

by Romina Pleschko
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Fiction

Open Water

Offene Gewässer

review

Open Water is a coming-of-age novel with a teenage protagonist who doesn't fit into the provincial town in Austria where she lives, then returns decades later to enact a kind of vengeance.

Elfi has recently moved to the small town of Liebstatt to live with her grandmother. It is not clear what happened to her parents, but she has spent some time in a children's home and there has been a court case in Stuttgart, suggesting that she has suffered some sort of neglect or abuse. Elfi is the novel's first-person narrator and has a unique and appealing voice: her observations and reactions to the world and the people around her are funny as well as shocking.

Elfi is a lonely child who is desperate to have a pet. The townspeople look down on her, and she feels her place at a Catholic girls' school has been given to her out of condescending charity. She doesn't fit in at school, unable to exchange stories of glamorous holidays abroad. Elfi's grandmother is keen to exploit Elfi where she can, training her to cheat at the local tombola to win household goods, although she does allow her to take part in a drama summer school. Elfi meets her future husband at the summer school, follows him to Vienna to study and marries him.

The second part of the novel takes place over twenty years later when Elfi is divorced and has returned to live by the lake in Liebstatt. She loves the lake and her house but has an embittered view of her

neighbours who she claims are only interested in money and image. When she learns that a Wellness Hotel is being built next door, Elfi is appalled at the idea of her quiet corner being overrun by tourists. In an act of revenge, she takes two petrol canisters, sets fire to the house, disappears into the lake to swim, and lets herself sink into the water. The reader is caught up in the psychological drama, as tension builds up through Elfi's successive outbursts of anger and we anticipate some dire denouement.

Elfi is an unusual character with a distinctive voice. Her matter-of-fact accounts of outrageous behaviour are combined with a compelling attention to small details: pigeons in flight, hydrangea buds in spring, tadpoles surviving in a pothole. The close attention she pays to inanimate objects serve as a distraction from anxiety, and paint a powerful picture of Elfi's psychological state. Her observation of adults and rather formal, complex syntax are reminiscent of Shuggie's voice in *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart, and her take on life as a damaged child will have universal appeal.

about the author



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Born in 1983 in Upper Austria, Romina Pleschko studied acting at the Vienna Conservatory and won bookings that included the Vienna Festival, Theater Rampe Stuttgart and the Donaufestival Krems. In 2016/17, she studied at the Leonding Academy for Literature.

She has published a variety of works and received a number of grants, most recently being Writer in Residence at ORFIII 2019 and receiving a BMKOES project grant from in 2021/22. Her debut novel *Ameisenmonarchie* is being published by Kremayr & Scheriau in spring 2021.

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