

## Liebesfluchten

*B.Schlink*

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Schlink a professor of law of distinction is also a writer of Bestselling works, the 'Reader' being the most spectacular example. A story in which a very young man is seduced by an older woman (still in her thirties though) who later turns out to have been a war criminal. There is nothing wrong with the plot, but such a study requires just the right tone to be carried off successfully, not just titillatingly and seductively so. If you want to elucidate an elevated topic you better provide it with an elevated presentation, without making it attract attention to itself. In literature, 'Gestalt' is primary, language secondary, and ideas and cleverness merely tertiary. Anyone can come up with clever and profound ideas, or at least borrow them from others. Furthermore a pleasant style, an elegant turn of phrase, lie within the capabilities of the many, and can be toned and even perfected by persistent practice, what is different though is to go that extra mile and add to a narrative an element of magic making it all worthwhile. For that mere competence is not enough.

One cannot fault the seven short stories collected as to plots and ideas. The first about a young man who since childhood is fixated upon a painting by the surrealist René Dalmann (a fictional artist) and which he gets obsessed with, as well as worrying about his rightful possession and how his father got hold of it during the War. The second about a westerner getting involved with an Ossi couple before the fall of the wall, and how he is haplessly implicated in their marital fight. The third about how a widower finds out about an infidelity of his wife and seeks out the other man to get his revenge, but eventually comes to a conciliation with the other. The fourth about a successful architect fatefully attracted to women, who cannot give up his wife for his new love, manages a double life, and when the pressures become too overwhelming finds solace in the acquisition of a third. Eventually he escapes by pretending to be a monk, meets with an accident and becomes confined to a wheel chair. And is finally caught by his three abandoned women, who have become friends and imprison him in an apartment. Then there is perhaps the most interesting one, about a German who falls in love with a Jewish woman in New York. He feels like an outsider, in spite of, or maybe because of the friendly solicitations of her relatives, resents being viewed as a German and hence made to share in the collective guilt, compares his discrimination to that of anti-semitism, which predictably provokes a bitter back-lash from his girlfriend. In the end he decides to become Jewish and has a circumcision performed not as a ritual by a Jewish Mohel but professionally at home in Germany by an old friend, without revealing anything to his girlfriend. In the end she does not notice, in fact seems not to really care, and he leaves stealing out in the early morning. Then there are two short pieces. One on an international observer to a Civil War, a professor who regrets that he never established a bond with his son who is now grown up, and in doing so is being (accidentally?) shot. The other on a man who while vacationing with his wife of many years, in an attempt of finding back to each other, is

intrigued by a woman at an isolated gas station, who reminds him very much of dream (or maybe a deliberate phantasy) about a woman in a gas station he had in his youth, and which made a deep impression on him. He decides to leave right then and there. As he notes, to think matters through (Nachdenken), requires but time, but to make a decision (Entscheidung) requires courage. All of those are worthy subjects on which to spin a short story, maybe even stretched out to a novel. It all is a matter of delivery. It is like themes in music, it all hinges upon the variations. Language is important, and that of Schlink is simple and lucid, a pleasure to read, thus no doubt explaining his large readership. But language is not enough, something more is required, and it is simply not forthcoming. It could be the format. To write a short story is more demanding than a novel. Mere extension creates its own justification. It becomes a life, and life itself once laid out in its richness of detail requires no justification beyond itself. It does not have to mean anything. It is not called upon to be the vehicle of an idea, or to prove a point, although many novels are written with exactly that in mind. At the extreme, we have the soap opera, which in spite of itself can engage, even if inane, just because by succeeding in bringing its characters into the everyday life of the viewer (never a reader nowadays unlike at the time of Dickens) they are viewed as friends. A short story is different, it is in many ways like a poem. It makes demands on the reader, and hence on the author. If it does not work, it falls flat on the face. Being necessarily of an elliptic character, if the reader fails to join the dots, it appears pointless, a kind of 'non sequitor' which leaves him or her puzzled and cold. This makes the publishing of short stores (as with poetry) a risky business. And unfortunately with those stories, in spite of promising beginnings and impeccable ambitions, they do not deliver. They do not touch, as a short story needs to do, and they do not brandish themselves in memory. They come short of the kind of magic which makes the readings of stories and narratives so engrossing. They certainly may have their share of insights, as well as evocations of sights and scenes, and particularly fascinating is the view of contemporary States as seen through the prism of the German language and its sensibilities, but in the end it just is not enough. They fail to engage emotionally, and hence not even intellectually.

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