



Der Hals der Giraffe

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Anpassung ist alles, weiß Inge Lohmark. Schließlich unterrichtet sie seit mehr als dreißig Jahren Biologie. Daß ihre Schule in vier Jahren geschlossen werden soll, ist nicht zu ändern – in der schrumpfenden Kreisstadt im vorpommerschen Hinterland fehlt es an Kindern. Lohmarks Mann, der zu DDR-Zeiten Kühe besamt hat, züchtet nun Strauße, ihre Tochter Claudia ist vor Jahren in die USA gegangen und hat nicht vor, Kinder in die Welt zu setzen. Alle verweigern sich dem Lauf der Natur, den Inge Lohmark tagtäglich im Unterricht beschwört. Als sie Gefühle für eine Schülerin der 9. Klasse entwickelt, die über die übliche Haßliebe für die Jugend hinausgehen, gerät ihr biologistisches Weltbild ins Wanken. Mit immer absonderlicheren Einfällen versucht sie zu retten, was nicht mehr zu retten ist.

Nach dem gefeierten "Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln" schreibt Judith Schalansky einen Roman. Darin kämpft eine Biologielehrerin für die Einhaltung der Naturgesetze, verrenkt sich den Hals nach unerreichbaren Früchten und fällt am Ende vom Glauben an Gott Darwin ab. Schauplatz der Geschichte ist eine der irrwitzigsten Anstalten dieser Welt: die Schule. (suhrkamp)

Der Hals der Giraffe Details

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Alexandra says

Einer der wunderschönen Einbände, den ich je gesehen habe und traumhafte biologische Schautafeln gezeichnet von einem sehr guten Grafiker können mich leider nicht darüber hinwegtäuschen, dass für mich die Hauptfigur und der ganze Roman absolut nichtssagend sind. Neben den ständigen unsäglichen biologischen Taxonomien der Hauptprotagonistin gibt es für mich keine Aussage, keine substanzelle Geschichte, und auch keine nähere Beleuchtung der Figur - es kann ja nicht sein dass ein Mensch derart eindimensional und langweilig ist. Man kann sie weder hassen noch lieben, die Beschreibung dümpelt derart an der Oberfläche der Persönlichkeit dass es schon ein Frevel ist, dieser Geschichte überhaupt ein eigenes Buch zu widmen. Was die Kritiker veranlasst hat, diesen Roman für den deutschen Buchpreis zu nominieren, ist mir wirklich schleierhaft. Auch die Beschreibung des aussterbenden Ostens (Neue Bundesländer in D) und die sich daraus ergebende Analogie zur Biologie, bringt mich auf eine Art zum Gähnen, die eines Buches unwürdig ist. Ach ja die Sprache ist natürlich hervorragend sonst hätten sich ja diese Kritiker nicht so gefreut.

Fazit entbehrlich und eine totale Enttäuschung!

Christian Krüger says

Mich hat die Geschichte gefesselt. Sie wird von einem Humor mit bitterem Nachgeschmack getragen. Die Hauptfigur, eine Biologielehrerin, ist vom Leben erkaltet. Besser noch, für mich lebte sie überhaupt nicht, sondern ist am Trott bereits gestorben. Jedes neue Schuljahr scheint für sie in den gleichen Bahnen zu verlaufen. Mit jeder neuen Klasse finden sich doch nur dieselben Charaktere. Ihr Verhältnis zu Partner und Kind kann auch nicht als Beziehung bezeichnet werden. Kurz hier tritt eine einsame Frau durchs Leben, deren Härte vor weiteren Verletzungen schützen soll.

Beeindruckt hat mich die Erzählweise. Sicher mag mancher Handlungsstrang bereits mehrfach in Filmen bedient worden sein. Doch vermag die Autorin mehr und das macht es lohnenswert ihr weiteres Schaffen zu verfolgen.

Steph says

Ich muss sagen dass mir das Buch zu Beginn überhaupt nicht gefallen hat. Ich war sehr verstört von der Sprache und der Abneigung zur Hauptfigur. Dann habe ich das Buch ein paar Tage ruhen lassen und wieder angefangen und auf einmal fand ich es großartig. Es ist einfach sehr sprachgewaltig und hat mich wirklich beeindruckt! Ich dachte nicht dass sich meine Meinung noch mal so umschlägt und ich bin froh es zu Ende gelesen zu haben. Es passiert eigentlich rein gar nichts, aber wie schon gesagt, diese Wortgewalt ist einzigartig und sie wird auch nicht jedem gefallen.

