

Sommerlügen

B.Schlink

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Seven short stories by the lawyer Schlink whose 'Der Vorleser' made a splash some twenty years ago and propelled him into fame. The book was later filmed giving him additional exposure. The book about a former illiterate Nazi-criminal who gets involved with a young man who reads to her and is rewarded by her sexual favors. Morally ambiguous in a way which may not have been intended, it is when all is said and done a somewhat sugary concoction with a bitter under-taste. The theme is ambitious, and hence just as likely to fail as to seduce. The public was apparently seduced.

The present collection also contains a couple of seductive pieces easily digested and hence quickly fading from memory. The author commutes between Berlin and New York, and this is reflected in the choice of location, many of the stories taking place in the Northeast. The first story is about a man and woman falling for each other along the shores of Lake Michigan. It turns out that the woman is much richer than the man, who upon arrival back in his modest quarters in New York suddenly realizes that the life he has become accustomed to will radically change and he will be unrooted and placed at the mercy of his more powerful lover, a woman who knows what she wants. With a sinking heart he despairs in spite of her frequent and fervent protestations of love.

The second story is set in Germany and about a man whose woman is always on the move and hence any kind of permanent settlement is out of the question. He has other girlfriends too, although he is not necessarily physically involved, even tempted by them, but his woman finds out and in a rage of jealousy he is thrown out. Is there a reconciliation? I do not recall, the story failed to make a sufficient impression on me. But it is of course a cheap trick to leave a short story unresolved. Admittedly in a few cases it can work, if the story engages you deeply and you are aware of the ambiguities, but mostly it is just cause for minor irritation. Why not conclude the story so you can safely forget about it, if it is not captivating enough to make you want to phantasize about it afterwards?

The story about the house in the woods is once again about a man attached to a superior and more successful woman. They are both writers, he from Germany, she American. Her career takes off and she becomes a noted bestseller writer getting a lot of attention, while he gets stuck and dreams about an idyllic family life far from the 'madding crowd'. He sires a daughter with her and while she sits at home writing, he takes care of the domestic scene, in particular becoming a favorite parent with their daughter. There is a snow storm and he hopes that their abode will become totally isolated from the outside world. On an errand to the close by town he spots a headline in the NYT informing him that his wife is about to receive yet another prize. He wants to prevent the world from once again entering into their charmed life. In order to do so he razes down with the aid of their car a telephone pole, picks up some police barriers and places them on their rural road to further postpone eventual discovery. His wife though gets restless being out of e-mail contact and decides to go to town and bring their child with them, he opposes it,

but is overruled. And then she suffers an accident with their child hitting the barrier he had placed. She figures it all out and decides to make a report to the police. And once again the story tantalizingly breaks off and you are left with the man alone in the house dreaming about his wife and child returning.

The next story is actually more engaging. It is about two men who meet on a flight (at first one suspects that the narrator is a woman) with one telling him the story of his life, involving a beautiful girlfriend who is abducted in Arabia by a sheik whom they have met at some international party. She is used as a white slave and it transpires that her husband actually received good money for her, money he could not return and which he put to good use. Eventually they get reunited but his friend cannot really forgive him, and after a fight she falls to her death. He is facing criminal charges returning to Germany and to avoid the inevitable he steals the passport of the narrator, who forgives him. Later on when he has served part of his sentence and been released they meet again and the narrator is prevailed upon to lend him money so he can fly back to the States in style. And once again the story terminates without any definite resolution. Somehow the story sticks in your mind unlike the previous.

The last summer is about a man who is dying from cancer and has decided that when the pains become unbearable he will commit suicide by drinking a special cocktail of poison which he keeps in the back of the refrigerator. His last summer he wants to enjoy his family, being surrounded by his children and grandchildren, making up for his many defects as a father in the past when he was too engaged in his academic career as a philosophy professor. His wife does however discover the cocktail and is aghast that he has made the decision without engaging her, reducing her to a mere extra in the movie of his life. She is so 'pissed off' that she leaves him to his fate, and not only that, his children leave as well with their broods. He is left alone in lonely misery, starts to drink, falls in the stairs to the basement, wakes up, takes himself to the hospital with a broken hand, which is mended, and then realizes his mistaken ways and types painstakingly to his wife a sentimental letter. Whether she will respond, we will of course never know. And do we care?

Then there is a story about a son who in vain tries to get in personal contact with his father. For the purpose he decides to invite him to a Bach festival on the island of Rügen in that way connecting to the two things he has in common with his father. The love for Bach and the sea. They drive along and try to converse. They have long walks along the shores, and the father confesses that he never saw the white cliffs on his previous visits to the island. This turns out to be as personal as he will ever get. He will talk engagingly on the music by Bach, but more in the manner of delivering a long soliloquy addressed to no one in particular. They return by car, and caught in a rain storm under a bridge across the Autobahn, the son puts on a CD by Bach and the sacred music touches him really for the first time and he notices that his father starts to cry. After that it seems as if he has resigned himself never to get closer to his father.

The final story is about an old lady with children and a herd of grandchildren who suddenly realizes that she no longer loves those close to her, maybe because she has always loved them out of mere duty before. Or because she never loved her husband, who cheated on her. Anyway she takes the loss of tender feelings towards her off-springs as natural as

her loss of smell. Something just to be accepted. After her birthday celebrated in style, she gets rather disgusted by the insincerity of her children and longs back to her first love who abandoned her. She is filled with a longing to revisit the town where she spent her years of studies and the scene of her aborted love affair. She is driven there by one of her grandchildren and during conversation she is provoked to reveal the existence of a long lost lover. Her grandchild is very much intrigued by the story and wants to know more, information that the old lady reluctantly submits. During the evening the girl takes off and arranges a meeting. At first the old lady wants nothing of it, but the young woman is very insistent and she eventually complies. It turns out that it is the lover who felt betrayed, she had not waited long enough for him, he had been away at a conference and could not be reached, while she allowed herself to be brought back too soon to her worried parents by the man, she had known through her parents throughout her childhood and whom she would dutifully marry. The lover's love life has not been very happy. The woman he had married on the strength of the beauty of her poetry, eventually went into a deep depression and died of cancer. There was a daughter, strange though, and not likely to leave any issue. What a contrast to the fertility and success of her own. As if that mattered. And the story ends.

The stories are professionally churned out, but with few exceptions leave no mark. Somewhat unkindly one may characterize them as perfect for magazines, the preoccupied reader finding some distraction during a wait in an airline lounge. As a matter of fact, this was how I read the last few on my way back from a brief visit to Bavaria.

March 18, 2015 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se