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The Paradise Machine

Die Paradiesmaschine

review

Acclaimed Austrian author Lydia Mischkulnig is back with an eclectic collection of eighteen short stories.

Unconventional and exciting, the collection presents a real mixture of narrative styles, genres and themes. Mischkulnig's writing is always humorous, and she has a keen eye for the absurdities of daily life. A short fairy tale retelling sits comfortably next to an essay on Venice and its inhabitants. A grasshopper trapped between two panes of glass in an office window confronts the narrator with a moral dilemma. A lonely woman allows herself to be pampered with Dead Sea salts. The single story which features a male protagonist, *Undine*, sees him take a mermaid from the water and attempt to drive her to Italy, despite having a wife. Narratives inspired by fairy tales constitute a significant portion of the latter part of the collection: *Märchen* provides a cynical retelling of Little Red Riding Hood, reminiscent of Carol Ann Duffy's *Little Red Cap*, which sees the protagonist have an affair with the wolf.

How do we relate to our environment? How does our environment shape our behaviour? Mischkulnig is an unflinching observer of power struggles and she questions the dynamic between man and woman in surprising ways. Overwhelmingly she chooses distinct female narrative voices, which provide a unique and welcome perspective. Mischkulnig also explores the spectre of everyday racism and xenophobia as well as the reluctance of some of her protagonists to confront their guilt over Nazi atrocities. Questioning what is foreign

and what isn't is a constant subtext to stories that are set in Vienna, rural Austria, Venice and Japan. In many cases, the bare bones of a plot serve as a springboard for a longer discussion of wider themes. The introspective nature of many of these stories is aided by Mischkulnig's use of a first-person narrator, who often reflects on a specific topic in masterful monologues.

Mischkulnig is not known as one of Austria's most surprising authors for nothing. *The Paradise Machine* manages to be both funny and thought provoking, absurd and touching. It is a potpourri of the fantastical and allegorical, of feminism and social justice, all held together by Mischkulnig's wit as well as her literary mastery.

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