

Kirsch, Sarah. *Das simple Leben*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1994. 99pp.

The genre of *Das simple Leben*, Sarah Kirsch's most recent work, lies somewhere between the diary and the memoir, with the lyricist's attention to fine detail, word sound and wordplay. Some lyric texts are interspersed with the prose. This mixing of genres reflects a tendency in all of Kirsch's writings to play with boundaries. In this collection, as in others, temporal boundaries are broken by memory, with the past intruding onto the present; the narrator's perspective shifts from the former GDR to the Persian Gulf, back to Schleswig-Holstein, where the author writes, tends her garden, family, and sheep, and reflects upon the world and on Sarah Kirsch. The strengths of this extremely self-reflexive book lie in its ability to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries through the poetic imagination. Its weakness lies in its tendency toward solipsism and over-preciousness.

The book contains many interesting uses of self-reflection. One section depicts a "Lesereise . . . bei der ein Vogel und geöffnete Türen vorherrschend waren." These elements, bird and open doors, appeared both in the poems being read and in the room:

wie hinreissend es war wenn das Gedicht
und die Wirklichkeit zusammenfielen
während ich laut diesen Text las, vor einem
Publikum so wie Sie jetzt eines sind, ich
hörte meine Stimme wie ich sie jetzt hören
kann in diesem heutigen Raum . . .

This is Kirsch at her best, effortlessly condensing three different times and places and changing perspective before one knows it is being changed.

There are instances, which are not few, of Kirsch's power to juxtapose the momentous with the everyday. References to the Gulf War sit beside descriptions of the garden and what needs to be done there. And while Kirsch is sharply critical of the complicity of former GDR citizens with the *Stasi* ("In keinem anderen Ostblockland . . . hatte ein Geheimdienst so viele freiwillige Helfer wie hier"), her account of reading her *Stasi-Akt* is written with more humor than self-righteous moralizing.

Kirsch eloquently depicts her writing process in a short section titled "Kollegen." This process is compared to what Kirsch observes the starlings doing as they sing. These birds observe no rules and mix all other sounds into their song: "Treckerlärm, Hundequietsche und die Kantate jeweiligen Sonntags aus unserem Fenster." Other sounds, then, are appropriated by the bird, enriching its song.

Kirsch writes: "ähnlich stehle ich mir auch alles zusammen und verwandle es meiner Handschrift dann an."

Such "Zusammenstehlen" is the book's weakness as well as its strength. For while Kirsch's inclusiveness is an exciting technique, the book could use some excluding. Even for those of us who are willing to hang on Kirsch's every word, much of the narrated material seems mundane and superficial. This is particularly true of Kirsch's remarks on her other literary projects. It is fascinating to learn that Kirsch worked on *Das simple Leben* concurrently with *Spreu* (a diary), *Schwingrasen* (lyrical prose), and *Erkönigs Tochter* (a collection of poems). Yet her references to these other texts often provide no more insight than the following: "Muß die Vögelchen füttern. Darnach gehe ich an die Texte für *Spreu*"; or, "Was die Arbeit betrifft muß ich *Schwingrasen* vorziehen, *Spreu* muß noch warten." There is too much teasing and not enough substance.

Moreover, there is much material which would have little meaning unless one were familiar with Kirsch's other works and her biography. There are repeated references to "der Tonsetzer" (Kirsch's companion), trips to "die häßliche Stadt" and references to places and characters meaningful only to those who have read *Schwingrasen*. The town of Mariehamn, for example, which is given excellent imaginative treatment in *Schwingrasen*, is mentioned in a passing, superficial way in *Das simple Leben*. These sections seem self-indulgent and ask too much of the reader's patience.

Finally, while I am a longtime admirer of Kirsch's ability to play with language, much of it here seems forced and overly cute. Her *Bundesland* is referred to as "Schließlich-Holzbein;" there are word distortions such as "ein Articul," "die Insul," "Koffie." Kirsch writes of working on material for "Gedichte Berichte Gesichte" and ends sections with "See you later James Green Alligator." Reading these, I was too conscious of a writer making herself smile.

But I do not wish to dwell on the negative. *Das simple Leben*, with its lyrical voice, its diverse insights, and Kirsch's humor and intelligence, deserves our attention. I would have edited the book differently, cutting down on some details and sharpening others. But perhaps asking Kirsch to do this is like asking the starling to edit its song.

CORA SCHENBERG
University of Virginia