

»Simone Lappert approaches her novel's heroine with verve, empathy and a great sense of humour.«

Ursula Krechel

Shadow Casters

A novel by Simone Lappert
July, 2014 / 205 pp.

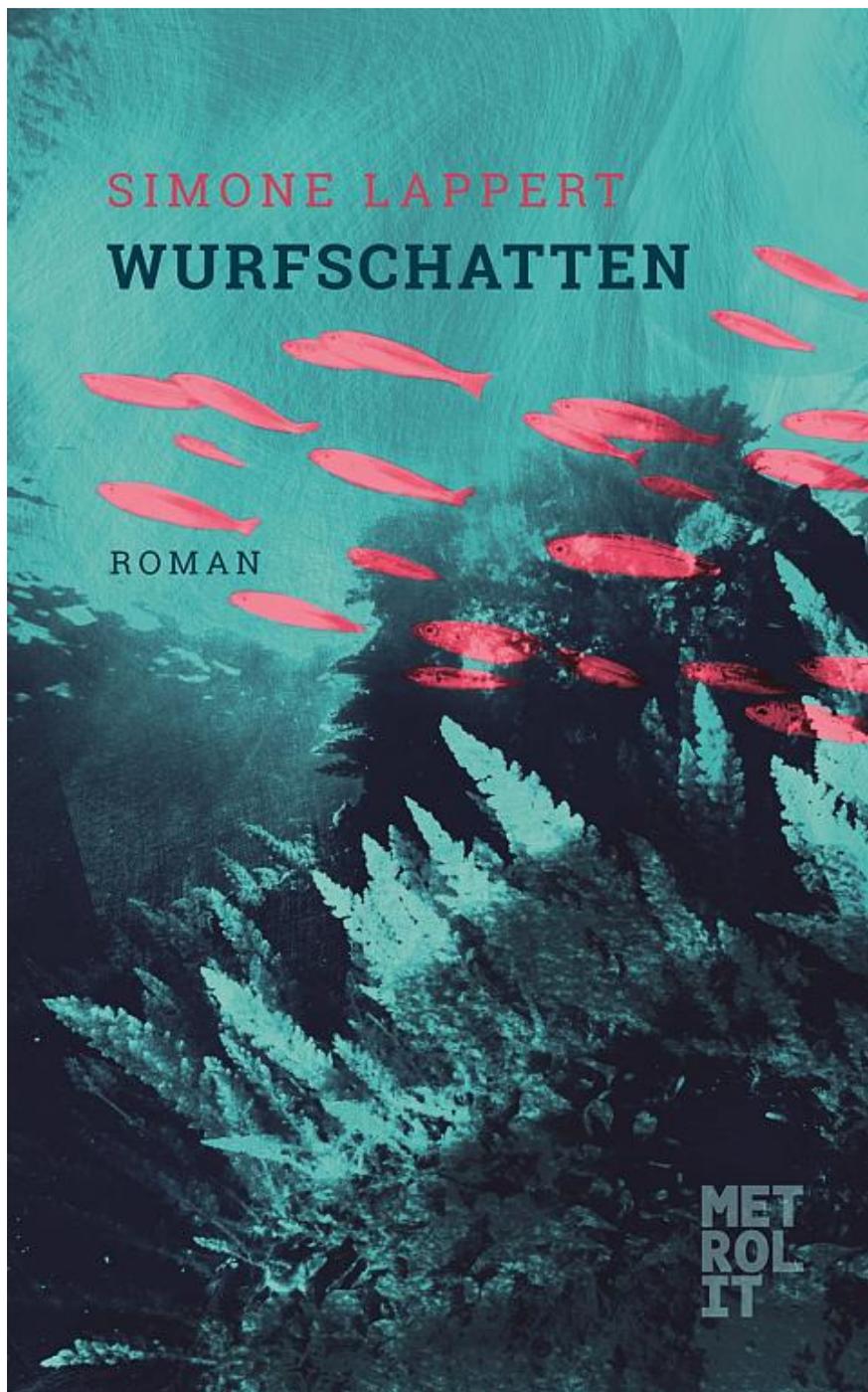
Ada is young, just 25, but she doesn't have much longer to live – or so she is convinced. Not only does she die every night anew in her dreams; her days are also ruled by the same fear of death. In an attempt to get rid of it, she has set up a therapy room. There, she archives her fears from A for Assassination to Z for Zuska's disease. On the outside, she appears strong and carefree, adopting the role of an ambitious actress taking a short time-out before continuing her career on a major stage.

