

In 2002 prostitution was decriminalized in Germany, and a new law was passed granting sex workers basic social and legal rights. It also opened up plentiful business opportunities to the (for the most part, male) profiteers in the sector, including landlords, bar and nightclub owners, small- and big-time crooks, as well as traffickers. Clemens Meyer's newly translated novel, *Bricks and Mortar* (*Im Stein*, 2013) is set in the 1990s and noughties in a fictional East German city that bears more than a passing resemblance to both Leipzig and Halle an der Saale, and charts the emergence of a new industry that did not exist in that form in the GDR. Venturing deep into the shadowy world of pimps, prostitutes and punters, Meyer presents the reader with a compelling chorus of voices in a neo-modernist masterpiece that explores not just the ethical complexities of the sex trade, but also the broader socio-economic transformations of post-1989 Germany.

Meyer makes few concessions to his readers. The narrative perspective shifts repeatedly, from first to second to third person; time and place are fundamentally unstable categories here; stream-of-consciousness and free indirect discourse are interrupted by transcripts from interviews, radio broadcasts and sections that appear documentary in tone. Hallucinatory and dreamlike sequences alternate with troublingly hyperrealist depictions of sexual acts; recurring leitmotifs (such as "my son, my son, what have you done") structure a work that focuses predominantly on internal rather than external events; the mode vacillates between tragic and comic, encompassing a remarkable range of human experience, from the mildly disturbing to the outright shocking. Meyer's multifaceted prose, studded with

The red-light cosmos

A brilliant neo-modernist exploration of the sex trade

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allusions to both high and popular culture, and superbly translated by Katy Derbyshire, is musical and often lyrical, elevating lowbrow punning and porn-speak into literary devices. A penchant for cinematic techniques such as montage and the literary equivalent of the long tracking shot, as well as a passion for the urban, place Meyer in the company of pre-war modernists such as John Dos Passos, Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Alfred Döblin. Other influences might include Hans Henny Jahnn, Hubert Fichte, Wolfgang Hilbig and Jörg Fauser.

Among the principal figures in this dizzyingly polyphonic novel is Arnold Kraushaar (aka AK), who leaves behind his violent past to become a property tycoon, renting flats to sex workers and protecting them from competing syndicates and gang masters in this labyrinthine underworld:

The alleys crossed and branched off and got lost in the dark, only to flare up again, bar after bar,

hotels, strip bars, karaoke bars, love hotels, massage, blow job salons, mana tanga, garishly lit glass fronts, the windows elsewhere glowed dark red, you recognize the English words in among the many symbols, walls of glass, schoolgirls in uniform in the window, tiny women crowding a dark side alley, the glowing tips of their cigarettes, let there be light, you're on the inside of the great machine, and onward, ever onward you walk . . .

Then there is the nightclub owner Hans Pieczek, who dreams big, risking his life in the diamond trade. Other leading characters include an ageing policeman investigating the deaths of three people found buried in a bog; a West German *Graf* who opens a luxury brothel; and a former jockey seeking his daughter, a victim of child sex abuse who has disappeared—the most tragic of Meyer's riders in the night. Perhaps most importantly, we hear the voices of numerous women working in the sex trade, some of whom are contented with their lot, some pragmatic, some resigned, some disgusted, some despairing. Others, like the young girl forced into prostitution alongside the jockey's lost daughter, and to whose distressing stream-of-consciousness we are exposed in the novel's darkest chapter, are profoundly damaged.

Both the men and the women in Meyer's red-light cosmos are, with a few exceptions, generally benign; many are well-read and

witty. The male protagonists are classic hard-boiled creatures—tough on the outside but with a soft centre—and more than capable of musing eloquently about Karl Marx, business economics and Buddhist philosophy. Yet their world is a perilous one, and their position in it perpetually under threat: warring syndicates flock into the city in search of new business opportunities, among them Turks, Yugoslavians, neo-Nazis and above all Hell's Angels. When we first encounter AK he has just been shot; by the end of the novel he may well be on the Angels' death list.

A compelling homage to the city and its various subcultures, to East German inventiveness, and above all to the people working in the sex industry, Meyer's novel is also an exploration of neo-liberal capitalism and the laws of the market as they affect people at various social levels. While the sex trade may be more overtly violent than other forms of business, the laws of competition, and of supply and demand, are essentially the same—as AK, who studied economic management, is well aware.

