

★ **The Trial of Anna Thalberg****Eduardo Sangarcía****Elizabeth Bryer, Translator**

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Misogyny and religious conviction are vicious bedfellows in Eduardo Sangarcía's horrifying, humbling literary novel *The Trial of Anna Thalberg*, based on the Würzburg witch trials that tore through poor populations with their insatiable accusations.

A few years after being brought to a strange village by her husband, Klaus, beautiful Anna is condemned as a witch by a jealous neighbor who sees danger in her honey-colored eyes. Other neighbors rush to add their false testimonies, too. Only the priest is willing to assist Klaus in protesting Anna's innocence to those who would rather make martyrs than mistakes.

In the jail and torture chamber, time stretches, compresses, and curls back on itself for Anna, who only speaks the truth. These terrifying periods are represented in alternating columns of questions and answers that appear in fevered disarray. The confessors so want to find evil in the story of Anna's simple, honest life that they interpret her childhood loneliness as an invitation to the devil, her befriending squirrels and birds as letting evil in, and her parents' deaths as a punishment.

Still, Anna keeps speaking the truth. She is told that the Bible says she should not speak—more “proof” of her deal with the devil. She refuses to make a false confession to end her pain. Those in charge, though, view “woman [as] a cathedral constructed over a cesspool, a palace whose gardens and fountains all lead to the same hell,” so her refusal is an admission, too. Protest is futile, all is in vain. But the powerful are unwitting: when Anna, bodily broken but spiritually unbreakable, is taken to the pyre to satisfy their fears, they condemn themselves with her.

The Trial of Anna Thalberg is an inferno of a historical novel, burning through the lies told about defiant women across the centuries.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2024)

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