



by Leo Tuor  
Limmat Verlag  
January 2004 / 176pp  
Fiction

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## Great Granny Maria

### *Onna Maria Tumera oder Die Vorfahren*

#### review

This is a powerful and lively book, and an oddity. Its focus is a group of strong and remarkable characters living in mountainous Graubünden, the easternmost province of Switzerland. Cut off, yet at the centre of Europe, still scarred by twentieth-century conflicts yet not spared the effects of twenty-first-century problems, the community leads an embattled life and is losing some of its battles. Yet both the central family and the villagers generally have highly complex cultural and linguistic resources at their disposal. Tuor shows them at a point where they command both old and new skills, mainstream and regional languages, traditional ideas and modern information, and where they respond to their situation with either magnificent inventiveness or malicious obtuseness.

Dysfunctional yet self-repairing over generations, 'our clan' moves onwards. Animals are sometimes closer than siblings. Cats have their place under the four-footed stove, and when the old cat dies a new one is formally inducted into 'office'. When grandfather's brilliant mind begins to give way beneath his unresolved traumas and disappointments, he joins the sheepdog under the table or the cat in the cherry tree. Wolves are a current motif, mountain wolves especially, spiritual descendants of the she-wolf who suckled the founders of Rome. And Great Granny Maria, the most forceful character in the book, is herself endowed with wolf-like attributes. She is alert, protective and subversive, a Russian Menshevik who

trekked through plains and forests to 'safety' in the west, and in this centre of Roman Catholic culture has succinct and trenchant opinions about the Pope. She is not to be messed with and she it is who urges her grandson, 'the lad', aged nine when the book begins, to aspire to higher and more intellectual things. When she tucks him into bed at night she tells him in a memorable phrase: 'Either you make this jump or you don't', and when she herself is dying he turns the same phrase back on her. This book is no *Heartbeat or Mrs Dale's Diary*, that's for sure. But it is greatly to be hoped that some publisher, or even film or TV maker, will soon make that all-important jump on its behalf.

We are grateful to translator Peter Egloff for opening the doorway to this world for us through German.

Publishers curious to explore further, please contact nbg office for a recommendation of a translator from Rhaeto-Romanic into English: we know of one.

## about the author

**Leo Tuor** born in 1959, spent fourteen summers as a shepherd on the dramatic Greina plateau in the Swiss Canton of Graubünden. His experiences there colour his writing. He devoted several years to compiling a six-volume edition of the collected works of the Rhaeto-Romanic writer and cultural historian Giacun Hasper Muoth. Tuor's is a unique and remarkable voice which captures the lives and language of a remarkable but disappearing world.

### Previous works include:

*Giacumbert Nau* (Rhaeto-Romanic, 1988; German, 1994) *Settembrini* (Rhaeto-Romanic, 2006; German in preparation)

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the novels of Swiss crime writer Friedrich Glauser, it also publishes dual-language books which reflect the richness and variety of language of Switzerland's past and present.