



by Joachim B. Schmidt
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Fiction

Tell

Tell

review

Joachim B. Schmidt's modern take on the William Tell myth is a compelling exploration of power, violence and masculinity. *Tell* brings psychological depth and complexity to a tale readers may think they know, combining these with powerful storytelling in a novel reminiscent of Gabriela Cabezón Cámara's *The Adventures of China Iron*.

The tale begins on the Tell family farm in a remote part of the Swiss Alps. Wilhelm is renowned as a hunter for his talent with the crossbow, but he is a silent man who struggles to communicate with those around him.

Out on a hunting trip, Wilhelm and his oldest son, Walter, meet the *Landvogt* or regional governor, Gessler –a representative of the Hapsburgs– and his henchman, Harras. A refined and educated man, Gessler is homesick and out of his depth in this far-flung outpost of the empire. Though horrified by the violent lawlessness of Harras and his band of drunken soldiers, he finds himself unable to stand up to them. Harras, meanwhile, metes out violence to the local people.

Schmidt's Wilhelm is not a man who ever intends to be a hero. The story's climactic scene occurs when Wilhelm and his sons go to a cattle market in Altdorf to sell the family cow. The town is bustling and, overwhelmed by the crowds, Wilhelm fails to bow his head to

the Hapsburg hat perched on top of a flagpole. (A ridiculous ritual insisted upon by Harras, notes Gessler.)

By way of punishment, Gessler orders Wilhelm to shoot an apple from the head of one of his sons, and Wilhelm must choose which of his two boys must stand against the tree. His shot is successful – but he is accused of having taken a second arrow to shoot Gessler in revenge, and is arrested and shipped off to prison. Wilhelm escapes when the overloaded boat sinks, and does indeed ambush and attack Gessler. He then disappears, making for the mountains.

The novel consists of ten chapters, each made up of short episodes told from the point of view of different characters – but never from the perspective of Wilhelm himself. Schmidt is thus able to depict the psychological complexity of the characters, particularly Gessler and Walter, as well as give a voice to the female characters in this otherwise male-dominated narrative. The short segments also help to ramp up the tension in this fast-paced novel, creating a gripping tale: an uneasy dissection of male violence and the complexity of power.

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press quotes

An incredibly vivid sense of place, and a gifted storyteller.

Welt am Sonntag, Berlin

Schmidt reveals himself to be an incredibly empathetic and skilled narrator with a strong sense for light humour.

Hanspeter Eggenberger / Tages-Anzeiger, Zurich

about the author



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Joachim B. Schmidt, born in Grisons, Switzerland, in 1981, has lived with his family in Reykjavík for more than ten years. He is the author of several novels and various short stories. He also runs a travel blog and works as a tour guide in Iceland.

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