

Schadenfreude, a love story - me, the Germans, and 20 years of attempted transformations.

Rebecca Schuman

This novel is a throwback to the great Jewish novelists of the 1970s

There was an era in which the whole United States was held in rapt awe of the stable of young Jewish authors coming out of the East Coast. Philip Roth, John Irving, Susan Sonntag and so many others. They wrote with such profound self understanding. Upon reflection, it seems like self absorption.

Rebecca Schuman has a similar gift with words. She composes the most exquisite prose, but it all seems to be centered around herself. She grew up in an academic family, nonpracticing Jews who practiced social liberalism intensely. This is the world she describes.

Rebecca Schuman appears to have been born about 1976. The high school scene she describes involves the kind of obligate sexuality, pot smoking and alienation that affected students of those years. The boyfriend who had been accepted to MIT but was really more enamored of weed than work. The other boyfriend who was deep into various liberal causes.

The dialogue manages to be authentic without being terribly interesting. She uses the F bomb in every other sentence, as young girls did back then. My own daughters among them, I regret to say. That is how young women talked and still talk in the United States.

Schuman's career in the German language reminds me of my own children, and my brief career as a substitute teacher in a high school much like the one I'm sure Shulman attended. The students are always going about learning the language, but never seem to master it. I once asked in the school where substituted, where an SAT of 1450 would not have been considered as astronomical as Schuman makes it out to be, what was their objective in teaching French and Spanish. The head of the department told me with a straight face it was "To prepare the students to learn the language when they get to college." This is unfortunately the state of education in modern America. Always on the way, never getting there. When I attended high school in the 1950s the goal had been to teach us French, by God! They were serious and I still speak it.

At any rate, I was expecting a book about the author's experiences in the foreign language, not in the process of learning said language. She can be as humorous as she wishes discusses in the ways in which she sidestepped, avoided and otherwise cheated success. It would be more heartening to read about a real success. This book may actually represent that success – kind of a Rodney Dangerfield I don't get no respect about failing to master a subject.

All of this makes the book hard to read in 2017, as the liberal idyll is collapsing all about us. The causes that she championed, and even the values she embraces, already seem dated. They seem as much on the way out the door as the Clinton Global Initiative and George Soros. I wonder what her young daughter will make of the mother's values when she grows up.

That's my conclusion. If you like the genre of American Jewish literature you will probably enjoy this book. I enjoyed it in its day, but don't really need any more.