

The Woman with the Bouquet

Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt

Alison Anderson, Translator

Europa Editions (Sep 26, 2010)

Softcover \$15.00 (224pp)

978-1-933372-81-5

"Literature like bloodletting, to avoid fever," the author writes in *The Woman with the Bouquet*. This collection of stories is for those who share this regard for literature, who see it as a salubrious—yet potentially dangerous—endeavor. Schmitt's is a book for companions of books. His characters are surrounded by tomes, and they base their lives on them. The stories Schmitt supplies likewise offer something to live by. They read like modern fairy tales.

The title story, "The Woman with the Bouquet," for instance, is one part mystery and one part fable, complete with its extractable lessons: "What is interesting in an enigma is not the truth that it hides, but the mystery that it contains." The story—which is by far the shortest in the book, running only eleven pages—explicates this lesson and another: that the life one projects onto another is likely to be one's own. As such, Schmitt's book is a rebuttal to one of his character's claims that there is nothing to be learned from a work of fiction.

For readers looking for the edification that literature can bring, Schmitt provides. Although his name may be new to some American readers, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt is one of the most popular contemporary French authors in Europe. This collection of short stories was first published in French in 2007 (with the first short story as its cover title—*La Rêveuse d'Ostende*, or *The Dreamer from Ostend*), and it was well received. Schmitt is also a renowned dramatist; winner of the French Academy's 2001 Grand Prix du Théâtre, his plays have been staged in more than thirty countries.

As one might expect from a contemporary dramatist, Schmitt's style is not language-oriented and is, instead, read-aloud ready. His stories are easily accessed. That said, Schmitt attends to words and follows where they send the mind. An apparent lover of books, he seems also to be a lover of letters. Speaking of the word "Ostend," he relishes each sound: "Because the word began with an O of surprise, then grew softer with the s, it anticipated the sensation of bedazzlement as I stood on a sand beach stretching to infinity..."

While infinity remains in view, Schmitt explores the finitude of human life. With Flannery O'Connor's penchant for rendering the misfits and the afflicted, Schmitt's characters have emotional vulnerabilities that become as observable as their bodies'. Going through these pages has the effect of a blood transfusion—letting another's life in.

JANELLE ADSIT (September / October 2010)

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