



by Alexander Kamber
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Fiction

Midnight Blue Flowers

Nachtblaue Blumen

review

Raw, moving and eerily plausible, Alexander Kamber's second novel, *Midnight Blue Flowers*, is a striking tale that shines a light on the treatment of women deemed 'hysterical' at the fin de siècle. An immersive and urgent read, it is reminiscent of feminist classics such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. It also delves into themes explored in modern bestsellers like Maggie O'Farrell's *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*.

Midnight Blue Flowers begins with a Note from the Editor, who claims to have found the pages that follow in the personal library of Jean-Martin Charcot, the pioneer of neurology known for his work on hysteria. The undated diary entries of varying length that make up the novel are like pieces of a puzzle, drawing the reader in and demanding to be solved.

The narrator is sixteen years old, a cabaret dancer who no longer wishes to dance. The owner of Le Voltage, the Parisian theatre where she works, brings her to the infamous Salpêtrière psychiatric clinic – where the loss of her desire to dance is considered proof of hysteria. Secretly, she starts writing a diary, both about her past and about everyday life at the asylum. She becomes friends with Cléo, another young patient, who is in the asylum because of her kleptomania.

The narrator becomes a favourite of Charcot and is often selected to

take part in his public 'demonstrations', in which the female patients and their symptoms are put on display. She soon realises, though, that these are simply a performance. A second doctor, never named but bearing a clear resemblance to Freud, tries to treat her with psychoanalysis and hypnosis. He comes across as fatherly, but his actions at times border on sexual assault.

The owner of Le Voltage visits to monitor the narrator's progress but loses interest when he realises that she is still refusing to dance. She knows that both the cabaret owner and the doctors see her as nothing but a broken machine, and that their objective is to transform her – and the other women in the asylum – into obedient, useful subjects.

One day, a doctor comes to see the narrator, telling her she is to perform at the Moulin Rouge. On the way there, she jumps out of the carriage and flees. It is left to the reader to decide whether the dancer has successfully escaped or not.

Find out more:

<https://www.limmatverlag.ch/programm/titel/952-nachtblaue-blumen.html>

press quotes

"Midnight Blue Flowers" is an effective but never flashy study of the force that only ever wants what it believes to be good and yet only ever leads to evil.'

Jan Drees, Deutschlandfunk

"Midnight Blue Flowers" is a masterpiece of precise observation. A dark dream of a book, shot through with flashes of irony.'

büCHerstimmen.ch

'One of the novel's great strengths is how it highlights that there is more than one side to every story. Alexander Kamber addresses his sensitive subject matter with great delicacy.'

Jasmin Rihner, Radio Kanal K

about the author



Alexander Kamber was born in 1995 and studied Cultural Studies in Zurich and Lüneburg. He is currently completing a PhD at the University of Zurich on the cultural history of dance and theatre around 1900, researching the interface between stage art, technology and the biosciences. His first novel 'All das hier' was published by Limmat Verlag in 2018.

Previous works: All das hier, Limmat (2018).

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