

Neon Pink & Blue

Christoph Schneeberger

Novel

German



Much of X Schneeberger's debut novel, *Neon Pink & Blue*, is quirky if not queer: the narrator's family story, life story, and awareness of gender identity between one, her, and human, as well as the use of indirect speech in the first section of the book. This novel also reads as a drag queen's account of an ecstatic summer of dancing in Zurich's underground and techno scenes.

"From the foam on the corner of everyday life's mouth, a diva is born dawn-blue. Or someone's heart is torn out sunset-red. Some people say prayers. I propose a toast. To beautiful divas and the artful tearing out of hearts. To heartbeats, to the tongue. Moments like these. The morning after the dance. I can tell you a thing or two."

Title

Neon Pink & Blue

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Author

Christoph Schneeberger has been active under different names in a variety of fields. His first novel, *Neon Pink & Blue*, draws on years of texts written the morning after, both from the underground rave scene and from his life as a political activist and drag queen.

Photo: Christoph Schneeberger

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Excerpt translated by Tess Lewis

Mostly the landscape stays nice and quiet. But something just happened. X, having just stepped out from under the completely useless shade of a plastic palm tree, hopped around a bit on the hot stones of the harbor wall. They were too hot for bare feet. With a view of the mountains across the water and a dripping ice cream cone like a melting microphone in hand – as if there were something to sing in this heat. And as if, on this late summer afternoon, the world were a giant open-air cabaret.

All you people and birds on the lake! Winter and my life as an ugly, sleepy larva has now lasted a bit longer – will last inordinately longer than that summer day when I unfold my glittering, iridescent wings. When I peel myself out of my greasy down jacket beneath the morning star, throw back the soon-to-be waxy hood for a day and a night, and rise from the swamp.

I am a dayfly

Born into the day

And as my day is long

All the live-long day I make love

Yes, that is my entire existence

And thinking all the while of walks taken as a child among grass lilies, chicory, and copper colored flowering grasses. There, on the dam, excavated from the power station canal, at the end of the short Limmat river, which begins at Lake Zurich and there, in Vogelsang, flows into the Aare arms outstretched. The child would have liked to dance ballet in Vogelsang and studied much less; the ballet school behind the trees has always come to mind here on the plane tree quay with Lake Zurich spread out ahead. *Un, deux, trois.*

And the child would have liked, given the opportunity, to have been a girl, and it would not have become *neuter* so swiftly, as putative personal pronouns feign to be. This, in turn, was easily confirmed with a single glance at the

after-work runway up and down the Lake Zurich promenade; quite the opposite of walks between the Reuss, the Limmat, and the Aare. At home we use the masculine article 'en' for both woman and man – instead of the usual 'e' woman and 'en' man, which they say is correct here around the lake, and in dialect as well. *'E' woman, 'en' man, and the neuter 'es' for child.*

There would be enough fabricated as well natural reasons to escape into the – actually foreign – scenery stretching out before one's ice-cream-daubed nose. Where one could negate oneself until almost nothing was left, a faint sepia tone, a grain of sand from the Sahara in a picture of overpowering natural beauty – one of those days when an unusually vast expanse of the Alpine ridge is visible. Or in distorted circles on the surface of the lake, 406 meters above sea level. Artistically, one would be in the best of company with a suicidal chorus circle-dancing in seaweed tutus, queued up, teeth-chattering, their retinue a mountain range of sheer silence between remotely located terminal moraines of outright speechlessness, as they leapfrogged now and then over woodpiles of redacted lines.

