

Close to the Edge

Eva Rottmann
Young adult fiction
German



Exploring her identity as a young woman, dealing with mental illness, coming to terms with her first heartbreak: the 17-year-old narrator of Eva Rottmann's "Close to the Edge" has a lot to juggle and she tells her story in a refreshing, cheeky and humorous way.

"He was incredibly good at skating and that was enough for them to judge his character. They would have loved Lord Voldemort, too, if he'd had a decent kickflip in his repertoire."

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Eva Rottmann, born in 1983 in Wertheim, lives with her children in Zurich, writes plays and fiction, develops her own performances and theatre projects, brings literature into schools, and works as a teacher at the Zurich University of the Arts. She has received several awards for her work. "Kurz vor dem Rand" has been nominated for the German Youth Literature Award.

Photo: Sabina Bösch

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Excerpt translated by Nicola T. Stuart

My name is Ari, and this is the story of my first love. It doesn't end well, I'll tell you that right away. So, if you're into happy endings, you better put this aside and go get yourself some ice cream. Frankly, I don't care. You can do as you please. I'm just telling you what's coming your way.

Bob gave me a big red book with lined pages; it's been sitting on my desk for days. Bob says I should write down everything that happened in the two weeks after Easter. He says it helps. I don't believe it helps. I don't believe anything helps. But I can't stop thinking about it. So, earlier, I opened the red book and took a pen in my hand. I thought about how to start, and then I remembered what Tom once said. That there are no beginnings, you see.

"Do you understand?" he said, "Something has always been there, and nothing comes from nothing, not in the universe and not in life. Every event that happens, happens because other things happened before. Not even birth is a beginning; it's already in motion, and you just join in. Like, I don't know, like a new actor in a soap opera or something. Then try to find your way. Get a grip or go die."

I don't know if that applies to all people, but it definitely applies to my birth. My birth was not a beginning but more like the continuation of the accumulated disasters that made up my mother's life.

My mother's name is Fanni, and she's crazy. That's not a joke; it's official. You can tell by the first name she gave me. I mean, what woman in her right mind and in full possession of her mental faculties names her daughter Arielle? No joke. Arielle, the mermaid. That's Fanni's absolute favorite movie. She knows the whole script by heart. Hardly anyone knows that I'm named Arielle. I always introduce myself as Ari. Someday, I'll officially change my name, Bob says it's possible. Until then, I can only hope that nobody figures out that I'm named after a Disney princess who combs her hair with a fork and gives up her voice for a guy she's seen twice in her life.

Anyway, if Tom is right, if there really are no beginnings, and everything flows from one thing to another without a clear boundary, and sometimes without sense, then it means that every story is a lie. Because stories pretend there's a beginning. Maybe everything

I'm telling you now is a lie. Maybe it's not true at all. But I'm still telling it. And I say it all started on Easter Monday. When else, if not then.

On a day when it finally stops raining, and instead High Noon strikes, and champagne is bought at the gas station, I just miss the mark. Easter Monday would be a good day, I knew that immediately. I woke up and saw that the sun was shining. The whole Easter weekend had been rainy. On Good Friday, we had been at Teddy's, listening to music, watching videos, doing this and that, as we do when it rains. At some point, we got bored and went to Bob's shop. We spent Saturday in the Kaufland parking garage, but after a couple of hours in the stale exhaust air, we started to have difficulty breathing and had to get back out into the fresh air. On Sunday afternoon, the rain had stopped, but the streets were still wet until the evening. I know that rain is important. Nature needs rain. Agriculture, animals, and so on. But could we not just say that it only rains where it's needed? People invent all sorts of things, self-driving cars, non-alcoholic beer, shuttles that can fly to Mars. It shouldn't be so hard to make certain areas, at least in cities, rain-free, right? I mean, what's the point of it raining on asphalt? It's essentially a gigantic waste of water. You could collect all the water that currently falls for free on asphalt and redirect it where it's really needed. To the Sahel zone or something. Asphalt doesn't need watering. Asphalt has, at least in my eyes, only one real purpose. You need it for skating. While I was still in bed, my phone beeped, and I knew, without checking, that it was a message from Yasin, Lou, or Teddy, who were definitely as eager as I was to go to the park. The park, as we call it, is a skatepark and, for many teenagers, the hottest place in the whole city. It's summer there, even though summer is still a long way off. That's where the people and the good life are. It smells like cigarette smoke and weed. Right next to the park is the river, and occasionally, a cool breeze blows across the square. Someone always has a boombox. Girls sit on the benches at the edge, chatting, phone in one hand, alcopop in the other. And we skateboard. I can only vaguely remember life without my skateboard. Honestly, I don't know what I did with all that time. I had hardly any friends, probably because I was quite irritable and regularly got into fights with someone. The girls from the neighborhood, I think, were a little scared of me; most of the time, they would go away when I showed up. I didn't want to play Barbie or jump rope or house with them anyway; those were games that bored me to death. But it's kind of obvious that it doesn't contribute to good mood when people run away from you.

