

★ **Darkenbloom**

**Eva Menasse**

**Charlotte Collins, Translator**

Scribe US (Feb 4, 2025)

Softcover \$19.00 (480pp)

978-1-964992-04-4

In Eva Menasse's historical novel *Darkenbloom*, the wartime secrets of a small Austrian town are compromised by the urgent demands of the present.

The book begins in 1989 in the Austrian village of Darkenbloom. Though it's no longer dominated by counts, countesses, and the majestic presence of Darkenbloom Castle, the town is still a place of traditions, festivals, and "winding streets and whitewashed houses." Modern buildings encroach upon the quaint landscape; the impending opening of the Austria-Hungary border and fall of the Berlin Wall are foreboding; and there is lingering anguish from World War II and the Soviet occupation that elder "Darkenbloomers" all remember but rarely discuss.

Darkenbloom's complex residents include Rehberg, the town historian and travel agent; Resi, the tenacious hotel manager; and Antal, the enterprising grocer. Their personal histories intertwine with Darkenbloom's legacy of violence, antisemitism, and exclusion. Beyond the town's dirndl-clad maidens, lush vineyards, and postcard scenes lurk wartime gang rapes, murders, and acts of duplicity.

As investigative visitors and younger residents question Darkenbloom's longstanding secrecy, the book conveys a sense of the brutalities and pressures endured by those who lived through World War II. Sterkowitz, the town's caring physician, was assigned by the Nazis to replace an exploited Jewish doctor. Raped as a young woman, Resi forced herself to marry her assailant. And after local boys were conscripted into the Hitler Youth, the German occupation was followed by Russian soldiers rampaging "all over the region like swine." Such disturbing events are tempered by rich, omniscient knowledge of the characters, whose quirky humor and humanity amid an impeccable backdrop of clandestine forests and "undulating, dappled" mountain views captivate.

Heralding the expansive disruptions of social change, the intricate novel *Darkenbloom* muses through an Austrian town's troubled past.

MEG NOLA (January / February 2025)

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