



★ **Go, Went, Gone**

Jenny Erpenbeck

Susan Bernofsky, Translator

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A major and important book, Go, Went, Gone tackles the issue of human displacement with intelligence and empathy.

This powerful German novel in translation humanizes refugees at a time when many find it politically expedient to demonize them. Focusing on the European refugee crisis, the story looks at how an unwelcoming, privileged society handles issues of race and nationality, and explores humankind's search for meaning.

The story centers on a retired professor, Richard, who, in his own twilight, is fixated with time. He is also intrigued by the African asylum seekers who stage a hunger strike in Berlin, headed with the slogan "We become visible." He decides to take up their cause—teaching them German, assisting them with paperwork, and advocating on their behalf.

Prose is glistening and polished, with formidable intellectual heft. It includes a litany of allusions to the likes of Ovid, Homer, and Proust, as well as profound observations about the human condition, as with "it makes no difference to the lake whether it's a fish decomposing beneath its surface or a human being."

The plot unfolds expertly, taking Richard on a journey to realize how much he fundamentally has in common with foreigners fleeing violence. The novel charts his progression from a reluctant retiree who skittishly makes a beeline to his train at the sight of dark-skinned refugees to a caring volunteer who hears them out and tries to help them get settled.

Richard has a well-developed voice and makes incisive observations, such as that refugees scrape by on around five euros a day after legal fees and remittances. He gathers heart-wrenching stories from migrants like Yusef, Ali, and Osarobo. Their tales are fleshed out and attain great pathos. At times, the novel reads like a collection of authentic refugee narratives, all of which help explain why people flee their homelands for unknown and often-hostile shores.

A major and important book, *Go, Went, Gone* tackles a contemporary issue with morality, intelligence, and empathy. The novel gives much-needed visibility to displaced migrants with no options. It's a portrait of humanity in extremis, and it vividly renders a man who seeks to infuse his time on earth with higher purpose.

JOSEPH S. PETE (September/October 2017)

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