

Guidebook Terror

Born in Germany and raised in São Paulo, Stefanie Kremser cut her teeth as a screenwriter for TV and cinema, including the German police series Tatort. Her crime novel Die Toten Gassen Von Barcelona was published in Spanish and Catalan last year as El Carrer dels Oblidats (Street of the Forgotten) to wide acclaim. The book introduces the fortuitous detective Anna Silber who comes to Barcelona to write an alternative guidebook and finds herself embroiled in a murder mystery which falls somewhere between Lonely Planet and the travails of the martyred Santa Eulàlia...

In the story, Anna comes to the city on the pretext of writing an 'alternative guidebook' but ends up becoming an amateur detective. And yet, by the time the book has finished, it has, in some way, become that alternative guidebook (*els okupes, cuina moderna, La Penya Espanyolista, Radio Bronka*): was this an intentional ploy?

Yes, I really hoped the novel would have this 'side effect'. In the end, though, I do not reveal any secret places which could be invaded by, say, mad crowds of readers, because they have actually all been closed (and because I have no mad crowds of readers). In this sense, Anna's alternative guidebook becomes a nostalgic farewell to many interesting places Barcelona has lost lately, mainly because of unaffordable rents – which closes the thematic circle, as the main issue in the novel is Barcelona's suffering under the pressure of speculation.

Does your implicit criticism of issues such as gentrification reflect a personal opinion?

I actually believe that gentrification can be positive for a neighbourhood, if it's controlled – in both kinds of neighbourhoods, the run-down as well as the posh: if you have a healthy mixture of social classes, for example schools will be socially mixed, too, which is positive for the quality of education. Ghettos could be avoided; immigrants (or at least their children) could have an easier adaptation to the new city or country... I say this having experienced a childhood and youth in a much more extreme and very elitist society, in São Paulo. Where I grew up, my neighbourhood and school were for high class or upper middle class kids only. Rich and poor lived completely apart, and it's hard for everyone to develop any kind of understanding of the other. And of course the rich had better education, better health attention, better food, better clothes, etc..., while the poor had to take what they got, having to rely on what the government offers. Public service was very bad then, and it's still not as good as it wants to be.

But I don't agree with gentrification based on real estate speculation, which is the one I criticize in my novel. I'll tell you another example from Brazil: in preparation for the World Cup and the Olympic Games, the latest fashion for international investors is to buy land in Rio's slums which crawl up the hills (the favelas in Rio have the best views to the city). Foreign hipsters are moving there already – that, to me, is a brutal and cynical form of gentrification, because it immediately imports high-end shops, etc. to a neighbourhood whose inhabitants can't afford any of this.

Although their two Barcelonas are very different, there are similarities between Pepe Carvalho and Anna in the way that the crime novel is combined with urban critique. Are you familiar with Montalban's character?

I still haven't read any of the Pepe Carvalho novels, which is a shameful confession. But I already know so much about him! He, as well as his creator Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, are a legend for me. I already have some of his novels at home; I've saved them for reading after publishing my own crime novel. I had a real fear that I would completely be absorbed by Pepe Carvalho, and that he and his view on Barcelona would have too much influence on me. I guess it's really a question of huge respect towards the master... I'll enjoy him now. And I know I'll learn a lot and probably wish I'd read him before writing Anna Silber's story.

The description of the city itself is very much the 'new' Barcelona: immigrants, lots of different nationalities, drunk tourists, celebrity chefs, perhaps even the idea of a gay couple of whom one is the police inspector. Is this the way you see/have seen the city since your arrival a decade ago?

I came to Barcelona ten years after the Olympic Games. Everyone keeps telling me how much the city has changed since then, but I have only known it like this: Barcelona with its wonderful new city beaches, for instance, or Port Vell, the Moll de la Fusta... I met a Barcelona already facing the sea. It was a cosmopolitan city, with lots of different nationalities, famous chefs and a lot of cultural treasures as well as creative potential. But I was able to observe some changes, too, mainly in the form of an increase of 'not- so-good' developments; a growing excess of tourism connected to some questionable hotel constructions, the increase of street-vendors selling beer, the decay of Les Rambles, etc; then there's the rise and fall of the real estate boom with its consequences of unaffordable mortgages, extremely high rents, cases of mobbing and speculation, illegal holiday flats, etc.

