



by Şehnaz Dost  
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Fiction

## ruh ruh

### review

‘ruh’ is a subtle and moving account of a father-daughter relationship under the shadow of divorce and racism, highlighting the everyday angst and struggles of a man torn between his life in Germany and his Turkish-Arabic heritage.

Cemal is a divorced primary-school teacher living in Berlin. He has custody of his adored six-year-old daughter Ekin – and her cuddly octopus – every other week. He is on excellent terms with his ex, Gül, and is tentatively happy in a new relationship with Georg, an easy-going man who collects vinyl and knows *The Rocky Horror Show* by heart. But Cemal is troubled. His memories of the village where he grew up with his grandparents are fragmentary, and at night he dreams of his great-grandmother, Süveyde who tells him – in Arabic, a language he no longer understands – of her miscarriages and her difficult marriage.

Cemal is summoned to the headmaster’s office after a complaint from a father who has accused him of favouring ‘the foreign children’. He then falls out with Georg, who is disappointed he doesn’t open up more, about his life with Ekin, for example. When Ekin starts school and has her first run-in with racism, Cemal’s depression and sense of powerlessness begin to spiral out of control. He is horrified nothing has changed since his own childhood and he struggles to accept his inability to protect Ekin as completely as he would wish.

Time does not bring resolution, but there are signs that Cemal is beginning to make some kind of peace with himself, to come to terms with his 'ruh', his 'genuine inner being'. He breaks his silence with Georg and tries to apologise. He finds himself thinking about what Georg calls 'negative space', the in-between spaces that make a painting interesting, that can turn loneliness or yearning into something beautiful. As the novel concludes, Cemal is beginning to make something of his own 'negative spaces', but also reconciling his dream life with his real life and becoming more at one with himself.

Moving effortlessly between different layers of narrative, 'ruh' makes subtle use of bilingualism, using context to clarify Turkish words and phrases without translating or glossing them. Dost's first novel is a beautifully written reflection on identity and racism with a deeply vulnerable – and deeply lovable – main character.

## about the author



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Zeynep Dost studied German language and literature, comparative literature and media and cultural studies. She won first prize at the Cologne Literature Festival in 2019, and in 2020 she was awarded a scholarship by the Prosa Authors' Workshop at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin. *ruh* is her first novel.

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