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The
a novel
Dark Room

RACHEL SEIFFERT



THE DARK ROOM



Rachel Seiffert

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Acclaim for Rachel Seiffert's

THE DARK ROOM

"Lyrical . . . explores the experience of 'ordinary' Germans—the descendants of Nazis and Nazi sympathizers—and poses questions about the country's psychological and political inheritance with rare insight and humanity."
—*The New Yorker*

"A novel of uncommon perception, *The Dark Room* deserves to be placed alongside such exemplary postwar German fictional works as Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Lost*."
—*Bookforum*

"Excellent. . . . A very readable, imaginative attempt to hold essential truths in living memory."
—*The Economist*

"[An] assured novel. . . . The title supplies the metaphor by which these stories are related: They are stages in a photographic exposure, and Germany itself is the darkroom in which the truth slowly comes to light."
—*The Washington Post*

"Provocative and accomplished."
—*The Times* (London)

"Rachel Seiffert's storytelling is completely absorbing and finally overwhelming in its detail, its relentless action, and its beautiful, shy eloquence. *The Dark Room*, in its strategies for approaching the unwatchable, the unseeable, is brilliant, and in its closing pages, it brings to light a set of images that no reader is ever likely to forget."
—Charles Baxter

"An exceptionally good debut, combining moral courage and seriousness with tremendous sympathy."
—*Financial Times*

Rachel Seiffert

THE DARK ROOM

Rachel Seiffert was born in England in 1971 and now lives in Germany.



THE DARK ROOM

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Part One



HELMUT

BERLIN, APRIL 1921

Birth. His mother cuddles him and cradles him and feeds him his first meal. Happy to hold this life she has felt within her all these months. He is a little premature, but not too small, and his miniature fists grip fast to her fingers. She knows him already, and loves him. The midwife takes her husband aside when he arrives home from work. Heads him off before he reaches the bedroom door. Unlike his wife, he never gets to look at his son and feel him perfect, to love him prior to knowing his fault.

The clinic is busy, the doctor brisk but sympathetic, recommended by the midwife. The new parents are told it is a congenital condition, but not serious. Put simply, their son is missing a muscle in his chest. Provided he is given regular physical therapy, he will certainly be able to write and do all the tasks required in everyday life. He will never have full use of his right arm, of course, and manual labour will be impossible, but the absence of a pectoral muscle need not be a significant hindrance. He might even be able to play sports in time, though they are not to raise their hopes too high.

At home they watch their baby closely while he gurgles and kicks in his drawer-for-a-cot. His curved limbs and long toes, creases of new skin. He is beautiful, and the new parents smile at each other, each ready to laugh if the other will. They remove their son's little undershirt and inspect his chest and his right armpit as he moves. He is thinner on one side than the other, it is true. But both arms

pump just as vigorously when he is fed or tickled, and he is robust and lively.

Mutti cries: There's nothing wrong. Papi puts his arms around her, still watching his son. They sit together on the bed for a long time, breathing, while the baby sleeps. And they name their tiny boy Helmut, bright nature, because that is how they see him. Perfect enough, and that is just fine.

Life between wars is harsh: food plain, luxuries scarce, living space small.

Helmut's Papi is a veteran, and still coughs in the night and in the autumn, when the weather is damp. He is older than his wife and grateful for his chance at happiness, so he leaves the house early, every day, finds work, again and again. The flat he comes home to is always clean, with at least one of the two rooms kept warm. And since Helmut's Mutti is a clever housewife, there is always something on the table.

Both parents are very happy with their one child, and take precautions against having more, showering their love on Helmut, who laughs much more than he cries. The mattress the three of them share is wide and warm, and though he is now talking and walking, a separate bed for Helmut seems extravagant, uncalled for, a shame. Mutti grows herbs on the windowsill, and flowers, which she lets her son tend; and if Papi is not too tired when he comes home, he will sing a bedtime song or two for the boy. The morning and evening exercises are a game Helmut plays with his parents. He is to think that all boys do this, to be strong like their fathers. That all families are as happy as this.

In the hot summers of early childhood, Helmut's Mutti takes him on the long journey north to the coast while his father works on in the city, at whatever he can find. Helmut is brown as a nut within a week, and his hair sun-blond. He plays, naked, in the shallows

with other children, and Mutti makes friends with other mothers on the beach. She never draws attention to her son's chest, to his arm, and when the other women don't seem to notice, Mutti chats more freely, relaxes, lies back and enjoys the company and sun.

Summer nights in hostel rooms full of whispering mothers. Bed-time stories for sleepless children, confidences and shared cigarettes by a window open to the hot dark sky.

