



by Isabella Straub  
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Fiction

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## Looking in *Südbalkon*

### review

*Looking in* is a compelling, empathetic work of fiction which will speak to a generation of restless thirty-somethings. Isabella Straub's narrator is in the middle of an identity crisis – an engaging and hilarious heroine who wants to change her life but doesn't quite know how.

Ruth Amsel lives with her disappointing and easily disappointed boyfriend, Raoul, in an apartment in the unpronounceable Przewalskistrasse in Vienna. Having broken off her medical studies years before, she spends her time compiling obituaries as part of an internship in an editorial office. Her careers advisor is disdainful, while her parents are indifferent and preoccupied with the drama of their own failing marriage. Ruth's best friend, Maja, on the other hand, seems to have it all. Happily married to a wealthy man, she has a professional career providing life-coaching services. In a nod to Ruth's financial issues, Maja and Ruth often meet up in furniture stores and kitchen showrooms as cheap alternatives to cafes. It is with utter horror and a sense of her world falling apart that Ruth begins to suspect that Maja and Raoul are having an affair. Ruth spends a great deal of time worrying about this and filling in the blanks of their relationship in her head, without finding the courage to confront them properly.

Early on in the novel, Maja insists to Ruth that honesty is for cowards, and that the success of her marriage depends upon her lack of honesty with her husband. Ruth, too, has a real penchant for lying to

people she knows and this characteristic is part of what makes her such a funny and likeable figure. When Raoul is suddenly admitted to hospital, Ruth sees what she thinks is the final proof of Raoul and Maja's affair. But just when we think that we know where the novel is going, we find that nothing is as it seems.

Straub writes clean, streamlined prose and has a flair for drama. Her characters seem to spring out of the pages, and readers will be instantly drawn to the flawed heroine whose witty, self-deprecating musings make her intensely appealing. Although parallels to a Bridget Jones-like character would not be unjustified, this novel is far more literary and subtle. It addresses such universal themes as the search for love, gaining self-confidence, and the challenge of seeing oneself through another's eyes.

## press quotes

*'This author really comes up with great ideas!'*  
– *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

## about the author

**Isabella Straub** was born in 1968 in Vienna, Austria, and studied philosophy and German literature. She has worked as a journalist and as a copywriter. In 2009 she was a finalist for the Bräuning Prize, and in 2011 she won the prominent FM4 Wortlaut Literature Prize.

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