are known because they are present in the media. And that’s quite difficult for a foreign author. You don’t have time to travel abroad all the time to do publicity. Or you don’t speak the language.

I had once written, now resting in the hands of the young woman, the librarian, the old woman who spoke of the rivers.

Translated by Katy Derbyshire.

DOROTHEE ELMIGER was born in 1985 and is a freelance writer, living in Switzerland. She studied in Biel, Leipzig and Berlin and is the Editor of the DORF Anthology. Her first novel was published in 2010: Einladung an die Waghalsigen (Invitation to the Bold of Heart, Dumont Buchverlag), which has won many prizes and been translated into several languages.

PHOTO © Sam Tyson

Robert Walser in the English-speaking world

SUSAN BERNOFSKY, TRANSLATOR

Although Robert Walser was first translated into English as early as 1955, nearly half a century intervened before he began to be considered a canonical author in the English-speaking world. British poet Christopher Middleton was Walser’s first translator, publishing a volume of Walser’s short prose (The Walk and Other Stories, 1957) and the novel Jakob von Gunten (1969). These books introduced Walser to literary cognoscenti, as a result of which the influential cultural critic Susan Sontag discovered Walser in the early 1980s, declaring him “a truly wonderful, heart-breaking writer.” It is thanks to her that Middleton’s book of Walser’s stories, now expanded with a few new translations by several other hands, was reprinted in 1982 as Selected Stories of Robert Walser by the important New York publishing house Farrar, Straus & Giroux. The book was well-received and well-publicized; there was even a feature about Walser in Vogue. And suddenly people in the New York cultural scene knew about Walser. Walser at this point was an “author’s author,” an insider tip, which is how I first heard of him, inspiring me, as a young
RG It must help that you speak English. Surely it helps in the promotion of foreign literature?

PS Sure, but there are all kinds of creative solutions for writers if you don’t speak the language. In China they project the text onto a screen in Chinese and you read in German. Or you have an interpreter. I’ve had excellent experiences at festivals in Spain, Colombia and Mexico, for example. Perhaps they are more welcoming and creative in countries where they have less access to books and writers! Not many Swiss writers go to Colombia, so I had a really warm welcome, good audiences and discussions. In Russia too they are very interested in literature. And in Germany they are very bookish people. In Germany, or Switzerland, we read and review many books from many countries. We know world literature well. But I don’t read a book just because it’s from a specific language; it must be an interesting author.

RG What do you believe Swiss literature adds to global literature?

PS I don’t believe in national literatures. There is just the author, maybe groups of authors with the same goals, but for me they are international. So I might feel close to a Colombian or Russian author. I don’t feel part of Swiss literature specifically. Of course I’m Swiss and I write, but there is no connection between me and most Swiss writers: we all have different goals and write in different styles. I don’t write about Switzerland.

RG The Swiss, though, market you as a Swiss writer and are very proud of you.

PS It’s like Swiss cheese. Switzerland is a small country. It’s nice, I like it. Of course I am part of that country. Writers are used to promote the country but not much money is put into literature in Switzerland. Most writers, even great writers, can’t live from writing. With the other arts – painting or music – you can live if you are successful in Switzerland. Which is strange, because the Swiss say that their favourite pastime is reading, so it’s a big market. You’d think there’d be more support for Swiss literature if it’s so important to people.

RG Do you think you would be more famous if you weren’t Swiss?

PS No, it’s just different. In the US it’s more difficult to become really successful because it’s such a big country. But if you are successful in the UK and US you can be a big success! In Switzerland it’s probably easier but success is smaller, just like the country.

PHOTO © Gaby Gerster

aspiring writer, to start translating his work. My first translations (the 1990 prose collection *Masquerade and Other Stories* and *The Robber*, in 2000) were enthusiastically reviewed but sold sparingly. It wasn’t until the new millennium, when Walser was picked up by the respected New York publishing house New Directions, that sales and reception really began to take off. When New Directions published my translations of Walser’s novels *The Assistant (Der Gehülfe)* and *The Tanners (Geschwister Tanner)* in 2007 and 2009, suddenly a new reading public appeared, one made up of a younger generation of poets and writers with a new interest in great modernist literature. And when my translation of *Microscripts* came out in 2010, Walser began to enjoy something like cult status. In this age of blogging and the short form, Walser’s experimental, high-modernist short prose appeared aesthetically visionary, and now there were visual artists as well as writers obsessed with his work – particularly because *Microscripts* contained high-quality facsimiles of Walser’s fascinating miniature manuscripts. New Directions quickly published three more volumes: *A Little Ramble, The Walk, and Thirty Poems*, translated by Christopher Middleton. Middleton also translated a new collection of stories, *Speaking to the Rose*, and New York Review Books Classics published two new Walser collections, my translation of *Berlin Stories* and one translated by Damion Searls, *A Schoolboy’s Diary*. The Swiss poet Daniele Pantano also published a collection of Walser poems entitled *Oppressive Light*. Walser books can now be found as a matter of course in every well-stocked literary bookstore, he is on the must-read list for most young writers and poets, and I think it is fair to say that his audience in the English-speaking world will continue to grow.

