

Charlotte Gneuss

Gittersee

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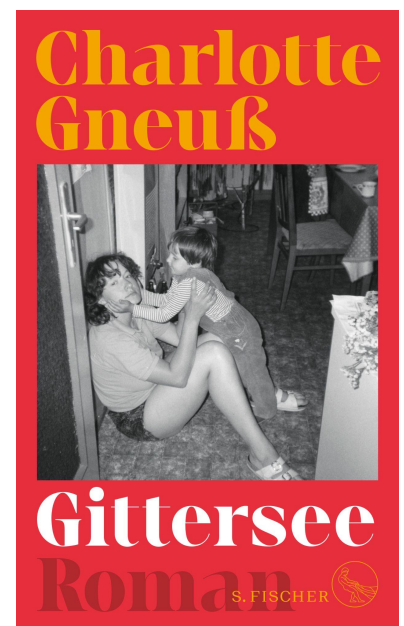
A shift in generational storytelling about recent German history - and a remarkable debut

Literary Prize of the Jürgen Ponto Foundation 2023

The year is 1976 in the GDR. Karin, 16, lives in Dresden's working-class suburb of Gittersee, where she looks after her toddler sister and helps her obstinate grandmother around the house, who is still lamenting the end of her time in the Wehrmacht. Karin's father is struggling to keep his Skoda and family life running, while her mother wishes she had a different existence altogether. Karin's only confidante is her friend Marie, a girl with big dreams: she wants to be the first woman on the moon. Karin is also head over heels in love with her boyfriend Paul, who aspires to be an artist but works in the mines. When Paul takes off on a weekend outing and doesn't come back, two policemen turn up at Karin's door asking his whereabouts. Her world is turned upside down and in her confusion, she seeks support from the attractive policeman Wickwalz. He in turn persuades her to inform on her family and friends as an unofficial collaborator. When she realises she's been betrayed by Wickwalz, she takes drastic measures to break free again.

In her searing debut novel, Charlotte Gneuss tells us stories from a country that no longer exists and asks whether innocence in a totalitarian state is possible.

"Does that sound familiar? Your heart is burning, but you're pretending it never burned? Charlotte Gneuss's heart is a lonely hunter." Monika Helfer



Charlotte Gneuss was born in Ludwigsburg in 1992, studied social work in Dresden, creative writing in Leipzig and writing for the stage in Berlin. She has published her work in literary magazines, is a guest writer for *ZEIT Online*, and has been invited to literary workshops by the Jürgen Ponto Foundation and the Kölner Schmiede. She is also the winner of the Leonhard Frank Scholarship for New Drama and the editor of the anthology *Glückwunsch*, published by Hanser Berlin. Gneuss' work repeatedly returns to the GDR – the reality and utopia of the country where her parents grew up, but which no longer exists.

Sample Translation: Lucy Jones

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It is early in the day and late in the year. Rühle stands motionless. A thin wire is stretched taut between two beech trees and flashes in front of his eyes. A hand protrudes from a coat sleeve at his feet. The hand is large and pale. Rühle kicks it with the tip of his boot; the hand barely stirs. The body that belongs to the hand is under a motorbike. The yellow headlight of the motorbike shines across the coat, hand and scarf. Blood trickles from the scarf. The blood stains the asphalt black. It takes Rühle a moment to untangle the knots, wind up the wire and stick it in his pocket. When he turns around, his soles crunch on the frozen ground. Startled, he looks around. But there's only a blackbird chirping and a pigeon cooing. Rühle's heart thumps all the way up to his temples. The roadside is coated with a thin frost. On it lies a black clump, like a sparrow fallen to the ground. Rühle picks it up and now holds a glove. Well-tanned, soft leather.

We were sixteen. Just two boys. Thorsten and David. No bickering today, said Betzler and folded out the blackboard. We sow and reap for the good of socialism, it said in tidy cursive script. Betzler adjusted her perm and said, today we're going to look at how white cabbage is sown. Anna put up her hand, can I go to the toilet. Babsi said, her again. She's got secrets buried in that toilet. Anna turned around, nope, my period. No one wants to know, Kerstin cried, but the door had already fallen shut. Be quiet now. Betzler tapped on the blackboard with her chalk. In which dishes do you find white cabbage. Stews, casseroles, *Dead Gran* black pudding, Marlene replied.

