



by Gerti Tetzner
Aufbau Verlage
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Fiction

The English language
translation rights to the book
have sold.

This page will be updated
once an English language
translation is published.

Karen W. *Karen W.*

review

This quietly powerful novel about a woman's search for self-fulfilment in her work and a love story set in the early days of the GDR comes from a forgotten voice from the Weiberrunde, Christa Wolf's influential circle of East German women writers.

Karen's relationship with her long-term partner, Peters, is faltering. She leaves him and their city (presumably Leipzig), taking their eight-year-old daughter with her. She returns to the village of Osthausen in Thuringia, where she grew up. The only local girl to attend secondary school back home, she now finds work in the farming cooperative. Slivers of her past resurface as the story unfolds: her harsh upbringing, schooling, and wild romance at university with Peters, when she was enthralled with the young socialist German state. Peters' career soared back then, while Karen struggled to reconcile the competing demands of motherhood, partnership and professional ambition. These disparate pressures eventually forced her to resign as a lawyer and try to regain stability. Yet a letter she sends Peters from her newfound life suggests their relationship might not yet be over.

In her shared house, she gradually realises that Steiner, the local vet, has fallen in love with her. Her feelings still unresolved, she decides to return to Peters over Christmas. Their reunion is short-lived; unwelcome everyday routines reassert themselves as Peters tries to align his professorship with new demands from the university.

Later, Karen has a brief affair with Steiner, but she doesn't share his hopes of marriage and children. In the end, when she returns to Leipzig to work on a collective farm, she is determined to forge a new chapter in her life, on her own terms.

In this blend of linear narrative and introspection, Tetzner creates a story shaped by memory and reflection. The deceptively simple structure of 'Karen W.' is typical of East German psychological fiction, where inner life often took precedence over dramatic events. Yet there is plenty of action in this tale of a woman's search for self-realisation, including striking details of the time: how agricultural workers still owned their homes, how education was discouraged for some, and how intellectuals, though celebrated, were subjected to tight control. This love story also offers a sharp, intimate look at a world in transition. Rather than making grand ideological statements, the novel offers a subtler, more intimate critique of a system where personal decisions carried political weight.

Find out more:

<https://www.aufbau-verlage.de/aufbau/karen-w/978-3-351-04264-6>

press quotes

One of the most interesting new publications of the year.

Dresdner Morgenpost

A very, very good, interesting novel [...] that tells of a lost world that the new world has almost completely forgotten.

DIE ZEIT

The conflict between the individual and society, between aspiration and reality, is authentically depicted by someone who was there.

Sächsische Zeitung

about the author



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Gerti Tetzner was born in Eastern Germany in 1936. She studied law, in defiance of her father, who had co-founded a Nazi Party group and was a former member of the SS. After working as a notary, she was on course to become a judge – until she realised she would be required to pass judgement on those who had fled the GDR. Refusing to do so, she resigned. She went on to study at the Leipzig Institute of Literature, forged connections within literary circles and discussed her novel project with other female writers in the “Weiberrunde” (Women’s Circle) around Christa Wolf. Her debut, ‘Karen W.’ (1974) was a critical and commercial success and was translated into multiple languages. However, when her second novel was in progress and set to be published by the West German Luchterhand Verlag, the Stasi came knocking. The project was abandoned, and ‘Karen W.’ gradually faded into obscurity. Today, at the age of 88, she lives in Berlin and has recently returned to writing.

rights information

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