SUSAN BERNOFSKY teaches workshops on Literary Translation at Columbia University, New York. She has translated seven books by the Swiss author Robert Walser. She is currently working on a biography of Walser.

PHOTO © Caroline White
They grew up in Switzerland in the 1980s and 1990s, in a country that was flourishing; but even so, the characters in One by One lead a life on the edge of society, a life full of unanswered questions. They all have their own worries, their little obsessions, their lives are all out of joint. They’re unhappy, or at least they’re quite convinced they’re unlucky.

Glauco, Magdalena, Davide, Maura, Esra, Martina and Simone each have their own chapter, in which they discuss their own destiny: they talk about their background, age and character, but it gradually becomes apparent that they’re all very different and nothing seems to link them together. Until one day they happen across a remarkable little text written by one Orfeo Bandini. Bandini, who’s a charlatan, worms his way into the hopeless lives of Soldini’s group and uses his pamphlet to persuade them there’s a way to a better life. And that way leads to Morocco.

In the second part of the novel, the group turns up in Morocco, seeking in the Medina at Essaouira the happiness they never dared believe they’d find. Not all of them come through the experience in the same way: some give up almost straightaway; others hang on right to the end. But they must all, against their will, wrestle with the concepts of love and beauty, hope and madness.

Soldini’s novel revolves around the major themes of life: a person’s history as a component of their identity, as a boundary and a burden; the delicate balance between despair and confidence, between world-weariness and the desire for happiness.

"Soldini’s novel is a courageous attempt to cast the narrative world not just in a single mould, but as a chorus of many, contradictory voices." NEUE ZÜRCHER ZEITUNG
ONE BY ONE TOMMASO SOLDINI
Excerpt translated by Simon Knight

But I’m not mad. I have my moments of derangement. And I’m Swiss, in the sense that I was born in the Mendrisio area, Genestrerio to be precise, opposite where the priest lived, on the other side of the street. I could see his house clearly from my window, stone-built with green shutters and a front door that had a medieval look about it. If I concentrate, I can hear the scraping of horses’ hoofs, the giggles of the ladies, the odour of their handkerchiefs rubbed over their private parts and thrown at the feet of that night’s favoured one. Of my father I have no memories. They tell me he lived with us, for a few months. In the attic there are some photographs of him as a young man, wearing flared trousers, owlish glasses, a pullover of clotted-blood colour overrun with the first layer of pus. He was smoking a pipe in the company of mother, who had him by the ankle, grasping him as if he were the forbidden apple. But for many years I didn’t know I had a father. Or rather, I thought my dad was don Enrico, whom I’d got used to calling father. In fact I also thought he was my mother’s dad, because she called him father, too. But then, when I was twelve, my maternal grandparents came from Zürich on a visit, and then I understood. It was because at home we never spoke of the grandparents. my father’s parents were dead, mother’s angry. With mother, because she had given herself to my father. In the end, my grandmother got cancer of the womb and, before snuffing it, decided to forgive her. We went out to lunch at a restaurant, the third time I had been to one, and I had spaghetti alla Ernest Hemingway, with strong caciotta cheese and swordfish. They told me mother had been a lively child, maybe excessively so. She would hide under the bed or in the wardrobe when it was time for her nap. She didn’t play with dolls. She didn’t pay attention when they read her stories. She didn’t clear the table. But she smoked cigarettes on the sly. Mary Longs filched from grandmother’s packet.

“You have something… an obsession, a vice, an ‘idée fixe’, an anxiety. This anxiety is what holds you back, yet also drives you on, to become the very thing you never wanted to be.”

