



Seal Woman

Solveig Eggerz

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Fiction. In the rubble of 1947 Berlin, artist Charlotte flees her past and everything she has lost by responding to an ad calling for 'strong women who can cook and do farm work' in Iceland. But painful memories and ghosts follow Charlotte as she struggles to make a new life in a raw and rugged landscape. This powerful debut novel celebrates the power of storytelling as a way of reassembling the fragments of Charlotte's broken self and move her--and everyone she loves--toward peace.

Seal Woman Details

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Connie says

Didn't like the first husband's need to stay. I think I would have drugged him and dragged him out of the country. I'm selfish like that. Can't believe he put them in such jeopardy. Idealists are selfish! Loved the character of the "old woman" who doesn't even have a name. Loved all the Icelandic farming and herb lore. The ending seemed a bit anti-climatic, but not too bad of a let down. Loose ends were tied up, which is good. Seemed like a book about dealing with loss and grief and "ghosts" conjured up by our grief. Loved the parts about art and painting. When I visited Iceland years ago, I was also taken with the wildflowers that grew there, so much so that I bought a photo book of them. You wouldn't think that there could be so many different kinds. It was so odd not seeing very many trees there. It was deforested generations ago by farmers, and now Iceland is doing its best to try to replant them. It will be interesting to see how long that takes. The contrasts between Germany and Iceland were very interesting. The book is well worth reading.

Tara Williams says

The book didn't focus as much on Iceland or selkie mythology as I expected it to. Thinking beyond that, the book is really about moving on after great tragedy and I agree that Iceland is a great place to do that and 'find' oneself. Solid read but still a bit disappointing.

Anne says

Solveig Eggerz charts a story about a young woman moving to Iceland as a possible wife to a widower. She leaves behind her home in Germany and a daughter whose location is unknown after the war, along with several other women. She marries, adapts to the hardship and the isolation of farm life in Iceland and builds a life vastly different from her previous urban existence with a Jewish partner heavily involved in workers' rights and anti-Nazi protests. Eggerz crafts a calm story with harsh underpinnings and enormous sadness experienced by all the characters. The novel introduces a different kind of landscape and a study of human needs that rings true.

Gordon says

This novel is a real novel, not just an experience. It requires an awareness of art while Charlotte is picturing her world through the paintings of the masters. An awareness of the decadents in Germany will help the reader to understand the colors that Max sees in the nipples of naked showgirls, the pants of men who have hurriedly taken open their flies to consummate meetings in back alleys, the yawning mouths of MC's at cabarets. Charlotte, the protagonist, is buffeted by life through Nazi Germany with her husband Max Bernstein and her daughter Lena as the people cast out the Jews and begin sending them East. The other part of Charlotte's life is in Iceland. She answers an ad in a newspaper asking for young German women who want husbands. Thus begins the other half of Charlotte's life, with Ragnar and his mother and small son left behind by his dead wife. This novel is a melding of story after story that the characters tell (even Lena) to

make sense of their lives as they have been thrown onto the table of life like dice in a board game. Charlotte goes from a pampered life as the wife of a privileged Jewish son of a mighty department store's magnate to the stark survival in the Berlin in which Nazis are hunting her husband and, ultimately, her child. Along with some awareness of art, it helps to understand the skalds that populate Icelandic mythology and the new language that Charlotte must learn. The book is not all it could be and does not overcome certain aimlessness that probably is meant to echo the reality of the lives of people who do not live in heroic tales, but the modern world. Ragnar's mother is magnificent. Pages spent on sheep are not.

Larsen says

An adult book very informative about WWII in Europe and about mid-20th Century rural life in Iceland -- Readers will likely gain increased appreciation for the emotional processes of artists and will also develop increased loathing for the atrocities of war. The author writes in a respectful way about proper, illicit, and abusive sex.

Donia says

I must be the only person who ever picked up this book and found it lacking. I found it difficult to connect the different moods. I've read a great deal about WW2 and the suffering of people everywhere and though I learned a few things with this story I found it fractured and disjointed. I picked it up for a second read and still find it lacking.

Mary Overton says

A haunted retelling of the Selkie legend as historical fiction - In a few glorious places this first novel almost verges into Magical Realism. A German woman loses her husband and their child to the violence of WWII. She moves to a remote farm in Iceland and struggles to remake her life. The author is a professional storyteller, which shows, in her use of traditional tales. I heard her read from & speak about the book at GMU. I look forward to other work by her.

A work-horse of an old farm woman advises: "If we don't have courage, we just memorize something and do it over and over again, always working on making it easier and safer, drawing a smaller and smaller circle around ourselves." (176)

And a moving piece about the drudgery of hard, physical life:

"She washed the fish in cold water, cut it into pieces, and covered it with water. Tomorrow she'd remove the scales and cut off the fins, boil it, and serve it with melted sheep fat and potatoes. And on and on until she rolled over dead ... Was something wrong with her? Did she have some kind of intolerance for daily life?

"And those cows. No matter how often she emptied their udders, they always filled with milk again. Again and again, twice a day, forever and ever....

"Her head was an animal trying to break out of prison." (210)

Jessica says

A beautiful, lyrical WWII and beyond story. I read a lot of WWII stories and was not aware of the migration of Germans to Iceland after the war. I also have not read many books that cover the beginning of the war from the German perspective. It was heartbreaking and chilling. I loved that the story spanned time and distance and gave a bigger picture to the story. Not an easy read. Not a fun read. But certainly worth it.

