

FOREIGN FICTION

The small town of Jericho in the East Frisia region of Germany during the 1980s and 1990s is the setting for Jan Brandt's huge debut novel, **Against the World**, translated by Katy Derbyshire (Seagull £31.50). Primarily, this is a story of provincial life, the petty jealousies of the shopkeepers, the graceless adulteries and the difficulties of living in a place where everyone knows everyone else. The ineluctable march of progress renders their concerns ridiculous, as supermarkets annihilate the independent shops, and the internet is poised to disrupt the world.

The narrative is mostly hung on Daniel Kuper, son of the boorish drugstore owner. Daniel is a misfit who gets caught up in unfortunate events. As a small child he catches a friend in the head with a hammer; aged 10, he emerges naked from a crop circle and sparks nationwide interest in alien abduction; as a teenager, he is wrongly arrested for spraying Nazi graffiti over the town.

Brandt interpolates different writing styles into the novel. Periodically, it is interrupted by letters to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder warning him that the citizens of Jericho are extraterrestrial imposters. A space-adventure story

erupts in the alien episode. The bleak episode of teenagers bullying a quieter boy has the parallel narrative of a train driver thinking over the breakdown of his marriage running across the bottom of the pages. When Daniel has his blackouts, the type fades to palest grey. These effects give texture to the examination of the frustrations of circumscribed lives.

Tellingly, what exactly happened to Daniel in the crop circle is never made explicit, nor who was responsible for the graffiti. Daniel might be mostly innocent but he is still implicated: you can't avoid the suggestion that this was true of many Germans in the country's not too distant past. This heftily ambitious novel doesn't always work, but when it does, it is very good.

Another first novelist, the Slovenian Jela Krecic is also a journalist, as is the central

Jela Krecic
Mixed messages
about what
women want

Continental gifts

character in **None Like Her**, translated by Olivia Hellewell (Peter Owen £9.99). Matjaz, a photographer with an online news magazine in Ljubljana, is devastated when his girlfriend dumps him. He embarks on an odyssey of seduction and, as he works his way through a cross-section of society from airhead Sasa to new mother Ronja, we learn that all women are desperate for a man in their lives.

If the author were not a woman, we would feel queasy about this, and we might have expected something more from a writer with a PhD in philosophy who is married to the philosopher Slavoj Žižek. It is probably meant to be more of a romantic comedy than comes across, particularly as the last section, when Matjaz is at a wedding posing as the boyfriend of a lesbian Marxist to keep her father happy, becomes more broadly

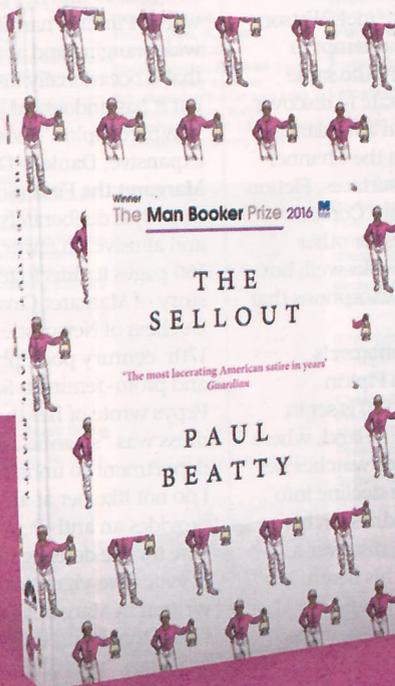
comic. More interesting is the extended episode when he ends up on a pensioners' annual coach trip through former Yugoslavia to indulge their nostalgia for the good old days of socialism.

Meatier fare can be found in Dusan Sarotar's **Panorama**, translated by Rawley Grau (Peter Owen £9.99), a dense but rewarding series of WG Sebald-like meditations on ideas of belonging set in Ireland, Belgium and, finally, Sarajevo. A third Slovenian novel **Three Loves, One Death** by Evald Flisar is also just out from Peter Owen, in their biannual scheme to publish three works of contemporary fiction from a single country. Three Spanish novels are planned for the spring.

An altogether different take on the vagaries of male desire can be found in **The Good Lover** by the Icelandic poet and novelist Steinunn Sigurdardóttir, translated by Philip Roughton (World Editions £9.99). A rich Icelandic businessman returns home from America to look for the woman who left him 17 years before when they were students. Since then he has had many lovers, but never consummated a relationship. A midnight phone call with a psychiatrist back in New York, who was one of those lovers, convinces him to contact the lost woman, who has long been married to someone else, and they run away together. Then he realises he might be in love with the psychiatrist. Although relatively short, from the ghost-story-like opening onwards this is a richly involving novel that grows in power as it proceeds. **C**

David Mills

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