UNO PER UNO TOMMASO SOLDINI
Italian original (p. 18-19)

Ma io non sono pazzo. Sono saltuariamente disturbato. E svizzero, nel senso che sono nato nel Mendrisiotto, precisamente a Genestrerio, nella casa di fronte a quella del prete, dall’altra parte della strada. La sua casa la vedeva bene dalla mia finestra, un edificio di sasso con le imposte verdi e un portone che mi sembrava uscito dal Medioevo. Se mi concentro sento lo scalpello dei cavalli, i risolini delle dame, l’odore dei loro fazzoletti passati nelle parti intime e poi gettati ai piedi del prescelto per la notte. Mio padre non lo ricorda. Mi dicono che abbia vissuto con noi, per qualche mese. In solaio ci sono alcune fotografie della sua giovinezza, portava i pantaloni a zampa d’elefante, gli occhialoni idiomiop, una maglietta color grumo di sangue appena invaso dal primo strato di pus. Si fumava una canna in compagnia della mamma, che gli teneva una mano sulla caviglia, stringendola come se fosse il pomo proibito. Ma per tanti anni non ho saputo di avere un padre. Cioè, io credevo che mio papà fosse don Enrico, che mi ero abituato a chiamare padre. Credevo anzi che fosse anche il papà della mia mamma, perché anche lei lo chiamava così. Però poi, quando avevo dodici anni, sono venuti a trovarci i nonni materni da Zurigo e allora ho capito. È che a casa mia non si parlava dei nonni. Quelli del papà erano morti, quelli della mamma arrabbiati. Con la mamma perché l’aveva data al papà. Alla fine la nonna si è beccata un cancro all’utero e allora, prima di schiattare, ha deciso di perdonarla. Siamo andati a pranzo al ristorante, era la terza volta che andavo al ristorante, ho mangiato spaghetti alla Ernesto Hemingway, cioè con caciotta stagionata e pesce spada.

Mi hanno raccontato che la mamma era una bambina molto sveglia, forse troppo. Si nascondeva sotto il letto o dentro l’armadio quando era ora di fare il riposino. Non giocava con le bambole. Non stava attenta quando le leggevano le storie. Non se ne occupava la tavola. Però si fumava le sigarette di nascosto. Mary Long rubate dal pacchetto della nonna.
A young Berlin couple set off on a tour through the Swiss mountains. André and Louise intend to climb high and seem well prepared for their adventure. Yet, the closer they get to the top, the further apart they drift. Roman Graf’s novel plays out the old theme of man’s existential encounter with mountains. Vigour and strength of will, but also the inner turmoil of his hero are reflected in his powerful but poetic writing.

André has planned this trip for months, right down to the last detail. This walking tour is a reminder of the happiest days of his childhood – for him, it’s something he must do. Moreover, he wants to show his girlfriend Louise how beautiful the mountains are. But everything threatens to fall apart. The village is shrouded in mist; persistent drizzle delays their departure. Louise seems listless, André feels thwarted. Eventually they set off, struggling with unfulfilled hopes and growing ill temper. With difficulty, they reach the end of their first stage. The next day, the good weather returns and their enthusiasm for the adventure with it. But the ascent is strenuous, and Louise’s hostility increases with every rock she climbs. Before the final ascent, she abandons her boyfriend. Hurt but proud, André climbs on alone.

In his rocky solitude, he reaches his mental and physical limits: he draws energy from his strength of will, from his childhood memories and from dream visions, which suddenly come upon him. His obsession remains to reach the mountain-top and leave everything else behind him. It will prove his undoing.

“As they walked along, André turned to Louise, who was a couple of yards behind him. ‘Do you know why the Swiss climb mountains?’ he joked. ‘It’s so they can escape from their prison.’”
NIEDERGANG ROMAN GRAF

German original (p. 131-133)

Er hörchte - nichts.

Nicht einmal leiser Wind, Vögel, das Knistern schmelzender Schnees. André drückte die Hand auf die harte Schnee-
fläche, bis sie hörbar einbrach, ein kurzes und einsames Geräusch, schon vorbei und vergessen. Er konnte noch viele solcher Geräusche produzieren, nichts vermochten sie zu ändern an der Totenstille.

Er ließ sich davon nicht beeindrucken. Er war allein, allein auf einem fernen, schneebedeckten Planeten, allein im Weltall, so allein, wie ein Mensch nur sein konnte - es gab viele Worte, die solche Zustände beschrieben - , aber er hatte einen Willen. Er verglich sich mit einer verloren ge-
vonden Ameise, die zäh und ohne Zweifel ihren Weg ging.

Vorsichtig, aber entschieden schritt er weiter. Furchtlos drang er tief in das Schneemeer hinein, hievte das eine, dann das andere Bein nach vorn, wieder das eine, das andere, lief wie eine Maschine, der Motor eines Autos, der sich in einem zu hohen Gang abmühte, stotternd, kurz
davor, abgewürgt zu werden. Das hatte nichts mehr mit einer normalen Wanderung zu tun, nichts mit der Leicht-
füßigkeit eines Marathonlaufs. André erinnerte sich an eine Fernsehsendung, die er als Kind gesehen hatte und in

bedenkt, was die würzen. Er rüttelte sich, bis er aufhörte innezuwerden. Der ursprüngliche Geschmack des Meeres,

Nachdem er etwas Schneearbeit verrichtet hatte, schloss er die Augen und versuchte, eine andere Welt vor sich zu

entfaltet, ein Ort, an dem er sich traurig fühlen konnte.

