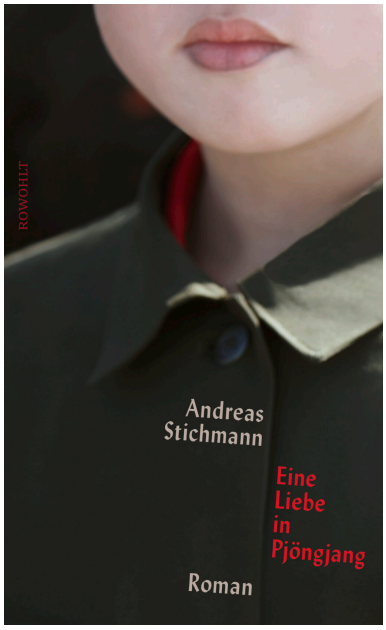

by Andreas Stichmann
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Fiction

German Book Prize Longlist 2022

A Love Affair in Pyongyang

Eine Liebe in Pjöngjang

review

The latest novel by prize-winning author Andreas Stichmann is set in North Korea. A love story between a German woman and a North Korean woman, it takes a sensitive and complex look at a country that is underrepresented and little-understood in the West.

The novel's content is timely and relevant, particularly in an age where we have witnessed a worldwide slide away from democracy towards autocratic leaders, and where there is a desire to understand dictatorships such as North Korea. The story is thought-provoking and suspenseful, as well as being of high literary quality.

Claudia Aebischer heads a German delegation to Pyongyang to oversee the opening of a library and cultural centre sponsored by Germany. She is fifty years old, unmarried and childless, and the author of some non-fiction books. Her main ambition, to write a book of literary value, remains unfulfilled.

In Pyongyang, she meets Sunmi, a North Korean charged with welcoming the Germans. Sunmi's background seems radically different from Claudia's. Raised in poverty in the North Korean countryside, orphaned, but highly gifted, she made her way to the capital and to university, finally specializing in German Romanticism. Claudia, though, grew up in the GDR, and below the surface, aspects of North Korea are more familiar than expected.

This is not a straightforward love story. As the attraction between Sunmi and Claudia begins to grow of its own accord, the North Korean authorities are putting pressure on Sunmi to get closer to Claudia, so that they can use her as a spy. Claudia is aware that the authorities are keen to lure her into a trap, and so her burgeoning relationship with Sunmi is undermined by a constant undercurrent of doubt. Sunmi, on the other hand, is torn between her professional ambition and her feelings for Claudia.

Diplomatic relations deteriorate and the German delegation leaves prematurely. Claudia finds herself in a bind: should she give the speech siding with North Korea that is demanded from her, destroying her credibility back home, but saving Sunmi from serious repercussions? How much should she risk to help Sunmi flee to the West? And can she really be sure that she can fully trust Sunmi?

Sunmi, on the other hand, has to make her own decisions. For the first time in her life, she has the chance to choose between duty and her own individual needs and desires. Between an oppressive system where she knows the rules, and a new liberty in which she will be a stranger. She will have to find out where her loyalties really lie. And it is Sunmi who will be left to have the last word.

Eine Liebe in Pjöngjang is narrated through the alternating perspectives of its two protagonists. The novel is elegantly written and a joy to read throughout, and offers a fresh and interesting perspective on North Korea.

https://www.rowohlt.de/verlag/rights/book/andreas-stichmann-eine-liebe-in-pjoengjang-9783498002930

press quotes

> *Novalis in North Korea – Andreas Stichmann has dreamed up this spring's strangest, most beautiful novel.*

Deutschlandfunk Büchermarkt, 15 March 2022

> *A Love Affair in Pyongyang is the wonderful story of a liaison in the world's blind spot … one of the best books of the season.*

Berliner Morgenpost, 21 March 2022

> *Believable and hugely empathetic. Every sentence of this novel fits.*

RBB Kultur, 10 May 2022

about the author

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Andreas Stichmann was born in Bonn in 1983 and studied at the Leipzig Institute of German Literature. He published *Jackie in Silber*, a collection of stories, in 2008, for which he received the Clemens Brentano Prize, the Kranichstein Literature Sponsorship Award and the Hamburg Sponsorship Award for Literature, among other accolades. His debut novel, *The Glowing,* was nominated for the Bachmann Prize and won the Bremen Prize for Literature. Andreas Stichmann lives in Berlin. *Eine Liebe in Pjöngjang* is his third novel.

rights information

Rowohlt Verlag (Germany)

Kirchenallee 19
20099 Hamburg

Contact: Erica Lorenzoni

erica.lorenzoni@rowohlt.de

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