

Fanny Fatale

Pedro Lenz
Novel
Swiss German



A would-be writer, latecomer to a group of artists and idlers in the small town of Olten, falls head over heels in love with the mysterious and beautiful girl of the title. As he pursues his muse he learns more about himself and his companions, and about the challenges of love and art.

What are you going to do now? – I could paint you, for example. Would you have time? – Are you serious, Louis? I mean, I'm just a normal person with no distinguishing features. You can't make art out of me.

Title

Di schöni Fanny

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Author

Pedro Lenz was born in Langenthal in 1965. He lives in Olten, in the canton of Solothurn and works as a writer and columnist. His first publication, in 2008, was a collection of stories in the Bernese dialect: *Plötzlech hets di am Füdle*. His first novel was *Der Goalie bin ig* (2010), which was made into a film (English version *I Am the Keeper*) and translated into seven languages. Pedro Lenz has already sold the film rights to *Fanny Fatale*.

Photo: Daniel Rihs

Translator

Shaun Whiteside is a literary translator from German, French, Dutch and Italian. His latest translations include *Blitzed* by Norman Ohler and *Lea* by the Swiss author Pascal Mercier.

Di schöni Fanny

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German original (p. 59–62)

Ir Nacht han i lang a dere Fanny umeggrüblet. Söu i i d Offensive? Söu i mou uf Bärn vor di Kunschthochschueu, oder was es isch, chli go warte, bis si usechunnt? Söu i der Louis no chli go usfrogen über se? Söu i der Grunz go usfroge? Söu i mi z Zofige chli schlau mache? Nüt vo au däm! Warten und schaffen und druf vertraue, dass si vo sich uus öppis lot lo ghöre!

Am Mäntig han i vier Site vo mim Roman i d Taschtatur gchlopfet, locker. Jede Tag vier Site, de chumen i i fünfzig Tag uf zwöihundert, han i usgrächnet. Zwöihundert Siten isch e vernünftigi Längi für ne Roman. Aues, was drüber isch, schreckt d Chundschaft ab. E Schriftstöuer, wo meh aus zwöihundert Site bruucht, zum es Buech schribe, het ke Säubschtkontroue.

Und äbe, im Minimum vier Siten am Tag. Das isch mi Vorsatz gsi und es het mi denn rächt en eifache Vorsatz ddünkt, wöu i jo d Gschicht, wi gseit, scho totau im Chopf ha gha. Aber nächär, won i di erschte vier Site ha tippet gha, han i aafö merke, dass es gliich wider nid so eifach dörfti wärde. Zwar han i der Fade gha, han i d Figure gha, han i eigetlech rächt genau gwusst, was aues mues passiere. Aber nächär han i für di ganzi Sauce no ne Sproch müesse finge, eini, wo chli louft, eini, wo richtig tönt. Und das isch de aus i auem gliich nid ganz so easy z mache gsi, win i mers zersch ha vorgstöt gha, wöu d Sproch bruucht jo ne Rhythmus, und dä Rhythmus mues me chli chönne dürezie, so dass me bim Läsen i ne Flow inechnnt. Und das isch äbe genau d Schwirigkeit.

Am Tag druuf bin i ömu tatsächlech scho i ds Stocke cho und ha mer vorgno, i föng no einisch ganz vo vooren aa. Am dritte Tag bin i wider bi vier Site gsi, derbii hätt i nach drü Tag zwöuf Siten uf em Plan gha. Macht nüt, han i ddänkt. Blibsch cool, geisch eifach witer. Bhautisch d Närve. Blibsch bir Sach. Aber nächär bin i wider i ds Stocke cho. Han i no mou vo vooren aagfange. Und so isch aus i auem di erschti Wuche düre, ohni dass i genau hätt chönne säge, wi wit dass i bi cho.

Es isch ähnlech gsi wi einisch, won i mou e Zit lang im Gartebou ha gschaftet: Du weisch genau, dass es us

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Excerpt translated by Shaun Whiteside (p. 59–62)

So anyway that night I brooded about Fanny for ages. Should I go on the offensive? Should I go to Bern and wait outside the Art School or whatever it is until she comes out? Should I ask Louis about her? Should I go and talk to Grunz? Should I go to Zofingen and ask around? Not a bit! Wait and work and trust that something's going to happen of its own accord.

On Monday I knocked out four pages of my novel at the keyboard, easy. Four pages a day, that's two hundred in fifty days, I worked it out. Two hundred pages is a decent length for a novel. Anything more is going to scare off your customers. A writer who needs more than two hundred pages to write a book is lacking in self-control.

