

The Sweet Indifference of the World

Peter Stamm

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In Peter Stamm's philosophical novel *The Sweet Indifference of the World*, writers and actors who're struggling to make art become a means of exploring both identity and reality.

Christoph is a writer who sends Lena, a young actress, a message asking that they meet in a cemetery. He has a story for her. It begins years ago, when he was writing his novel. He'd also just broken up with his actress girlfriend, Magdalena. Christoph's narration takes a twist: he describes meeting a doppelgänger in Lena's boyfriend, Chris. He thinks that Chris and Lena are younger versions of Magdalena and himself.

As Christoph and Lena wander around Stockholm, they try to understand the eerie parallels between their lives. Those mysterious repetitions are portrayed with a clarity that makes it easy to believe the unbelievable. The younger couple's story mimics that of their elders in many ways: the women acted in the same stage roles; the men wrote, or are writing, the same book. Personalities and appearances repeat. But the couple's paths also diverge in matters small and large, introducing uncertainty. Is this life repeating itself, or is something else going on?

While the novel probes the relationships between art and life, memory and identity, its high-minded philosophical questioning is balanced by its sharp characters. Christoph's story of love and loss, and his struggle to write, are compelling. Lena's independence and readiness to question Christoph's interpretations of their predicament give her depth and make her a counterpoint to Christoph's dreaminess.

The story is anchored in Christoph and Lena's meanderings through Stockholm, but also shifts to other European settings. It moves back and forth between the past and the present with ease. In short chapters, the novel's complex world comes together piece by piece.

The Sweet Indifference of the World is a beautiful, melancholic novel whose characters are lively and whose philosophies are subtle.

REBECCA HUSSEY (January / February 2020)

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