This fragile construction begins to sway when her landlord, old Mr Matuschek, parks his grandson Juri in the apartment because she is behind with her rent. To begin with, Ada is horrified; she feels pressurized by a stranger watching her fail to get a grip on her life. Yet over time, the two come closer. A tentative love story develops, perhaps one that might help Ada find a more conciliatory way to deal with her fear and lead her back to life.

What if fear stops people from living life? In *Shadow Casters*, Simone Lappert tells the story of a young woman who functions perfectly on the outside but threatens to shatter on the inside. Cautiously and without ever denouncing her protagonist, Lappert comes ever closer to Ada, relating the tragic and the comical moments in a life come to a standstill.



Simone Lappert, born in Aarau, Switzerland, in 1985, lives and works in Basel. She studied creative writing at the Swiss Literature Institute in Biel. In 2013 she was awarded the Heinz Weder Prize for poetry, in 2014 the Austrian Wartholz Prize for best newcomer. She won a place on the 16th Klagenfurt literature course and at the LCB.



»*Wurfschatten* deserves to be seen not ‘only’ as an extremely remarkable debut novel, but also in general as a very important representative of German-language literature in 2014.«
Tobias Wrany, Hanns-Georg Jost Bookstore

»I’m bowled over by her command of language.«
Daniel Arnet, SonntagsZeitung

Shadow Casters
(Original: *Wurfschatten*)
A novel by Simone Lappert

THE HOSTILITY OF VITAL ORGANS

You see, it's still beating. Ada pried her fingertips away from the pulse on her neck and lowered her hand, not too far, only to her collarbone. She stared at the street through the dusty window. The pale February sun dealt shadows to the passers-by on the pavement, in synch and in scale, a grain of stencilled black for each one. Everything as it ought to be, at least outside; even the fat pigeons dragged their small shadows along the gutter, where the last of the snow was seeping down the drain. It was near silent in the small room. The only sound was the bubbling of the aquariums, and now and then the hum of the fridge from the kitchen. Ada didn't know how long she'd been standing at the window in her pyjamas, chewing on the end of her plait, which tasted of shampoo and smoke. All she knew was that it must have been a long while, that it was time to move her cold feet and start the day. Instead, she crumpled the artificial scalp of her short blonde wig with her left hand. She'd meant to put it on to rehearse and then she'd forgotten it. That had happened a lot recently – her intentions got tangled up in her thoughts.

Out of the corner of her eye, Ada could see the stethoscope rolled up on the table by the window. Don't, she thought, not again. She leaned her forehead against the cool windowpane and tried to count the shadows on the pavement. But the shadows kept shifting, so she tried it with the streetlamps, the cars, aerials, passers-by, yet her gaze slipped off and off and off on the smooth glass and got caught in the black plastic tube of the stethoscope.

A whale's heart, thought Ada, is as large as a VW Beetle; a heart like that must be incredibly stable. Had a whale ever had a heart attack, she wondered, and what would it look like if a colossus like that doubled up in pain and sank to the bottom of the sea, first whirling up sand with its tail fin and then lying motionless. Ada closed her eyes. There was the glass diving bell again, the one that separated her off from the day, that made her head heavy and her breathing hard. That giddy feeling some people have

when they're jerked out of a deep sleep and the pictures in their head are still stronger than what their tired eyes see. Ada raised her right hand to chest height, held it there a moment and looked at it – the hand was trembling. And if her hand was trembling now, it wouldn't be long before the diving bell pressed her head underwater, deep into her own wash of fear. And while, seen from outside, from one of the windows opposite for instance, she would look merely like a young woman watching the pigeons on the pavement with rather fixed eyes, inside she'd be treading water against the pressure down in the depths. And no one could tell by looking that she was underwater and gasping for air, not from one of the windows opposite and not from close up; for even someone standing next to her, very close, so close that he'd see the chapped skin on her lip, the flakes she hadn't yet bitten off, even someone like that would only have asked in slight confusion what she was thinking about.

Ada lowered the trembling hand onto her thigh. So what, you won't let it get that far today. Get dressed, get your day started, get something started and stop falling into yourself.