And that's exactly it, a minimum of four pages a day. That's been my principle and it seems to me that all you need is a decent principle when you've got the whole story, as I said, in your head. But afterwards, when I'd typed the first four pages I began to realise it wasn't going to be as easy as all that after all. Yes, I've got the plot, yes, I've got the characters, as a matter of fact I know exactly what has to happen. But afterwards I realised I needed to find a language for the whole thing, a language with a bit of flow, a language that sounded right. And all in all that wasn't quite as easy to do as I had at first imagined it was going to be, because language needs a rhythm, and you need to weave the language through it so that it flows when you read it. And that's exactly the problem.

The next day I got stuck and decided to start all over again from the beginning. On the third day, I ended up with four pages again, even though I'd thought after three days I'd be reckoning on twelve pages. What odds, I thought. Cool head, just keep going. Keep your nerve. Keep your mind on the task at hand. But then I got stuck again. Had to start over again. And that's pretty much how the first week went, and I couldn't tell you exactly how far I got.

It was like this one time when I worked in landscape gardening for a bit: you know it's about shrubs and

däm Strüüchli mou e Boum git, und du weisch, was für ne Boumsorte dass es wird. Du weisch, wi de dä Boum mou usgseht, wenn er usgwachsen isch. Du weisch räschtlos aues über dä Boum. Aber du muesch extrem Geduud ha, wöu är wachset nume genau so schnäu, wi ne Boum wachset. Und du chasch nüt forciere, höchstens es Birebitzeli mit Dünger. Guet, es git Böim, wo schnäuer wachsen aus angeri, das scho. Aber innerhaub vore Sorte Böim chasch fasch nüt künschtlich beschlönige. Und wenn ig mi Roman mit ere Sorte Böim hätt wöue vergliiche, de isch es vom Gfüeu här so ne Wiisstanne gsi, auso öppis, wo vergliche mit emne Loubboom ender schnäu sött wachse, wo aber natürlech gliich ou sini Zit bruucht. Dä Gedanke het mi fürs Erschten afe mou chli beruhiget und i ha di ganzi Sach für unbestimti Zit lo ligge.

Vor Fanny han i di ganzi Wuche nüt ghört. Das het mi närvos gmacht. Ds einten oder angere Mou han i mer vorgstöt, wi si sech bim Louis uf em Diwan räklet. Wi der Louis seit, si söu der eint Arm hinger e Chopf näh und der anger eifach lo abehange. Blib locker, Fanny, aber blib bir Sach, tue nid abschweife mit de Gedanke. Und lueg bissoguuet, dass der Arm immer schön abehanget. Es geit nüm so lang, Fanny, jetz han is de grad.

I ha mer vorgstöt, dass si sech bim Louis irgendeinisch nach mir erkundiget. Säg mou, Louis, was isch eigetelech di Kolleg, dä Jackpot, für eine. I finge nen uf nen Art no interessant, aber i wirde no nid so rächt schlau us nim.

Und de han i mer vorgstöt, was der Louis würd antworte: Red jetz nid, Fanny, blib ganz bim Momänt.

Aber d Fanny würd insischtieren und si würd wahrschiinlech säge, si bruuchi sowiso e Pouse. Si würd vom Diwan ufstoh und der Louis, galant wi immer, würd ere i Morgemantu inehäufe. Und de würd er säge: Der Jackpot? Über dä gits nid wahnsinnig vüu z verzöue. Der Jackpot isch eifach der Jackpot. Eines Tages isch er plötzlech do gsi und sit denn het me ds Gfüeu, är sig immer scho do gsi. Ab und zue het er Glück bim Wette und der Räschte vor Zit lot er sech vomne Brüetsch lo finanziere, wo gloub z Basu ungen e guete Job ir Chemii het und wo offebar zimlech grosszügig isch. Wenn ne frogsch, was er miech, seit der Jackpot auben ohni mit

trees, and you know what sort of tree you're dealing with. You know what the tree's going to look like when it's grown. You know absolutely everything about the tree. But you have to be extremely patient because it grows at exactly the speed a tree grows at. And you can't force it, you can only help it a wee bit with manure. Yes, of course, some trees grow faster than others, that is true, yes. But within one species of tree you can hardly speed them up. And if I wanted to compare my novel with any kind of tree, well, it feels a bit like a fir tree, something that grows quickly compared with a deciduous tree, but of course still takes its time. That idea reassured me a little for now, and I let the whole thing lie for a while.

I hadn't heard anything from Fanny for a week. That made me nervous. I couldn't help imagining her lying on Louis's sofa. Louis telling her to put one arm behind her head and just let the other one dangle. Relax, Fanny, but keep your mind on the job, don't let your thoughts fly away with you. And make sure your arm's hanging down. It won't take long, Fanny, I've nearly got it.

I imagined her asking Louis something about me. Tell me, Louis, what sort of guy is that mate of yours, Jackpot? I think he's kind of interesting, but I never really know what makes him tick.

And then I imagined Louis answering: don't talk, Fanny, stay in the moment.

