



by Sabrina Janesch
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Fiction

Sibir

Sibir

review

Sibir is based on the author's own family's experiences, and traces the connections between her father's childhood as a deported German in Soviet-ruled Kazakhstan and her own childhood in Lower Saxony.

At the opening of the novel, narrator Leila Ambacher is coming to terms with her father Josef's diagnosis of advanced dementia. Leila recollects the stories he used to tell about exile in Kazakhstan when she was growing up and remembers her own childhood in small-town Lower Saxony. We see Leila and her best friend Arnold in their imaginative world, hiding from adults and planning adventures.

The narrative then transitions to Josef Ambacher's childhood forty-five years before. We see the child Josef being deported with his German family through Soviet Russia, finally arriving in Kazakhstan after losing Josef's mother and brother along the way. From this point, the narrative alternates between episodes from Leila's and Josef's childhoods. Josef's family struggle to survive in exile; Germans in the deported community are forbidden from communicating with each other, tensions abound, and Josef finds solace in his friendship with a Kazakh boy.

In 1990s Germany, life in the Ambachers' neighbourhood full of 'old Siberians' – people repatriated from Kazakhstan in 1955 and now living on the fringes of the local community – is interrupted by the arrival of yet more returnees. German exiles who, unlike Josef's family, were not repatriated following Konrad Adenauer's intervention in 1955, are now returning to Germany after the collapse of the USSR. Leila witnesses the impact of the returnees on her father and resents it, wanting to protect him from the traumatic memories they represent.

Janesch explores a little-known aspect of German-Russian history, considering how borders and boundaries affect the ways in which we remember things. What begins as the narrator's attempt to help her aging father come to terms with his diagnosis of dementia becomes an exploration of her own childhood and the impact of war, migration and trauma on her and the people around her. The book resists the simplistic answer that uncovering the past always brings peace.

The book's compassionate representation of the experience of otherness of migrants, whether willing or unwilling, makes it especially timely and thought-provoking. Janesch also brings humour to her subject matter, no mean feat in a novel dealing with so much unaddressed trauma and pain. Her juxtaposition of the domestic banality of the adult world with the intensity and urgency of the child's is a welcome light touch and ensures the text is entertaining as well as absorbing.

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press quotes

This novel is a wonderful and fascinating father-daughter story about the attempt to wrest the past from oblivion.

Berliner Zeitung

about the author



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Sabrina Janesch was born in 1985 in Lower Saxony. She is the daughter of a Polish mother and a father who was deported to Central Asia from Wartheland/Posen.

Janesch has been awarded numerous prizes, and *Die goldene Stadt* (2017) was a bestseller.

Her research into Sibir involved interviews with eyewitnesses and reading of diaries and historical documents. Her travels eventually led her to the village on the Kazakh steppe where her father had spent his childhood. Sabrina Janesch lives in Münster with her family.

Other works: *Die goldene Stadt*, Rowohlt-Berlin Verlag GmbH (2017)

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