Michaela says

Dieser "Bildungsroman" begleitet Inge Lohmark, eine Biologielehrerin vom alten Schlag, die im kurz vor der Schließung stehenden Charles-Darwin-Gymnasium im Osten Deutschlands unterrichtet und bitterböse Beobachtungen über die Jugend, das Altern, die Evolution und Unzulänglichkeiten der Menschheit und deren gesellschaftliches Zusammenleben macht.

Einsam und verbittert macht sie spitze Bemerkungen über ihre Schüler und KollegInnen, Nachbarn und Vorgesetzten, Kommunismus und Kapitalismus und die "natürliche Selektion". Dabei ist die von ihrer Tochter verlassene und von ihrem Mann vernachlässigte Lohmark getrieben vom ewigen Lehrerzwang, überall Fehler zu sehen, nur nicht bei sich selbst:

Evolution bedeute eben die die Weiterentwicklung von etwas Unvollkommenem, so Inge Lohmark, die es jedoch nicht für nötig hält, sich selbst weiterzuentwickeln - bis ihr eines Tages zu ihrer eigenen Überraschung eine ihrer Schülerinnen auffällt - und zwar in einem Maße, das über eine gesunde Lehrer-Schüler-Beziehung hinausgeht...

Blixen says

Opera prima della tedesca Judith Schalansky... e si vede, perché è un romanzo "eccessivo", come se l'autrice avesse tante, troppe cose da dire e volesse esaurirle tutte in una volta. Troppe idee originali e nessun filo conduttore. Stordisce e non convince, alla fine sa di falso.

Capita, quando si è all'inizio, ed è un peccato perché a quel punto l'autore fa tutto da solo e non lascia al lettore il tempo adeguato per comprendere cosa sta accadendo.

Veniamo alla storia: Inge Lohmark, donna algida e sussiegosa, insegna biologia in un liceo di quella che un tempo era la DDR. La sua vita appare monocromatica come le lande desolate in cui è ambientata la storia: ha un marito interessato solo all'allevamento di struzzi e una figlia che vive negli USA e dà sporadiche notizie di sé.

A sua volta, Inge, ha un approccio con la vita freddo e distaccato, nulla la coinvolge perché la biologia è il metro con il quale analizza il mondo, spiega ogni evento umano attraverso le dinamiche del mondo naturale. Per questa ragione all'interno del romanzo ci sono pagine e pagine, a dir poco estenuanti, di spiegazioni scientifiche e curiosità zoologiche. Questo è il primo eccesso dell'autrice, perché ci si stanca presto della lezioncina e soprattutto questi pensieri risultano falsi. Il personaggio diviene una "macchietta". La visione dell'amore secondo la professoressa? Sbalzi ormonali che servono alla continuazione della specie. A parte il fatto, che sotto un certo punto di vista è vero, e già Laborit negli anni '70 chiamava l'amato il nostro "bisogno biologico", ma non è questo il punto. C'è una *reductio ad unum* spaventosa. Manca il lato umano, che tutti, ma proprio tutti abbiamo. Non è possibile non soffrire, non avere dei desideri e delle debolezze... Qual è il desiderio di Inge? Perché dobbiamo continuare a leggere questa storia?

Si intravvede un po' di umanità in quello che dovrebbe essere il colpo di scena: la professoressa inizia ad interessarsi ad una sua studentessa in modo sempre più evidente.

Un amore saffico? Sarà il primo nella sua vita? La professoressa ne è consapevole? Una persona così rigida come vive questa nuova emozione? Non è dato saperlo, purtroppo anche questa parte non è stata approfondita, la Schalansky prepara tante piste da seguire e non si comprende dove voglia portarci. Troppi temi: fine della DDR, visione razionale della realtà, analfabetismo emotivo, bellezza della natura e amore omosessuale.

L'idea di base era buona, ma penso che l'autrice fosse interessata più ad essere originale che a raccontare una

storia, quella che invece tutti noi cerchiamo.

P.S. I disegni all'interno del romanzo, invece, sono proprio belli e li ha realizzati la stessa autrice.

Elisa says

Lo sforzo incessante di dare a tutto un ordine e un senso, perché tutto segue la legge della natura e la natura è giusta, l'evoluzione inevitabile, il più debole soccombe al più forte e così dev'essere.

Eppure non tutto nell'essere umano può essere ricondotto alla ragione e al puro calcolo, qualcosa di incontrollabile compare sempre nei momenti e nei luoghi meno sospettabili.

Un libro unico e poetico nel suo trattare di biologia, mi è piaciuto tanto e mi ha fatto riflettere.

Suad Shamma says

I cannot begin to tell you what this book is about, so don't ask. Was it about a Giraffe's neck? No. Was it about a teacher who tries to adapt to modern times of creating a relationship with students in order to keep her job? I don't know, I didn't think so. Not really.