Would you please raise your hand, Betzler asked. Marie wrote in my exercise book: Annoying lot. I wrote underneath: Most of all you. Don't touch my stuff. Outside a cat ran across the cracked concrete. Marie drew a line: ~~Don't touchy my stuff~~. Then she leaned over to me and whispered, how's it going with Paul.

As soon as Paul had come rattling into the yard on his moped that Friday, Grandma had rolled her eyes. I ran upstairs to check on the litt'un but she was still fast asleep. Hastily I painted my lips red, mussed up my hair, smoothed my dress and ran back down again. Paul had turned off his moped and was standing, legs planted apart, leaning against the saddle. Want to go on an adventure, he asked and winked.

Of course I wanted, but the littl'un was going to wake up any minute and besides, it was washing day. Come on. He wanted to drive to the Czech summer solstice. With Rühle. A machine in their factory had packed in and Paul said that by the time the spares arrived, the Russians would be dead. Of course I wanted to go with him – but the littl'un, the washing.

It's now or never. Paul fiddled with the brakes, clickety-clack. All I wanted was to take off, right there and then. But I said, uh-uh, not so fast, and without Mum's permission, you know I can't.

Ok, then ask her.

She's not in.

Then let's ask your Daddy, he's more likely to say yes anyway, Paul said and started up his moped and in no time we were doing a hundred and eighty on the straight road, rapeseed yellow zipping by. I hugged Paul from behind, leaning against his shoulder with my breasts in his back, and in a flash, we were in Kleinnaundorf, took the first left, and then in Zossener Street. Father's office was on the third floor and suddenly, when we were standing there, I no longer felt at ease.

Go on then, said Paul, can't stand around here all day. He still had things to pack and wanted to pick me up again at around half past three. And if it gets later, just come straight to the place in the woods at a quarter to six, said Paul and went to caress me but I shook my head and his fingers away. Oh, come on, you can talk to your old man. That's what you think, I shouted but he had already left.

I looked up to see if the window was open and perhaps Father already looking out. What was I supposed to say. By the way, Daddy, I'm driving to the

summer solstice with two lads, the washing will take care of itself and the littl'un learned to cook over lunch. Don't worry, I'll be back on Monday. Of course there was no window open. I kicked a ciggie stub off the pavement, sat down on the lowest step, leaned my elbows on my knees and my head on my forearms. Finally, I scraped some dirt out from under my toenail. Then I looked back up at the top window. Maybe the secretary would be on his lunch break, would come walking through the door at that very moment, see me and say, Goodness, child, your daddy's working, off home with you. But the window remained closed, and the doors firmly shut. Nonsense. I wasn't a child anymore, but I wouldn't let a girl of mine go to Czechoslovakia on her own with two lads either. Far and wide, the street was empty. The littl'un would soon wake up and she couldn't be left alone with Grandma for long. I climbed up on a garden wall and looked over a photinia bush at the church tower. Gone half-past two. Another hour before Paul came back, and whether he would was by no means certain. I might as well walk home, I thought, and jumped down off the wall.

Just before I got to the village, someone gave me a lift. Thick grey hair sprouted from his ears and when he smiled and called me a real cutie, I could count how many gold teeth he had. Four. It's really nice of you to give me a lift, I said. I only live in the next village, so it's not far. He leaned on the steering wheel and asked what my name was, how old I was, about my brothers and sisters and my parents. Did they know I was gallivanting all alone on the country road.

My name's Karin but my friends call me Komma, I'm sixteen, have a sister and two parents, and of course they know where I am, I replied. But I wouldn't say I'm gallivanting all alone on the country road, I added after a moment's thought. He smiled, ah-hah. Five. He had five gold teeth. The endless fields of rapeseed

beyond. Do you live around here. I asked. Wouldn't you like to know, he said. Should I show you where I live. Sure, but not today. I have so much to do. What are you up to, he asked and smiled again. Well, aren't you a nosey parker, let me out here, I said. He stopped and I shoved open the passenger door. Any time, Mademoiselle, he said, tooted his horn and drove off.

Grandma was fuming. Whatever was I thinking. Had I gone mad. What was that ruffian up to. I couldn't just drive off with any old Tom, Dick or Harry. I took the littl'un from her, who was chattering the whole time, and explained that Paul wasn't any old Tom, Dick or Harry. That I'd just been away for a short spell and she didn't need to shout it from the rooftops. I could hear her screaming all the way to the other end of the yard.

