



by Bettina Balàka  
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Fiction

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## Cassiopeia *Kassiopeia*

### review

*Cassiopeia* is a novel which gets under one's skin. Its tragicomic story is narrated in lively sharp-tongued prose, laced with ironic humour.

'Cassiopeia' is the name of a constellation of stars, the title of a best-selling novel that launches the career of Austrian author Marcus Bachgraben, and the third favourite word of Balàka's protagonist, Judith Kalman. Marcus and Judith have a one-night stand after meeting at one of Marcus' readings, and Judith is certain that they are meant for each other. So when Marcus goes to Venice for a six-week writers' residency, Judith follows him there, and the city of romance becomes the stage for Judith's increasingly obsessive antics.

Accustomed to getting her own way, Judith has decided that Marcus is the key to renewed happiness after her husband's suicide some years previously. Judith stalks Marcus, singlemindedly amassing details of his personal life and movements. Her efforts to ensnare him make *Fatal Attraction* seem tame. A surprise visit from her larger than life, poodleowning best friend generates further amusing encounters, in which Balàka sets up hilarious contrasts between the characters' thoughts and the words spoken out loud.

Much of the action takes place in a beautifully described Venetian home, a treasure trove belonging to an antique-dealer friend of Judith's. Flashbacks to the main characters' family histories enrich the narrative with marvellous and grotesque detail. There is the fairy-tale betrothal of Judith's parents, Judith's spiteful tom-cat who is fond of urinating in her deceased husband's clothes and shoes, and the

cruel conditions in which Marcus' mother keeps her hens, a far cry from the organic, wholesome image she portrays at the weekly market. As in a Shakespearean comedy, the whole cast of characters are brought together at the end for a dramatic showdown. Startling revelations and the realisation that each character has been engaging in their own game-playing lead to a jolly romp of an ending with smiles all round.

Bettina Balàka is establishing a reputation at the forefront of contemporary Austrian literature. The originality of *Cassiopeia* consolidates her literary achievements to date. Its sardonic tone and ability to let initially unlovable characters nonetheless endear themselves to the reader are especially diverting.

## press quotes

*'In her magnificent new novel Kassiopeia, Bettina Balàka displays great brilliance and subtle irony.'* – *Der Standard*

*'A whole sea of illusions and false hopes, of deceptions and manipulations, is contained in this nimble, yet profound book. Brilliantly ironic and entertaining.'*

– *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

*'A truly great book'* – *Falter*

*'Bettina Balàka has written a social novel that is conscientiously and interestingly constructed, as well as gleaming with irony.'* – *Die Bühne*

## about the author

**Bettina Balàka** was born in Salzburg in 1966, and currently lives in Vienna as a freelance writer. She has written numerous books, plays and radio plays and has received many awards for her work, including the Theodor Körner Prize (2004), the Salzburg Award for Poetry (2006) and the Friedrich Schiedel Literature Prize (2008).

### Previous works include:

*Eisflüstern* (2006); *Schaumsluchten* (2009); *Auf offenem Meer* (2010)

## rights information

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