On a similar theme, does this mean for outsiders, Barcelona comes across simply as a huge cosmopolitan tourist city like so many others around the world (Rome, Paris, New York, etc.)? Perhaps this is different to the image of a would-be capital of a Catalan state that is currently in all the newspapers: how conscious were you of the 'Catalan question' when you were writing the book?

Indeed, Barcelona has to deal with similar questions and problems as all other capital cities do these days. We are in a global crisis, people are migrating in all directions trying to find jobs; criminal structures are growing fast, too, taking advantage of the situation. Housing, jobs and education are issues everywhere, as well as the increasing gap between rich and poor. But still, each of those cities has a story and a character of its own, and I was very aware of Barcelona being a Mediterranean harbour city, as much as I was conscious of the 'Catalan question' – although I do not mention national politics in the novel, only in hints. My small contribution was to make Anna Silber the daughter of a Catalan mother, and she speaks German and Catalan rather than Spanish. I wanted to introduce a linguistic normality and show that it is possible – and that people are glad when you speak to them in their mother tongue.

Will Anna become a regular character in a series or is this a one-off?

I believe it's a one-off, because it's impossible for me to keep pace with the demands of the publishing business. If you want to build up a regular character, you must have the next book ready for publishing every two, maximum every three years. As I am also a literary writer and a screenwriter, I've got too many projects I really love and hope to fulfil instead of concentrating only on crime novels. It's not an easy choice, because once you have established a character with enough readers to follow the story, it must be nice to build up continuity. Any other book or film I write is, each time, a new beginning, but I like changes. In this sense, I very much

admire the English 'all-round' writer Alan Bennett, who is well accepted as an author but crosses formats and genres.

...If you did continue with the character, would it be Anna in Barcelona or something like the series 'A Dead man in...' or 'M is for Murder' where the character moves from place to place?

If I'd continued with Anna Silber, my wish would have been to send her to many different places – I mean, she writes city guidebooks! But maybe I do, one day, write a crime story which takes place in São Paulo, for example – and Anna could have an appearance as an extra. Or in Munich. Or in Copacabana... I've lived in all those cities; I could and would like to write about them. Who knows? But then, it wouldn't be a series in the traditional sense.

The idea of extracting quotes from the chapters for the beginning of each works very well – what was the inspiration for this?

Well, another thing from my Brazilian past.... In São Paulo, I used to watch the daily telenovelas, those 170-episode soap operas shown on TV. I was devoted to some of them, and I remember the 'epílogo', the bit to be shown after the last commercial break: it showed you the next scenes of tomorrow's episode, like small appetizers. This is what inspired me to begin my chapters with those quotes.

You have experience of writing crime thrillers for German television – in what way has the writing of a crime novel differed from the screen work? Also, how has this experience affected your book?

Writing a novel is very different from writing a screenplay. For a film you must fit the story into a space that will last around 90 minutes, and it has to have a very clear dramaturgy. However, a novel allows you to write infinitely more freely, you can play with the narrator(s) and you don't have to worry about stuff like the set becoming too expensive! But I have learned from my experience with the crime thrillers I wrote for television. I think it helped me in terms of building the crime plot and its linearity.

Who are your influences in terms of crime fiction? And writing in general?

In terms of crime fiction: Richard Price's *Lush life* is a model for me. He wrote elegantly and authentically about the changes of New York's Lower East Side neighbourhood. I've also enjoyed some Wallander novels by Henning Mankell, where the loneliness of the landscape and of Wallander himself are a constant threat. And I liked very much the strange and almost abstract *Red Riding Quartet* by David Peace. But I am also an old fan of charming Georges Simenon or the incredibly funny Austrian crime writer Wolf Haas...In general, I very much admire Salman Rushdie's explosive art of storytelling and Vladimir Nabokov's literary mastership. Both writers are an example, to me, of how to transform personal memory into something new and universal. But I also adore Jane Gardam's wit in *Old Filth*, Michael Köhlmeiers clear and beautiful style in *Abendland*, Jeffrey Eugenides' fictional family saga in *Middlesex*... Oh, and there are so many others! It's funny though. I've just realized that either these authors or these books I mentioned all deal with migration. Crossing cultural, national and linguistic borders moves my life and my imagination.

So how has growing up in a different continent to Europe affected your writing when

it comes to setting dramas either here in Barcelona or in Germany?