Unkompliziert, fleißig ging er weiter, Stück für Stück, ohne an

durchzugehen, noch so lange er konnte. Er schaute auf die Uhr. Über vierzig Minuten waren ver-

ngangen. Für die Bewältigung von fünf Metern hatte er je-

welche einer Minute gebraucht. So langsam bin ich gar nicht
gewesen, sagte er in Gedanken zu Louise. Das war sein
typischer Humor auf Wanderungen, den zu ertragen von

seiner Begleitung ebenfalls Humor verlangte.

Zufrieden rieb er die Hände aneinander. Das Schneemeer

war geschaffen, und er war noch bei Kräften. Aber was

türmte sich da vor ihm auf?

DOWNFALL ROMAN GRAF

Excerpt translated by Shaun Whiteside

He listened – nothing.

Not even quiet wind, birds, the crackle of melting snow.

André pressed his hand onto the hard surface of the snow

until it broke audibly, a short, lonely sound, already over

and forgotten. He could make lots of sounds like that, they
could do nothing to change the deadly silence.

He refused to be impressed. He was alone, alone on a dis-
tant, snow-covered planet, alone in the universe, as alone

as a person could possibly be - there were many words

that described such states – but he had a will. He likened
himself to a lost ant, stubbornly going its own doubt-free
way.

Carefully but resolutely he walked on. He pressed fear-
lessly deep into the sea of snow, heaved one leg forward,
then the other, again the one, the other; walked like a ma-

chine, a car engine struggling in too high a gear, sputtering

just before it stalls. It no longer had anything to do with a

normal hike, nor with the light-footedness of a marathon

race. André remembered a television programme he had

seen as a child, in which heavy, muscular men, competing
to see who was the strongest, had to overturn a number of

small cars; they ran to a car, gripped the edge of the

underside with their hands, turned the car onto its roof,
ran to the next car... That was how André took his steps,
every step a small car, at least for him – he wasn’t Hercules,
after all.

He stopped to get his breath back, took off the glacier

goggles to see the reality for a moment: singing bright-

ness! Without glacier goggles he wouldn’t have been able
to go any further after the chimney, there would have been

no point. His eyes were starting to hurt already, and all the

white confused him.

Uncomplaining, steadfast, he walked on, one piece at a
time, not thinking of giving up. And then, at last! just a few
metres away there was a slab of rock at an angle, part
of it dusted with snow. He was about to reach the shore,

of the sea of snow. He was about to reach the shore,
elation!

He looked at his watch. More than forty minutes had passed.

To travel five metres it had taken him a minute each. I was
not that slow!, he said to Louise in his thoughts. That was
typical of his sense of humour on hikes, which required a

sense of humour on the part of his companion as well.

He contentedly rubbed his hands together. He’d made it

to the chimney after all.

‘Perhaps we’d survive,’ he smiled; ‘it’s not quite vertical. We’d slide
down, rather than falling.’ ‘Stop it!’ barked Louise.”
THE GRIZZLY BEAR’S PEN

LA PLUME DE L’OURS

GENRE Novel, LANGUAGE French

“With The Grizzly Bear’s Pen, Carole Allamand has written a first novel of great humour.” LE TEMPS

CAROLE ALLAMAND was born in Geneva in 1967. She has lived for more than twenty years in the USA and has taught French Literature at New Jersey State University for the past thirteen. She has written extensively on French and American authors and has published a book about the writer Marguerite Yourcenar. La plume de l’ours (The Grizzly Bear’s Pen) is her first novel.

PHOTO © Christiane Robin

The Camille Duval case has kept the literary world busy for some fifty years now. No-one has been able to explain why this highly successful Swiss writer emigrated to the USA after the mysterious death of his wife and the unusual move by the Catholic Church in 1948 to censor one of his novels and put it on the Index of banned books. And how was it that, after a twelve years’ silence, he was suddenly once again the man of the moment? How did he manage so radically to renew his style? How did he become the literary genius, who changed the novel for all time?

Camille Duval (1901 – 1974) is one of literature’s special cases; Carole Courvoisier is a young Swiss literary expert, who wants to find the reason for this. So she sets out on the trail of the mysterious writer. But she has no idea that she’s embarking on the craziest quest ever undertaken in the history of literature. So the heroine of this biographical crime novel finds herself in a “road movie” that takes her across an unfamiliar and untamed America, in the company of Jasper Felder, a veteran of the Iraq War. Their journey goes from Manhattan to Alaska – where an encounter with a grizzly bear finally brings the longed-for truth to light.

