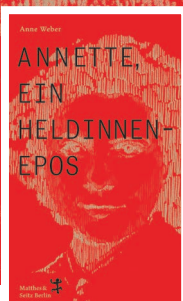


EIN HELDINNEN- EPOS



Anne Weber *Epic Annette*

What a life! Born in 1923 in Brittany, member of the communist youth organisation and of the *résistance* during the Second World War, Annette de Beaumanoir saved two Jewish kids and received from Yad Vashem the distinction of the „Righteous Among the Nations“. Because of her participation in the Algerian war, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison. She broke free after an incredible escape, was part of the Ben Bella government before fleeing again to Switzerland this time where she works as a neurologist. The epic life of Anne Beaumanoir is brilliantly told by the French-German author Anne Weber and gives the reader the reassurance that true heroes still exist.

„Surely one of the best books of the year.“

Der Tagesspiegel

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Anne Weber

EPIC ANNETTE

Sample translation by Damion Searls

Anne Weber, born in 1964 in Germany, lives in Paris. She always writes her books in two both languages, German and French, and has translated numerous French authors into German.

Anne Beaumanoir is one of her names.
She exists, yes, she exists, and not just on
these pages—but in Dieulefit, or in English
God-made-it, in southern France.
She doesn't believe in God but he does in her.
If in fact he exists, that is how he made her.

She is very old, and, as the story's telling
would have it, at the same time not yet born. Today,
at age ninety-five, she comes
into the world on this blank page—
into an impenetrable void into which she
casts long round mole-like glances and which
is gradually filled with shapes and colors,
Father Mother Heaven Water Earth.
Heaven and Earth are lasting things
while Water comes and goes, it streams
into the dry riverbed of the Arguenon where it
twice a day straightens up the boats that
for hours have lain on their flanks. Twice a day
it again withdraws into the sea. A "sleeve canal"
they call it here, in brief, La Manche, The
Sleeve, even though it is not a canal and also not a sleeve,
not hollow, if anything more of an arm: the
arm of the sea with which the Atlantic reaches
up toward the North Sea. Gently the boats
lie back down on the bellies of their sides.

In the universe of the room, the still-uninhabited
room, swim four and sometimes six
shining brows or eyes. As in a darkroom,
outlines slowly rise up out of the nothing,

starting to sketch out faces around
the brows. Mother. Grandmother.
Father. The child, named Anne, whom everyone calls
Annette (pronounced Annett, not a German An-net-tuh),
sets these
planets whirling in their orbits.

The Anne of today is by age
twice as far removed from Annette as her
Grandmother was then, but somewhere,
astoundingly close and far away,
the child still lives. She is one with the her of today,
not vestigial, not dead, but sleeping;
she still exists.

Annette was born on a dead-end street,
and not just in the metaphorical sense
as all of us are. Her grandmother's house comes
at the end of a row of unplastered fisherman houses that
ends
with this one right before the river.
Every one of these little houses has a living room
downstairs and two attic rooms, left and right.
"Her grandmother's house" should not be taken to
mean it was hers. She rents it. The accommodations
are pitiful, and the rent correspondingly
low, but this small amount is still
a lot for her, widowed young, bringing up
her children with the income from pêche à pied or
fishing without a boat:
day after day she sets out at ebb tide
and tirelessly digs through the wet sand for all kinds

of sea creatures, clams crabs
carpet shells northern whelks,
that she carries in a basket on her back to
villages in the area—Saint-Éniguet,
La Ville Gicquel, Le Tertre, Notre-Dame-du-Guildo,
Le Bouillon—and sells there.

Her mother's mother was born in Brittany in
the 19th century, so in a certain sense
two centuries before her, as
one of many children of indigent farmers who
couldn't feed their children and therefore sent
them one by one into richer people's service.
The little byrewoman or tender of cows is very poor. She
wears
—oh, what a shock later to her little grandchild!—
no underwear. Didn't have any. Slept in the straw. Her
yearly wage was a pair of new sabots and every two
years there was either a curtain along with
a pair of stockings or a dress and a jacket, which
was hardly a luxury, since she wasn't
grown-up yet. She never went to school. Illettré
they say when someone is like her or
able neither to read nor to write.
At fifty, she realizes for the first time—Annette
is maybe seven—that she never once got
a kiss from her mother, upon which this woman
who had never complained before bursts into tears. And so
they sit, grandmother and granddaughter,
and kiss and kiss and kiss each other
and cry. About her father she knows only
how crude he was. Her brothers and sisters, servant

children like her, she never mentions,
maybe they're dead by now, or lost,
or they live nearby. Annette
loves this grandmother more than anyone; she
is rich not in goods and educated
not by reading.

