

Women and Clothes

Brigitte Kronauer

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In literature, slight moments can often hold more power and import than lengthy tomes. Such is the case with Brigitte Kronauer's short, connected stories that offer brief yet profound glimpses into the life of Rita, a narrator judged by her own creator to be "rather unreliable."

Beginning in her childhood, Rita makes observations about her family, her neighbors, her friends, and strangers that offer succinct, personal definitions that transcend the ways we try to imagine ourselves. For instance, in "Aunt Fritz in White," young Rita watches a beloved aunt's reaction to her own temporary transformation into a desired woman. Gone are the drab green clothes that hid her aunt's body; a new white angora sweater shows the world, including the construction men working outside the window, the shape of her breasts.

"...she presented the proof of her treason for the world to see, which she didn't realize either—on the two jutting-out white and furry breasts were the black traces of the crane operator's hands." It's such decisive moments that make Kronauer's writing both canny and delightful.

Many of her stories address the often uncomfortable whimsy of the heart, how it yearns to find both love and evidence of goodness and strength. But Rita is constantly disappointed. Instead she makes friends with an older man, Gadowski, who finally proves his age and ignorance when he reveals he's a broken man, with nothing left to his name; and Annagret—her very name reflecting a keen human emotion—who Rita thinks is the embodiment of goodness until Annagret loses herself in a stream of vicious criticism.

Kronauer, a prolific German writer of fiction and essays who has received many honors, offers language that is wonderfully stripped of unnecessary platitudes and transitions. She expects her readers to keep up with her varied stories that follow Rita from childhood to beyond the grave, and keeps us riveted with her dynamic language and dedication to detail. "Dazed, I staggered out, away from the prayers into the evening that lurked behind the church portal, searching—the way we're searching our whole lives for the one unknowable overwhelming joy—we could die in a minute, if it only appeared!—for the gaze of a certain less-than-pious person crouching on some stone post maybe cleaning his fingernails..." Evocative and timeless, Kronauer's writing will attract many generations.

ANDI DIEHN (March / April 2011)

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