

Clean food, dirty talk

GERMAN LITERATURE

ANNELIESE'S HOUSE LOU ANDREAS-SALOMÉ

Edited and translated by Frank Beck and Raleigh Whiting
292pp. Camden House. £80.

This intricate psychological novel by the Latvian-born German writer Lou Andreas-Salomé, friend of Nietzsche, lover of Rilke, colleague of Freud, seems almost too delicate to be intelligible in the coarse-grained present day. It is about the house of happiness we may build for ourselves, and how that deeply human vision sits with nature. Attentiveness, luck, and a profound sense of self and other play their part.

Anneliese, who must be in her early forties, has, with her cherished husband Frank, a professor of gynaecology, two adult children, daughter Gitta and son Balduin, and the memory of a second daughter lost in childhood. The loss is still sharp as the older couple witness the courtship and marriage of Gitta to Dr Markus Mandelstein, and confront Balduin's sickly and so far unsuccessful life.

Throughout this tale, with its sweetly evocative descriptions of nature and landscape, there is a sense of humanistic and material progress, though the crisis of the city is far away. Above all, the story reflects the progress of women, a cause dear to Andreas-Salomé as a writer and psychoanalyst. In Anneliese and her friend Renate, and in Gitta, we see them increasingly better understood by men and, perhaps, ready to seize their independence.

The actual plot covers more familiar emotional ground. Both parents worry about their "Balder", a young poet of irritable and nervous temperament, who has yet to make his breakthrough. For readers interested in Rilke, on whom Andreas-Salomé's character is based, the narrative contains many fine observations about this insecure, cantankerous and moody figure. Gitta by contrast is charming and gifted, but, like her mother, she has something too much in her makeup, an exuberance and independence which make marriage a shock.

Is it a novel? *Anneliese's House* is a story in prose imbued with the same poetic provincial atmosphere of the nineteenth-century German *Novelle*. Mainly written in 1904, but not published until 1921, it is set in the 1890s in Göttingen, where the author lived with her husband from 1903. The governing metaphor is the idea of a house where a few souls live intimately together, with its confining walls, its sheltering roof, its windows of opportunity, and its balconies reaching out into nature.

The narrative is quietly teeming with ideas, not least the preoccupation of that era with the implications of Darwin's view of human descent. The marriage of Gitta, a Gentile, to Markus, a Jew, comes under intriguing scrutiny, from both families. In their otherwise helpful introduction, Frank Beck and Raleigh Whiting mention neither of these factors. Rather, they chronicle a critical tradition that has wrestled with Andreas-Salomé's degree of feminism and been slow to grasp her merits as a creative writer. *Das Haus*, the original German title, is surely the best of her fiction and deserves to be read widely.

Lesley Chamberlain

SWEAR WORDS

NINE NASTY WORDS – ENGLISH IN THE GUTTER

Then, now, and forever

JOHN MCWHORTER

276pp. Avery. \$24.

For the American linguist John McWhorter, "profanity channels our essence without always making sense". Why, for instance, does hitting one's thumb with a hammer prompt the utterance of a word that's the equivalent of "sexual congress"? How come a star footballer is "rich as shit" having grown up "poor as shit"? Where, and why, has "bitch" become a term of endearment? This effervescent book aerates these and many similar questions, examining the history and multifarious present of those "nasty" words that erupt from "the more emotional, impulsive parts of our brains".

McWhorter's story is one of changing taboos. Today the most unacceptable words are those that slander social groups. Yet when I was a child, nothing was more certain to offend than the barnyard terms for body parts and their functions, and 500 years ago the most delicate subject was religion. That's why McWhorter begins with "hell" and "damn" - their sting long lost, though the latter was still sufficiently nettlesome in Victorian England for the poet Swinburne to inform a female correspondent, "I wd. rather die than write it at length".

Readers won't struggle to guess the subjects of the chapters that follow. Most consist of a single syllable and end with a consonant. But one is devoted to "motherfucker" (or "Martin farmer", as a team leader at the author's childhood summer camp used to say), and there is a lengthy, thoughtful response to the question "Why Do We Call It 'The N-Word'?"

McWhorter peppers the reader with assertions that invite, if not some zesty riposte, at least a raised

eyebrow: guinea pigs are "naught but their oval little poo-popping whateverness"; "today, cock is to porn as bouquet is to wine"; "We can't be assholes until we are roughly ten years old". And, as he ponders matters such as the difference between "I don't give a shit" and "I don't give two shits", the frame of reference is admirably wide: *Seinfeld*, Renaissance diplomats, *Piers Plowman*, the film *Legally Blonde*, the rapper Cardi B, the Scottish makar William Dunbar.

Sometimes the erudition pours out breathlessly, and McWhorter's puns can be laboured: "the assorted meanings of ass have drifted so far beyond any gluteal connotation that it might be hard to fully feel the wonder of its pathway". But this is a funny and surprising book, sure to delight lovers of lexical tidbits. Did you know that "ponce" may well derive from "pensionnaire"? That some people believe the root of "bulldyke" is the name Boadicea? That, in 1931, the clarinetist Harry Roy released a song with the title "My Girl's Pussy"? That Edward I's retinue contained a man called Henry Fuckbeggar? Or that in Thomas Hobbes's translation of Homer, completed in the 1670s, Ulysses addresses Penelope as "You bitch"?

