

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



16 / Tania Witte, novelist, journalist, performance artist, Berlin, Germany

In her second novel, 'leben nebenbei' ('living close', my initial tentative translation), recently published in Germany, Tania Witte continues what she started with her first novel, 'beziehungsweise liebe' ('respectively love' in English), and explores the trials and tribulations of a group of friends and lovers in modern Berlin. 'Living close' may be too literal a translation missing the author's intention, because 'nebenbei' also means 'by the way' or 'beside'. Therefore a better try may be: 'being there', which is less indicative of a relationship of locations.

Her first novel was published only yesteryear, just about at the time Tania, or CayaTe as she is also known, was writer in residence in Matfield Green. She arrived in Kansas a convinced and confirmed vegetarian. On her second day, in the early morning, I took her across the open range to the west of Chase County to attend a cattle round-up at Susan and Dennis Hague's ranch, the oldest ranch in the county, started by the Sauble family (Susan's) in 1857. A day later, I took her out to dinner in the Grand Central Hotel & Grill in nearby Cottonwood Falls, the county seat, and to my surprise she ordered, and obviously much enjoyed eating, one of their truly great steaks. "These cows here, running around freely and grazing on this magnificent prairie ... they have such a good life, look so healthy, so happy—I just had to try their beef ... it tastes so good I don't want to swallow, just cherish each piece on my tongue."

In Caya's tale of Berlin, where "genderqueere" identities and normative heterosexual love structures easily mix, the reader will meet a narcissist career woman, a pregnant woman who considers herself to

be the “letzte Butch der Stadt” (last butch in town), a father who at the same time is a mother, and an aging turtle named Miss Rottenmeier, to name a few. The ones you would not expect to connect, or even to notice each other, happen to meet nevertheless in the big city and have to learn to either live together or ignore each other.

Caya’s characters develop a behavior that allows them to easily create a balanced arrangement between “L” (lesbian) life and outright “queer as folk” (weird) behavior. Eight females and scores of events marking the ups and downs of desire, love, and sex tumble over the pages. Miriam, a cleaning lady, behaves as if she owns all these characters; only on the last pages of the novel it becomes clear why. Caya’s two novels can be read in sequence as well as independently. As a critic wrote: “In both novels the pace is high. The ‘queer’ standard continues to be raised.”

Caya lives in Berlin since 2004. She has been a writer since she learned how to spell and a performer since she discovered the pleasure of speaking out loud. A licensed media educator and adult educator, she decided to follow her passion for words; in addition to her creative work she writes as a freelance critic and journalist for music, art and culture magazines and was a senior editor of the German music magazine ‘Zillo’. In 2007, she co-edited ‘Drag Kings. Mit Bartkleber gegen das Patriarchat’ (Drag Kings. With Adhesive Beards against Patriarchy) published by Querverlag, Berlin--an anthology portraying the diversity of the drag king scene in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. “Writing has to be done all alone and in silence. To counterbalance the silence I became a performer, a spoken word artist, and with four other women started ‘Shut Up And Speak’, the Berliner Spoken Word Stage. We are touring Germany and also published a CD, called ‘City Voices’. This is where I become CayaTe, which resembles the Spanish word ‘callate!’ and means: keep quiet, keep your mouth shut.” Yet on stage the last thing Caya does is keep quiet; she exuberantly explores the limits of spoken word and moving, and moveable, image. Says critic Katinka Kraft: “CayaTe pushes against societal norms through a lyrical explosion of words. She is a natural performer who combines the spoken word with a poetic body language that sings.”

While staying in Matfield Green, Caya between eating beef and writing page after page of her new novel modeled for her Dutch partner, gender photographer Risk Hazekamp. She dressed in outfits similar to what women were wearing during the Dust Bowl and the 1930’s economic crisis in America, and re-enacted scenes which became known all over the world from images by WPA-photographer Walter Evans published in the dramatic book written by James Agee, ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men’. This series of Risk’s photos have been shown in Berlin as well as Amsterdam.

“As a journalist,” writes German author Corinna Waffender, “Tania Witte is an exceptionally good observer, and she knows how to convert her observations into gripping, exciting texts. Her prose work shows another dimension of writing: the sensitivity to understand the language of her characters and to make them come to life before the inner eye without falling back on cliché behavior. Thus, she creates extraordinary story lines full of depth but also filled with easygoing humor. What remains, is a smile and the lasting effect of a novel with meaning and depth--a combination that will unflinchingly move every reader.”