Frau Lohmark is a very annoying character. She is a disgruntled, bitter, old lady. It's all good and well if you want to be strict in school as a teacher to earn respect or fear or whatever you think it is you're earning, or because you believe that's the only way students will actually retain the information you are teaching them, but if you're actually a disgruntled, bitter, old lady outside of your career, then you're just annoying. The fact that her own daughter has no emotional attachment to her mom is no surprise to me, considering what kind of woman her mother is.

This book is heavy on evolutionary theories, things that I don't necessary believe in, but I do find interesting. So I thought I'd enjoy reading this book, but honestly, it just felt like one big boring Biology lesson that I had no interest in attending, but I was forced to. My brain felt like it was shutting down halfway through, and I was skimming through great chunks of passages because I had no interest whatsoever in what was being said. There seemed to be no story, no plot, no character development. It was all very vague and ambivalent. What development did take place was extremely infinitesimal and held no significance - to me at least.

All in all, a very boring book that you will want to put down again and again and again. I'd have given it no stars, BUT, I will admit that there were a few passages that I did find very appealing and found myself highlighting for future reference.

One such passage is the following:

"The very fact that man had to go to school said volumes about the inadequacy of his construction. Almost all other animals were ready at birth. Ready for life. A match for it. After a few hours they were already standing on their own feet. Human beings, on the other hand, remained unfinished all their lives. Deficient creatures. Runts. Physiological premature births that have reached sexual maturity. Unprepared by nature.

Only ready for life right at the end. You only grew so old because you had such an infinite amount to learn." (p.174).

That, to me, was a brilliant rant. And earned the book at least a one star.

Bjorn says

Like a cross between *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Stoner*, set in reunited Germany. And that's the sort of soundbite that Inge Lohmark herself would most likely have had nothing but contempt for.

Frau Lohmark (she's very adamant about being on last-name terms with everyone, and cannot fathom how the younger teachers can let their students address them by their first name) is a biology teacher in a dying town in the former GDR. Each year, she gets a new class (smaller each year, as more people move away and the ones who remain lose all motivation to study) of bored high schoolers whom she's expected to teach the basics of what should be a hard science; she's been doing this since the good old communist days, and while other teachers have had to change their entire syllabus to adapt to a new society, *biology* hasn't changed, has it? Well, apart from people like Lysenko falling out of favour, the idea that improvement can be passed on from generation to generation, and so she clings even harder to the basics: genetics, evolution, survival of the fittest. She loathes her weak students, her daughter's moved to California and her husband has taken up ostrich farming... what else is she supposed to do but carry on, convince herself that nothing really changes but the buzzwords in the principal's motivational speeches?

Like with *Atlas of Remote Islands*, Schalansky plays a lot with the narration here, almost to Oulipoan levels. The book is only three chapters long, each covering one day in Frau Lohmark's life, but with each spread having a different heading - *Infanticide*, >*Niches*, *Central Nervous System*, *Embryogenesis*, etc etc - as she forces everything that she feels and remembers into a purely biological context, trying to explain everything with a Darwinian *deus vult* to keep from screaming. Not that she would. That sort of self-serving sentimentality is for those who still think words like "freedom" and "happiness" actually mean something. We fuck up because we're born that way, we foist responsibility onto the next generation, and then we blame them for not accepting it.

And yet, within all this, amid the closed-down factories and empty apartment buildings, the averted eyes, flashes of pure beauty and a longing that she almost allows herself to feel, itself perverted by the setting. Until she forces it down again.

notgettingenough says

We are inside the head of an aging school teacher of biology. In a theoretical way, if asked, we know that life is about natural selection, evolution, the struggle to survive. But for Inge Lohmark it is far more than a theoretical by-the-way. It is life, it really is for her. Every thought, every observation, every relationship, every mouth of food, every moment of teaching, every coffee break, nothing exists without this conscious understanding of what is happening.

She sees teaching as something to survive in a Darwinian way. She is a disappointed person, but in a matter-of-fact way. Her take on her classes, on the behaviour of teenagers, on the Eastern German education system

is hilarious in a bitter, dry sort of way.

I can't resist giving a couple of examples: if nothing else they will serve to reassure the reader that this book works in translation.

Here she is in front of her class.

Bull by the horns.

'There are cases when patients with Alzheimer's and dementia can't remember the names of their children or their partners, but they can remember their biology teacher's.' Bad experiences sometimes left more of a mark than good ones.

'A birth or a marriage may be an important event, but it does not secure a place in the memory.'
The brain, a sieve.

'Never forget: nothing is certain. What's certain is nothing.'

