

Out of the Sugar Factory

Dorothee Elmiger

Novel

German



“Sugar” appears in various guises throughout Dorothee Elmiger’s new book, *Out of the Sugar Factory*. It refers to each individual’s greed for gratification: of their hunger, their lust, or their yearning for wealth and happiness. But it also symbolises the greed of our capitalist, patriarchal society, which fulfils its desires by exploiting the vulnerable. And, as a self-referential metaphor, it reminds us that literature and art themselves are greedy for recognition.

“In the case of Ellen West too,” writes Binswanger, “the greed for fulfilment did not just manifest itself in the form of bulimia and hunger, but also in the form of her greed for life and power, her hunger for life and power (‘ambition’) in their entirety.” West bit “greedily into life of every kind”.

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Born in 1985, Dorothee Elmiger lives and works in Zurich.

Her debut novel, *Einladung an die Waghalsigen (Invitation to Dare-Devils)*, appeared in 2010 at DuMont Buchverlag, which also published *Schlafgänger* in 2014 (translated as *Shift Sleepers* by Megan Ewing for Seagull Books). Her work has been translated into a number of other languages and adapted for the stage. Dorothee Elmiger has received numerous awards, including the Aspekte Literature Prize for the best German-language prose debut, the Rauriser Literature Prize, a one-year writer’s bursary awarded by the City of Zurich, the Erich Fried Prize, and the Swiss Literature Prize. For more information (in German, English site under construction), see: dorotheeelmiger.com.

Photo: Peter-Andreas Hassiepen

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Excerpt translated by Alan Robinson

- Something like this: I'm walking through undergrowth. And some birds are chirping.
- And then?
- That's all, it just goes on and on like that.
- You like this undergrowth, though.
- What shall I say?
- Whether you do like the undergrowth, you can surely say that - what you're hoping to get out of it, what's in it for you.
- But I'm right in the midst of it myself. You obviously haven't got a clue what it's like there.
- I picture it as being very muddled; I mean disordered, with no overview. And beautiful, because you can come across almost anything there and because, depending on the time of day, the light falls here, then there, and sometimes there's a covering of snow - but also irritating, because you're constantly getting caught on branches, especially if the shrubs have thorns, and because you really like wearing those velvet trousers.
- Okay, fair enough.
- So, you just wander round then in this undergrowth, or what are you doing there?
- Nothing, nothing at all. Well, all right, I might take a few steps, and then sometimes I stop and smoke a cigarette.
- And the birds?
- Oh, I like *them*.

Plaisir

The sun is always shining now when I wake up.

On the TV a documentary about a pineapple farm near Santo Domingo. Wide, white-clouded sky. In the fields the Haitian labourers toss the ripe fruit to one another.

Then the *Pineapple King* enters the picture; he stands in the field and speaks to the camera. Before buying his 180 hectares in the eighties, he had farmed vegetables in the canton of Zurich.

The sembradores set the seedlings in the ground at piecework rates.

The *Pineapple King* measures the sugar content of his fruit for the TV audience.

Later he pays the wages.

On one labourer's T-shirt: MY SKILLS NEVER END.

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A second film: Karl Feierabend, a distiller from Rotkreuz, who emigrated to the tropics to establish a large farm, rides on horseback, driving four geese before him through the verdant landscape. Grasses, meadows, palm trees. The sky completely colourless.

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Message from France: I'm asked to talk about my work this winter at a school in a Paris suburb. The school director, I learn, will collect me by car from the Quartier Latin and drive me to Plaisir, where the Collège Guillaume Apollinaire is located, and then bring me back to my hotel.

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The makeshift explanations when someone asks me what I'm working on.

The Philadelphian car park (NEW WORLD PLAZA)

Desire

Sugar, LOTTERY, *Overseas*

Annette over dinner: Two years ago she'd read a novel by an Australian writer that described a succession of images which appeared suddenly, images that evoked one another and thus were at least loosely connected, so that they formed a kind of path, a luminous path leading through things.

When I leaf through my notebooks and photocopies, the illustrations, the diagrams and the photographs, when I open the files that I have created over the past months,

then I don't see a path, nor images, illuminations overlapping at the edges and referring to one another, but instead a place, a point from which I set out four or five years ago. Since then I've carried back there everything that came into my hands, everything that caught my eye and seemed to be connected to that original spot, and deposited it for now in that sprawling place.

As with the yew trees at Plaisir in the grounds of the château, which are pruned like sugarloaves. The shopping centre in the north of the town (GRAND PLAISIR), la mosquée de Plaisir.

In that place there is no fixed order: With every walk through the chaos, over the pineapple fields of Monte Plata, through the Paris suburbs or the long-abandoned grounds of a sanatorium, over the Sicilian mountains, past the Russian Baths in Philadelphia to the banks of the Swan River in Australia, things seem to enter into novel relationships with each other.

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Throughout the landscapes, this tentative arrangement of things, this *essai*, I keep returning to that one scene, in which, when I first saw it, something seemed to manifest itself to me, something I couldn't formulate, but at best rediscover in relationships with a similar, analogous structure, as affinities, repetitions, parallels.

1986: The men standing packed together in the large, low-ceilinged dining room of a guesthouse in Spiez, on the southern shore of Lake Thun, their sons among them – boys of twelve or thirteen, perhaps – and some women, wives, mothers. The warm light that illuminates this gathering of local inhabitants, who spill out into the corridor. Finally, the man towards whom all eyes are turned at this moment, as if he were the celebrant of a profane mass: In his hands two statuettes, which he elevates above the heads of the assembly, two female statuettes carved of wood or burnished black stone, perhaps thirty centimetres tall. Apart from loosely flowing drapery around head and hips, and a

golden necklace, their gleaming bodies are naked. They are kneeling, apparently oblivious to all around them. Then the auctioneer raises his voice:

Who'd like to start the bidding Can I have some quiet, please Twenty Twenty francs Who'll give me more A fiver Twenty-five Twenty-five Who wants to bid Just take a look at those breasts Thirty-five Who'll go a little higher The princely sum of thirty-five francs has been bid Thirty-five francs going once Thirty-five going twice Sold So, that's got these old n----- out of the way too

The more often I go back to this room, which I know only from a documentary film made in the eighties, the more evident it becomes to me that my desire to seek out this place over and over again has nothing to do with my being shown something with particular clarity. On the contrary, I have come to suspect that these recurrent visits, my neurotic pilgrimages, stem from the fact that this is, as it were, an *irresolvable* scene: a convergence lasting only a few moments of diverse strands of history – as if disparate rock masses were colliding, celestial bodies that had been circling the sun for aeons, seemingly detached from each other, until their impact produced a split-second epiphany of things, of debris, and of dust.