



Leona Stahlmann

All these Petty Miracles

Original title: All diese belanglosen Wunder
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400 pages

'Love is a soft fabric, but it isn't a stretchy concept.'

Zeno lives with his mother Leda in an old, abandoned saltworks, surrounded by a river and salt marshes. He knows what to do here. He is acquainted with the bleak, hot summers and the river mists of the clammy winters. However, above all, he knows the birds – buzzards, golden eagles, falcons, northern goshawks, Eurasian eagle-owls, and owls – that they rent out in the saltworks to sensation-hungry day-trippers. But one day, his mother vanishes. And as if miraculously summoned, other people find their way to Zeno in the saltworks – people from the big city who long for the last remnants of raw nature, who no longer perceive any meaning in their working world.

A dazzling, poetic novel about the destructive but all-too-human longing for nature, the lifesaving quality of the relationships we choose to have, and the hope that rests in the tides.

- An urgently critical, literary exploration of the climate crisis
- The extraordinary story of a lifesaving friendship
- A poetic fable about THE topic of our time: people's interaction with nature



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Leona Stahlmann, born in 1988, lives in Hamburg and works as an author, journalist and event organizer. In 2017, she won the Hamburg Advancement Award for Literature, and the following year, she was a fellow at the Novel Workshop of the Brecht House Literature Forum in Berlin, and won the first Wortmeldung Advancement Prize. Her debut novel 'Der Defekt' ('The Defect') was released in 2020 and received major critical acclaim. It was also awarded the Mark State Grant and was included on the shortlist for the 2021 Text & Sprache Literature Prize. Among other awards, she received the German Literary Fund Work Grant for 'All These Petty Miracles'.

Synopsis & Excerpts

(written and translated by Emma Rault)

SYNOPSIS

Part I

Twelve-year-old Zeno lives in a disused saltworks by a river with his eccentric, temperamental mother Leda in an unspecified near future characterized by constant natural disasters. In the nearby city, where Zeno goes to school, he likes to spy on lonely urbanites in apartment buildings at night while looking at their dating-app profiles on his phone. Leda falls in love with a scientist named Paul Osander who shows up at the saltworks, ostensibly as part of a project documenting the sounds made by different fish species before they go extinct. When Zeno watches porn online, he recognizes some of the sounds he has heard in Osander’s recordings. Leda is crushed when she finds out Osander’s project is fake. Not long after, she disappears.

Part II

The second part of the novel is narrated by Katt, a young woman from the city who is mourning the loss of her eccentric, temperamental girlfriend Stine, who has walked out on her. Katt makes her living reading tarot cards on an online video channel. She starts talking to who she believes to be a man with the user name ‘Zero’ on her dating app; when she takes the bus to his town to meet him, she is taken aback to find it’s Zeno, a twelve-year-old child. Nonetheless she moves in with him at the saltworks. They are joined by a few other city dwellers: Maju, who we met in part I, when she was working as a customer-service hotline representative for the manufacturer of Japanese maneki-neko cats, and Pella, Golden and Janusz, a formerly homeless group of friends distinguished by their colorful beanies. They form a de facto commune surrounding Zeno, who speaks in Buddha-like aphorisms and introduces them to the riparian landscape surrounding the saltworks. When the wildfires that are consuming much of the European countryside reach the area, Zeno ends up losing his life. After his burial Pella, Golden and Janusz move back to the city, but Maju and Katt decide to stay at the saltworks.

EXCERPTS

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Headphones dangle from her neck, emitting quiet moans. Mangarahara cichlids, she whispers. Off Madagascar. She repeats the word, Mangarahara, Mangarahara, abracadabra, a spell for children that loses its power when they stop believing in it, it's like If you finish your plate, there'll be good weather tomorrow, another incantation that's past its expiration date, good weather is the kind of weather that doesn't kill anyone, and every child knows that only exists in old stories nowadays, in books—more worn-out hocus pocus. Where do discarded spells go? To a museum? To the compost pile? To a landfill? Into people's homes, where they stand around under old sheets in basements and attics—dusty old junk from yesterday's world. People buy each other's old junk, Zeno sees the flea markets in the city, in the courtyards of his friends' apartment buildings, every day there's another one somewhere. The dustier the junk, the more the grown-ups will pay for it, the newspapers say that before long the world will be gone, the great disappearing has started everywhere. The only place it hasn't reached yet is people's attics. Meanwhile people keep on buying, as if there were room for a record collection in the void. Maybe, Zeno thinks, for grown-ups the void is like an empty living room. Someone comes along and puts a sofa in there and the whole thing starts over from square one. The grown-ups are running out of planet, that's been true for as long as Zeno can remember, it's all he knows, the Earth is the dwindling number at the end of a subtraction which is calculated anew every night. But we will never run out of sofas or record players or spells. Zeno understood this a long time ago: we must never run out of spells.

[...]

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Am I still allowed to have a broken heart when the world is ending, Leda asks. Do the medium-sized catastrophes still count. Am I still allowed to get up on the wrong side of the bed, am I allowed to be grumpy in the morning and am I allowed to have a bad day just because if I'm a mother and have got a child and my people have set his future on fire, no, we didn't even manage to accomplish that, we're not the arsonists, we're not the firefighters, we're nothing, we're just stuck in the middle, grown fat and lazy on what our parents put into our mouths, and once we began to understand that it was our children's future that we were eating, it went stale on our tongues and tasted like what it was, ashes from a fire, but we kept mechanically masticating, a reflex like jerking your knee when the doctor taps it with the little hammer, we had no choice, it's all we know, we kept eating, until not even the ashes were left for our children. [...]

REVIEWS

»*All These Petty Miracles* is a post-decadent statement about new open spaces. Its skilful combination of nature writing, climate fiction and social politics creates a poetic Stoicism. With its calming, non-judgmental observational style, this story allows its messianically intelligent child to progress towards a melancholy hope. Only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the last river has been poisoned, only after the last fish has been caught, humanity will not only realise that money cannot be eaten – they may also look back at Leona Stahlmann’s *All These Petty Miracles* to discover a catechism for a new era. «

Deutschlandfunk

» *All These Petty Miracles* is an audaciously ambitious book that impresses with lyrical descriptions of the natural landscape and unflinching reflections on climate catastrophe, [...].

[...] Where the book really shines is in its descriptions of the flora and fauna surrounding the saltworks, and the characters’ reflections on climate change, in which (the author and I are the same age) I recognize the grief and discomfort of my generation. «

Emma Rault, literary translator

»Deliverance through beauty

With her novel *All These Petty Miracles* Leona Stahlmann has created a poetic climate narrative. [...] Despite the bleak and apocalyptic scenarios she is drawing, this is not a dystopian novel on climate change. Stahlmann says she has tried to create a work of beauty. And that she did. With poetic eloquence she manages to distill moments of utter darkness into dazzling prose. [...]

The authoress sees her novel in the context of the decadent movement and shaped in a kind of Fin-de-Siècle aesthetics. ‘I am somebody who is evermore in pursuance of beauty hoping it will offer the world deliverance’. «

Süddeutsche Zeitung