She tried to think of something calming. The ducks down at the harbour, the vines up in the windy Tüllingen hills, the confidence of migrating salmon, all the freshly baked loaves on the bakers' shelves and the fact that the others were coming to visit that evening, steaming pasta and wine from Lake Constance. But that's the thing, she thought, dying means never again. Never again wind and wine and freshly baked bread, never again feeding the ducks, applying false wrinkles with make up, never again finding yourself ugly for hours on end, pinching your own fat, never again driving to the sea, waking up sunburned in the arms of a stranger and saying something just because it sounds good. Never again suspecting a home somewhere, never again envying fish for their disinterest. Never again feeling guilty about success and then staying off the stage, never again fearing your own courage and telling yourself tomorrow's another day. Never again being able to put things off, using TV series to break the emptiness in your head down to pixels, waiting from episode to episode for sleep, never again starting the day too late. Never again not calling your

mother, not sending off an application, only one last gasp for air and then: simply standing still – or lying still, more likely – in the middle of a falsehood, an incompleteness perhaps; and that would surely be the worst thing of all: dying incomplete; getting lost somewhere along the way.

Ada put her hand in the pocket of her pyjama top and clenched her fist, as if she could compress the trembling in there. She wondered whether a cigarette would help now. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps the click of the lighter and the crackle of the glowing tip would help: a handful to do for seven minutes, at least.

The jangle of the bell tore Ada out of her thoughts; she flinched. The next moment, though, she was relieved at the anticipated distraction.

Behind the front door's frosted glass loomed one of the pavement shadows of a minute ago, the silhouette of a pudgy figure. Ada looked at her hands. The trembling had stopped. The bell had shattered the separating glass around her head and the day was back again, like an object you come across unexpectedly after looking for it everywhere in vain.

Ada opened the door and looked into a wrinkled but friendly face.

'Miss Ada,' said the man. 'That's right, isn't it, that's you.'

Ada nodded.

'Matuschek,' said the man, rubbing his hands in embarrassment. 'You ought to know who I am. We've already, well, this here belongs to me.' He made a clumsy gesture towards the stairwell. Now Ada remembered and grew restless; she rubbed the top of her right foot warm against her left calf.

'It's a nice building,' she said.

'Yes,' said Matuschek. 'I did the garden myself in ninety-four, you should have seen, I can tell you, but that's not why I'm, I'll just say it straight out.' He took a deep breath.

'I assume you know what this is about?'

She felt sorry for Matuschek. But still Ada smiled and said, 'Thank you for getting the bell mended so quickly. Shall we have a sit down in the garden, with a cup of coffee?'

Matuschek fended her off with both hands. 'Oh no,' he said, 'I'm not allowed, my doctor you know, but that's not why I'm – look, you're behind, over three months,

you know, behind with the rent, and you haven't responded to all the... well, it means I have to take certain, well, certain measures.' He was pulling a face as if he wanted to apologize for waking her up.

'Doctors are such humourless killjoys,' said Ada and shook her head. 'They're professional bullies, bullies and party poopers, every one of them.'

'Miss Ada,' said Matuschek in a tortured tone, 'it's just not, you see, I have no choice but to, I'm going to have to give you notice.' He gestured into her flat with his chin. Ada folded her arms. 'I thought you had sympathy for us artists,' she said, 'for our irregular income.'

Matuschek sighed. 'Look,' he said, 'I do admire the theatre, I like to, but we all have to, I'm sorry, Miss Ada, at the end of the month you really have to, otherwise, well, Mrs Sacher will deal with it then, my secretary. But we don't have to discuss it here in the,' he said, 'perhaps it's better if we both –'

With a single movement that both calmed and shocked her, Ada gave the door a slight push. It closed slowly, with a quiet click, just like that.

I'm sorry, she'd have liked to say, it was in self-defence. I can't possibly allow you to come tramping through my flat, possibly even into the room at the back. I wouldn't be able to explain the slightest bit of it. But Ada knew Matuschek would have misunderstood, she knew he must have misunderstood everything up to now. So they both stood in silence, breathing for a while, each on their side of the door, until Ada finally crept away and slipped into the rescuing room she'd just come from.