The Grizzly Bear’s Pen is a light-hearted tale about a thrilling subject – a tale that runs from the depths of the Hudson River via the remains of the Twin Towers to the world of the Mormon University. And this humorous and satirical novel reveals at the end that research into bears and books will reveal they have a thing or two in common.

TITLE La plume de l’ours
PUBLISHER Éditions Stock, Paris
PUBLICATION DATE 2013
PAGES 420
TRANSLATION RIGHTS Marielle Kalamboussis, mkalamboussis@editions-stock.fr
The evening was mild for late November and long swathes of pink clouds frayed in the sky over Brooklyn. It was almost five o’clock when Carole Courvoisier reached the corner of Mercer Street and East 8th Street. A few heads lifted at the sound of the bell hung on the coffee shop’s door but immediately returned to their novels or laptops. Carole removed her woolen hat and surveyed the room, looking for a blonde woman reading the paper. She noticed Betty Glattner in a leather chair next to the window.

“Not at all, I just got here,” the American woman said, setting her copy of The New York Times down on a low table. (Florida was recounting ballots for the fourth time.) Carole took a notebook from her backpack and sat down across from Camille duval’s former student. Carole had found her on a list of graduates from the university that had welcomed the writer after he had been disgraced in his native country. The hunt had been arduous: more than forty years had passed, the women had changed their names, others – the Robert Wilsons or John Browns – shared theirs with several hundred others in the directory, most of whom hung up on Carole before she even finished her first sentence. There were a few false hopes: a certain George in Chicago claimed he remembered Camille duval but was obviously confusing him with another professor. A dentist in New Jersey swore he had been a close friend of the famous writer, however, he would only reveal more in the privacy of his suburban home, to which he invited Carole that very evening. She was the one who hung up that time. Elizabeth Glattner was the only one who seemed credible and willing to help. She had come in a taxi from the Upper East Side. According to Carole’s calculations, she would be seventy-eight or seventy-nine years old, an age that Carole’s smooth cheeks and blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail utterly belied. She spoke impeccable French and clearly enjoyed talking about “Camille” who had directed her dissertation on Racine in the 1950s. But most of all, Betty Glattner was delighted to find herself so closely involved in the Duval affair.

“You should know that, in this part of the world, there are no stories without bears.”
The Forger, the Spy and the Bomb-Maker

is a novel about three reluctant heroes.

First, there’s the young man who dreams of world peace and becomes a bomb-maker: Felix Bloch is working in the United States on the development of the atom bomb. He studied atomic physics in Leipzig under Werner Heisenberg and fled to the USA in 1933. Later, he helps Robert Oppenheimer with his work on the bomb at Los Alamos and is awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1952.

Then there’s the girl who’s determined to become a singer but comes to realise that she just hasn’t the talent to make it to the top: Laura d’Oriano is caught up in the maelstrom of history and ends as a spy for the Allies in Italy. She makes contact with the Resistance in France but fails to realise Mussolini’s secret services have been watching her ever since she arrived in Italy. She is the only woman to be executed by the Italian fascists during the Second World War.

Finally, there’s the art student, who sets out for Troy: Emile Gilliéron travels to the legendary excavation site with the famous researcher, Heinrich Schliemann. He makes drawings of the objects they find, restores them, even makes reproductions of them and, almost by accident, becomes one of the greatest forgers of all time.

These three so different individuals only happen upon each other once: in November 1924, at Zürich’s main railway station. Felix Bloch is living in the city, the other two are passing through. But their paths remain strangely intertwined.

Alex Capus has researched the careers of his heroes in great depth and he tells their stories with a light and elegant touch – interspersing them with a lot of contemporary detail. There’s even a short, easy-to-understand introduction to the world of pre-war atomic physics!


The Forger, The Spy and The Bomb-Maker

Excerpt translated by John Brownjohn

I like the girl. It pleases me to picture her sitting in the open doorway of the rearmost carriage of the Orient Express with the glittering silver waters of Lake Zürich gliding past her. It could be early November 1924, I don’t know the exact date. She’s thirteen years old, a tall, thin, rather gawky girl with a small but deeply incised furrow above her nose. Her right leg is drawn up, her left dangling over the step into space. She is leaning against the door frame, swaying to the rhythm of the rails with her fair hair fluttering in the wind. For protection from the cold she holds a woollen blanket over her chest. The notice board on the side of the carriage reads ‘Constantinople-Paris’, and emblazoned above it are golden brass lettering and the company’s emblem with the royal lion of Belgium.