The parabolic dimension of *Bricks and Mortar* is complemented by a network of mythological allusions. AK, who returns from the dead at the beginning of the novel, is also called Mister Orpheus; the leader of the Angels who gradually take over the city is referred to as the "man behind the mirrors"; and key scenes take place in the labyrinthine underbelly of a crematorium. While the novel would have benefited from tighter editing here and there, it is admirably ambitious and in many places brilliant—a book that not only adapts an arsenal of modernist techniques for the twenty-first century but, more importantly, reveals their enduring poetic potential.

The Austrian polymath Hugo von Hofmannsthal once described Vienna as the "gateway to the Orient". Mathias Enard's latest novel peers through this gateway at the centuries-old relationship between the West and the Orient, describing a world that was both exploitative and syncretic—one in which European composers drew on the Muslim call to prayer, and French writers such as Balzac consulted Eastern scholars when seeking fictional inspiration. Enard, a French novelist who came to international attention for *Zone* (*TLS*, November 7, 2011), a 517-page novel written in a single sentence, lived in Syria for two years before the outbreak of the civil war, and in *Compass* he evokes a time before the Middle East became synonymous in the minds of Westerners with terrorism and refugees. While the book could perhaps be read as an elegy for empire, it is primarily a meditation on a forgotten globalism. The title itself nods at cultural overlap: "Compass" refers to a gift given to the narrator, a replica of a compass

Mash of civilizations

West meets East in a hymn to the interchange of cultures

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Mathias Enard

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Beethoven once owned, and also to the fact that compasses were traditionally carved into Islamic furniture to indicate the way to Mecca.

Compass is set in the present day over the course of a single hallucinatory night, as a middle-aged musicologist in Vienna lies awake reflecting on his life and studies, and, between intermittent dreams, thinking about a woman. Franz Ritter is the model of a certain kind of nineteenth-century intellectual—erudite in vanishing traditions, fluent in European Orientalist schools of study, and personally conservative; a politely repressed Austrian who once circulated among the intelligentsia in Tehran, Damascus and Istanbul, and who now socializes mainly with his mother. The novel opens after he receives a letter from Sarah, a peripatetic French academic he has loved quietly for years. Lying in bed, he allows his mind to wander through vivid memories of late-night opium parties in Turkey, trips with Sarah through the

desert in Palmyra, and strolls through Persian villas in Farmaniyeh. Somewhat tediously there is almost no plot of which to speak; the narrative instead drifts between fragments of academic articles, monologues and digressions on obscure intellectuals who embody the values Franz holds dear. The most fascinating sections are the biographical passages, describing characters both fictional and real. Enard depicts Franz's room-mate in Istanbul, a French scholar of prostitution in Turkey, as a kind of vulgar Jean-Paul Belmondo, and he dedicates many pages to Annemarie Schwarzenbach, a twentieth-century Swiss journalist and lesbian who married a gay diplomat in order to travel freely through Persia and Afghanistan. The result is both enrapturing and irritating, at times demonstrating Enard's deft turns of phrase, at others tempting us into the sleep that eludes Franz.

Since its release in France and award of the Prix Goncourt in 2015, *Compass* has been celebrated as a response to rising anti-Muslim sentiment, and more specifically to *Soumission* (*TLS*, March 6, 2015), Michel Houellebecq's dystopian take on how these sentiments might one day play out. (It has also been shortlisted for this year's Man Booker International Prize.) Certainly, it challenges notions of a strict division between East and West, instead envisioning the two histories as intertwined. At

one point Franz imagines a scholarly article in which Sarah argues that "what we regard as purely 'Oriental' is in fact, very often, the repetition of a 'Western' element that itself modifies another previous 'Oriental' element, and so on". This argument is politically loaded, and yet *Compass* avoids addressing politics overtly. Instead Franz lives in the past. He is a paradoxical, Proustian figure, gifted with a rich inner life yet hemmed in by a mysterious illness and a darkening sense of the world around him. "Sometimes I feel as if night has fallen", he writes. "That the global construction of the world is no longer carried out by the interchange of love and ideas but by violence and manufactured objects."

In *Zone*, Enard took a stream-of-consciousness approach to explore questions of politics and memory. *Compass*, while expansive and multivalent, is also a study in distancing: Franz keeps at arm's length the kinds of exchanges the book itself celebrates. "The human species isn't doing its best these days", he observes. "You want to take refuge in your books, your records, your memories of childhood." In the final pages his internal monologue is suddenly interrupted, and, no longer only in dialogue with himself, Franz thinks in real time, about what might come next. After hundreds of pages of musings about the bloody, generative ties that bind East to West, this encounter challenges him in a minor way to consider, as Sarah put it pages earlier, a mode of seeing that looks "beyond the stupid repentance of some or the colonial nostalgia of others, [to] a new vision that includes the other in the self". Whether he can is left unanswered.