



## Reviews

### **Mithu Sanyal, Identitti**

Carl Hanser Verlag, Hardcover, 448 pages

It almost seems as through the author Mithu Sanyal founded a new literary subgenre with “Identitti”: the identity novel.

The story centers on the student Nivedita and her professor Saraswati. Nivedita, a person of color (POC), has never really felt like she belongs or is recognized and accepted by a community. That changes when Saraswati comes into her life. The rhetorically brilliant professor of Postcolonial Studies, also a POC, is ubiquitous—on television, on the radio, on stage. And she is revered by her students as a savior. Until the day when it turns out that Saraswati is in fact not a POC at all, but a white woman. The identity debate is brushed against the grain and woven into a novel that is clever, original, often entertaining, at times a little strained.

Edgar Rai

### **Norbert Gstrein, Der zweite Jakob**

Carl Hanser Verlag, Hardcover, 448 pages

In the end, is about guilt. And how we deal with it. Or, to be more precise, how Jakob deals with it. His sixtieth birthday is coming up, something he would rather not have to face. After all, who likes turning sixty, and certainly not an actor, which is his profession. He makes a confession to his daughter that he would rather not have made. It’s about something he was guilty of a long time ago. At this point, Jakob doesn’t suspect at that this confession marks the beginning of a fatal exploration of his own life, of the lies concealed in it, and of everything this has done to him and made out of him. A masterfully composed, artfully narrated novel that sometimes seems a little behind the times.

Edgar Rai



Thomas Kunst, Zandschower Klinken

Suhrkamp Verlag, Hardcover, 254 pages

What can be said with a fair degree of certainty about the story is this: Bengt Claasen's dog has died, and now Bengt is sitting in his car, driving, the deceased dog's collar on the dashboard. Where it falls off, Bengt resolves, he will start a new life. The collar takes him all the way to Zandschow before it falls. So Zandschow it will be. Another thing that can be taken for granted: Zandschow has a fire-fighting pond and Getränke Wolf, a kind of social hot spot. And is home to various people who like to pass the time doing curious activities—on Thursdays, for example, when Mr. Wolf puts twenty plastic swans out on the pond and the spectators on land follow the movements of the swans on the water.

One has to be open to the grotesque; sentences or entire paragraphs often recur, arranged like collages; perspectives change, and it is often difficult to pinpoint the time or place. Nor is it easy to make out story with a developing, comprehensible plot. And this is probably not intended. Yet one can certainly enjoy Zandschow, in general, and the Zandschow residents in particular.

Edgar Rai

Antje Ràvic Strubel, Blaue Frau

S. Fischer Verlag, Hardcover, 432 pages

Adina, a young girl from a village in the Giant Mountains in the Czech Republic, is raped on an estate in the Oderbruch region. She flees and ends up in Helsinki, where she has an affair with Leonides, an Estonian diplomat and university professor. She meets Kristiina, a young activist and member of parliament, which gives her the opportunity to testify against her rapist, Johann Bengel, an influential networker from Brussels.

As cruel as it is logical, the narrative is a suspended, almost ephemeral web of scenes set in different times and told from different perspectives. For the brutal



Johann Bengel, Adina is “Nina”; for the amorous Leonides, she is “Sala”; and for others she is an Eastern European of indeterminate origin. This role is reinforced by Leonides’ struggle to unite Western and Eastern Europe, which for him is only possible if the West accepts a share of responsibility for the atrocities committed by the Soviets against their own people. Between the chapters, which slowly coalesce into a story, the BLUE WOMAN appears repeatedly, a ghostly figure that Adina encounters on a regular basis. She seems to take seriously the young woman who wanted to become invisible in Helsinki, and thus becomes an important witness of her existence.

*Blue Woman* is a challenging 420-page book that requires effort and at the end leaves the reader exhausted by disturbing events, oppressive states of mind, and ambiguous narrative perspectives. Antje Ràvic Strubel spent eight years writing the book creating an impressive work of narrative art about devastating female reality and Eastern European identity, telling the story of a young girl emerging from the darkness.

Katharina v. Uslar

### Christian Kracht, *Eurotrash*

Kiepenheuer & Witsch Verlag, Hardcover, 224 pages

*Eurotrash* has an extraordinarily beautiful format and a very successful cover. I mention this because Christian Kracht certainly had had an influence on these things, as he knows something about good looks. And he also knows something about wealth, about places in the world where the affluent own houses, about expensive furnishings and iconic 1960s fashion designers. After all, he grew up in this world, in the seemingly untouched idyll of the Swiss ski resort of Gstaad, with its grand hotel, elite boarding school, polo ice rink, and old-fashioned-looking tearoom where billionaire chalet owners spend their afternoons.



It is precisely this world, however, that the main character Christian Kracht hates with a vengeance. He never tires of despising and insulting his father, his mother and her Nazi family, their friends, his godparents, and above all their money. He only tolerates his mother, who is demented and addicted to pills, while he travels with her through Switzerland in a taxi with her hands full of 1,000-franc bills that she gives away. In the process, something unexpected happens: Kracht and his mother meet on a new, at times almost truthful level, recognizing each other and giving each other support.

*Eurotrash*, a thoroughly mannered, immensely intelligent, funny, and very well written novel, is the grown-up sequel to Kracht's *Faserland*, a carefree furious reckoning with Germany's past and in the end a thoroughly reconciliatory, albeit deeply sad, family episode.

Katharina v. Uslar

### Monika Helfer, *Vati*

Carl Hanser Verlag, Hardcover, 176 pages

When Monika Helfer talks about her *Bagage*, or baggage, she means her family: her father Joseph and her mother Grete, her siblings Gretel, Richard, and Renate, Uncle Sepp, Aunt Irmi and Aunt Kathe, to name but a few. *Bagage* (which is also the title of her successful last book), sounds pejorative, like countless children and poverty and overcrowded kitchens, and that's exactly what life is like in the household of the Helfer family, who come from poor backgrounds. And yet she uses this term with pride, because it also means cohesion and protection.

In this volume, Helfer devotes most of her time to her father: a man she didn't know very well, yet whom she adored in a childlike way, as he had chosen her as an ally among his children. They were allied in their almost physical love of books. Thus, her favorite place, too, is the library that her *Vati*, or father, maintains at the War Victims' Rest Home on the Tschengla plateau. It is books that incite him to swallow poison (from which he will never fully recover); it is books that get him to



catch up on his schooling; and it is books that he will stumble on and die over at the end of his life. Until then, however, life holds many twists and turns that will alienate Monika and her father from another and then later bring them back together.

*VATI* is a childhood memoir of the postwar years in the Vorarlberg countryside, in which the Austrian dialect is constantly echoed, funny, sad, and dramatic. And ultimately touching, when the author realizes that she is glad that her father never dared to really confide in her as a person and thus always remained *Vati*.

Katharina v. Uslar

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