



by Helene Bukowski
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Fiction

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

The Warrior

Die Kriegerin

review

Helene Bukowski's latest novel focuses on the special friendship between two women as they navigate a violent and threatening world. Tackling universal and topical themes, *Die Kriegerin* offers a rare insight into women's lives in the army.

Lisbeth is diagnosed with neurodermatitis as a child and has an acute sensitivity to others' pain that makes the condition worse. The only way to cope with it is to retreat into herself. After a difficult adolescence she joins the army, attracted by its discipline and anonymity. There she meets the feisty Florentine, known simply as 'the warrior', and who is likewise motivated by a desire for self-protection inherited from her refugee grandmother. The two develop a strong bond, until Lisbeth is raped by a sergeant and is so traumatized that she abandons her military career.

The rest of the novel recounts the terrible legacy of the sexual violence inflicted upon Lisbeth. Lisbeth meets Malik, who, like Florentine, is loving and protective towards her. She becomes pregnant and hopes to make a new start, but the past catches up with her and she becomes isolated from both Malik and the child. When things become unbearable, she escapes to a bungalow in the seaside town where she used to go on holiday with her parents. There she bumps into Florentine who is on leave following an unexplained shooting incident.

Lisbeth then gets a job as a florist on a cruise ship where – as in the army – the hard work and transient relationships suit her. Florentine writes to her from her tours of duty, and they meet up at the bungalow every winter. It gradually becomes clear that Florentine is suffering from PTSD, and Lisbeth suffers vicariously in her vivid, empathetic dreams, yet feels unable to reach out to her friend. Nor can she bring herself to tell her that Florentine's new lover and drinking partner is, by coincidence, Lisbeth's own partner Malik.

The narrative is cleverly constructed, divided into three parts – 'Brine', 'Sweat' and 'Tears' – all salty substances with the power to heal in different ways. The sea that soothes Lisbeth's itching and is an ever-present leitmotif; the toil of army life and long working hours on board the ship; and the emotional release that comes with the final reconciliation. The time shifts, too, are handled very skilfully, moving backwards and forwards between present, recent past and distant past so as to build up a picture of the protagonists' lives and motivations.

This moving story is gripping from the start and holds readers' attention throughout. There is a narrative arc building up to an emotional climax that makes it a very satisfying read. The novel makes wider points about violence and the female experience, both in a contemporary context and historically. As a study of a close and complex relationship between two women it will appeal to fans of Elena Ferrante.

"A skilfully crafted novel which is both a compelling read and an allegorical reflection on the theme of female solidarity in the face of violence."

Sharon Howe, Reader

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press quotes

Bukowski has a keen sensorium that allows her politically virulent topics to be captured with crystal clarity.

Der Tagesspiegel on Milk Teeth

about the author



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Helene Bukowski was born in Berlin in 1993 and has now returned to her city of birth. She studied at the Hildesheim Literature Institute and, in addition to writing, also runs creative writing courses and workshops. Her debut novel *Milk Teeth* (Milchzähne), which was nominated for several awards, was published in 2019. It has been translated into French and English and a film adaptation is in the works.

Milk Teeth, Aufbau Verlage: Blumenbar (2019).

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