

by Dana Grigorcea
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Fiction

The Weight of a Bird in Flight

Das Gewicht eines Vogels beim Fliegen

review

Dora, a writer, goes to the Ligurian coast to write the story of an elusive statuette and its creator, the sculptor Constantin Avis, who took it to New York a century earlier. Writing his story – Constantin is taken under the wing of a gallery owner, has a love affair with Lidy, a photographer, and finds his way around the art scene – Dora grapples with the process of creation.

Grigorcea's major theme is the role and purpose of art, and this is reflected as Constantin is torn between the desire for commercial success and the desire simply to create. Two versions of his statuette crop up throughout the narrative, and it is not always clear which is which: a replica made by Constantin for a film set, and the original sculpture, which is sold to a collector. Constantin sells other works, finds success, and is happy with Lidy. But there is also a sense of loss – his works will never come home to him, so he is always on the trail of his next creation.

Constantin's narrative concludes with an account of a court case (based on the real-life case of Constantin Brancusi vs the United States, and his sculpture 'Bird in Space') to determine whether his sculpture is a work of art or not. The overt goal is to enable him to reclaim customs duties, but the real aim is to attract publicity. The case ultimately concludes that the statuette is indeed art. But

Constantin is more concerned with getting back to his studio in Paris, which is waiting quietly for him to begin to create again.

Grigorcea's serpentine exploration plays constantly with the interrelationship between the real world and the world of the imagination. The overlaps between her two narratives (names, characters, objects, ideas) serve an unspoken illustration of where stories come from and how they are created. We follow Dora's mind as the characters in her story take on lives of their own, with the figures in her own life becoming increasingly shadowy and harder to grasp.

Dora's story ends on a positive note. As she heads home, she re-engages more wholeheartedly with her son and the world around her, obsessing less about her writing. She understands that the only way to write is to live. As she concludes, 'what [is] art for, if not to sharpen the senses and live a good and beautiful life?'

With a vivid and evocative sense of place, this is an accessible and engaging treatment of an ambitious subject that will appeal to readers of Ali Smith and Julian Barnes.

about the author



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Swiss-Romanian writer Dana Grigorcea was born in Bucharest in 1979 and has a degree in German and Dutch studies. She has won worldwide acclaim for her novels and short stories, including An Instinctive Feeling of Innocence (published in translation in 2019) and 'The Lady with the Maghrebi Dog'. Her novel Dracula Park (published in translation in 2023) won the 2022 Swiss Book Prize and was longlisted for the 2021 German Book Prize. Dana Grigorcea is also the winner of the prestigious 2015 Ingeborg Bachmann/3sat Award. Her books have been translated into numerous languages.

Previous works: Die nicht sterben, Penguin (2021); Die Dame mit dem maghrebinischen Hündchen, Dörlemann Verlag (2018); Über Empathie – Macht uns

die Kunst zu besseren Menschen?, Telegramme Verlag (2019); Das primäre Gefühl der Schuldlosigkeit, Dörlemann Verlag (2015); Baba Rada, Dörlemann Verlag (2011); Marius fliegt nach Afrika, Baeschlin Verlag (2021); Die Namen der Blumen, Baeschlin Verlag (2019), Einmal Haare Schneiden, bitte!, Baeschlin Verlag (2018); Der Nase nach, Baeschlin Verlag (2018); Mond aus!, Baeschlin Verlag (2016).

Previous translated works: Dracula Park, Sandstone Press (2023); An Instinctive Feeling of Innocence, Seagull Books (2019).

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