She went over to the window and opened it. Perhaps a burst of city wind would help matters. Cold February air splashed over her and grabbed at the photos, computer printouts and newspaper articles attached to the left-hand wall with drawing pins or tape, covering almost its entire surface. One of the sheets of paper came loose and sailed onto the floor. Ada bent over for it. It was a piece from a free magazine about retinal detachment. She had spent weeks plastering this wall with everything that scared her, in alphabetical order from Assassination to Zuska's disease. She contemplated the rustling mosaic, the open wounds and earthquake rubble. If she only studied her therapy wallpaper for long enough, over and over, examined the photos and read the articles, she'd try to convince herself, then the same would happen to all these threats as happened to a word repeated over and over again:

they'd dissolve into meaninglessness.

Her glance fell on the bluish-black X-ray image of a brain tumour, which she'd bought at a flea market the week before. If she held out and looked for long enough, she sometimes spotted the shell of a stag beetle in it, sometimes the watery body of a jellyfish. In fact, though, Ada knew her fear would go on sprawling even despite the wall. As soon as one threat died down, a new one formed in its place. Her fear was like the cancerous growth there in front of her, forming ever new metastases unseen, and the therapy wallpaper was a permanently incomplete documentation of the fears that held her in their grip. Ada was reminded of the passers-by and their shadows and remembered that shadows cast by blocking light testified to the existence of their casters; shadows on the inside of the body, however, meant cysts, tumours, clots; they endangered existence, obliterated it.

Ada stuck the article back in its place, directly next to a photo of a Californian mental hospital. Matuschek's footsteps had fallen silent. Her hands were trembling again. Next to the stethoscope was a pile of pinkish paying-in slips, countless unpaid bills, a pile of mute threats, which were now joined by the one from Matuschek. What if she had to leave the flat, what then? And above all: where would she go?

One more time, she thought, and she went over to the little table by the window. She picked up the stethoscope, put the chair in the middle of the room and sat down with her back to the window. She drew her legs up to her body and pulled the seam of her pyjama top over her feet, put the stethoscope around her neck and turned the funnel-shaped disc in her hands. When she put the plastic plugs in her ears there were a few seconds of perfect silence. She inserted the disc under her pyjama top, past her collarbone to the place beneath which her heart was located. The membrane was cool on her skin. Ada closed her eyes and listened to the bass in her rib cage, now entering her head from both sides and filling it up. You hear, it's beating. It's beating and beating and beating and – what else would it do, she thought, pull yourself together, drag yourself out of here and stop wasting your time on such stupid nonsense.

Ada stood up and went over to the smallest of the five aquariums. She removed the cover, held onto the thin glass edge with both hands and leaned her head, the stethoscope dangling from it, over the aquarium. Lower, and a bit more, until her chin touched the water and the disc sank towards the bottom. She looked down at the

brightly coloured backs of the neon tetras twitching around the silver foreign body. She took a deep breath and her head filled up with even white noise. Now she was down there herself, in the filtered water, a fish among fish. And for a moment with enough lack of memory to stop worrying entirely.

After a while, by the time the neon tetra had lost interest in the stethoscope, Ada raised her head. She removed the plastic plugs from her ears, took the disc out of the water and wiped it dry on her pyjama top. The quarter-hour bell rang. Ada didn't know what hour it was a quarter to. She picked up one of the fish food tins and unscrewed the lid.

'You'll be getting a nicer room soon,' she told the tetra fish as she sprinkled the coloured flakes onto the water surface, 'soon I won't need all the stuff in here, I'll get rid of it all and I won't use you as bait to make sure I come in here in the first place.' They're so good, fish are, she thought, such good, undemanding fish.

Even as a child, she'd had no interest in penguins, flamingos or monkeys. She'd only ever wanted to see the seadragons, the rays, stingrays, eagle rays, the sluggish pulsing of the jellyfish behind glass – the way they drew their poisonous, lace-trimmed nightdresses through the water, headless.

Ada's pudgy hands had left brief prints on the panes of the aquariums at the zoo and the supermarket fish counter. She didn't understand why her mother didn't want to buy her the bream that shimmered in the display every Saturday, turning to the glass to present the sickle-shaped golden band on its forehead. No one else wanted it. Week after week she burst into tears at the fish counter, until her mother refused to take her along to the supermarket.