Annette has another, as
do we all. This one she loves less.
Her father's mother, a Beaumanoir,
which means Beautiful Manor and
is in fact the better family in a place
with no actual high social circles.
Madame Beaumanoir, too, is a widow and the
daughter of the notary. In her early years
Annette never once saw
Grandmother Two. The bridges
between her and her son had been burned
on the day she forbade him from
taking the girl from the fisherman's house—one of
the daughters of Grandmother One—as his wife,
and Madame Beaumanoir surely suffered
from this, but what was to be done?
Everything in her bristled against
the unequal union, from which,
to her great regret, an Annette
promptly sprang. She considers her son
a better sort and she's right about that,
he is a better sort, for he renounces
both her respectable company and his inheritance
for the sake of his darling. At this point
they are both practically children, not

legally of age and unable to marry without parental permission, so Annette, just like in a fairy-tale—a Breton fairy-tale—is born in Grandmother One’s poor fisherman house and out of wedlock, but not outside of love. She is for the time being not entered into any birth registry.

She has happy parents, one would say, but is that right, and, when put so sweepingly, even possible? Isn’t it always said that the condition of happiness exists for moments, at best? But they are happy all the time, and let anyone with proof to the contrary speak up, now’s their chance. Happiness is the keynote of their everyday lives. From the start suffused with this inaudible warming music, furnished with the bright eyes and undaunted hearts of her parents: Enter Annette.

Her parents are not only what one calls happy, they are also opposites. Jean is tall and Petite Marthe is short, he is thoughtful and laid-back, she chatty and bustling, but reasonable too, and a storyteller, the kind you listen to open-mouthed. He likes to call her “my suffragette,” by which he means not so much her feminism as her tendency to get angry about injustice and fume with rage; in her

own idiom she is soupe au lait a.k.a. milk-soupy, anyway like the kind of soup that quickly comes to a boil. She has taught herself everything, and “everything” might not be everything but still, it’s a lot—love of reading, how to play ping pong. Only driving hasn’t worked out, she’s too tempestuous for that.

No wonder, one might well think, that given these fortunate circumstances the daughter would become what she then became and what the blurbs, since decades of deeds and struggle far exceed the bounds of any book cover, hardly summarize. If it were so—if circumstances alone predicted the future—we would be free of all responsibility, any sense of guilt, any conscience. It’s not that simple. The main thing still arises, still remains to be done.

For the time being Annette is almost five, yes, her birthday’s coming up but will she live to see it? From today’s point of view a stupid question, but back then the answer is entirely unknown. For she is seriously sick and even unconscious, but then she wakes up and the first thing she sees is the bicycle she’s being given for her birthday. Her parents have taken no notice of the worldwide economic crisis—they had their own Great Depression, they sat on the edge of their only daughter’s bed and didn’t pray, just followed, with the exactitude of despair, the

doctor's orders, while the doctor himself
didn't truly believe that the child could be saved.
Meningitis. —The worst
is over. Annette has come back to her senses,
no mere flip of a switch but a
slow process, for she still,
ninety years later, remembers that first her
muscles skin joints sinews and
entrails made themselves known,
only when she found her ears again
could she hear her parents' voices.
At the convalescent's bedside a
summit meeting of both grandmothers takes place.
Madame Beaumanoir comes up against La Mère Brunet,
as Grandmother One was called in the village.
Enchantées, yes, both are thoroughly enchantées,
if mainly at the little girl's
recovery. Annette's parents
are by this point of age and married.
Annette now bears the name of her father
and of reconciled Grandmother Two
and is called, on paper, Raymonde Marcelle
Anne Beaumanoir. She has long since left
the little fisherman's house and moved with her parents
and Mémère across the iron bridge over the Arguenon
or Pont du Guildo, which Mémère's husband,
an ironsmith, had moved here to help build,
although five short years and three children later he was
(consumption) dead. The new house, again
just a little house, is on the other bank, across
from her birth house. The river that
separates the two houses—a wide current

at high tide—is at ebb just two trickles.

