

Bordering on Revelatory

By Steph Morris

Borders surround and protect us, divide and exclude. They can also frame or split identity. Writers who have crossed or confronted borders will always have stories to tell. Some choose to travel, others are forced over for political and economic reasons, their stories traumatic but demanding to be told. Speaking more than one language is a passport allowing the holder to cross linguistic borders, picking up yet more stories; without it, frontiers of a different kind are faced.

Zurich-based author Ilma Rakusa was born in Slovakia, her mother and father from Hungary and Slovenia respectively. She grew up between Budapest, Ljubljana and Trieste, before her family settled in Zurich. She studied there, as well as in Paris and St Petersburg. Her prize-winning *Mehr Meer* (NBG 27, Spring 2010) evokes a childhood of transience and estrangement. The flipside to this is cosmopolitanism; Rakusa loves to cross borders, and as a lecturer and translator from multiple tongues, she has helped many stories travel, breaking through Europe's south-eastern borders in particular. Her latest book, *Einsamkeit mit rollendem 'r'* ('Loneliness with a rolling "r"', Droschl Verlag) is a collection of vignettes set throughout and across the world; each character has connections and histories in places far from where they are now, from Russia to New York, Berlin, Bosnia, Japan, the Hungarian Steppe – and even the small island of Britain. In precise, poetic language, Rakusa captures places and people, displacement and uprooted identities.

Borders are often used to manage, define and pigeonhole people. The title of Olga Grjasnowa's first book, *All Russians Love Birch*

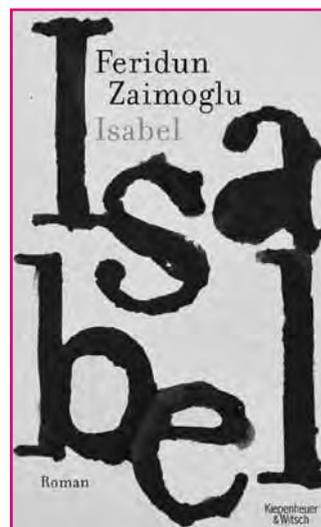


Trees, is an ironic comment on generalisation, and assumption-busting is Grjasnowa's game. Here and in her second novel (see p. 12) her characters live what she calls post-national existences, and also fail to fit the neat categories of gay and straight. Her writing draws on her own migrant background and travels, from Azerbaijan to Berlin via Israel, Poland, Russia and small-town Hessen, and she is vocal on the issue of assimilation versus multiculturalism, describing 'a discourse surrounding integration which assumes there is someone better than others, who can teach the "barbarians" how they should live.'

Another voice in this debate is German writer Feridun Zaimoglu, who was born in Bolu, Turkey, but moved with his parents a year later to Kiel, then in West Germany, where he still lives. Turkey provided post-war Federal Germany with the extra workers it needed, and still provides Germany with its largest number of immigrants, which also provides us with new books, in German, telling stories we might otherwise not have heard. Depending on your point of view, immigrants may be said to enrich or sully the language of a host country. Zaimoglu's first published book, *Kanaksprak*, celebrated second-

generation Turkish immigrants' use of the German language – riding roughshod over grammar and flinging in expressions from English and Turkish – as a lively, valid way with words. The title reappropriates a derogatory, racist German word for Turkish and Arabic immigrants. Zaimoglu clearly loves language itself, in all its forms; he is well versed in all kinds of literature, from classical to contemporary, and is celebrated in German broadsheets for his masterful use of the German language. He describes Islam as a personal source of strength, and defends his right to be who he is and to be German, but recently crossed a border – or a line – when he dropped the diacritic from his Turkish surname, feeling no further need for it; Zaimoğlu became Zaimoglu. The stories he tells sometimes involve people with Turkish heritage living in Germany; sometimes they don't. *Leyla* remains his most popular book, translated by Anthea Bell (NBG 19, Spring 2006). His latest, *Isabel*, is a tale of a lost soul in Berlin.

The border which ran through Berlin for decades is the inspiration for countless books and films. In 1960, as the iron curtain was pulled tight across Europe, Brigitte



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Reimann wrote in her diary: 'Lutz has left for the West. He is now two or three kilometres away and yet out of reach – in the refugee transit camp at Marienfelde. This is the first time I have felt, painfully, not just rationally, the tragedy of our two Germanys. Families torn apart, brothers and sisters on opposing sides – what subject for literature! Why has no-one given it form, why is no-one writing a proper book about it?'. Brigitte Reimann and Christa Wolf both did, but it was later, after the wall fell, that this challenge was really taken up in German literature. Julia Franck is arguably the writer who has best achieved what Reimann called for, describing the emotional cost of political division. *Back to Back* and *The Blind Side of the Heart* are available in English (Harvill Secker). An earlier book, *Lagerfeuer* ('camp fire') is set in the refugee camp in Marienfelde, West Berlin, which Reimann's brother Lutz passed through, and where as a child in the 1970s Franck, her mother and sisters were detained for nearly a year. The book is told from a variety of perspectives, telling the very different stories of people held at the camp, and is just out in English (*West*, tr. Anthea Bell).

Reinforcing borders may seem convenient, but writers cannot afford to barricade themselves within a comfort zone if they wish to write believable, lively prose. Without crossing boundaries they cannot create great stories. Luckily they continue to break into new territory and the stories just get better.

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