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Booklover -- Simple Letters

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Herta Müller’s gift for language is a remarkable one. A search for English translations produced a very thin book, and I noticed upon flipping through the book that it is written in short chapters giving a poetic feel, even though this is a work of prose. The poetic dynamic of the book is announced by the following poem by Herta Müller:

“Everyone had a friend in every wisp of cloud that’s how it is with friends where the world is full of fear even my mother said, that’s how it is friends are out of the question think of more serious things”

I didn’t immediately begin writing about this book after reading it. Simply put, there were too many aspects to ponder, and I was quite frankly unsure what approach I wanted to take. Several themes, thoughts, and directions were swirling in my head. Poetry? Communism? Oppression? Relationships? Friendships? The metaphor I felt described in the English title that nothing in this land ever ripens? Instead I busied myself with several other books, one of which was entitled Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See. The theme of “Friendships” is a strong one in this book and I decided to explore this theme and see where it took me. See’s book is on the New York bestseller list. It seems an odd match, but I hope my simple letter will befriend you.

A group of young men and women trying to learn, love, and live under government oppression provide the characters in The Land of Green Plums. They have come to the university for an education but find an atmosphere lacking free speech and thick with fear. Their relationships develop in hopes of finding security, the ability to trust, and escape from...
both the constant police interogation and the dictates from the state. Lola never finishes university as she, a victim of suicide or murder, is found hanged by a belt in a dorm closet. Later, Georg jumps, or maybe is pushed, from a hotel window after emigrating to Germany. Edgar lives in Cologne after finishing school. Kurt supposedly hanged himself with a rope (another possible “quieting”), Tereza dies from the “nut” (tumor) growing inside of her. The nameless narrator (think Müller), who gives me hope that our friends can sustain us even in their death, muses: “To this day, I can’t really picture a grave. Only a belt, a window, a nut, and a rope. To me, each death is like a sack.”

Müller opens The Land of Green Plums with “When we don’t speak, said Edgar, we become unbearable, and when we do, we make fools of ourselves.” I am intrigued with this observation and soon discover that Müller intends to hold the intrigue, as this is also the last line in the book. This quote by one of the principal characters is, for me, what connectes these two books. Communication and trust among friends who live in fear of oppression requires creativity. The letters written between the students in The Land of Green Plums contain a small strand of hair. The presence of the hair was the security system designed to detect if the letter’s seal had been comprised—necessity in order to maintain the trust developed among the friends. One can only surmise how much of Müller’s hair was used to secure her communications. The conflict, love/hate relationship with Romania, and paranoia described in The Land of Green Plums screams autobiographical, or maybe it just screams. One final twist. The Romanian title for this book translates as The Animal in the Heart, which is a purer translation of Herzijer.

Two young girls trying to learn, love, and live under socialism provide the main characters in Snowflower and the Secret Fan. Lily and Snowflower are growing up in the Hunan province of China during a time where women are valued only if they married well and produced a son. They are from pronouncedly different socioeconomic backgrounds but are encouraged to sign an “old same” or laotong contract by one of the local matchmakers with an ulterior motive. The girls need to learn from each other in order to function and survive their respective destinies, for unknown to them they will switch social positions upon marriage. See’s use of letter writing between Snowflower and her “old same” Lily is in a secret woman’s calligraphy known as nu shu.

Snowflower is versed in this secret woman’s writing because of her social standing and must teach Lily this art form. Letter writing becomes their lifeline, gives them purpose and the letters are exchanged via the matchmaker. This communication nurtures and sustains their relationship from the innocence of their youth, to the uncertainties of their respective marriages, in the pain and bliss of the birth of their children, even in the horrors and tragedy of war until the subtle nuances of the nu shu writing are misinterpreted; an unfortunate misreading of a calligraphic figure that places a wedge between the women ending the trust and nurturing communication.

Just as an old nu shu brush stroke evoked an emotion, a confidence, or a celebration, so does the Müller’s poetic description of the painful oppression she experienced. She was betrayed by the country of her birth, and the pain of this betrayal awoke her creative soul. As Romanian novelist Mircea Cartarescu stated on the occasion of her Nobel Prize: “We can only speculate about what her writing would have become if Romania were a free world. I’m certain she would still have been a great poet, but she would not have been Herta Müller.”

Fondly,
The Nobel Laureate Book lover

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Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — Making Hay While the Sun Shines, or Being Laid up When the Snow Falls

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What do you do, and what happens when the department head isn't there? This is my account, my true reality show, for the past two months. I ruptured my Achilles tendon, completely severed it, and had to have extensive orthopedic surgery in January. Staffing the collection development area in Cleveland in winter — and in Cleveland, winter goes well into March — is not a bad thing. Surgery is no fun, and having to scuttle with a bandage and wheelchair then a walker and cast just to get to the bathroom is also no fun. Our house is split level, which meant I was a prisoner on the top floor for quite a while. The logistics of everything is a pain. The device that the elderly use called a grabber, comes in very handy.

Eight weeks is about the amount of time one can expect to be off work with such a thing. As it happened, two library staff members were on medical leave overlapping with mine. The other two, one the head of the mailroom, the other an administration employee doing vital work with human resources matters, had to be replaced with a temp in the meantime. He was actually an excellent employee who had worked in the library on projects and was familiar with the place. In my case, however, as a department head, a lot of the work devolved on my staff, and other things, dealing with acquisitions on my supervisor, the Interim Director, and collection development issues from my subject areas to the Associate Librarian for Collections and Human Resources.

Expertise and accountability of my staff are stellar. That was a key element in the continued functioning of acquisitions in my absence. There are just two of them, but they are enthusiastic, hardworking, and were able to figure out the conundrums that would have come my way. One is a long-time employee whom everyone in the library admires and depends upon for her excellent work — that going-the-extra-mile quality. The other employee is fairly new but has an MLS and has a great deal of that important element that makes a person a “self-starter.” She will rise far fast in the profession.

Of course, some off-the-wall things came up or kept going, but they were resolved by my staff, the financial officer, and others, or they were still in progress. I have worked in libraries a long time, and at this library for a long time as well, and there are always the usual suspects.

The timing was actually pretty good work wise. Fall is always the time with a heavy rush of ordering and receiving of reserve materials, meeting with faculty, just doing new things — period. The period after the holidays with the new semester is less busy in that regard. Now as I’ve returned, the rush of orders is coming, as well as Library Opportunity Grants, which consist of proposals to acquire materials by a collaboration of a faculty member and a librarian. The orders that come out of these grants are often out-of-print, microfilm sets, arcane stuff. They are a challenge — to get them done as well as the regular orders by the end of the fiscal year. I came back at the right time!

I thought that I would be able to do some things at home, but legalities regarding medical leave were such that they excluded any library work by me during that time. It was probably for the best anyway. Pain medication and decision-making shouldn’t mix.

We did have some of the mammoth snowstorms and generally cold and bad winter weather of Cleveland while I was at home. However, our lovely fireplace is in our family room on the lower level so I missed that during a good part of my recovery. Our four cats thought it was heaven to have me on the bed with them for a good while. After I could move around a little from level to level the dogs enjoyed my presence, as well.

Family Medical Leave or FMLA is a great thing. My recovery took about nine weeks, and I had more than enough sick time accumulated for that. My husband took a month off to take care of me on FMLA, as well, and very useful

continued on page 77