



by Melinda Nadj Abonji
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Fiction

Tortoise Soldier

Schildkro?tensoldat

review

Melinda Nadj Abonji's striking new novel combines lyrical prose with absorbing storytelling: another triumph for this award-winning author.

After an accident leaves Zoli with learning difficulties and epilepsy, he is unable to continue his apprenticeship as a baker, so his parents enlist the 'useless' young man in the army to fight in the Yugoslavian civil war in 1991. This alternative coming-of-age novel gives insight into young Zoli's peculiar, yet witty and poetic way of thinking.

Tortoise Soldier focuses on the life of Zoltán Kertész, who has suffered from learning difficulties since he fell off his father's motorcycle as a child, unable to hold onto a heavy sack of flour. Since his accident he has developed a keen interest in the natural world and in words, collecting both in a shed in the garden, where he keeps specimens and indulges in crossword puzzles. His parents cannot accept that their once-bright son will be unable to complete his baker's apprenticeship and feel cursed with a useless child. In the Yugoslav Wars, they see a chance for their son to become a proper man, and enlist him in the army. The military lifestyle forms a stark contrast with Zoli's calm and secluded life, and he struggles to fit into the structured and disciplined regime. When his closest friend in the army, Jenó?, dies from exhaustion during a routine drill, Zoli is unable to hold it together. He is sent home, unable to serve, where he suffocates because of an epileptic fit while eating.

The reader observes Zoli's struggle to fit in through his own eyes and those of his cousin Anna, who also struggles with mental health

problems and understands Zoli better than his immediate family. After Zoli's death Anna leaves her teaching job in Zurich on a whim to visit her old home. On the journey, she reminisces about Zoli and their childhood together, and tries to find answers about how and why he died. Through the voice of Anna, as she mourns the death of Zoli, *Tortoise Soldier* acquires an elegiac feel, celebrating Zoli's approach to life and his character. Despite its brevity, *Tortoise Soldier* demands to be read slowly so that the reader can cherish the word-play and love of language conveyed by the author.

This is an extraordinary book distinguished by Nadj Abonji's unique, expressive prose which insightfully conveys her protagonist's particular way of perceiving and interacting with the world. *Tortoise Soldier* captures a whole life with poignant brevity.

press quotes

'This book is made special by the humorous levity with which it connects the serendipitous, the incidental and the mundane: a requiem for a country that has disappeared.' – FAZ

about the author

Melinda Nadj Abonji was born in 1968 in Becsej, Serbia. At the beginning of the 1970s she moved to Switzerland with her family. She works as an author and musician in Zurich. Nadj Abonji was awarded both the German and Swiss Book Prizes for her 2010 novel *Fly Away, Pigeon*.

Previous works:

Tauben fliegen auf (2010), *Im Schaufenster im Fru?hling* (2004)

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