There, there, I whispered in the littl'un's ear and kissed her soft, thin hair. Grandma doesn't mean it like that. She's just angry because she lost the war. I set the littl'un down on the ground. She immediately clung to my leg. Little Goldilocks, I have to do the washing and can't carry you around the whole time, d'you understand.

The littl'un didn't understand. Tears hung on the ends of her lashes. Why Mum'd had to add to our brood was beyond me. I shook one of the lower branches of the walnut tree. The littl'un gaped dumbly at the thing shaking and stopped fussing. See, I said, opened the machine, smacked the wet clothes into a zinc tub and went into the house with two buckets.

I'd just finished cranking the wringer when I heard her caterwauling at the gate. How I'd been with that boy again. It was a disgrace, that's what it was. How I needed a good talking to. Young people these days. The gate clanged shut. Father

walked into the yard a little later. The littl'un beamed. He picked her up, threw her into the air and said, Grandma says your friend Paul has been here again. I nodded and took a vest out of the wringer. That Paul, Father laughed, he's turning my daughter's head and driving my mother mad. What did you get up to.

We just drove around a bit.

Just drove around a bit, said Father.

Just drove around a bit.

And will you drive around a bit again.

I shrugged. Maybe.

All right, before you plan on driving around very often, please ask me. Otherwise, this situation here might drive us all up the wall.

The littl'un whined and Father patted her soothingly on the bottom. Then he fixed on me with a very serious look and said, Please promise me that you're being honest.

I promised.

A quarter to five. Another hour. Why hadn't I said anything to Father. I lay the littl'un on the changing table and wiped the poo from her behind while I thought about how to get to the place in the woods by a quarter to six. Spill the beans to Father. Too late for that. Three days in Czechoslovakia. He'd never allow it. And even if. Mum would forbid it.

Five o'clock. Father was lying in the driveway under the Skoda with only his feet sticking out. Next to him sat Grandma on a stool, the corners of her mouth

turned down. In front of her was the toolbox. When Father yelled wrench, she handed him the wrench; when he yelled piston, she passed him the piston, when he yelled turn, she went over to the steering wheel and turned. Damn. Father started cursing. No chance of asking him now. I picked up the littl'un, put her on my feet and walked up and down the garden. She loved that game. I hoped Mum would be home soon.

A quarter past five. First, her shoes clacking on the asphalt, then the squeaky gate and finally the squeaky door. The littl'un began screaming. What's the matter now, said Mother. Does she have gas, a temperature, the runs. I shrugged and said, Can you take her. Can I get in the door first, Mother said and walked past me and up to the bedroom.

Half past five. Mother on the sofa. Me on the carpet with the littl'un. She was driving a wooden block across my leg and murmuring, brumm-brumm.

Mum, can you take the littl'un, please.

Why, you're playing so nicely together.

Mum, seriously.

Then give here.

I handed her the littl'un, ran upstairs, lipstick, blue dress, hair up, hair down, out. I wanted to be there early, earlier than Rühle. Outside I waggled Father's left foot and called out, I'll be home for dinner.

Where are you off to.

I leaned my bike against a birch and crept forward through the thicket. Paul was kneeling in the clearing and fiddling about with the back wheel of his moped. The light was falling on his neck. He was wearing his best flares, a

light-coloured shirt and new sandals. He looked so handsome. I wanted to creep up on him from behind and cover his eyes with my hands. He would laugh, turn around and kiss me. So I crept up but wasn't quiet enough and a branch cracked or leaves rustled, in any case, Paul jumped, turned around and asked, What are you doing here.

Because the sun was in his eyes, he put his hand across his forehead like a baseball cap. His face was so shadowy that I couldn't see his expression. I ran over to him and shouted, We had a date, didn't we. Quiet, he hissed and that's when I saw it. Between the casing and the tyre, money was hidden. Maybe 600 marks. Paul, I said. He placed his finger on his lips. Without saying a word, he clamped the casing back over the money and the wheel rim.

Where did you get that money.

Saved up.

What do you want to do with it.

Buy climbing gear.

But you aren't allowed to take more than a hundred across.

I know, that's why – lips sealed.

Before he checked the tyre, he looked around. In the stillness, a train whistled, its wheels chugging rhythmically. It took forever for Paul to get the tyres the way he wanted. Then he asked where my luggage was.

I'm not allowed to come.

What.

Daddy won't let me.

Did you tell him you'll be back Monday.