My main effort still is learning to understand how those societies work – the German as much as the Catalan and the Spanish. Different languages, different cultures, different histories – and different souls, mentalities, rhythms... But even though I grew up in South America (Brazil and partly Bolivia), I already knew something about Europe, although it is an entirely different thing to live and study ten years in Munich than coming every two years to visit your grandparents in a tiny German village. I still do feel like a stranger – or a half-stranger – in Munich as much as in Barcelona. I am a multi-migrant, and I'll never be able to be of one place only. I believe that my stories will always have a touch of 'something or somewhere else', no matter where the setting is. Which is fine, isn't it? It's my only chance: I must embrace the plurality of my biography and cultural background. This is my path to find a truly authorial voice... and I'm working on it.

Street of the Forgotten

Stefanie Kremser /translated by Ryan Chandler

After a quick snack, and with the coffee still warm in my belly, we are soon both standing in front of a building which – from next week – will be Rafael and Quim's new home in the Passeig Picasso, just in front of the Parc Ciutadella. The perfection and grace of the building before me is breathtaking. Its five-metre columns support a four-floored façade and in the porchways there are two restaurants, now with the shutters down. A few decades ago these were all traders' warehouses. On the ground floor there would have been offices and on the next, but not quite the first – the entresol – there would have been smaller rooms with low ceilings and arch-top windows. Here, the clerks, telegraph operators and book-keepers would work. I imagine coffee sacks full of oily black-brown grains, maps of shipping routes, the fat stubs of receipt books, ink stains and pince-nezs.

Rafael turns a key as big as a letter opener and pushes open the heavy iron door. The entrance is colossal. I'm surrounded by caramel-coloured marble and a luxurious chandelier hangs overhead. We pass two brand-name bikes and a brand new baby buggy for twins. The tardy results of in-vitro reproduction.

'They are the only ones who have moved in so far,' says Rafael. 'Has the building been completely renovated? All the flats?' I ask. 'Yep, all of them. If the architect wasn't Quim's brother there's no way we

could afford it. Just wait, you won't believe your eyes!' We go up a couple of steps to a golden cage of a lift, and then up to

the third floor. I walk behind Rafael almost bewitched. He punches a code into a small box next to the door of the flat and click..., I find myself in a room which leaves me speechless. It must be about two-hundred square feet with a mosaic-tiled floor, walls pared-down to the brick-work and twelve-foot-high windows overlooking the park. It would be anyone's dream loft, designed by Quim's brother: an island kitchen in the centre, original beams, and three doors...

'...bathroom, bedroom, study,' says Rafael, opening them proudly, standing there like a master of ceremonies. That said, he is looking around the flat strangely, as though he had never seen it before in his life.

'Is there something wrong?' I ask. Rafael frowns. 'It all looks so finished,' he murmurs, confused. I glance at the skirting board in the bathroom with its silver tiles, I know where the bed will go in the master bedroom; I go into the light-flooded study. Rafael is waiting behind me, impatiently curious.

'What...?' he asks, 'What do you reckon?'

The chaos leaves me speechless. The walls of the study are papered with photocopies of police photographs and notes. The floor is also covered with lists and reports. By the window are some open paint pots, and next to them, left carefully on an old newspaper, some brushes and a roller. There is a crumpled sleeping bag in the middle of the room.

'Looks like Quim has been getting on with it in private,' I say.

Rafael is silent and obviously feeling emotional. I give him a friendly push.

'If this isn't proof of how much he loves you I don't know what is! At night he takes his work to the new flat and while he's there he paints the walls as well!'

Rafael smiles, embarrassed, looking affectionately at the paint brushes. He smooths out a newspaper and begins to fold-up the sleeping bag. I approach the wall to get a closer look at the photos. They are pictures of seven people who have been violently murdered. They don't seem to be in any recognizable order, but they are marked with the date of death and their personal details. I'm so entranced that I almost jump out of my skin when Rafael lays his hand on my back.

'Anna, the editorial meeting...we should have been there ages ago.' 'What?' I turn and I don't know how to ask him, but he understands. The way he

is looking at me now, I know he can see that all of this is important to me. I don't know why it's important to me but that's the way it is. Rafael nods even though I haven't said anything.

'Take your time then and come along later. You can skip the meeting. When you leave just slam the door behind you, OK?' He takes the motorbike helmet and gives me a kiss.