Now she'd even started tapping herself on the head with her forefinger.

The class looked on in dismay.

Back to the book.

'There are about two million species in the world. And if environmental conditions change, they are endangered.'

Total lack of interest.

'Can you think of any species that have died out already?'

A handful of outstretched little arms.

'I mean - apart from dinosaurs.'

All the hands came down straight away. The nursery disease. They couldn't tell a blackbird from a starling, but they could rattle off the taxonomy of extinct large lizards. Sketch a brachiosaurus out of their heads. Early enthusiasm for the morbid. Soon they'll be playing with thoughts of suicide and haunting cemeteries at night. Flirting with the beyond. More death trend than death drive.

Rest here:

<https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress.com>

Ms. Smartarse says

Available in English as The Giraffe's Neck.

I would occasionally stumble on a review of a classic novel, that is so thoughtfully written, without all that stuffy and pretentious school lingo, that I couldn't help but reread it numerous times... the review, not the book itself. Then, I would *wish* I could read something to inspire similar feelings in me. So I chose a nominee of the German Book Prize: big mistake.

There is a little town in eastern Germany, where life is still simple and boring. Probably the last remnant of the communist regime, when education was still "serious business"... or so our heroine - Inge Lohmark - laments at the start of every school year. She teaches Biology at a soon to be disbanded school, due to constantly diminishing student body.

The news is merely an excuse for Ms. Lohmark, to intensify her disparaging inner monologue about her students, her estranged daughter, her indifferent husband... and life in general. There's not much that our heroine regrets, at least not when it comes to her *own* actions. If the rest of the world was so set in its mediocrity, then surely solitude must be a preferable alternative. Well, that along with a constant stream of unfavorable scientific comparison to animals.

Then, unexpectedly, at the start of the school year, one of the high school freshmen, a scrawny little girl, starts to slowly break down the heroine's shell... and that was about the extent of my patience.

My main gripe is with the purpose of this book. What was the point of it? Reading it was costing me a *huge* effort, and I just couldn't keep justify it. *Why* should I care about any of the pretentious bullshit that inhabits the mind of cranky old woman? Come to think of it: why did the panel of judges at the German Book Prize?

Score 0.5/5 stars

I DNF this book at 54%, because there was just no way for me to stomach any of Ms. Lohmark's disparaging remarks anymore, full of scientific terms that I had to constantly look up in a dictionary. It's a fairly short book, barely over the 200 page mark, and yet it took me *two months* to slog through half of it.

André van Dijk says

Inge Lohmark is biologiedocente op een middelbare school in voormalig Oost-Duitsland. Haar beeld van zichzelf en de gehele mensheid is gebaseerd op de wereld van ecologische systemen en de natuurlijke selectie volgens Darwin. 'Survival of the fittest' is het principe dat overal op van toepassing is, iedere vorm van levensvatbare ontwikkeling past zich – vroeg of laat – aan aan de gegeven omstandigheden. En dat kan generaties lang en miljoenen jaren voortduren. Op fraaie wijze weet Judith Schalansky deze metafoor door te

trekken naar de wijze waarop Lohmark haar leerlingen beschouwt: de zwakken zullen het onderspit delven en de sterksten bepalen de overlevering van genen voor de volgende generatie. Nog mooier is hoe dit tegelijk van toepassing is op de manier waarop de Oost-Duitse samenleving ten onder is gegaan aan de geldende West-Duitse overheersing. 'Alleen al het feit dat de mens naar school moest, sprak voor de gebrekkigheid van zijn constructie. Bijna alle andere dieren waren bij hun geboorte al af. Klaar voor het leven. Er tegen opgewassen.' Een indrukwekkende masterclass biologie waar het gevoel geheel uitgebannen is.

Adam Kirtland says

This may be the most beautiful book you'll ever read, and that's not just my opinion, it's official. The book, along with another of Schalansky's works (An Atlas of Remote Islands) has won the prize for 'the most beautiful German book'. It's also no wonder that the book is aesthetically pleasing as it is as Schalansky is also a book designer as well as an author.

In this novel we become accustomed with a high school biology teacher who works her class as an army officer would, regimented and strict. Her approach is clear with every word of the page, however you can also see a softer side that peeks through the stern exterior. The thing that stood out for me was not only the appearance of the book itself but also the way that the sentences are physically structured, short and sharp and often to the point.

Her philosophy is apparent from the off, only the strong survive... 'survival of the fittest'. The issue is that because of her teaching (and living) style she is unaware of the downward spiral of one of her pupils. Other than this there isn't really a strong narrative, yet that is obviously what Schalansky is aiming for. If you read 'Stoner' by John Williams, and enjoyed it, then I'd you'll enjoy this also. The similarity between the two is that the focus is on one individual, living their life apparently unaware of their exact surroundings, plodding through life with no sense of ending.

