



by Eva Schmidt
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Fiction

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The World Over There

Die Welt gegenüber

review

Eva Schmidt's collection of twelve intriguing short stories focuses on the people who populate our lives, but who never take centre stage: neighbours, acquaintances and estranged couples.

Schmidt's enjoyable stories are full of real-life characters that ring true: the holiday-maker smoking outside her B&B window, pondering what kind of life awaits the young couple across the road; the choleric estate agent, always on the road and always on edge, until the rage boils over; the retired midwife taking her dog on daily walks, always up for a chat across the garden fence. Schmidt creates a convincing atmosphere and high levels of psychological tension in her subtle observations of the minutiae of people's interactions with not-quite-strangers.

Curtain-twitching is taken to the extreme in some of the stories, prompting neighbours to intervene in others' lives. In 'That which is missing', a retired neighbour effectively kidnaps a young boy who is being neglected by his mother and takes him to a mountain pasture hut off-season, without any long-term plan. The elderly Olga helps her new neighbours in 'The Night Jessica tripped over the rope', looking after the younger siblings when the teenage daughter is rushed into hospital after an accident. When the daughter dies, the family move away again, and the reader's final glimpses are of Olga barely taking her dog for a walk and not wanting to get involved in her neighbours' lives anymore.

Recurring themes in the collection include alcoholism, sudden deaths and unhappy marriages, but this is not a downbeat title, tending instead towards observation of real lives and human interactions rather than shocking social realism. While the people and places in the stories have a timeless feel, it is in fact timely to read about people who are somewhat isolated within, or even cut-off from, society, living alongside other human beings, but never fully among them. The collection conveys a deeper understanding of the multiple facets of solitude and loneliness, and the ways in which, even without mandatory social distancing rules, it is often not possible for us to be close to other people.

The World Over There stands out for Schmidt's clear and direct depictions of scenes and characters. Her tone is always understated and subtle, leaving enough room for the reader's imagination, while also being precise from the beginning of each story and vignette. Not only does she create very clear images for each scene and story world, but she also knows exactly what she wants reader to believe and feel at each twist and turn of the narrative.

<https://jungundjung.at/die-welt-gegenueber/?fbclid=IwAR3sCqK8NYGJ2xr74juLmQEWiYonsPztcDo91LTFzzKA9uOeyq3OI24dArw>

'Schmidt's subtle observations of the minutiae of people's interactions with not-quite-strangers are detailed, yet never voyeuristic: she does not exploit their weaknesses or oddities, or caricature any of them. Instead, she almost teases the reader with her oscillation between curiosity and reticence, nosiness and neutrality, but always shows empathy for her characters.'

Rebecca DeWald, literary translator

about the author



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Eva Schmidt was born in 1952 and lives in Bregenz, Austria. She published her first work in 1985 and more recently, after a break of almost twenty years, the two novels *Ein langes Jahr* (2016) and *Die untalentierte Lügnerin* (2019). Both books were nominated for the German Book Prize.

Previous Works: *Ein langes Jahr*, Jung und Jung (2016); *Die untalentierte Lügnerin*, Jung und Jung (2019)

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