Of course.

I spoke loudly and clearly to seem convincing. Psst, Paul hushed. Hey, I whispered, it's not that bad. We're going climbing next Saturday, we're doing the Barbarine and—

And what if you came anyway, Paul interrupted me.

What am I supposed to tell Mum.

Do you need to.

Come on.

A fly landed on Paul's arm and he didn't swat it away. He looked at the ground as if at a faraway spot. Then he stood up and brushed the sand off his knees. Why do you need all that, I asked, pointing to his bags. For climbing gear, food, and stuff. He shrugged. I didn't know what to do with my hands. He whispered, please, don't say a word about the money, you understand. I nodded and he nodded too. And don't forget you're my baby Komma and I love you more than anything else, he whispered and kissed me on the forehead. Then he said that Rühle would soon be here. I laughed and said, I'm off already, then took his face in both my hands and kissed him on the mouth and thought how handsome he looked.

As I was cycling back down, I passed many people. First the new guy. He was leaning against his motorbike, smoking. Evening, Herr Wickwalz, I shouted and waved. After that, I passed Rühle. What's up, aren't you coming Too short notice, I called out and then, see you Monday. Lastly, I passed Rita, whose face was blotchy from wheezing uphill. I pretended not to see her and half sang a song. At home, I

went to park my bike quietly and creep past Grandma and Father into the house, but they must have finished fixing the car. Only when I reached the hallway did I hear them arguing. That was Friday.

Fixing the Skoda, playing with the littl'un – that was Saturday. And by then, everyone was pissed off as hell with the Skoda.

I had a dream that night. I was standing in a big stadium where sprinters were running, training for a competition. They were as big as giants; they stepped up to the starting line and said to me, come on, you try too. I took up the starting position like them, put one knee on the ground and my fingers on the red sand. And when the whistle sounded throughout the stadium, Mother was sitting at the table and spat her teeth into her soup. Then I heard screaming like someone was being murdered. Instantly I sat upright. The littl'un was screaming, the bell at the gate was ringing and someone was crashing down the stairs. I picked up the littl'un, spoke soothingly into her ear and took her to the window. Downstairs Father was walking across the yard in his dressing gown, then he opened the gate. A smart car was waiting at the entrance, and Father had to shield his eyes to stop the headlights from dazzling him. Two uniformed men stepped out. One was very tall and the other – it was the new guy. Now Mother joined him in a white nightdress. For a while, everyone gesticulated wildly, then suddenly they all stood still, very still for a moment, as if frozen. Eventually, they turned towards the house.

Karin, can you please come. Father's voice, sharp.

It's all fine, I whispered to the littl'un, all fine. I laid her carefully in her bed. Then I went downstairs. The gentlemen were standing on the landing and looked

at me. And how they looked at me. And it was quiet, so quiet. Just the clock, tick-tock.

Father opened the door to the front room. Would you like tea. Coffee.

The corner of his mouth was twitching. On the round dining table, there was a beer, a salt pot and two glasses. He hurriedly cleared them away. Avoiding my eyes, he said, sit down.

My name is Hamm, explained the tall man in uniform, and this is my colleague, Herr Wickwalz. We're here to clarify a matter and wondered if you could help us.

He stroked his moustache. You don't happen to know a Paul Forster.

I looked at Father and Father looked at the floor.

Do you know a Paul Forster, Hamm asked.

You see, she doesn't know him, Father said to Wickwalz.

I'm the one asking the questions, Hamm replied. Upstairs the littl'un began to cry. Mother jumped up and slammed the door. You can tell us everything, Wickwalz said. It was the first time I'd heard his voice. It was deep and warm. There were still breadcrumbs from dinner on the table. Are you scared to talk about it in front of your Daddy, Hamm asked. He put some leniency into his tone and his hand on Father's shoulder. I don't want to nose around in your affairs, but Paul takes your daughter to the woods every day. Let's just hope that soon she isn't —

He winked at Father as if to a friend. I arranged the breadcrumbs on the table according to size. Karin, please. Father looked at me, hangdog.

Hamm leaned back. He exuded calm as if he could sit like that forever. Then out of nowhere, he slammed his hand down on the table and upset everything. If it's going to be like this, I'll have to ask her to come with us, he said. You surely understand. No, Father said. No, I don't understand. Even if my daughter, even if my daughter with Paul. What's happened. And that's when Wickwalz said, defected to the West.