The copy I read of this was the same as the final print copy (now available in 'all good bookshops'), which is not your conventional piece of fiction. Styled to look somewhat like a textbook / academic science book, comes complete with scientific drawings in the place of chapter headings. Just brilliant to look and also brilliant to read.

Kris McCracken says

The tale of a teacher nearing the end of her tether as the World as she has known it crumbles around her. It interests me that most reviewers found Frau Lohmark – the narrator, a middle-aged high school biology teacher in the former East Germany – entirely unsympathetic. I found the ruminations on nature, biology and human relationships from an observer in a moribund town, in a dying school with a collapsed marriage and a severed relationship with a daughter who lives far away actually quite moving.

Indeed, Inge Lohmark is an unsympathetic character, but surely only the hardest heart cannot see the longing for Erika – a seemingly plain girl in her class – represents the last grasp at humanity for our narrator. Indeed, her 'cracking up' despite the rigidity of her views and biologically determined worldview demonstrates her better qualities.

Perhaps many of those who struggled to enjoy this book might have more actively considered the frame of reference of a woman born, schooled and raised in the East German system and struggling to adapt to rapid change that contradicts everything that she knows: professionally, politically and personally. I found it desperately sad and real. Funny at points, ultimately the extent of Frau Lohmark's alienation is tragic.

To be sure, this is an understated book. The action, tension, emotion and dark humour exists under a surface a melancholic rumination. It positively reeks of decay and the kind of gloom only known by those who've felt history has left behind. Any reader that fails to be moved by the reveal at the end of the book and final rallying call to those students left behind has surely missed much.

I should also note the excellent translation by Shaun Whiteside. There was barely a wrong note in capturing a unique voice and tone.

Frau Zerstreuung says

Gleichmut kommt nach der Wut

Eigentlich hatte ich nie etwas gegen Frontalunterricht. Da - mit genügend Abstand zum Lehrer - mir Raum fürs Träumen blieb. Die Gedanken der Inge Lohmark erschlagen mich wie ein mit Schönschrift voll geschriebenes Tafelbild meiner alten Deutschlehrerin, ihr innerer Monolog ist erstickend und zeitweise nervend, man ertrinkt fast in ihrer Frustration. Auch zwischen den Zeilen kein Platz zum Durchatmen. Wut kommt auf, da kein Mitgefühl und kein Bedauern. Ich sehe, wo es witzig sein könnte, doch fehlt mir da die Selbstreflexion der Hauptfigur oder Selbstironie, die eine Vertrautheit schaffen könnte. Doch dass wäre eine andere Figur als Inge Lohmark. Als Leserin fand ich mich plötzlich wieder in einem kargen, gefühlskalten Klassenzimmer. Mit einer Lehrerin, die endlich kurz vor den Osterferien auftaut, dennoch: "Die war wirklich die Pest. Menschen, die glaubten, immer alles richtig zu machen, waren das Unerträglichste." "Danke, danke, das reicht schon." - Ich gehe mir jetzt den Tanz der Straüße anschauen.

Linda says

In a little village in the former DDR, a German, strict, cynical woman named Inge Lohmark is teaching a class in biology. She views the world in terms of biology. To her, the pupils are different species, whereas some of them have potential and the rest is eventually wiped out by the relentless, natural selection. Their genes, that is. The title refers to evolution and survival of the fittest. The longer the neck of the giraff, the greater possibility of reaching the leaves of the trees and surviving.

Evolution is, according to the narrator, based on competition, which is of great importance, both to the main character and the pupils, but also to the ideology that has begun to grow in the German society. It's ironic that the strict Inge Lohmark - who despises the modern teachers, which, according to her, lack authority - herself symbolizes a species on the way to extinction. What does that kind of society do to the people? What do an ideology based on elitism lead to?

This is no easy book. It is comical, occasionally, but not easy. It has a serious tone, with rather dark elements when it comes to the mother - daughter relationship. The book also contains a lot of the educational fragments that the title promises. The teacher's view of life represents an interesting perspective of

philosophy. The content is philosophical but the prose is objective in style, with short sentences. There's not much of a dialogue, and even though it would have been preferable, the educational monologue is interesting.

Lohmark is living in her own bubble, occupied with her biological views and unaware of what happens in her surroundings. Her knowledge somehow makes her blind when it comes to relationships. Schalansky makes everyday life connected to evolution. It's an fascinating perspective that will surely lead to interesting conversations.
