

Tante Eva

Paula Bomer

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Paula Bomer's stark historical novel is set among the detritus left behind when the Berlin Wall fell.

After World War II, Eva and her husband, Hugo, made the natural choice to live in the GDR, reasoning that communists saved him from the Nazis, and that the GDR's promise that none would go hungry was a gift after years of deprivation. They raised their daughter in this would-be paradise, teaching her to be wary of the trappings of capitalism. Still, their friendships with artists and exiles placed them under the Stasi's constant watch.

By the time the Wall falls, Hugo is dead; Eva has retired from nursing. Eva lives in a crumbling building, depending more on a troubled young neighbor than she'd like to; she avoids the neighborhood skinheads, and waits for visits from her married, untrustworthy lover, Hans. She drinks too much; she remembers more than she'd prefer.

Eva works to maintain empathy for strangers, and to tamp down her resentment over past betrayals, both by people and the state. When her radical American niece, Maggie, announces that she's moving to Berlin, Eva is ecstatic. But meeting grown-up Maggie corrodes the stories she's told herself about her family and her past.

Bomer's novel is incisive in cataloging the consequences of war, and of the restrictive political systems that lead to, or follow from, it. For Eva, condemning the Nazis was easy; acknowledging the shortcomings of communism is less so. She proclaims herself not political, but is conscious of state surveillance. She proves gifted at simultaneous recognition of other people's hubris, and at concentrated denial of the flaws of those whom she loves. Though true happiness evades her, she is meticulous about ensuring her own survival.

Tante Eva is a sensitive, startling novel about post-Soviet existence.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2021)

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