She is using her right hand to smoke cigarettes that quickly smoulder away in the airstream. It’s not unusual for children to smoke where she comes from. Between cigarettes she sings snatches of oriental songs – Turkish lullabies, Lebanese ballads, Egyptian love songs. She wants to be a singer like her mother, but a better one. She will never enlist the help of her cleavage and legs on-stage, the way her mother does, nor will she wear a pink feather boa or be accompanied by individuals like her father, who always keeps a tumbler of brandy on top of the piano and winks and performs a glissando whenever her mother shows her garter. She wants to be a genuine artiste. She has a big, expansive feeling in her chest and will some day lend expression to it, she knows that for sure.

Her voice is still thin and hoarse, she knows that too. She can hardly hear herself as she sits on her step and sings. The wind snatches the melodies from her lips and bears them off into the turbulence in the wake of the train. It is three days since she boarded a blue, second-class carriage in Constantinople with her parents and her four siblings. Since then she has spent many hours sitting in the open doorway. Inside the compartment with her family it’s stuffy and noisy, and outside it’s mild for the time of year. During those three days on her step she has sniffed the scent of Bulgarian vineyards and watched hares cropping in the stubby wheat fields of Vojvodina, waved to Danubian bargemen who responded with a blast on their hooter, and, in the suburbs of Belgrade, Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna, glimpsed weary men in vests sitting in front of their plates in the dimly-lit kitchens of soot-stained tenement buildings.

“Do you know what’s left of science if it just sticks to facts, without any imagination? Not much...nothing, really. Just a load of facts, a load of sterile, lifeless facts.”
ON THE VERGE OF SALVATION

KURZ VOR DER ERLÖSUNG
GENRE Epic Poems, LANGUAGE German

Seventeen Sentences (Siebzehn Sätze) is the sub-title to Michael Fehr’s first book, and in fact this unusual piece of writing does only contain seventeen sentences, long sentences, which are developed in the manner of a musical theme and variations (the word ‘Satz’ in German can mean both sentence and musical composition). Within this structure we meet diverse groups and individuals, who have only one thing in common: they are all ‘on the verge of salvation’ and, moreover, all ‘at the same point in time’.

Michael Fehr tells a modern Christmas Story, in which the telling is itself the subject. He takes us from one scene to another, to Joseph and Mary, who surprises a farmer in the stable. A male-voice choir strikes up a song in the bar of the inn. A king on his camel follows a shooting star. We meet a music group in a TV studio, a family at their meal, a woman who plays the organ and many more: they are all straining together in hope and anticipation, whilst the cathedral bells in the capital city are already ringing out.

Michael Fehr’s Seventeen Sentences are moulded, indeed borne along by, an individualistic and extraordinarily daring use of language. It twists and turns, wrestles with itself and with the evanescent nature of story-telling. Patiently, word by word, line by line, Fehr circles round his scenes and characters; again and again, he discovers unusual ways of getting inside his stories, which we seem to know intimately, but which we re-discover here anew.

“His lyrical prose carries us along in an irresistible, musical undertow (…).”
NEUE ZÜRCHER ZEITUNG AM SONNTAG

MICHAEL FEHR was born in 1982 and grew up in Muri, near Bern. He studied at the Swiss Institute for Literature and the Bern Arts College, where he gained his Master’s degree in Contemporary Arts Practice. In 2013 he won the Bern Cantonal Book Prize. Kurz vor der Erlösung (On the Verge of Salvation) is his first work of fiction.

PHOTO © Patrick Savolainen
And at the same time
already in the capital
in the modern and therefore characterless new town
where not far from the tranquil historic centre
in a land white as snow
since it was apparently snow-covered
as if sugar-coated
on which it apparently continued snowing
therefore continued sugar-coating
it glittered there
and it sparkled there
and that is why it was appealing
and the fir trees were military green and agreeably
trimmed and sugar-coated
and angels were there
white as light
white light lit up and beamed across the land
dull over there and glaring over there
the land appeared and shone silvery in the light
it glittered and sparkled silvery
in short a spreading light
there were spotlights
that seemed dull white
and spotlights
that beamed glaring white
and further
there were further fir trees
that were further sugar-coated
there were recording devices for images and recording
devices for sound and further instruments
in short electrical apparatus
there were cables
that were curled
and cables
that lay flat
and further
there were further angels
angels
that seemed like light
and angels
that beamed like light
and glittered and sparkled as if sugar-coated
since it apparently went on snowing
in this apparently snow-covered land
that glittered silver and sparkled over and over in the light
amid further spotlights
amid further fir trees
amid further cables
amid further angels

“Michael Fehr’s style has a rhythmic feel, with virtuoso puns. And so this ‘performance poem’ is in the best sense characteristic of him: stubbornly independent.” DER LANDBOTE
THE MENSCH FAMILY

LES MENSCH

GENRE Novel, LANGUAGE French

“The Mensches’ story, with its suggestion of American craziness and excess, was played out on the street, where you perhaps live.”

