Longing for freedom

Biting but plaintive at the same time

CILETTE OFAIRE
"Ismé"
German edition:
Th. Gut Verlag, Zurich, 2020
560 pages, CHF 39

French edition:
Éditions de l'Aire, Vevey,
2020, 549 pages, CHF 39

The steamboat "Ismé" sets off from La Rochelle on the French Atlantic coast in September 1933. Cilette Ofaire, the first-ever Swiss woman to hold a captain's licence, is at the helm. She intends to circumnavigate Spain and Portugal with a small crew, including an Italian man called Ettore. The stormy winter months, corrupt port officials, and a lack of money force the crew to dock on land – sometimes for weeks at a time – until they reach the Mediterranean via the Strait of Gibraltar in summer 1934. Ofaire makes ends meet by writing stories and welcoming paying passengers on board. During their long stopover anchored at port on the island of Ibiza, the crew and their boat become embroiled in the turmoil of the Spanish Civil War. A bombardment damages the "Ismé", forcing captain and crew – now consisting solely of Ettore and his pregnant wife – to seek refuge on the island. In December 1936, all three are unexpectedly forced to leave Spain. With a heavy heart, they must abandon the boat.

Ofaire calls "Ismé", the book that she wrote about the journey, a novelistic report. "Ismé" was first published in Lausanne in 1940, and later in France. It soon became a bestseller and was translated into various languages. The poignant human kindness and longing for freedom that pervade the story, as well as the author's humorous tone, were welcome respite to readers during the Second World War. Written in a refreshing, unembellished style, this maritime novel was – and is – a fascinating account of life and adventures on the high seas.

The new edition of "Ismé" has been published by the Swiss publicist and literary critic Charles Linsmayer, whose excellent biography of the author is included alongside the work. Photographs documenting Ofaire's life as well as extracts from the author's diary sketches also grace the book, which is available both in French and German.

Cilette Ofaire, who was born in 1891 in the canton of Neuchâtel, trained as a glass painter. She sailed through Europe on rivers and canals with her husband, the artist Charles Hofer. After their marriage fell apart, Ofaire bought the steamboat "Ismé". She had to give up painting due to an eye disorder and later moved to the south of France, where she wrote a handful of other novels. After her death in 1964, the author fell into oblivion before being rediscovered in the late 1980s.

RUTH VON GUNTEN
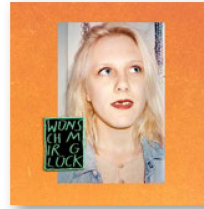
STEINER & MADLAINA:
"Wünsch mir Glück"
Glitterhouse/Irascible 2021

Nora Steiner and Madlaina Pollina get straight to the point in their new single "Heile Welt" (Perfect world): "Wenn viel zu viele gern mit dem Feuer spielen, in Hass losgerannt und Hoffnung verbrannt, haben wir versagt" (Too many of us have played with fire. We've set off in rage and burned our wings. We've failed.) Donald Trump, plastic waste on a beach, refugees, despots and the Mexican border wall – the video pulls no punches either. "Today's world is dividing humanity," they lament, before breaking into a memorable, melancholic chorus. Theirs is a rueful longing for a perfect world, embellished with images of a bucolic childhood in Switzerland.

The song has a charming pop melody combined with biting lyrics. Yet "Heile Welt" is just one facet of the duo's eclectic new album "Wünsch mir Glück" (Wish me luck). "Denk was du willst" (Think what you want) is an acoustic singer-songwriter number about self-destructive lust and longing, while title track "Wünsch mir Glück" is a disarmingly plaintive love song: "Warst du gestern, als ich blieb, auch kurz verliebt?" (Were you briefly in love yesterday when I stayed?) The lingering emotion is solitude. "Wenn ich ein Junge wäre" (If I were a boy), on the other hand, is an indie rock piece with edgy guitars, expansive synths and a driving beat. "Wenn ich ein Junge wäre, würde man mir mehr zutrauen. Wer bestimmt das Rollenbild der Frauen?" (If I were a boy, they'd trust me more. Who gets to decide what a girl can and cannot do?)

Zurich-based Steiner & Madlaina recently celebrated a successful debut in Germany. They had only just finished their follow-up when the pandemic struck.

But now the duo's second album is finally out. "Wünsch mir Glück" is a refreshing record by two young women who epitomise the current zeitgeist of youth activism. The songs have lost none of their relevance since the enforced hiatus – even with Donald Trump no longer in office. Steiner & Madlaina's observations are not very groundbreaking and are too direct to be poetic, but at least their political and social critiques are forthright and not just skin-deep. They can be forgiven for sounding a little preachy at times.

MARKO LEHTINEN