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# *Sky Glow* (*Streulicht*)–German novel looks at class society with fresh pair of eyes

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Deniz Ohde's debut novel *Sky Glow* (*Streulicht*), published in August 2020, takes an innovative, original look at German class society and its discontents.

The novel received the ZDF television network's *Aspekte* Literature Prize in 2020, as well as the Jürgen Ponto Foundation Literature Prize. Ohde's work was also shortlisted for the prestigious German Book Prize, has been translated into five languages and was staged as a play last year. (Sample English translation here.)

*Sky Glow* is part of a literary trend focusing once again on the lives and experiences of workers.

Deniz Ohde, born in Frankfurt am Main in 1988, the daughter of a chemical worker and a Turkish mother, has the first-person narrator return to her father's house for a short visit in the opening of what is clearly a semi-autobiographical novel.

Fragmentary memories are evoked in a very immediate, sensual manner as soon as she gets to the area where she grew up. "The air changes as you enter the town." One can smell the immediate proximity of a giant chemical industry facility, which German readers will easily recognise as the Höchst Industrial Park on the site of the former Farbwerke Hoechst AG in Frankfurt.

It is not just the acidic smell, the permanent hum and the diffuse light that the industrial estate (home to dozens of chemical and pharmaceutical firms) casts on its surroundings at night, which leaves its mark on people living in the neighbourhood. Nor is it simply the recurring chemical accident drills, the vouchers issued by the industrial park to the population when the air is too polluted or the stench of its waste incineration plant …

Feelings of discrimination and oppression, of shame and helplessness, emerge with a vengeance. "My face also changes," the narrator explains, "at the town sign, hardening into the expression my father taught me, a look of anxious indifference that he wears himself whenever he ventures out—a look to stop you from being seen."

Nominally, Ohde recounts the stifling path through the institutions of "education" and her failure on the official educational path. But from the outset, this experience connects with a picture of contemporary society at a deeper level, which Ohde hints at through a rich imagery that is sometimes poetically picturesque, sometimes fast-paced or cryptically humorous.

The narrator's two childhood and then teenage friends, Sophia and Pikka, effortlessly pass from one grade to the next, but her own bad report card prevents her transfer to a higher grade. The verdict without appeal, "Must leave this type of school!," catapults her out of the community of friends for good. The failure initially leads to shock, breakdown and depression—but gradually also to understanding and self-confident resistance.

"It was not an identity that was formed, but rather one that was taken away from me" is her interim assessment, a judgement with which a large part of Ohde's readership will be familiar, whether from their own youthful experiences, or as teachers or helpless parents confronting their desperate children when they leave school. In the manner of a jigsaw puzzle, Ohde pieces together fragments and demonstrates the connection between poverty and a so-called lack of education.

The question of identity, "Who am I?" runs through the entire book. The conclusion: "I was not born swaddled in foam, but rather dust-born, soot-born"—i.e., the fate suffered by millions of working class children. "Swaddled in foam"—these are those friends from better placed homes and academic circles, as embodied by Sophia's mother or Pikka's father, who holds a leading position in the chemical company.

How the narrator would have liked to have had a life similar to that of her friend Sophia! The chic school bag, the blond hair softly pinned up, cared for by a mother who not only asks about the school routine, but also pays attention to a balanced, healthy diet for the family. Sophia receives riding lessons and ballet classes, which the mother considers essential for a "comprehensive education."

One is involuntarily reminded of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* when Ohde brings this typical representative of the complacent upper middle class to life. "Sophia's mother came quietly down the stairs. With each step she pushed forward with a practised movement her pear-shaped hips which, despite all their softness, testified to a firmness in life: the evenings at volleyball she had spent in her early twenties, the preference for dark bread. She wore jumpers of mottled wool and glasses with red metal sides, two thin bars over the bridge of her nose, no rim around the lenses."

Her friend's mother proudly refers to her short career as a trained clerk, "back in the bank," someone who knows her stuff and stands out from the housewives in the street. She organises her life straightforwardly, with sporty, energetic élan, as exemplified by the well-stocked hygiene and cosmetic articles in her bathroom, testifying to "a secure sense of womanhood." Her neatly enclosed garden paradise, with the white-painted family home in the middle,

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clean, fragrant, tidy, almost makes one forget the proximity of the industrial park.

The house of the narrator's parents is quite different. In a rented apartment, the smoke and stench of her father's cigarettes come together with his alcoholic fumes. When she comes home, no one asks: how it was at school? Instead, in the flat's doorway, she looks for tell-tale signs: has her father been drinking again? Is he asleep or is another drunken explosion of rage on the way? Will she discover her anxious mother in the kitchen sweeping up broken glass?

