

by Carlo Leone Spiller
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Fiction

Story from the Edge of Town

Geschichte vom Rande der Stadt

review

Carlo Leone Spiller's 'Story from the Edge of Town' is a fable-like piece of literary fiction. Set on the Swiss border in the interwar period, in what is likely Basel, but never named as such, it focuses on Jakob and Emmanuelle, a young couple struggling to make ends meet. Emmanuelle teaches and aspires to write; Jakob works occasional shifts at the port, smuggles goods across the border, and burgles houses with their upstairs neighbour.

During one burglary, Jakob finds a safe containing the formula for a blue textile dye. The couple recreate it, name it Emja, and discover that textiles dipped in the dye make the wearer more intelligent. At first they use the discovery quietly, for themselves and to earn extra income, wary of being caught. But the dye's effects are unpredictable, and keeping it secret becomes harder. The pharmaceutical industry moves in, offering the couple the life they have always wanted: a house, travel, an end to manual work. The company behind the offer, La Rive, wants to use the dye to create an elite cadre of enhanced humans. This runs counter to Jakob and Emmanuelle's values and aims. They believe that if everyone becomes smarter, the rise of fascism and another war could be prevented, so they sabotage the factory and release the chemical into the river.

The final pages follow the rest of their lives, content but unremarkable, and show that the pace of change continues

regardless of their actions. Progress, the book concludes, is inevitable, and their deed mattered less to history than they had hoped. A late development complicates the picture: their friend Leo Baumbach, writing from the US, where he has fled the war, tells them he has combined Emja with a formula of his own called Libera, which is designed to increase empathy. Intelligence, he argues, has become more common than understanding, and the risk is the rise of a rational kind of barbarism. The dye sharpens intelligence without increasing empathy, and Baumbach's Libera is designed to close the gap.

The novel presents itself as a found manuscript, a detail withheld until the afterword. The time period is hard to place until markers arise such as the recent invention of moving pictures and women not yet having the right to vote. The narration shifts between Jakob's perspective, Emmanuelle's perspective, and an omniscient voice. Both characters think and speak in a way that can feel closer to the present day than to the 1920s.

The style is light and witty, closer to oral storytelling than to more experimental prose. Spiller draws on the real history of the Swiss textile and pharmaceutical industries, and moves fluently between close, detailed scenes and sections that cover years in a couple of paragraphs.

This novel raises questions about whether technological power should sit with the few or be shared, even with the risks of misuse. Environmental and feminist concerns surface without taking over the story and the work should appeal to readers of Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*.

Find out more:
https://www.harpercollins.de/products/geschichte-vom-rande-der-stadt

press quotes

> *I love Emmanuelle and Jakob, who dispel all gloom with their humour and charm. In his captivating novel, Carlo Leone Spiller masterfully tells the story of two people who boldly transcend all boundaries.*

Dana Grigorcea

about the author



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Carlo Leone Spiller studied Literary Writing in Biel, and German Language and Literature, and Philosophy, in Zurich and Berlin. His works have been published in literary magazines such as *Edit*, *entwürfe* and *Delirium*, as well as in the poetry anthology *Ansicht der leuchtenden Wurzeln von unten* ('View of the glowing roots from below'). His debut novel In *Wahrheit war es schön* ('In truth, it was beautiful') was published in 2023. Carlo Spiller lives in Basel.

Previous work: *In Wahrheit war es schön*, Nagel & Kimche (2023).

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