The föhn wind has made the mountains larger and brought them within reach of the city while flattening the land. They are right up in your face, the mountains are, as if they had something to say. Meanwhile it's bringing on a panorama-headache. The straw hat was left with the other bundle, espadrilles and hoody, back there under the weeping willow, so one is left hopping around bare-headed and barefoot in cut offs and a torn T-shirt. In this heat. One can get ideas in the city on the lake – that one might be able to forget oneself; until the next hangover in this landscape that is and be blown away in cavity-distressing föhn-like echoes. One dances in this city as if dancing for one's life. And those were precisely the stakes. A child more man-made than natural, a curvature of the spine, scoliosis, mechanically corrected in malleable infant bones; a small upright person of clay, so to speak, a nubbin in other hands. *Un, deux, trois.* A little trick. At the time, there was no anesthesia for infants – the memory of this time is desolate and empty.

Manipulations of the living object are necessary, even existential, they claim, otherwise walking *right* and standing *right*, lying *right* and sitting *right* would have been impossible for sheer twistedness. Downright inhuman – that’s no life, as they say so breezily; seems a defective life, not *right*. But one danced. For one’s life. So that one’s straightened spine wouldn’t only mean wearing a uniform. *One, two, three, and*. The options were military service, prison, or a certificate of unfitness. “Good work,” the doctor said to the upright spine. In recruit school, they were still making *real* men out of everyone, that was the constant, nimble threat made in the upper reaches of the barracks, regardless of where one had just been to visit and certainly intended to comfort the parents of this still somewhat twisted being, certainly well-meant.

So, one didn’t end going into the military and prepared an escape accordingly: becoming an internationally renowned drag queen and walking long-legged to America, spine included. Not completely thoughtlessly, but after having sought out contact with pacifist underground churches, which immediately took one to their hearts; yet at the mere mention that one was Swiss, their eyes immediately brimmed with sincere regret. *Refugee or political prisoner, we understand*.

It was always the same. Travesty and church. Before long, not going seemed easier than expected, so outwardly one could stay home. And yet if one were fleeing and even only in thought for just a few years, internally one would remain one the run. Eternally wandering in the American tropics. Happiness always seems to be elsewhere. That said, one could hardly get around certain visits at home. In the best case, they’d just say one is quite the *artiste*, with a familiar pat on the hand, isn’t that right.

Therefore, from a certain authenticity in relation to artificiality one didn’t want to call oneself a writer or an artist and so out of linguistic self-consciousness one ended up calling oneself a poet – grammar isn’t everything – and from vocal self-consciousness one soon switched to *disease*, rehearsals were rarely

successful. As a result, every appearance became a rehearsal. As if in a dream. Dilatoriness seemed a glamorous obligation in the land of PUNCTUAL. Their proverbial punctuality is hardly surprising if you consider all their umlauts, a furriner once remarked under the ice cream stand’s plastic palm tree down in the harbor. So slapdash you’ve prided yourself on something. But glamour can be derived from grammar and not from careless lapses. To the illiterate, grammar or rather grammar in the Middle Ages Latin grammar books must have seemed to impart magical powers to their informed owners just like books of magic spells. But declension, conjugation, and inflection have all effectively bent German to meaning. Glamour, therefore, would completely be the others’ lapse; lower back and knee pain, cramps in your calves are nonetheless very particular obligations for treatment. *Un, deux, trois*.

Enough of being corrected, enough of conforming to *proper* grammar; only the intuitive will be authentic, will be like proper, even. One throws oneself into life but is still just a quotation. Cobbled together. Nothing but phantom pain that cannot be divided up. Like something that offsets a deficit in creation. Everything is always LIKE.

It is only through reading that one understood what one lived through. Recognized oneself in reading to the point where even this summer one will be leading a purely literary existence. Things will go that far. Or one will be the correction of a twisted word, properly hunched. Letter by letter. Improving nature means forgetting it. But nature doesn’t forget. One obstinately remains the picture of a man in the literal sense. Now, straight, like a tree. And about as naked and exposed, like the trees in this summer’s heat with their foliage suddenly shed.

What is left of one’s crooked spine is a crooked phantom pain from which the only reprieve is sleeping deeply or dancing for a long time: a constant reminder of the desolation and emptiness underlying everything.