



by Susanne Gregor
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Fiction

The Last Red Year

Das letzte rote Jahr

review

Susanne Gregor's supremely readable novel gives readers an exceptional insight into an important chapter of recent European history.

The Last Red Year is the story of three friends, Misa, Rita and Slavka, who live in the same apartment block in a small town in Slovakia during the final year of the Socialist regime. The reader follows a year in the lives of the girls as they negotiate school, puberty, friendship, family and boyfriends, with the shadow of a failing Socialist state in the background.

Misa, the narrator, lives with her parents and older brother Alan. Her father works for Tesla and regularly comes back from trips to Europe with exotic gifts like magazines, modern clothes and glitter pens. Misa's best friend Rita lives upstairs and her other best friend Slavka lives downstairs. The girls are all fourteen years old, and talk about boys, periods, make-up and music, as well as the shifting political landscape. Their mothers are best friends too, and meet up regularly to drink wine and discuss their daughters and the latest political developments.

The narrative follows Misa's adolescent journey during the year of 1989, when she begins to feel as though her friends are growing away from her. When Slavka injures herself during a gymnastics performance, things start to unravel. Misa discovers why Rita has been distancing herself from her: she has been in a relationship with Misa's brother, Alan. Misa starts a romance of her own and finds out

that Slavka has been having an affair with the history teacher. The trio can't seem to find a way to talk to each other about their changing lives. They fall out, and it is Misa who feels most left behind.

This is an expertly written, first-person narrative of a young girl coming to terms with her own shift into adulthood, set within a political landscape that is as fascinating now as it was then. The young narrator's preoccupation with friends and boys is more absorbing to her than the dramatic political developments she references, and reminiscent of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. There is also something of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the thoughtful evocation of the minutiae of childhood within a narrow domestic life and the dynamics of family and neighbours. *The Last Red Year* is a beautifully written book that will find an appreciative readership in the English-language market.

about the author

Susanne Gregor was born in 1981 in Žilina (Czechoslovakia) and moved with her family to Austria in 1990. Since 2005 she has lived in Vienna, where she teaches German as a foreign language. She received the Hohenemser Literaturpreis Advancement Award in 2009, and was awarded the exilliteraturpreis in 2010.

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