



by Sarah Elena Müller  
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Fiction

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## Picture without Girl

### *Bild ohne Mädchen*

#### review

Swiss author Sarah Elena Müller's nuanced debut, *Picture without Girl*, tackles the subject of child abuse from an unusual and thought-provoking perspective. Written in spare prose that implies more than it tells, the novel blends references to myth and superstition with a modern, cinematic treatment. A multi-disciplinary artist who has already received numerous awards, Müller proves herself an original and noteworthy talent.

In five distinct sections, *Picture without Girl* follows a young protagonist growing up in rural Switzerland. The unnamed girl is fascinated by television and moving images, but her left-leaning parents, a sculptor and environmental scientist, have a deep distrust of the media and are wrapped up in their own worlds. Unable to express herself, the child seeks refuge at the house of her neighbours, Ege and Gisela. Ege is a technology addict, equally cut off from the real world, while Gisela lives largely upstairs and is often away travelling. Ege allows the child to watch as much television as she wishes and invites her to participate in the films he makes.

Here, darker undertones creep into the novel: child abuse is strongly implied yet never made explicit. Müller's unemotional language and shifting narrative perspectives draw the reader into the story but keep us in a state of uncertainty, reliant solely on our suspicions. Combined with the main characters' inability to communicate, and their roles as outsiders in a small Swiss village, this cleverly

underscore how easy it can be not to act on misgivings, how perpetrators can bend reality to suit their own stories, and how intervention often comes too late or not at all.

Caught between the literal darkness of Ege's home and her parents' insufficient attempts to bond with her, the child barely speaks and begins to wet the bed. Her parents turn to a healer for help, while the child herself begins to communicate with the picture of an angel she finds in a book – the figure comes alive in her mind and allows her to have a voice. Emphasising their alienation from each other, none of the characters aside from Ege and Gisela are named, existing merely as social or familial roles (father, child, neighbour, and so on).

Spanning several decades, from the 1960s to the recent past, *Picture without Girl* tackles other complex issues including climate change, the conflict between agriculture and the environment, and the responsibility of individuals in society. Provocative and engaging, asking more questions than it answers, Müller's debut is a fresh and compelling novel worthy of much discussion.

Find out more here:

<https://www.limmatverlag.ch/programm/titel/934-bild-ohne-maedchen.html>

## press quotes

*An incredibly powerful novel.*

Gesa Ufer, Lesart, Deutschlandfunk Kultur

*Sarah Elena Müller writes of the inconceivable, without short-circuiting any of the morality. A cleverly constructed novel.*

Timo Posselt, Die Zeit Schweiz

*Sarah Elena Müller's novel may be one that makes a lasting impact this year.*

Daniel Graf, Republik

*Nightmarish and brilliant.*

Florian Oegerli, Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen

*A highly controversial book and highly recommended.*

Nicola Steiner, Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen  
Literaturclub

*Sarah Elena Müller's language is quite extraordinary. I am very happy to have come across this book and look forward to reading everything else this wonderful author writes.*

Lukas Bärffuss

*Impressively, Sarah Elena Müller is able to deliver an entire media theory of her own with regard to abuse. She manages to make cover-ups transparent, but at the same time she does not release the reader from the risk of complicity. A highly astute novel that tells of the power of the gaze.*

Paul Jandl, NZZ

## about the author



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Sarah Elena Müller, born in 1990, is a multimedia artist working in literature, music, virtual reality, audio play and theatre. She writes for and performs in the Swiss dialect pop duo Cruise Ship Misery and directs the virtual reality project Meine Sprache und ich – an approach to Ilse Aichinger's linguistic criticism. Her collected columns for the Swiss newspaper Der Bund were published by Der gesunde Menschenversand in 2019 under the title Culturestress – Endzeit isch immer scho

inbegriffe [Culture stress – the end times are always included]. Her debut novel, *Bild ohne Mädchen* [Picture without Girls], was published by Limmat Verlag in 2023. In 2024 she will take up a residency in London on a Landis & Gyr scholarship.

Previous works: *Fucking God*, *Büro für Problem* (2105), *Culturestress*, *Der gesunde Menschenversand* (2019).

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