'But don't touch anything. And don't you dare think about telling Quim that I'm a crazy jealous fool!' he says as I shake my head, laughing, but I know he's ashamed.

'Maybe we should tell him we were here,' I suggest. He agrees, he pauses 80

for a moment, and then leaves. 'Thanks,' I say, continuing to stare at the photos. I don't even hear him close the door. I can only see the seven people. Seven murders. Seven stories. I don't understand Quim's system but I allow myself to be led by the order they have been put on the wall. Each photo is accompanied by hand-written notes, bits of autopsy reports, biographical details and various crime-scene photographs.

I begin with Marcelo Puente. Twenty-nine-years-old, born in La Plata, Argentina, granted Italian nationality ten years ago and in Barcelona since then. He was an official tourist guide until they found him on Barceloneta beach on January 30th, drowned. Around his neck, on a long string, is a pumice stone in the shape of a foot. It looks more like a bathroom accessory than a piece of jewellery. It's odd he didn't lose it in the water. In the photos, the string doesn't really look to

be wet except where it's in contact with the dead man's clothes.

I shiver. It was only an hour ago I was swimming in the freezing water at exactly that part of the beach.

Next to the dead Argentinian is a dossier on Yi Zhang Ling, born in Baoding, China. He had been living in Barcelona for three years, had a fixed address and a residency permit. He ran a souvenir shop not far from the Palau de Música. He was killed on January 15th, close to his shop. The images show a slightly plump thirty-year-old curled up in a pool of blood in front of the entrance to a ruined palace. His face is covered in blood. He had been beaten with a poker which the murderer had carefully left at the feet of the victim. Yi Zhang still had his wallet in his trouser-pocket. And it was still full of money.

The other victims were divided into two groups. On the one hand, there was Modou Kanouté, born in Banjul, Gambia, no residency permit, wanted by police for drug pushing. Killed in the Raval on January 8th. In the police photos you can see a tall thin man lying down on a bench in a kids' park. They must have surprised him while he was sleeping and stabbed him before he could react. Under the bench there is a sports bag with his belongings: some jeans, trainers, a towel, a toothbrush. In a secret compartment of his belt they found 300 Euros, in the side pocket of the sports bag half a kilo of weed. At his feet there was a small pile of grey-white coals – the leftovers from a fire he must have made to keep warm.

Just next to Modou Kanouté there are photos of Livia Danescu, born in Otopeni, Romania. I can see from the notes that she was about 50 years old. Not registered as a resident, she was suspected by police of sending groups of Romanian orphans out to beg, although they couldn't prove it. She had been actually going to ask for charity when they stabbed her in the toilet of the car park next to the cathedral. In the photo, she is lying under the sink with her head on a shiny stain. Her long black hair looks greasy. Tilting my head, I read the autopsy report diagonally: 'olive oil', it says. Once she was dead they had poured a litre of olive oil over her head.

In the next group, there are three cases. The first is Richard Brook, born in Edinburgh, Scotland, not registered as a resident, ran an illegal agency of tourist apartments. Murdered in his office near the Rambles on January 2nd. Various shots of the crime scene show a forty-something red-head sunk in his office chair. They had strangled him with a leather leash which someone had assiduously left perfectly straight on the desk. You can see a thin blue-red line all the way round his neck and his face is covered with small dark spots from the haemorrhages. His eyes and his mouth are half open, blind and mute. The office looks tidy, they don't seem to have broken in. 'They don't seem to have stolen anything,' Quim has written next to one of the photographs.

After that comes Chineye Ayodele. Born in Abuja, Nigeria, a police record for street-walking, murdered January 20th. I study the photographs of the girl for a while. Around twenty years old and barely dressed considering the freezing temperatures. They found her between two stalls in the Boqueria Market. The gold Creole earrings and the silver-painted fingernails and toenails reflect in the police photographer's flash. Like the Scotsman, they had strangled her, although here the murder weapon was not found. On her chest, a thin line of blood has soaked through her shirt. One of the photos shows a fresh wound under her left breast. Inflicted post mortem, says a note. Suddenly I am very cold.

The last victim is Pere Puigmartí, born in Barcelona, killed two days ago, February 12th, in a

building under construction in Rafael's street. Strangled and thrown from the top floor. It is not necessary to go on describing because...

'I see you two already know each other.' says a voice behind me, and I nearly die of shock...

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