One rainy day in autumn, Ada's mother was in bed with flu and couldn't collect her from kindergarten. Ada was wearing her blue and yellow polka-dot cape. When she spread her arms she looked like a bluespotted ray. She swam straight up to the fish counter, her trouser pocket weighed down by the change from her piggy bank. The woman behind the counter looked a little like a fish herself, with her blotchy face and wrinkled mouth, which she opened and closed without saying a word. Ada stood on tiptoes to look taller and asked for the bream. But the old woman took hardly any

notice. She grabbed the golden-cheeked fish with her wizened hands and packed it in a bag, which she handed over the counter to Ada. The woman on the checkout scrutinized her mistrustfully but said nothing when Ada clinked all the change into her hand. The checkout woman counted about three quarters of it out and gave the rest back.

At home, she tore open the bag, impatient. The bream was a joy to behold. Ada stroked its cool scales and golden cheeks. She put the fish in a shoebox and put the shoebox under her bed.

Two mornings later, her mother vomited into the washing basket at the foot of her bed. Her father cut the bream into four pieces with the garden shears and flushed them down the toilet.

Ada screwed the lid back onto the fish food tin. Down on the pavement, the passers-by were still drawing their shadowed workday lines. The top of every skull a round compass, every parting in their hair a trusty needle. On days like this, Ada missed the dirty stage floor of the *Breadbox* more than usual. She would have liked to know where the director had run off to with the outstanding wages. By now she was keeping herself just about above water with her part in *Murder on Board*, a dinner show on the between-deck of the *Andromeda*, where the actors mingled in with the guests as they ate. She only appeared for a few minutes, playing the shy Helene who collapsed motionless under the dinner table soon after the show started.

She spent the rest of her time, which was a lot of time, putting off finishing her application documents. And so, instead, she roamed the underground corridors of the vivarium at the zoo or between the vines up Tüllingen Hill, she sat on walls and bridge heads, sometimes with an umbrella, sometimes without, and measured the time passed in cigarette ends, she sat in cafés contemplating crumbly cake, sometimes carrot cake, sometimes blueberry, she took a seat in the cinema for the matinee showing and stayed put until midnight, until the last letter of the last movie credits, she sat with her fish for hours on end, learned the patterns on their backs off by heart and played with her right earring, played so long that it came loose and fell on the floor, she hollowed out bread rolls, combed her wigs and cast shadow fish on

the wall with the aid of the desk lamp or a lighter, stingrays, flounders, tiger sharks. On the nights when she had enough money she called a taxi and had it drive her through the city empty with sleep, into all its threatening, apparently dead corners, and sometimes she drank and danced until the cleaners came, with people she liked or people she couldn't stand, because anything was better than being alone with that deafening silence in her head. And that's why she sometimes brought a man home and fed for a few days on the courage that came over her when one of them fell in love with her and gave her an opportunity to reinvent herself for him for a while and forget everything else. Mainly, though, she tried not to get too close to anyone. Sometimes she cursed how easy she found it to be someone else in company, from one sentence to the next, all a question of vocal pitch and body language, and especially of what she left out. What a wonderful distraction it was when she'd acted an Italian guest professor from Genoa for Felix, a biology student from Freiburg – she'd been invited to the music academy to hold lectures on Puccini's lost flute sonatas. Or when she'd almost driven Geoffrey to insanity, an unsuccessful Dublin bar pianist, as an earthy baker with a French accent and a sailing licence. It felt like speaking a foreign language that she knew well: by using the other language, the familiar world suddenly became exciting and pliable. Until the effect wore off, bit by bit. Not really a foreign language, thought Ada, more a foreign body. But as soon as she was alone that pleasing foreignness of her own body turned back into a threatening foreignness.

She tried to console herself with the thought that it all might soon be better, and if not better then at least different, because in a few weeks she'd be going to Munich, for an audition and perhaps a part. Perhaps, thought Ada, she'd finally enter into the world. But she thought it at the very back of her mind and only because she'd grown accustomed to thinking it.

She closed the window. Water, she thought, heavy, floating bellies, why not, she could always rehearse later, with a lighter head; and she had no money to pay the bills anyway. She decided to claim her shadow down on the pavement, to go shopping for dinner, pasta and wine from Lake Constance, and then go to the zoo, to the vivarium.

Translated by Katy Derbyshire