ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

Seven Years
Peter Stamm
Michael Hofmann, translator
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Peter Stamm's Seven Years is a dynamic and taut novel that examines the conflicted heart and the perception of what love is within the confines of marriage. Told from the point of view of Alex, a young, attractive architect, this story oscillates between his present-day marriage with Sonia and a sweeping flashback that details his compulsive lust for a Polish émigré, Ivona. Sonia appears to be the best wife a man could hope for: stunning, driven, and intelligent; while Ivona is the opposite: subservient, quiet, and plain.

Sonia and Alex's relationship begins while in architecture school; once married, they start a firm together that becomes successful after years of hard work. Their relationship weakens with their firm's success and Alex finds himself unable to live up to Sonia's and his own expectations, as well as the outward perception that they have the perfect marriage. Sonia's increasing detachment motivates Alex to find Ivona after years of no contact. She asks nothing of him, takes only what he gives, and never complains. At times repulsed by her body and her submissiveness, Alex is also comforted because she makes no demands on his mind, his heart, or his time, and, as his effort in his marriage deteriorates, his involvement with Ivona becomes more intense.

Stamm invigorates his narrative by avoiding direct quotes in dialogue and instead folds conversations into the retelling of the story. This is difficult to do but he establishes a distinct rhythm that pulls the reader along swiftly. Most of the flashback is told to Sonia's older artist friend, Antje, who provides an unsettling counterpoint to Alex's selfish and indulgent behavior. Antje offers him no solace for his honesty about his flaws and seems to be the voice of judgment that Sonia refuses to be. In the end, Alex gives no excuses for his affair with Ivona, something that renders him that rare, unlikeable narrator that actually works.

Seven Years sweeps across Bavaria and Southern France after the fall of the Berlin wall. It is a novel for those who seek realistic rather than happy endings, limning the intricacies of relationships and the failures of expectations. And for readers who understand that the right

choice doesn’t always equal happiness, it’s a story about being comfortable with who you are and what happens when you’re not sure who that is. The Swiss-born Stamm’s other novels include On a Day Like This and Unformed Landscape.

Monica Carter