



W. A Novel

Steve Sem-Sandberg

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In Steve Sem-Sandberg's historical novel *W.*, a soldier is sentenced to death for murder during the Napoleonic Wars.

Always at the wrong place at the wrong time, Johann Christian Woyzeck struggles to find his place in life. Orphaned at a young age, he trains to be a wig maker. But wigs are falling out of fashion, so he enlists with allies of the French. He does so as Napoleon's military successes are waning. He fathers a child with a woman whom he barely knows. Desperate, he pins his last hopes on Johanna Woost, a widow leading a comfortable life because of her inheritance, but who also has relationships with more than one man.

When Woyzeck hears that Johanna has once again been seen walking, arms linked, with another soldier, jealousy consumes him. He catches Johanna outside of her apartment and kills her. Panicked, he then flees the scene and disposes of the murder weapon. But it is too late: there were witnesses to the murder, and Woyzeck's clothes are covered in Johanna's blood. He is arrested. After years in prison, he is sentenced to death.

The prose is precise, even poetic at times. Inspired by George Büchner's play "Woyzeck," about a man who murders his wife and is driven insane by medical experiments, the novel also offers a possible backstory to the play's real-life protagonist, who was sentenced to death for the murder of his wife, Johanna, in 1824. It involves both research and speculation as it sets Woyzeck on his adventures across Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, and Russia, all in search of a place to fit in.

W. is an immersive, intricate historical novel about the alienation experienced by those who struggle to find their places in life.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (July / August 2022)

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