

April 2010

Booklover -- Simple Letters

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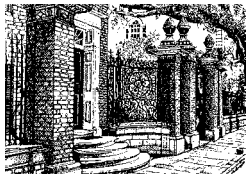
Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Donna (2010) "Booklover -- Simple Letters," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 22: Iss. 2, Article 30.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5519>

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Booklover — Simply Letters

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Core Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC 29425) <jacobsd@muscd.edu>

Dear Booklover:

Simplification of a complex thought is a tough task. In the literary field the "Dummies" book series come to mind: *iPhone for Dummies*, *English Grammar for Dummies*, *Getting your Book Published for Dummies*. Well, you get the picture. During my time at the **Medical University of South Carolina**, I have had the privilege to attend several lectures by **Nobel Prize** winners in Medicine. The ability to eloquently define the complexity of their scientific thoughts in simple terms that anyone can understand is a gift that many of them also possess. When I sent my first rough draft to my friend **Jim** for review, his comment was "Simplify." I was attempting to connect too many dots..... But "Simply put" is difficult when contemplating works by **Herta Müller**.

October 8, 2009: the **Swedish Academy** in Stockholm announced that **Herta Müller** has won the **Nobel Prize in Literature**. Müller was born in 1953 in the German-speaking village of Nitzkydorf located in the Banat district of Romania. Her father served in the Waffen-SS during World War II and her mother spent time in a work camp. She attended the **University of Timisoara**, also located in the Banat district, studying German and Romanian literature. While at the university she joined the Aktionsgruppe Banat, a group of idealistic Romanian-German writers seeking freedom of expression under the Ceausescu dictatorship. Her first job as a translator in a machine factory ended in termination, as she refused to cooperate with the secret police. She ultimately emigrated to Germany but not before the oppressive air that she breathed combined with her censorship and fused to form a remarkable literary artist.

Müller has won almost every literature prize in Europe publishing her works in German. A search for English translations produced a very short list. A quick survey of a few of my Romanian friends reveals that she is not widely read in Romania, either. I did find *The Land of Green Plums*, published in German (*Herztier*) in 1994, translated by **Michael Hofmann** in 1996, and loaned to me by **Coker College** courtesy of

PASCAL (Partnership Among SC Academic Libraries). The book is a thin book, and I noticed upon flipping through the book that it is written with 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 **Gellu Naum**, a Romanian poet who is credited with finding the Romanian Surrealist group. In addition the poem is in play in the story line.

"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 as it is in *The Land of Green Plums*. 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

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both the constant police interrogation 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 connects 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—a 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 *Herztier*.

Two young girls trying to learn, love, and live under social oppression provide the main characters in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. **Lily** and **Snow Flower** 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 **Snow Flower** and her “old same” **Lily** is in a secret woman’s calligraphy known as nu shu.

Snow Flower 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 every 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.

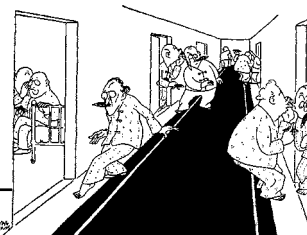
As Romanian novelist **Mircea Cartarescu** stated on the occasion of her **Nobel Prize**: “We can only speculate about what her writing would have become if Romania were a free world. I’m certain she would still have been a great poet, but she would not have been **Herta Müller**.”

Fondly,

The Nobel Laureates Booklover 

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

Column Editor: **Arlene Moore Sievers-Hill** <axs23@case.edu> <arlenesievers7@hotmail.com>



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. On the one hand, missing the commuting 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, some 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 here when I came back. 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

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