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Burden
Packerl

by Anna Neata
Ullstein Buchverlage
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Fiction

review

Anna Neata's powerful debut follows the lives of three generations of women in 20th and 21st–century Austria.

Burden is a mesmerising novel, presenting a dynasty of strong female characters and the complex dynamics in their families as they live through the rise and fall of Nazism and experience how the decisions they make play out through the generations. The novel's three main characters are Elli, a teenager during the Second World War, her daughter Alexandra, and Alexandra's daughter, Eva, who is born during the 1980s. The narrative highlights the parallels and contrasting experiences between their lives at different historical moments.

Elli, Alexandra, and Eva all have difficult experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, and the narrative provides an intimate portrait of their struggles. Elli becomes pregnant very soon after meeting Alexander. It is a few years after the Second World War, and Elli is swept of her feet by the gaunt man in an expensive fur coat, who has just returned to Austria from a Russian prison camp. The couple get married and by 1951 Elli is caring for her newborn baby, Alexandra. She has a troubled marriage to Alexander who is uncommunicative and unkind, and before long she flees, returning to her parents' house with her daughter.

Years later, Alexandra finds herself trapped in a stifling marriage of

her own, turning to an old friend to help her terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Alexandra later marries again and goes on to have a daughter, Eva, who is an enigma to Alexandra. Eva is strangely quiet and self-contained as a baby and Alexandra struggles to relate to her. As an adult, Eva experiences periods of debilitating depression – partly connected to an abortion she has at seventeen – for which she is repeatedly admitted to psychiatric clinics.

Alexandra has a fractured relationship with her mother, Elli, at the heart of which is Elli's refusal to talk about Alexandra's father. While Alexandra laments the 'black hole' in her school history books in relation to the Nazi past, Elli is incredulous that people now should want to know what that past was like. When Alexandra finally tracks down her father, she drives to his isolated house in the Tuscan hills with her husband and toddler Eva, full of trepidation about what this longed-for encounter will bring. Her father gives her a package of papers, but it takes years for Alexandra to open them. The package is eventually passed on to Eva, who must make her own decisions about how best to deal with the contents.

Burden contains some breathtaking descriptions of the novel's most dramatic scenes, as well as beautifully observed reflections on the quieter moments in the characters' lives. This sophisticated family novel stands out both for its sensitive treatment of popular themes and its exquisite literary qualities.

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Find out more:
https://www.ullstein.de/werke/packerl/hardcover/9783550202520

press quotes

Anna Neata creates a portrait of a generation in which women carry around in their lives all that is unspoken by mothers and grandmothers. And a portrait of Austrian society, pithy, pointed and full of wit. An absolute joy.

Katharina Adler

Three women, three eras, three worlds: Anna Neata's novel is touching, captivating – and makes you want to research the women in your own family!

Rotraut Schöberl, Book Advocate at Puls4

about the author

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Anna Neata studies Language Arts at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Her play Oxytocin Baby was awarded the Hans Gratzer Stipend of the Vienna Schauspielhaus; Walkthrough 89 won her the Austrian Office of the Federal Chancellor's playwright stipend. This is her first novel.

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