

## Jill Alexander Essbaum, *Hausfrau* (Pan Macmillan 2015)

‘Anna was a good wife, mostly ...’

This is the first line of American poet Jill Alexander Essbaum’s debut novel. The author of several collections of poetry and the associate editor of the online journal *Anti-*, Essbaum teaches at the University of California, Riverside, and lives in Austin, Texas, but like her *hausfrau* heroine Anna Benz she once lived in Zurich. Readers might struggle, however, to find any area of domestic life in which Anna Benz could be considered a ‘good wife’. An expat American, she lives in comfort and affluence in Dietlikon, a pleasant suburb of Zurich, with her Swiss banker husband Bruno and three young children. Her widowed mother-in-law, Ursula, is a constant if grudging child-minder as Anna spends her days attending language school; after almost ten years in Switzerland she has mastered only rudimentary German, and nothing at all of Schwiizerdütsch, which ‘leaps from the back of the throat like an infected tonsil trying to escape’. Nor has she a bank account or a driver’s licence – trains and timetables modulate her daily life – and she deliberately keeps herself apart from the other mothers at the school gate. Depressed, listless, unable to summon any enthusiasm for life, Anna is a prisoner of her own making. ‘Boredom, like the trains, carried Anna through her days.’ (‘Get a job, I was silently urging; be a Red Cross volunteer.’)

At the instigation of her husband (*I’ve had enough of your fucking misery, Anna. Go fix yourself*), she is a patient of Jungian psychotherapist Doktor Messerli, and the interactions in her office are part of the narrative. Messerli has encouraged Anna to enrol in language classes. ‘It’s time you steer yourself into a trajectory that will force you into participating more fully with the world around you’, she tells Anna, a sentence that might persuade the reader that it is the good doctor who needs language lessons. The advice works after a fashion: what Anna doesn’t tell Messerli is how she is ‘participating’ with the world and alleviating boredom: by engaging in short-lived but intense sexual affairs. Her present one is conducted during the day after language class with Archie, a fellow student. Her previous lover, and the one she misses fervently and is sure she loved, was Stephen, the father of her youngest child, Polly, although nobody knows that but Anna. Soon Karl, a friend of the family, will come along. There seems to be no end to the men eager to flirt and sleep with her. Adultery, Anna discovers, is ‘alarmingly easy’.

There is plenty of sex in this novel but the descriptions of it are emotionally detached and matter-of-fact, mirroring Anna’s own preferences. Thus love in the afternoon with Archie:

Anna had never been mad about foreplay. She was not one of those women who needed to endure complicated half hours of rubbing and prodding and explosive plyometrics [sic] before her body tensed and the dam holding back her pleasure burst. Her desires were basic. *Put it in, take it out. Repeat for as long as possible. ...*

They fucked so hard that afterwards neither could walk.

Of course it is not love but since she never tells Messerli about these infidelities readers are left to draw their own conclusions about what is driving Anna.

Her husband is a bit of a workaholic and after ten years together they have little to say to each other; like Anna, he is economical when expressing his feelings. This is a weakness in the novel: Bruno is too lightly sketched for us to understand Anna’s frustrations with the relationship or his subsequent behaviour when he finds her out.

Our heroine’s first name is a link to that other fictional tragic heroine, Tolstoy’s Anna, while there are echoes in her story of another frustrated wife, Emma Bovary. As in those novels, we

expect that things will not turn out well, and we hardly need to be given the heavy hint, in the opening pages, that Swiss trains run on time except ‘when someone jumps in front of one’.

Anna refuses to make herself likeable, either in her daily life or to us, the readers. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing; but passive, sad and miserable characters are rarely engaging unless we are given insights into their minds and souls and can empathise. It is hard to empathise with Anna, but travellers planning to visit Switzerland might take along this novel for in-flight reading. As Anna drifts around her adopted city, the reader is treated to an almost street-by-street guide to Zurich, as well as descriptions that could come straight from the pages of a tourist brochure (‘Rapperswil is a picturesque city on the eastern end of the lake about thirty kilometers from Zurich. Built on a Bronze Age settlement, its sinewy alleyways date to medieval times ...’) and insights into the Swiss who, ‘like the landscape upon which they’ve settled ... are closed at their edges. They tend naturally towards isolation, conspiring to keep outsiders at a distance ...’

Anna kept me at a distance too, until an unspeakable tragedy sends her spiralling down into chronic depression and a long, final section that is totally gripping, even though one can see it coming. It is no less sad for that.

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