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Past and Present Lies

Lügen von gestern und heute

review

Dreams of a different life are at the heart of Ursula Fricker's explosive new novel set against the background of the current refugee crisis. Beba, a sex worker, fled her home country years ago and dreams of a career as a jazz pianist. Isa, a university student in search of meaning, becomes a member of an activist group fighting for refugees' rights. Otten is a councillor who has to make a decision about the clearance of a refugee camp when some of the inhabitants, including Isa, go on hunger strike.

The lives of the three protagonists overlap at obvious and, occasionally, surprising points. Councillor Otten is Isa's main opponent in a fight for justice. Otten meets Beba in a jazz club and wants to foster her musical career. Isa and Beba meet without ever fully recognising their connection: Isa's father is one of Beba's regular clients. The novel charts the characters' attempts to follow their dreams of a different life. Only Otten seems to have had enough of dreaming already, having abandoned the idealistic attitudes of his youth in favour of weary pragmatism. As Isa becomes ever more radical in her thinking, the action hurtles towards a violent climax.

Fricker's style is evocative, brisk, and often haunting, particularly in passages when Beba or Otten reminisce about their past. She cleverly explores different attitudes towards the refugee crisis via her well-drawn and memorable protagonists. Her choice of characters – an immigrant from the Balkans, a disillusioned millennial, and a local politician – give her the opportunity to approach her topic from often

surprising angles. Fricker's nuanced approach is one of the great strengths of *Past and Present Lies* as she juxtaposes Beba's personal and, in a sense, apolitical experiences with Otten's theoretical musings on the old political divide between right and left. To Isa, Otten is a corrupt politician, but Otten is himself conflicted about the right actions to take. Avoiding clichés, Fricker's characters defy expectations. Beba especially exemplifies a very modern feminist for whom self-determination is the most important goal in life. This is a thought-provoking yet incredibly readable novel about people who are forced to reconsider their notions of what constitutes right and wrong.

rights information

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