Helmut feels his mother climb into bed, smells the fresh smoke in her hair. Closes his eyes again, falls asleep again. Thumb in his mouth, sand under his fingernails, salt beach taste on his skin.

Helmut's father has found regular work with Herr Gladigau, who owns the photography shop at the station. Three or four days a week of assured income. Papi cleans the darkroom, changes the chemicals, and minds the shop when Herr Gladigau has appointments to attend. Gladigau likes his new employee, trusts him. He is childless, a widower, and enjoys the contact he has gained with a young and happy family. He can't afford to pay as much as he would like, as much as Helmut's family needs. To compensate, he offers to create a photographic record of family life. A portrait sitting every six months is the initial agreement: while the boy is young and growing quickly. Mutti is excited, Papi slightly embarrassed, but also pleased. They arrange the first session for the following week.

The print Papi chooses has Helmut standing on his father's knee, pointing with his right hand toward Herr Gladigau's decorative palms, which are on the left-hand side of the picture, next to his mother. Both of his parents are looking at him and smiling. A blond boy, growing out of babyhood, his right arm at full stretch, at shoulder height, perhaps just over. A normal pose for an inquisitive, active child, though unconventional for a portrait.

Gladigau favors the more sedate pictures taken earlier in the session, in which all the sitters face the camera and have their hands

folded in their laps. But his employee is quietly adamant, and Gladigau can find no reason to refuse his request. He chooses a simple frame from the middle price range and wraps the portrait neatly.

The carefully patched clothes and prominent cheekbones in this and the following portraits are painful for Gladigau to see. Papi is with him almost daily, with the same face, same jacket and shoes. But in the photographs, in the darkroom, it is all too plain, sharp, clear: the cabbage-and-potato diet, the mend-and-make-do of the man's life, his wife, his son with the crooked arm. As soon as he can, Gladigau makes Papi's job full-time.

There is enough money now to move into a better flat. The tenements near the station are well maintained, light and clean, and Helmut, now grown out of his parents' bed, can have a box room of his own. Their new neighbors are friendly and house-proud, and there are plenty of local children for Helmut to play with. At first he is shy, preferring to watch the trains pull in and out of the station. Long mornings spent gazing out of the kitchen window, while his mother sings behind him as she cooks and cleans. Soon, though, he takes to watching the trains from the landing, and then the back steps. Before long he has forgotten the trains and runs around the back court with the other children, playing riotous, overlapping games of hide-and-chase and catch.

Mutti looks for her son in the flat, on the landing, out on the back steps, sees him running. She spends an afternoon at the kitchen window, watching him play. Mutti can see how her son's right arm lags behind him as he runs. How his right shoulder hangs lower, and the way he introduces a small skip into his gait every so often, to help his right side catch up with the rest of his slight frame. She can also see that Helmut is unaware of this. Shifting her attention to the other children, she sees little feet that limp without shoes as they run over the rough ground. Pale complexions and eyes ringed dark

with hunger, bitten nails and straggly pigtails. Of course, shoes can be bought, and so can food. Certainly bad habits can be dropped and hair can be brushed. Helmut cannot be cured by prosperity, by nourishment, or by discipline. But none of the neighborhood children mock him, or even stare. And though she never gives up the habit of watching, checking, Helmut's Mutti does allow herself to feel relieved.

With school, though, there comes a change. The sports teacher orders a full inspection of his new charges. Shirts off, they stand to attention in order of height. Those deemed in need of special treatment are pulled out of line and assembled in a raggedy bunch in the corner of the schoolyard. Helmut finds himself among the fat boys and the weak boys with bad teeth, and doesn't know why. Once it is established, in front of the silent eyes of his class, that unlike the others he cannot raise his right arm above his shoulder, Helmut knows there is something wrong with him.

At home Mutti cries, and later Papi rages. He goes to the school with Helmut the next day and demands that his son be allowed to take sports with the healthy boys. He has never had problems out in the back court with the neighborhood children, or on the beach in summer.

Papi is asked to wait in the wide lobby. There is no chair, so he stands near the door, on the edge of the parquet with its high wax shine. A class ends, another begins, and Papi is now very late for work. In the silence he remembers Helmut's birth. The clinic they took him to, with the same corridors; same wide, swinging doors; same stifled, shameful feeling about his son. He resents the midwife, the doctor she sent them to. Blames them for coming between him and his child. Resents the headmaster, too, though he does not

argue when he is finally sent word. The school will not reverse the decision. Helmut will take gymnastics to supplement his daily physical therapy, but no team games unless his condition improves. Papi reads the note, picks up his hat and coat, and leaves.

