



by
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Snow, Fire, Guilt and Death

Der Schnee, das Feuer, die Schuld und der Tod

review

This cinematic debut novel by Austrian writer Gerhard Jäger is an unusual and beautiful homage to the power of the Alps. A crime story in a nostalgic post-war setting, against the backdrop of an isolated Tyrolean mountain village, *Snow, Fire, Guilt, and Death* is an evocative and timeless story of two characters searching for truth.

The year is 1950. Young historian Max Schreiber arrives in Tyrol to research the murder of a witch a hundred years previously. What he encounters instead is a distrustful, archaic community, prone to a heady mix of religion and superstition, and wary of outsiders. Increasingly isolated, Schreiber loses himself in unrequited love to a local woman. As winter closes in and the village is cut off from the world by avalanches, the death toll rises, a barn goes up in flames, and claustrophobia and paranoia reach their peak. More than half a century later, John Miller travels to Tyrol from America to find out what happened to his cousin Max. Hunting for clues in the archives of Innsbruck, he finds Schreiber's manuscript of his time in the Alps.

Jäger's exploration of a lonely man's encounter with a mountain community immediately calls to mind recent Alpine Western *The Dark Valley* or Robert Seethaler's phenomenal *A Whole Life*, but Jäger uses the same backdrop for an original, beautiful story that defies easy categorisation. His vivid characters spring to life before the reader's eye and his sense of place is so pronounced that reading *Snow, Fire, Guilt, and Death* feels like being stuck in the mountains

oneself. The closed-off world of the Alps is described with its charms as well as its destructive energy, and a sense of terror is palpable as the characters live through what became known as the 'winter of terror' of 1950, a winter with an unprecedented number of avalanches. This is not nostalgia for a more traditional way of life: it is an unflinching description of a world that has now almost disappeared.

Jäger has written a timeless, melancholic novel about the search for the truth in a complicated world.

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