NICOLAS COUCHEPIN was born in Lausanne in 1960. He worked in education before turning full-time to writing. He has so far published three novels: Grefferic (1996) and Le Sel (Salt, 2000), which appeared under the Zoé imprint. Les Mensch (The Mensch Family) is his first to be published by Éditions Seuil.

PHOTO © John Foley

The Mensches are a completely ordinary family. They live in an ordinary part of town, worry about the usual things and hope for what everyone hopes for. Theo, the ‘paterfamilias’, is worried about growing old. Muriel, his wife, frets that she isn’t the perfect mother. Marie, their daughter, has discovered that she won’t live forever. And Simon, her younger brother, is mentally handicapped: he longs to be independent, which can’t happen.

As the Summer holidays approach, Theo sets about clearing out the basement of the house. His mother used to live there. Now, the whole family want to use it. They all have their own reasons for shutting themselves up down there. And they all in their own way insist on why they should live down there. For Theo, it’s become clear that he would rather live a less ordinary life, and he records his feelings in a notebook. Muriel’s notes and lists, on the contrary, reveal her strong desire for normality. And in her ‘dear diary’, Marie records her first tremors of love.

Lastly, Simon can only express his needs with the help of the others. And Lucie, their elderly neighbour, watches over all this.

The central characters in this story go on to create a new story, a drama that’s been covered up for many years. And to the family’s own perceptions of this story, there is added a new one: “The post-mortem of a drama...the remarkable story of the Mensch Family”, which is the title of the book written by a certain Nicola Lievo, from which all this is quoted.

TITLE Les Mensch
PUBLISHER Éditions du Seuil, Paris
PUBLICATION DATE 2013
PAGES 216
TRANSLATION RIGHTS Martine Heissat, mheissat@seuil.com
Like all ordinary folk, they also never had the slightest suspicion.
## 8 More Unmissable Swiss Books

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<td>978-3-257-08887-2</td>
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PRO HELVETIA'S SUPPORT FOR TRANSLATION

The Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia supports the translation of literary works from Switzerland, with an eye to promoting cultural and linguistic diversity and helping Swiss authors reach larger audiences both within the country and around the world. Supporting translation is a central part of Pro Helvetia’s activities.

Pro Helvetia supports the translation of:
- literary works by Swiss authors (fiction and poetry)
- books for children and teenagers (it may also cover part of the licensing fees)
- non-fiction books by Swiss authors on cultural and artistic topics relating to Switzerland
- plays by Swiss dramatists (including theatre surtitles)

How to proceed Applications must be submitted by the licensed publisher. Signed copies of the licence agreement and the translation contract must be included in the application. The application should also include the final edited manuscript or a substantial extract from same (minimum 30 pages) as well as a draft promotional plan for the book. Translation fees will be paid directly to the translator by Pro Helvetia upon publication. Translation fees are based on the translation contract and calculated according to the current rates in the country of the language of translation.

Deadline We accept applications at any time, but they must be submitted at least three months before printing, to allow time for Pro Helvetia to check the translation.

Application portal www.myprohelvetia.ch

Please contact us if you have any further questions. We look forward to receiving your application.

TRANSLATION HOUSE LOOREN

Since 2005, the Translation House Looren in the Swiss canton of Zürich has been offering professional literary translators from all over the world a place to work and study. All language combinations are welcome. As the first institution of its kind in a country that, with its four national languages, has always been a land of translation, Translation House Looren sees itself primarily as a location for concentrated work. In addition, a programme of events aims to increase the visibility of literary translation and to support its practitioners. Through readings, workshops, and conferences, we offer translators a forum for continuing professional development and for enhancing the public’s awareness of their activities.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.a-d-s.ch Autorinnen und Autoren der Schweiz (AdS)
www.sbvv.ch Schweizer Buchhändler- und Verleger-Verband / Swiss Publishers’ Association
www.asdel.ch Association Suisse des Diffuseurs, Éditeurs et Libraires (ASDEL)
www.editori-sesi.ch Società Editori Svizzera Italiana (SESI)
www.unili.ch/ctl Centre de Traduction Littéraire de l’Université de Lausanne (CTL)
www.new-books-in-german.com
www.literatur.ch
www.literaturschweiz.ch
www.viceversalitterature.ch (www.viceversaliteratur.ch)
www.werliestwo.ch
SWISS LITERATURE AGENDA 13/14

October 2013

SWISS BOOKS AT FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR
www.sbvv.ch
www.asdel.ch
www.buchmesse.de

Oct. 18.-20.
BRASILIANISCHE LITERATURTAGE ZOFINGEN
www.literaturtagezofingen.ch

Oct. 24.-27.
ZÜRICH LIEST
www.zuerich-liest.ch

Oct. 25.-27.
BUCHBASEL
Presentation of the Swiss Book Prize (SBVV)
www.buchbasel.ch