At home that evening, Helmut's father takes him on his knee. He is a strong little man, loved by his Mutti and Papi, and he will work hard to prove himself to the school. They will do it together, all three of them. The strength of the family will prevail.

But Helmut is still with the fat boys and the weak boys with bad teeth, and he still can't catch a ball thrown over shoulder height. At home, the twice-daily exercises become more vigorous, less fun, especially when performed with his father. In the toilet down the corridor, he scrutinizes the thin twist of muscle below his right collarbone. In the wide, sleek bakery window, he sees how his right arm hangs: low and crooked, crowding his narrow chest.

Helmut still plays in the back court with the neighborhood children, but Mutti also frequently catches sight of him standing at the high fence at the far end of the tenements, staring through the slats at the trains pulling in and out. It is not a large station, but most days there are two or three passenger trains arriving from other cities, going to places far away. Dresden, Leipzig, Stuttgart, Munich.

Helmut does not concern himself with engine numbers or types of carriage. He likes times and destinations, arrivals and departures. He likes to watch the people, in groups and alone, with trolleyloads of baggage, or carrying nothing. By their other-city walks and clothes, he can tell if someone hasn't been to Berlin before.

Helmut is not always alone by the high fence. His encyclopedic knowledge of the timetable impresses many of the other little boys. He also makes friends with the guards, quizzing them on arrivals and distances through the turnstile bars. Soon he is allowed onto the platform, where he collects the punched tickets from the passengers

as they disembark. Those who notice his arm and his patched clothes sometimes slip a groschen into his hand. Helmut is faintly embarrassed by these gestures: certain his parents would disapprove, uncertain as to why. But he never refuses the strangers' gifts: the ability to buy sweets is a powerful weapon in the war for friends. He uses his access to the railway station and his small bags of licorice well. As favors bestowed, not pleas for acceptance. The neighborhood children often come calling, clatter down the stairs behind him, across the back court to the tracks.

The family photos show a healthy boy, already quite tall, standing between his parents, both seated slightly in front of him. He has a sailor suit on, the regular uniform for boys on Sundays and holidays. His right arm rests on his mother's shoulder, and he is standing so that his left side favors the camera slightly. The combined effect is to minimize his lopsided chest, to mask the crooked hang of his arm. For three or four years, the family adopts a similar pose, variations coming in the clothes, Helmut's height, and the gradual graying of his father's beard. The family looks content, healthier, cheeks plumper than in previous years. For all the artful masking of a son's disability, they are relaxed. Still proud, still a unit, gradually growing into a kind of prosperity.

Puberty and the Third Reich arrive simultaneously. To Helmut's shame, not only does he grow hair on his body, but the fluff that should be under his right arm grows higher, more visible, under his collarbone. The strange sinew-twist below the skin on his chest becomes more pronounced as his muscles become more defined.

All boys do gymnastics now at school, but that only makes Helmut's restricted arm movement more conspicuous. He wears a long-sleeved jersey, not an undershirt like the rest. Some stare at him as

they change, still others push into him as they pass in the long school corridors. Most of the time, it is not discussed.

Helmut is good at his studies and has a few friends at school. At home, he still spends most afternoons at the station, usually alone. Some evenings he finds the neighborhood boys in the back court on his way home. Helmut stands with them a while as they wrestle and joke, and they ask him about the trains but only half listen to his replies. They have joined clubs to which Helmut is not invited, have grown more interested in the gangs and street fights, and licorice isn't the draw it once was. Occasionally one of the neighbors' girls will join him on the platform. Edda Biene, waiting by the mail sacks, sucking her long plaits, watching Helmut greet the disembarking passengers, gathering his tickets. The hang of Helmut's arm has become more pronounced with puberty, and increased prosperity has made the passengers more generous. Helmut knows if he saves for a few days, and takes Edda for an ice cream in the shop next to Gladigau's, then she might let him hold her hand, or even show him her legs in the stairwell on the way home.

He knows he is fit, feels he has a strong heart and good lungs and swift legs to offer his nation. He also knows he is imperfect.

Helmut has left school now. Other boys go to work, learn trades, but Mutti persuades Papi to let their son stay at home. Just for a while, he's not ready yet, still just a boy. Helmut's Papi sighs and agrees.

Mutti takes in washing now, and Helmut does a share of the folding and carrying, but for a year or so, his days are largely spent drifting between station and home. Quiet and content, his head full of timetables. Eating the warm lunches Mutti cooks for him, gazing across the kitchen table to the window with his daydreamer's faraway eyes.

Papi is irritated by his son's idle behaviour. At Gladigau's, busi-