Julie Christine says

For my residency at Anam Cara on Ireland's Beara Peninsula last June, I was assigned the "Novel" room. Painted blue, with blue linens, carpet, curtains, the room was like the inside of a raindrop. A large window above the desk faced west, over looking the bay, and at that time of year, the sun drifted away on clouds of coral sometime after 11:00, headed toward Iceland.

I found *Seal Woman* on the shelves that lined the Novel room, shelves that groaned under the hundreds of works of fiction, classic and fluffy, familiar and, well, novel. The cover looked just like the view from my window—black rocks reaching from the water and behind them, a velvet-smooth sea stretching toward a setting sun. The story—set in WWII Germany and post-war Iceland—sounded intense and soulful and achingly beautiful, like the scenery around me. I ran out of time before I could read *Seal Woman*, but returning to the States, I searched until I found a copy, serendipitously signed by the author.

Solveig Eggerz researched the lives of a small group of Germans who traveled to Iceland in the late 1940s as contract laborers for Icelandic farmers. Of the group of 314 men and women, roughly half stayed past their year of service, married and settled into their new communities. *Seal Woman* is the author's imagining of one of those lives, Charlotte Bernstein, who left Berlin broken by grief over the loss of her husband and only child.

As the story opens, we see a woman looking into the near distance at her middle-age, a silent husband beside her, two boys growing past the boundaries of their farm. The yearning, a voiceless keening, in Charlotte is palpable from the beginning. The story's quiet tension is built on her conflicting feelings of love and despair for her present and her past. There is grace and comfort to be found in the harsh, exhausting landscape where she lives, this lonely corner of a lonely island, yet we wonder how long she will last.

Much of the novel is rendered in flashback to Berlin before and during the war. Of scant means, working as a waitress and attending art school, Charlotte falls in love with Max, a fellow artist and department store heir, and, incidentally to Charlotte, a Jew. They marry, even as brownshirts and stormtroopers goose step like automatons through Berlin and relationships—business, familial, romantic—between Aryans and Jews are declared illegal and punishable by death. Charlotte begs to leave Berlin, their situation made even more precarious with the birth of their daughter, Lena, but Max joins a resistance movement and refuses. They remain, malnourished, terrified, but defiant. The nearly fifteen-year span between Charlotte and Max's courtship and the end of the war tripped me up a bit—years passing in a sentence seemed to diminish the sense of urgency and danger—but Eggerz shows the gradual, then precipitous, descent of Berlin as Hitler gained momentum and the Third Reich rose, smashing its way to power.

By war's end, Charlotte is alone, certain her husband and daughter are dead. But with no bodies to bury, no official notice, there is no closure, only a heavy cloak of grief and guilt, and a dreadful sliver of hope that

haunts her dreams. Unable to bear the rubble of her heart that is so like the rubble of a bombed-out city, she leaves for the isolation and supposed peace of a farm in Iceland.

Seal Woman is a work of extraordinary rawness and depth. Eggerz portrays Charlotte's complex psyche with solemn grace, giving us time to develop profound empathy for her as she struggles to knit her past with her present. This is not only a finely rendered work of historical fiction, it is a rich character study, and a portrait of place. Iceland works its way into Charlotte's soul, the land and sea dueling for possession of her—one bracing her like the solid comfort of her new family, the other offering the sweet release of nothingness.

I have something to tell you... Charlotte's mother-in-law encourages Charlotte to release her story, the one she has kept locked inside for nearly twenty years—how she lost her husband and daughter—before she loses herself. In a land of legends, where storytelling is a way to explain a violent and beautiful world, Charlotte at last finds her voice.

Highly recommended.

Gerda says

A good read. Interesting to see the horrors of the second world war from a German perspective. Intriguing about starting a new life in Iceland, but not really being able to start over. Fascinating, the way the old woman and her manners are described.

Ken Fredette says

Although this story was not a crime novel it had the makings of a story within a story. It was interspersed with other stories that made it a good read.

The seal woman was what Charlotte had become. Her daughter was alive back in Poland after escaping from a German death train. She seemed to find herself in her son Henrik.

Julie says

This book was very haunting and moving, you had the life in Berlin before the Nazis gained full power, then how difficult life became as they gained more and more power, until it became so dangerous for The Jewish people, Charlotte an artist married to a fellow artist who happens to be a Jew and refuses to leave the country, they have a daughter life is hard for her being half Jewish. The husband is taken one day and Lena the child sent to a home in the hope of being safe, will they ever be reunited. After the war the story moves to Iceland and Charlotte starts a new life, the story is woven with Icelandic folk tales and descriptions of a beautiful landscape. The only thing which spoiled the book for me was the ending, I wanted a happy ever

after ending i think they all deserved it !

Jill says

Haunting and beautiful. I loved this book.

Sharon says

Another reminder of how nice normal people get caught up in mob mentality and lose their humanity. It seems to happen all too often in the world.

Iceland is a wonderful, interesting country, and I looked forward to reading this book. The Iceland parts were my favorites. The writing is beautiful, but a bit too artsy for my taste. I liked the book, but didn't love it.

Sandy says

A German woman leaves behind her painful personal losses from WWII and starts a new life in Iceland.

Told in flashback, there are stories within the stories. The characters are both vivid and yet somehow emotionally distant, laced with mystical edges that are fascinating, yet sometimes frustrating. As the title implies, the main character evokes the folk lore of the silkies, torn between two worlds and two family loyalties. I couldn't help wishing for a different (happier!) ending, but in fairness, the lack of "closure" was probably a bit more realistic. After all, how many Holocaust survivors never really learned what happened to their loved ones who disappeared, and had to just live with not knowing
