

Yiza

Michael Köhlmeier

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Simultaneously bleak and hopeful, Michael Köhlmeier's *Yiza* traverses the expansive landscape of human suffering as seen through the eyes of displaced migrant children.

When little Yiza is abandoned in the streets of Germany, she finds herself scooped up into a shelter for other migrant children. Though she is fed and clothed and given a bed to sleep in, she is attracted to two older boys at the shelter, Schamhan and Arian, who convince her to run away with them.

The boys treat Yiza like a younger sister, going so far as to break into a house to make sure they have food and survival supplies. Pursued by the police, Yiza falls ill, and Arian attempts to care for her, but when she is taken into custody against their will, the novel culminates with the great lengths to which Arian goes to rejoin with Yiza.

The novel dispenses with frills with its childlike narrative style. The absence of quotation marks, or any punctuation, to set off dialogue draws attention to a central theme of the novel—namely, the universality of the human experience. Yiza cannot communicate directly with anyone in her own language except for Schamhan, yet she and Arian form a bond that defies their verbal limitations. And so, even though verbal exchanges may be transcribed, within the world of the novel, these exchanges are not actually occurring. Rather, it is through a deeper communication that Yiza and Arian are able to understand one another.

Poverty and the plight of migrants are on full display. The three children travel across the wintry German countryside and eke out their continued survival in any desperate way they can. Interwoven with the stark realism are hints of a fairy tale. Native Germans—the nurse at the shelter, the police, the woman who takes the sick Yiza into care—slip into the narrative like ghosts or strange creatures encountered in a blasted version of Wonderland. When Arian first meets Yiza, he gives her a thimble, a gender reversal of the story of Peter Pan. The novel's grisly conclusion is reminiscent of many a darker fairy tale.

Yiza wraps felicitous social and humanitarian commentary in the evocative lexicon of childhood innocence.

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