



by Stefan Cordes
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Fiction

Billie: To Heaven on Wild Horses

BILLIE »Ich fliege Himmel an mit ungezähmten Pferden«

review

A powerful debut by TV director/producer Stefan Cordes, *Billie* imagines two years in the life of Sibylla Schwarz, a little-known 17th-century poet. With its core theme of women's struggle for personal and artistic autonomy, this vibrant novel will appeal to readers of Natalie Haynes, Lauren Groff and Maggie O'Farrell.

Set in Pomerania during the Thirty Years War, *Billie's* eponymous hero is the poet Sibylla Schwarz, the youngest of six children and (in this fictionalised retelling, at least) affectionately known to her family as Billie. As conflict rages and the Schwarz home in Greifswald falls under enemy occupation, Billie and her sisters seek refuge in the countryside following their mother's death from plague. Despite living at a time when formal education was not available to girls, Billie has defied convention by teaching herself to read at the age of five, translating Ovid, Homer and Virgil, and forming a friendship with her brothers' tutor.

In her rural refuge, Billie bonds with another young woman, Judith Tanck. The two soon develop feelings for each other, though society expects them to find husbands. Billie instead refines her poetic talent, guided by her tutor friend Samuel Gerlach, and becomes known as 'the Pomeranian Sappho'. When the family maid is accused of

witchcraft and executed, Billie also falls under suspicion for showing an interest in Hildegard von Bingen. She is later released and able to recite a poem at her sister's wedding. Shortly afterwards, she falls ill with dysentery, and dies at the age of just seventeen.

Billie's life may have been brief, yet it had a big impact – despite the fact that her work is not widely known today. As a young woman navigating a society ruled by men, not to mention conflict, bereavement and the constant threat of interrogation for witchcraft, she is a strong, defiant and inspiring character who pursues her ambitions and fights for female autonomy.

By turns witty and poignant, intellectual and tender, *Billie* is a captivating exploration of love, poetry and a little-known legacy. Thoroughly researched yet never less than accessible, Cordes's debut showcases an exciting talent, brings to life a dark era and draws illuminating parallels with the present day.

about the author



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Stefan Cordes was born in Brussels in 1969, studied Journalism, History of Art and Philosophy and spent many years working as a TV format developer, creative director and producer. 'Billie' is his debut novel: he wrote it partly for his two daughters, whose freedoms must never be infringed.

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