I got even angrier; at seven or eight years old, I ran through the neighborhood like a mini-Godzilla, looking for opportunities to release the incredible anger that built up in me like electricity in a thundercloud. The boys who usually played football let me join in, but they usually assigned me to the goal. From there, I shouted commands across the field, and if someone on my team made a mistake and I conceded a goal, I sometimes got so aggressive that the boys grabbed me and carried me off the field. Then I went home, lay on my bed, and stared out the window. In my memory, I'm lying on my bed and staring out the window quite often. For my ninth birthday, Bob gave me my first skateboard. It was a complete Baker skateboard, already fully assembled, black-and-white lettering on a red background, the most beautiful gift I ever received. Actually, it was much more than a gift. It was a life-saving measure. I never talked to Bob about it. But I think he knew exactly what he was doing when he gave me the Baker board. My real life began only when I started skateboarding. Beginnings. There they are again. One thing led to another, as Tom said. If all the anger and sadness and heaviness before hadn't been there, I probably wouldn't have become a skater. Basic hate, he called it. You need a certain basic hate to skate. Tom. Yes, Tom. He showed up in the park for the first time on Easter Monday. And he definitely had more than enough basic hate.

It was just past ten o'clock when I arrived at the park. Other than me, there were only a few small children and their parents there. I don't understand why people have to take trips to a skatepark with their two or three-year-old children. There are so many playgrounds in the city. Who benefits from having the little tykes standing around in the mini-ramp with their plastic scooters? And if they do, at least these parents should put a skateboard in front of their children's feet. In my opinion, scooters are an absolutely unnecessary invention. In the park, there are indeed a few guys who call their scooters, "scooters," and do some pretty cool stuff with them. But in most cases, people on a scooter look rather embarrassing. Adults are the worst. When I see one of those business types in a fancy suit rolling through the streets, I could die of embarrassment right away. I dropped my backpack and nodded to the parents sitting on the benches at the edge, watching their children stand around. Then I selected my reggae playlist and took my first lap around the park with Bob Marley in my ears. I did a few Ollies to warm up; the board felt good under my feet. The sun was shining, the air was mild, it smelled so much like spring, I could have screamed with happiness. I took a run and

flew over the kicker with my board. A little boy opened his eyes wide and exclaimed, "Wooooow!!" When Yasin and Lou arrived at the park about an hour later, I was already soaked in sweat. The toddlers and their parents had gone home by then, and the park was slowly filling up with our people. Of course, we weren't friends with every child who showed up at the park with a skateboard. But if a guy was over twelve years old and regularly skateboarded, then we knew him. We would have known the girls too, but there were none. There were only a bunch of boys, me, and Lou. For a few weeks now, a group of younger girls had occasionally shown up at the park, the Ari fan club, as Teddy called them. They were about ten years old, the same age I was when I first stood on a skateboard. I hoped they would stick with it and in a year or two, make sure the park was no longer such a boys' club. I know that elsewhere there are many girls and women who skateboard, some of them quite professionally. I see them on social media every day; they get sponsored, create impressive video parts, participate in the Olympic Games, and all that. But in our city, you could get the impression that we're still in the 18th Century life. Of course, there are also girls in the park, like Leyla and her friends, for example, and occasionally they let one of the boys give them lessons. Lessons in quotation marks. Because - of course, it's not about skateboarding. That's clear from the way they giggle and twist their long hair between their fingers. Honestly, I could vomit when I see that. On the day I start twisting my hair between my fingers, you can shoot me on the spot. Leyla was also in the park on Easter Monday. She arrived almost at the same time as Yasin and Lou and joined her friends on a park bench, holding a large bubble tea in her hand. I couldn't stand Leyla and just waved briefly to her. Yasin and Lou, on the other hand, went to her and greeted her with hugs and kisses, even before they said hello to me. Yasin was into Leyla, we all knew that, even though he wouldn't admit it. I couldn't understand what he saw in her; in my eyes, they were at two opposite poles of the world order. Yasin cool, Leyla sucks. To put it simply.

After they had kissed Leyla and her friends, Lou and Yasin rolled over to me and threw their backpacks next to mine on the bench. "Hey Ari," said Lou. "What's up," said Yasin.

"Easy," I said. We greeted each other with a handshake, as we always did. If I suddenly demanded a hug and a kiss, they would probably be completely thrown off. Teddy sometimes says that I don't count as a girl. Then everyone laughs, but I don't find it

particularly funny. Just because I have no idea about makeup and prefer to wear T-shirts in XL rather than XS doesn't mean I'm a boy. But no one really believes me. Even Bob says that a boy got lost in me. I don't understand what that's supposed to mean.

Lost where? Does anyone miss him? Is he sitting in the LostBoys' Lost and Found office and sending hate mail into orbit, complaining that my body had been so rude as to develop into a girl's body, or what?