Henry Hitchings

ARTISTS

ANYTHING BUT A STILL LIFE

The art and lives of Molly

Lamb and Bruno Bobak

NATHAN M. GREENFIELD

380pp. Goose Lane. £26.99.

Molly Lamb was born in 1920 into a genteel, moneyed world, if in somewhat unusual circumstances. Her father was a mining executive, her mother the family maid who lived with Lamb, his wife, their children and Molly. The family was artistic, and Molly easily found teachers and mentors among her father's friends.

Bruno (born Bronislaw) Bobak, by contrast, was the child of Polish immigrants so poor that Bruno and his younger brother spent much of their childhood searching the railway tracks for pieces of coal, and scavenging for thrown-away potatoes to fill their empty bellies. As a teenager he discovered art when the Art Gallery of Toronto ran a free Saturday-morning class by a Group of Seven artist; soon, he was training as a commercial artist.

By 1943, Molly was using her father's connections to be appointed as Canada's first woman war artist; Bruno, angling for a similar post, was instead sent to Britain to await embarkation for Normandy - he was made a war artist only weeks before D-Day. Bruno's

war images are moving, concentrated, but not ground-breaking; Molly's are more unusual, her "War Diary" is a graphic novel *avant la lettre*, depicting fleeting moments of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, while "Private Roy" (1946), a portrait of an African Canadian soldier, was, as Nathan Greenfield notes, a "radical departure" from Canada's then self-perception as a nation of white British settlers.

Molly and Bruno were assigned a shared studio space; just two months later, they were married. For some time, the couple appeared to be a marriage of two artists, rather than artist and muse, or artist and helpmeet. Yet cracks soon appeared. Neither took to abstraction, which put them out of step with the art world, but Molly's subjects - flowers, and joyful crowds, fleeting moments and movement - were popular with the buying public, while Bruno's paintings of inner angst found a less ready market.

The marriage of equals, therefore, became a marriage of alcohol, rage and adultery. Greenfield relies heavily on nearly three decades of Molly's diaries (Bruno's friends contributed, but the weight is all on one side). Furthermore, the couple's two children declined to be interviewed, another yawning gap. Instead, the reader is given a stop-start tale: four or five paragraphs of art exposition, followed by a paragraph or two of biography. Greenfield drops into colloquialise - artists "didn't get the memo" - followed by sentences such as "Central to the watercolour is the dialectical tension inherent in the aestheticization of violence", and references to Bakhtin.

Greenfield has nevertheless performed a service in returning Bruno Bobak to the consideration of an art world that has long overlooked him: the admirable Art Canada Institute has a monograph on Molly, but only passing references to Bruno as her husband. The publisher, too, is to be commended for an extensive section of coloured illustrations, well reproduced.

Judith Flanders

INFLUENCERS

THE HOWE DYNASTY

The untold story of a military

family and the women behind
Britain's wars for America

JULIE FLAVELL

480pp. Liveright. £27.99.

The Howes, as Julie Flavell describes them, were a "celebrated and intrepid military family", whose influence was felt "across four wars and spanning nearly a century". The untold star of this dynasty is Caroline (1722-1814), older sister to more famous brothers George, 3rd Viscount Howe (1724-58), Richard, Admiral Lord Howe (1726-99) and General William Howe (1729-1815). As a

Angelica Mesiti, *Citizens Band*, 2012 (still). Four-channel High Definition video, 16:9, colour, sound, 21 minutes 25 seconds; from *It's Not Personal* by Susan Best (208pp. Bloomsbury Academic. £19.99).

young girl, Caroline "kept pace with her brothers" by reading widely in several fields and languages and relishing maths problems.

Later, "Caroline's attractiveness for educated men was a constant note in her adult relationships". In 1742, she married John Howe (no relation). A member of the Society of Dilettanti, he died in 1769 leaving Caroline widowed at age forty-seven. *The Howe Dynasty*, Julie Flavell submits, is more than biography, though. It presents a case for the family's "crucial role - and their very personal odyssey - in the American Revolution".

Flavell, an independent scholar, meticulously combs manuscripts held in numerous archives on both sides of the Atlantic. The archival trail is difficult: the brothers were known for secretiveness and their papers were destroyed in a nineteenth-century house fire. Luckily, many of Caroline's papers survive. One trove - "the largest single private collection of letters in the British Library" - comprises tens of thousands of letters to her intimate friend, Lady Georgiana Spencer. There, we find the inner workings of Caroline's aristocratic family.

For their part in the Seven Years' War, all three brothers became "household names in Britain and America", gaining reputations as "daring men of action". George - killed in New York at Ticonderoga - was memorialized at Westminster Abbey. Meanwhile, Caroline became known for her skills at the card table and chess board and as