Keeping quiet and tiptoeing around are part of the survival mode necessary in a family home marked by poverty, despair and bitterness. At the same time, they correspond to the survival mode needed in the outside world, where she also wants to be as inconspicuous as possible.

Last and not least, she also bears the stigma of her mother's "Turkish roots"—in the colour and density of her hair, in the shape of her eyebrows. As a young woman, her mother had left her small home village and her own mother, who beat her. She found herself stranded in the Rhine-Main area without any education or knowledge of German. Since that time, she has toiled away, outside the house as a poorly paid cleaner, and at home as an unpaid cleaning lady and cook for her husband and father-in-law. The teachers treat her daughter as a foreigner, even though she does not speak her mother's language. Only the daughter's name, her "secret name," which her mother uses quietly and only in the flat and which (with the exception of her father and two friends) no one else knows, connects her to her mother's language.

It is the period following the reunification of Germany, a time when refugee centres were set on fire by neo-Nazi gangs. Her mother, however, does not want to translate the graffiti against migrants on the walls of the houses. "You are German, ... they do not mean you," she tells herself and her daughter after the latter is racially insulted by an older classmate and pushed so hard she falls and injures herself. The school nurse and the class teacher also cover up the incident, calling it an unfortunate coincidence. The class teacher goes so far as to blame the daughter for the incident: "She is too sensitive" and needs "a thicker skin."

On one occasion, a school assignment involves writing about "identity." After the narrator looks perplexed at her blank page, the teacher advises her she has a name that indicates a Turkish background.

In its most important aspects, however, her identity is not ethnically but socially determined. It is not ethnicity but class that shapes her destiny. "Who am I?" she asks herself again later, when she succeeds against all odds in obtaining her school-leaving certificate via the so-called second educational path and begins her studies. She feels lost among her fellow students, the "daughters and sons from established 1968 households," who had inherited the "knowledge of proper behaviour at university" along with their parents' old "Nuclear Power, No Thanks" patches.

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A passing glance at her reflection in a glass door makes her realise she will never belong to "them." When, in the evening after a student job as a cleaner, overtired and still in work clothes, a stranger, a worker, helps her at the ticket machine on the platform, she is struck by the solidarity and friendliness of her peers.

The more she becomes aware of social contrasts, the closer and more understanding she becomes in her relationship with her father, whom Ohde describes very sensitively. In particular with the character of the father, the author manages to go beyond the narrow framework of the novel's educational theme and develop a narrative about the problems of a migrant, working class background.

Like her grandfather, who lives on the ground floor of the same house, her father works as a shift worker in the industrial park. Both men are taciturn. Over the years, both become alcoholics and the father an inveterate "hoarder." When the daughter asks her mother why she stays with him despite his outbursts and drunkenness, the latter replies that he has "also had it hard." When her mother dies, the father does not want earth on the grave, but rose petals, and not fir branches, but a spring flower arrangement. For the first time, he talks to his daughter about the contemptuous attitude he encountered at school parent-teacher meetings.

The author provides a sharp characterisation of the father on one of the first pages of the novel. "For forty years he worked for the same company—another spiel of his. That working man's pride mixed with defiance and an arrogance born of necessity (chin slightly raised, eyelids drooping a few millimetres, shoulders down). My father spent forty years dipping aluminium sheet into electrolytes, forty hours a week."

Intuitively, the author captures the impact of the defeat suffered by a generation of workers whose former social gains were rolled back following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reintroduction of capitalism across Eastern Europe.

After decades of ideological propaganda announcing the end of the labour movement and the triumph of capitalism, the novel *Sky Glow* reflects the beginning of a new development, the return of working class pride and self-knowledge.

The fact that the father is portrayed as a "hoarder" who buys food and cheap goods in abundance (after all, they had been "bombed out twice"), who refuses to throw away anything broken and old and refrains from sorting out mementos of his family and beloved wife—this is not simply a whim, as it seems at first glance. Indirectly, this account also provides a metaphor for the fact that the working class cannot and will not shake off its history.

The highest recommendation for this novel was provided through its spiteful rejection by right-wing critics such as Denis Scheck, who hosts the *Lesenswert Quartett*, a literary discussion program on ARD television. This "woman cannot think," Scheck raged. Deniz Ohde wanted to blame the "reasons for her social failure" on others instead of "starting with herself." After all, Scheck blustered, today's society offers great opportunities for advancement.

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