



by Feridun Zaimoglu
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Fiction

🏆 Longlisted for the
German Book Prize 2015.

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Seven Towers

Siebertürmeviertel

review

Controversial, provocative and exciting, the writer, playwright and artist Feridun Zaimoglu has been challenging German audiences since he burst onto the scene with his first work *Kanak Sprak* in 1995. Born in Bolu, Turkey, raised in Berlin and Munich, and at home in Kiel for many years now, Zaimoglu is rightly feted as ‘one of Germany’s most important contemporary authors’ (*Spiegel*).

In *Kanak Sprak* the author presents himself as interviewer, giving us his interviewees’ words in sharp bursts of a uniquely stylised language that mixes rap, Turkish-German street slang and Kiel dialect (for the ‘sound’, think Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani* in the British context). Zaimoglu went on to capture the public imagination with a series of explosive talkshow appearances in which he reclaimed the term ‘Kanake’ (formerly a racist insult), unmasked a series of apparently liberal public figures, and emerged as a forceful ‘enfant terrible’ – and cult author.

Zaimoglu has since published prolifically, and with impressive range. His seventeen books to date include a ‘Kanak-Romantic’ makeover of Goethe’s *Werther* (the epistolary *Liebesmale, scharlachrot*; ‘Love-brands, scarlet’, 2000); a ‘very European’, multi-site novel peopled by ‘dreamers and smoking guns’ (*Hinterland*, 2009); and *Ruß* (‘Soot’, 2011), his Ruhr Valley epic, set in a downtrodden, industrial milieu. Zaimoglu’s work is broadly characterised by vital, vibrant language, with critics highlighting the Romantic drive of his outsider heroes. In his work as a playwright, he collaborates with Günter Senkel, both to

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develop new pieces, like 2006's monologuedriven montage of unapologetic, no-holds-barred young German Muslim women, *Schwarze Jungfrauen* ('Black Virgins'), and to reshape and revitalise classics such as Shakespeare's *Othello* (2003). As visual artist he staged his first comprehensive solo exhibition in 2013 in Lütjenburg, coinciding with the publication of his illustrated novel *Der Mietmaler* ('Artist for Rent') in the same year.

The spotlight on Zaimoglu as public figure has never really gone away, perhaps as a result of the voice and platform he created early on, his commitment to taking literature beyond the 'middle classes', and latterly his co-option as 'public Muslim'. But above all, Zaimoglu epitomises – and performs – the figure of the author, working on a typewriter and marking corrections by hand, and is well-known for his gripping readings, as attested by his Jury Award from the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize (2003) and the 2012 Prize of the Literature Houses.

It was with *Leyla* (2006), his first work centred on Turkey and, as he described it, 'the story of a simple woman of the people', that Zaimoglu hit the mainstream. This novel lost none of his commitment to language, 'sound', and powerful, often visceral prose, instead gaining him a wider fan base through this, his 'least furious' narrative (*Spiegel*). Reviewed enthusiastically across the board, *Leyla* sees Zaimoglu proving his talent for morphing into his characters, capturing the voice of his female protagonist as she grows from young Turkish girl in a small 1950s Anatolian town to twenty-year-old woman stepping off the train in Munich. The novel has sold 100,000 copies and has been translated into eight languages. Opening with the words 'This is a story from olden times. But it's not an old story', *Leyla* uses its quietly resilient, eponymous protagonist to throw a critical eye, albeit a subtle one, on her authoritative world. 'I come from a family of strong women', says Zaimoglu, who draws here on meticulous transcriptions of his mother's oral narration of her life. Largely staying at *Leyla*'s 'eye level', the novel sidesteps sentimentality and moralising, instead giving us decidedly grey-toned characters (in particular the father and husband), an everyday that's both beautiful in its details and simmering with an undercurrent of violence, and, ultimately, the small-town dream of a better life, which *Leyla* reaches for quite literally at the novel's close: 'I'll stroke the wolf, and maybe he won't bite the hand on his back.'

Zaimoglu's new novel *Siebertürmeviertel* ('Seven Towers') appears this autumn and marks a return to Turkey, this time to an impoverished district of Istanbul in the 1930s-40s, and to a male voice

– that of (another) Wolf, a boy provocatively nicknamed ‘the Aryan’ or ‘Hitler-son’. Wolf comes to the area having fled Nazi Germany with his father Franz, a dissident schoolteacher. But the war is almost a non-event, and the ‘ethnic’ German ‘acts out’ the Turkey of Zaimoglu’s own father’s childhood, first as a tough, loyal Seven Towers boy, and later as a flaneur of central Istanbul nightlife and its underbelly, with a penchant for revolutionary poetry. The chapters’ titles, shaped by the ninety-nine names of God, seem to make ironic comment on their almost visually-charged contents, especially on the powerful revenge drama with the Chechen antagonists, where ‘The Merciful’ sees a crow’s head ripped off, and the final chapter, ‘The Patient One’, a memorable description of a dead body.

As influential critic Volker Weidermann remarked in his *Leyla* review: ‘If Zaimoglu didn’t exist, he’d have to invent himself’. It’s high time he had an English language audience.

By **Kate Roy**

Kate Roy lectures in German literature and Comparative Cultural Studies at Franklin University Switzerland and is an Honorary Research Fellow of the University of Leeds.

about the author

For a very accessible English-language account of **Zaimoglu** and his work see Tom Cheesman and Karin E. Yeşilada’s excellent edited volume *Feridun Zaimoglu* (2012), which also contains interviews and extracts from Zaimoglu’s writing in English translation. For longer samples of Zaimoglu’s work in English, see ‘Artist for Rent’, translated by Steph Morris, *no man’s land*, Issue #9 (2014) and ‘Selections from *Koppstoff*’, translated by Kristin Dickinson, Robin Ellis and Priscilla Layne, *Transit*, 4.1 (2008).

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Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch Contact: Iris Brandt

Tel: +49 221 376850

Email: ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de

www.kiwi-verlag.de

The NBG funding guarantee applies to Zaimoglu’s latest novel, *Siebentürmeviertel* (2015). See our glowing *review of Leyla* (2006), as well as a sample translation from that novel.