Look there, the happy little houses, one might
well think, were one standing on the bridge
today and glancing left and right
at them both. In the hall of the second,
between the front door and the door to the parental
bedroom, serving as goals, the family
plays soccer before dinner,
until ten goals are scored.
Then a wrestling match flares up,
as can happen sometimes in happy houses,
where it is a sign of—well, happiness.

When there's a dance and music is being played
down by the bridge, Mémère and Annette dance
the polka at the kitchen's open window.
Jean, Annette's father, is a Socialist,
but the priest—we are in Brittany
and the minister is Catholic—
so, Monsieur le curé often comes by
for dinner, which is hardly
surprising once you know that
as soon as he took up his office he introduced the same
candles
for everyone, or rather, the same size of candle.
Up until then communion celebrations used—
depending on how rich the parents were—for this one
a finger's-width little candle, for others
—little Dibonnet, for example—
a kind of candle-pillar.
Annette's father gets along well with this priest,

and so as not to worry him sends
Annette to First Communion
(her mother, Marthe, doesn't much
care, but she likes the priest too).
This produces two weeks of "explosive mysticism"
(Annette's words), which to be sure is not nothing, but
from a distance of almost a century is
surely rather little. Beforehand and afterwards:
nothing. As in Dumas's novel
there are in that village Blues and Whites,
which is to say Republicans and Royalists,
though the latter are no longer precisely
Royalists, but Traditionalists
and Catholics. The Blues are
still Republicans, and Laicists
too, which means that they want to separate
the church from themselves, of course, and
especially from the state, and once that happens
they'll have nothing further to say about it.
In Brittany this is still a pious
or rather impious wish. In Le Guildo
there is a girls' school, Catholic, where
most of the children go, even the
daughters of the few rich farmers and of the leaseholders
of the princely estates, for there is
a prince, too, and a castle to go with him.
In the second school, run by the state, are gathered
the poorer to bitterly poor daughters of the
seafaring people au longs cours or away on long voyages,
fishing for cod in great number off Newfoundland,
which months later they will bring back home
as stockfish, which is to say, salted. Coastal

fishermen's daughters are there too, and two or three
farmer's children, thirty girls in all, in other
words one class, there aren't enough for more in the école
laïque.

There Annette learns to read and write, and
almost as soon as she knows something she
starts teaching Mémère, who
in fact can do neither one nor the other.
The cavern under Annette's blanket makes
a good classroom. It takes a couple of
months, then both can read, or let us say:
decipher. With Annette's help, Mémère writes
the memorable sentence: "Today
I made a soup with the potatoes and leeks
from the garden." She
reads to her son-in-law—somewhat laboriously,
but still—an explanation from
a dictionary, unfortunately
tradition has not preserved which word.
The fact remains: Under the covers
the word Enlightenment still means something.

A quarter century later, Grandmother lies
dying. Annette is there, and
to bear the parting she clings to
the book she is currently reading,
that is, not really reading but the one
she has with her. It is by Arthur Koestler
and called *Darkness at Noon*, translated into German
under the title *Sonnenfinsternis*, *Sun Darkness*. On
the cover of the French edition it says *Le zéro*
et l'infini, *The Zero and Infinity*—

three titles, in short, to each of which
this death chamber gives a new meaning.
The dying woman reaches out her emaciated
hand for the book, examines it
for a long time, and then points—a smile, a
hint of a smile, on her lips—with her gnarled and
tiny finger to the z in zéro, and very softly
and a little mischievously says: I couldn't
remember that.

Rest.

Back to the beginning, for Annette's life
has only just begun. As stated, as early
as 1929 she is in possession of a bicycle,
which naturally not every five-year-old can
claim, especially when, like Annette, she has
parents who are not especially rich, but not
every child her age is the
daughter of a cycling champion,
well, all right, champion is a bit much
but anyway an athlete who has competed
in the Tour de France, namely in the
early 20s, before Annette's birth.

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