

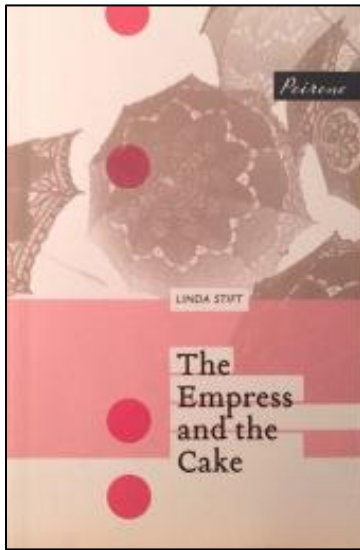
The Empress and the Cake by Linda Stift

Translated by Jamie Bulloch: Peirene Press Ltd, 2016

A Spoonful of Sinister

A seemingly innocent slice of cake lures a vulnerable young woman into a downward spiral of crime and enslavement. Bewildered at first, she cannot say no and succumbs disturbingly easily to the takeover of her life. Prepare to be held captive by the nightmarish unfolding of this lavish, Kafkaesque psychological thriller.

'It could never just be one more time.'



Set in present-day Vienna, the story opens with an invitation to a stranger's apartment to share a dessert. The unnamed young woman, who is both the story's heroine and narrator, feels compelled by social niceties to submit to this apparent act of kindness. Her older hostess, Frau Hohenembs, is a powerful social butterfly with a penchant for theft and cocaine. As she uses her status and connections to gain the young woman's trust, the tension mounts into an unsettling sense of impending doom.

Joined by the downtrodden Ida, Frau H's servant whose unconventional daily chores include polishing a pickled human head in a jar, they embark on a precarious law-breaking spree. Blowing up statues and stealing priceless objects from museums, their actions all play a part in the orchestration of the heroine's inevitable ruin.

A parallel story about Empress Elizabeth of Austria runs alongside the main drama. This celebrated nineteenth century monarch felt stifled by the unrelenting etiquette of stately life. Craving admiration achievable only by obsessively watching her weight, she maintained her tiny figure through rumoured binge eating and fasting. Part contemporary suspense, part historical memoir, this riveting read reveals the pressure on women throughout history to conform to impossible ideals of beauty.

'As decades passed the women got thinner and fitter.'

The distorted image the characters have of themselves is explored in fascinating detail. Trapped in a situation over which she has no power, the modern narrator finds solace in old habits, making herself sick using ostrich feathers in an ancient ritual copied from the Romans. This eating disorder, from whose grip she thought she had escaped fifteen years earlier, resurfaces as a sort of comfort blanket to cling to as she loses everything.

Frau H eats little to remain impossibly slim while the overweight Ida stuffs herself with sugary treats at every opportunity to numb the misery of her circumstances. The twisted relationship between these three starkly different women is unified only by a mutual obsession with food as they struggle to satisfy their appetites amidst an oppressive atmosphere of guilt and punishment.

'The grotesque face of my abnormality, which had lain dormant within me, resurfaced.'

Although mostly set in the present day, the story feels timeless, featuring extravagantly ornate settings and opulent lifestyles. Like the sumptuous cakes that appear throughout, this book is a thrilling treat to be devoured within a short space of time. A claustrophobic and gripping page-turner, it is an easy-to-read, scintillating little gem.

About the publisher

Peirene Press Ltd publish contemporary European literature in translation. Great care is taken when choosing unique new works with the focus firmly on the merit of each book and the talent of the writer.

About the reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, dog lover, poet, and reviewer of books. Amongst other things! She was recently shortlisted for the Verve Poetry Festival Prize. Follow her on Twitter: @BeckyD123