



by Judith Schalansky
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Fiction



The Goethe-Institut
supported the English
translation of this book.

The Giraffe's Neck *Der Hals der Giraffe*

review

Schalansky is both a writer and artist of the highest quality. Her new novel, like her acclaimed *Atlas of Remote Islands* (Penguin), interweaves lucid prose with her own beautifully crafted drawings to great effect. But these drawings, all of creatures, are not incidental illustrations. The novel's protagonist Inge Lohmark is a biology teacher at a secondary school in contemporary Eastern Germany. Her passion for, or perhaps obsession with, natural history defines her entire world view and is expressed in Schalansky's intricate line drawings that depict images from the narrative: chromosomes, jellyfish, a huge manatee, a tiny amoeba.

The story is of Inge's attempts to come to terms with the new order of things: the closure of the school; the realisation that her daughter, long since emigrated to America, will never return; her husband's obsession with breeding ostriches ... And it is the reliability and constancy, along with the endless fascination, of natural history that helps her in this process. For Inge, the slippage between the animal and human worlds is self-evident and defines her understanding of human nature. In passages that range from lyric to outright comedy (Schalansky can rip a character to shreds with immense style), Inge's reflections on the behaviour of those around her are made with the sensibility of a natural historian: kids hanging around at a bus stop, spitting, raise considerations of natural selection; her neighbour's short-lived affair is a classic example of temporary mating pairs who come together solely to breed; and survival of the fittest finally makes

itself brutally felt in Inge's own classroom.

Inge's obsession with natural history makes her, in part, a guardian of the past: she is keeping watch over a dying institution (the school is to be shut down in four years), a run-down and emptying town, and an ideologically bankrupt state. It is in the staff-room conversations that the clashing of ideologies – innovation set against tradition – within a unified Germany makes itself felt, when the often comedic Marxist ramblings of an older teacher face up to imported ideas from the West German headmaster.

In the novel's closing passages, the giraffe's neck moves centre-stage: the evolutionary result of the giraffe's ancestors constantly striving to survive, to reach ever higher branches in times of drought. A final plea for a fitting and humane education. Yet for Inge, this realisation comes too late.

press quotes

'Judith Schalansky has created a character who is both wonderfully cruel and at the same time equally pitiful and touching. She has developed a magnificent, haunting voice, at once sarcastic and extremely funny ... A voice that will remain in the reader's mind long after they have finished reading.' – taz

'A talented and promising new voice.' – FR

'Schalansky's novel is original, headstrong and razor sharp. The author has placed herself squarely at the forefront of literary evolution.'

– Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

about the author

Judith Schalansky Schalansky's Atlas of Remote Islands was published in the UK and US by Penguin Books and was warmly received in the press.

Previous works include:

Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln (The Atlas of Remote Islands, 2009)

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