But Fanny would insist and probably say she needed a break anyway. She'd get up from the sofa and Louis, gallant as ever, would help her into his dressing gown. And then he'd say: Jackpot? There's not that much to say about him really. Jackpot's just Jackpot. One day he was suddenly there, and since then it's been as if he's always been there. Every now and again he lays a lucky bet and the rest of the time he's paid for by his brother, who I think has a good job in chemicals in Basel, and who's apparently really generous. If you ask him what he's up to, Jackpot will tell you straight up he's a writer. But apart from a couple of funny short stories in literary magazines nobody's ever heard of and the odd poem, he's never published a thing. Or wait, once, years ago, he self-published a little book, about a dog that's dumped on the motorway and walks back a thousand kilometres from the Baltic Sea to Switzerland. And all

der Wimpere z zucke, är sig Schriftstöuer. Aber ussert es paar komische Churzgschichten i unbekante Literaturzitschriften und em einten oder angere Gedicht het er no nie öppis publiziert. Oder wart, einisch, vor Johre, het er es Büechli im Eigeverlag useglo, so nen überdrääiti Gschicht vomne Hung, wo uf eren Outobahn usgsetzt wird und de über tuusig Kilometer vor Oschtsee i d Schwiz zrüg louft. Ungerwägs passiert däm Hung luter komisches Züüg. Isch aus us der Sicht vom Hung gschribe, aber totau wirr. Hesch fasch nid chönne läse. Es himutruurigs Büechli, würtlech. Das Büechli isch er de johrelang vo Beiz zu Beiz go verchoufe, het immer es paar Exemplar ire Tasche gha, wenn er mou eis isch go zie. Aber i glouben ussert mir und es paar wenige Fründe het nim niemer eis abgchouft. Ke ganz schlächte Typ, dä Jackpot, aber aus Schriftstöuer chasch ne grad wider vergässe. Und Fanny, chöi mer bissoguet witerfahre, es isch nid guet, wenn mer z längi Pouse mache, i verlüüre d Spannig und du ou. Lig no einisch uf e Diwan und versuech no einisch ganz natürlech z blibe, aber trotzdem geischtig immer ganz bi mir, süsch geits nid.

I ha mer de überleit, dass es natürlech ou chönnt si, dass d Fanny gar nüt über mi froggt und gar nid a mi dänkt. Oder dass si scho froggt, dass der Louis aber öppis ganz anders verzöut, dass er zum Bispüu seit, i sig uf ne spezielli Art taläntiert, es verkannts Genie, wo früecher oder spöter müess entdeckt wärde, wöus eifach nid mögliche sig, dass eine, wo derewä guet schribi, uf d Längi unentdeckt blibi. Und dass es en unbeschreiblechi Ungrächtigkeit sig, dass vüu vo de Guete niene sige, währenddäm dass vüu vo de Schlächte gross usechieme. Bis jetz heig i leider eifach vüu Päch gha. Oder möglicherwiis seit er ou, i sig e liebe Fründ und meh gäbs nid z säge. Oder es chönnt ou si, dass er seit, si söu mi doch grad säuber froge, wenn si wöu wüsse, was i für eine sig.

I ha mer aui Variante dür e Chopf lo go und keni het mer richtig wöue passe. Auso han i beschlosse, i höri uuf noche-zdänke. Aber mach das einisch bewusst, versuech mou ganz bewusst, nüm z dänke. Das geit gar nid, wöu jo der Gedanke dra, dass i nüt wöu dänke, ou scho ddänkt mues si.

kinds of funny things happen to the dog on the way. It's written from the dog's point of view, but it's a total mess. You can hardly read it. A pathetic little book, really. For years that little book was sold from pub to pub, he always had a few copies in his pocket whenever he went out anywhere. But I think apart from me and a few friends no one ever bought one off him. He's not a bad fellow, Jackpot, but as to him being a writer, forget it. And Fanny, could we please get back to it, it's not a good idea to take too long a break, I lose my concentration and so do you. Just go and lie on the sofa and try to look and stay natural but be with me in your mind, otherwise it doesn't work.

I thought about how Fanny mightn't ask about me at all or even think about me either. Or how perhaps she did ask, but Louis told her something quite different, for example he might say I had a special sort of talent, I was a misunderstood genius who would be discovered sooner or later, because it was just impossible that anyone who was anywhere near as good as that would go undiscovered in the long term. And that it is an indescribable injustice that something so good was rejected while the lousy stuff went from strength to strength. He's had really bad luck until now. Or he might even say I'm a good friend and there's an end to it. Or he might even say she should ask me herself if she wanted to know what kind of guy I was.

I had loads of variations going through my head and none of them really fit. So I decided to stop thinking about it. But try doing that deliberately, try deliberately not to think about something anymore. That's impossible, given that you can't help thinking about how you mustn't think about it.