November 2013

Nov. 01.-10.
SWISS BOOKS AT BEIRUT BOOK FAIR
www.asdel.ch
www.salondulivrebeirut.org

Nov. 08.-10.
DIS DA LITTERATURA A DOMAT
www.litteraturarumantscha.ch

Nov. 09.-10.
ABRAXAS ZENTRAL-SCHWEIZER KINDER- UND JUGENDLITERATURFESTIVAL ZUG
www.abraxas-festival.ch

Nov. 15.-17.
SWISS BOOKS AT PISA BOOK FAIR
www.editori-sesi.ch
www.pisabookfestival.it

Nov. 18.-24.
SWISS BOOKS AT VIENNA BOOK FAIR
www.sbvv.ch
www.buchwien.at

Nov. 20.-25.
SWISS BOOKS AT MONTREAL BOOK FAIR
www.asdel.ch
www.salondulivremontreal.com

Nov. 27.-Dec. 01.
NON/FICTION BOOK FAIR MOSCOW, GUEST OF HONOUR SWITZERLAND.
www.asdel.ch
www.sbvv.ch
www.moscowbookfair.ru/eng

December 2013

Dec. 05.-08.
SWISS BOOKS AT ROME BOOK FAIR
www.editori-sesi.ch
www.piulibripiuliberi.it

January 2014

LYRIKFESTIVAL BASEL
www.lyrikfestival-basel.ch

February 2014

Feb. 20.-24.
SWISS BOOKS AT BRUSSELS BOOK FAIR
www.asdel.ch
www.flb.be

March 2014

Mar. 07.-09.
THUNER LITERATURFESTIVAL
www.itteraare.ch

Mar. 13.-16.
LEIPZIG BOOK FAIR, GUEST OF HONOUR SWITZERLAND.
www.sbvv.ch
www.leipziger-buchmesse.de

Mar. 20.-23.
LUZERN BUCHT
www.literaturfest.ch

Mar. 21.-24.
SWISS BOOKS AT PARIS BOOK FAIR
www.asdel.ch
www.salondulivreparis.com

Mar. 24.-27.
SWISS BOOKS AT BOLOGNA CHILDREN’S BOOK FAIR
www.sbvv.ch
www.asdel.ch
www.bookfair.bolognafiere.it

ABSOLUT ZENTRAL
www.absolutzentral.ch

April 2014

Apr. 08.-10.
SWISS BOOKS AT LONDON BOOK FAIR
www.sbvv.ch
www.londonbookfair.co.uk

Apr. 10.-13.
EVENTI LETTERARI MONTE VERITÀ
http://www.eventiletterari.ch

July 2014

July 04.-06.
INTERNATIONALES LITERATURFESTIVAL LEUKERBAD
www.literaturfestival.ch

September 2014

Sep. 18.-21.
BABEL FESTIVAL DI LETTERATURA E TRADUZIONE, BELLINZONA
www.babelfestival.com

October 2014

SWISS BOOKS AT FRANKFURT BOOK FAIR
www.sbvv.ch
www.asdel.ch
www.buchmesse.de

Autumn 2014

4+1 ÜBERSETZEN TRADUIRE
TRANSLATAR TRADURRE
http://www.chstiftung.ch/ch-reine/4-1

November 2014

Nov. 01.-10.
SWISS BOOKS AT ALGER BOOK FAIR
www.asdel.ch
www.sila-dz.com

Nov. 08.-10.
Swiss Films at Belarusian International Film Festival
www.kino-avantgarde.by
www.asdel.ch
www.buchmesse.de

November 2014

Nov. 18.-24.
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www.flb.be

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www.leipziger-buchmesse.de

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www.absolutzentral.ch

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http://www.eventiletterari.ch

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EVENTI LETTERARI MONTE VERITÀ
http://www.eventiletterari.ch

Apr. 30.-May 04.
SALON DU LIVRE ET DE LA PRESSE DE GENÈVE
www.salondulivre.ch

Apr. 30.-May 05.
SWISS BOOKS AT ABU DHABI BOOK FAIR
www.sbvv.ch
www.adbookfair.com

May 2014

May 01.-04.
FESTIVAL INTERNAZIONALE DI LETTERATURA DI CHIASSO
www.chiassoleteraria.ch

May 08.-12.
SWISS BOOKS AT TURIN BOOK FAIR
www.editori-sesi.ch
www.salonelibro.it

May 30.-June 01.
SOLOTHURNER LITERATURTAGE
Presentation of the Swiss Federal Literary Awards
www.literatur.ch
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