



by Urs Zürcher
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Fiction

Desire *Begehren*

review

Urs Zürcher offers a fascinating tableau of life in contemporary Switzerland, told from the perspectives of four friends in their forties who are caught up in an erotically charged network of conflict and desire.

Mara, Charly, Zora, and Nico all belong to the Basel Reading Society, and share an interest in language and poetry. Mara is a journalist, who keeps hoping for a big scoop instead of the endless local stories she is assigned; she is attracted to Charly. Charly, a brewer and occasional poet, suffers from a mysterious internal illness that mirrors the state of the world and of his business; he dreams of Zora. Zora, who works in communications for a large company involved in some dubious ventures, is attracted to Nico. Nico, a schoolteacher and would-be author, longs for Mara.

The loyalties and rivalries between the group of friends are called into question when a fifth person arrives on the scene. Grace disrupts the delicately balanced quartet of their friendship, with fatal consequences. In the novel's striking closing scene, Nico recounts how the four friends spend a night away in a forest hut with Grace. After an awkward few hours spent drinking and talking, Grace goes out into the forest. One by one, Mara, Charly, and Zora go out to check on her and return to the hut, each saying that 'she just needs a bit of fresh air.' Finally, Nico leaves the hut to check on Grace, finds her frozen to death, and hurriedly covers up the body. When he

returns, he too repeats the phrase the others have used, 'she just needs a bit of fresh air.'

The novel investigates the fragility of friendship, as well as the interconnections between eros and envy. Zürcher reflects on a broad array of themes, including gender and sexuality, identity, climate change, the effects of colonialism, capitalism and its discontents, the effects and after-effects of the pandemic, and the power of the state. The style is high-literary, very polished, with many references to Swiss and other literature, interspersed with snippets of Swiss dialect, which adds local colour. Zürcher also pays special attention to the senses, lingering on some of the sights, sounds, and smells that characterise life in Basel.

Beautifully written and tightly structured, 'Desire' is a compelling read, and an insightful exploration of some of contemporary European society's most pressing concerns.

press quotes

An excellent 'time-capsule' panorama of post-pandemic Switzerland.

Linda L. Gaus, NBG Reader

Urs Zürcher is one of the most exciting Swiss authors. With "Begehren," he delivers virtuoso contemporary analyses.

Hansruedi Kugler, CHMedia

One can read this book on two levels: as a linguistic masterpiece or as a sociological attempt that subtly becomes a crime thriller

Manfred Papst, NZZ am Sonntag

about the author



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Urs Zürcher studied history, philosophy, and modern German literature at the University of Basel after completing an apprenticeship as a commercial clerk. He earned his doctorate at the University of Zurich. Afterwards, he was a lecturer at the University of Basel and worked as a project manager and teacher. Zürcher lives in Basel.

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