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Booklover -- Simple Letters

Donna Jacobs
MUSC, jacobsdf@musc.edu

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I did not 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? Opposition? 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
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 Huanan province of China during a time when 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 Laureate Booklover

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