

OF MULTILINGUAL CABBAGES AND SWAPPED PIGEONS...

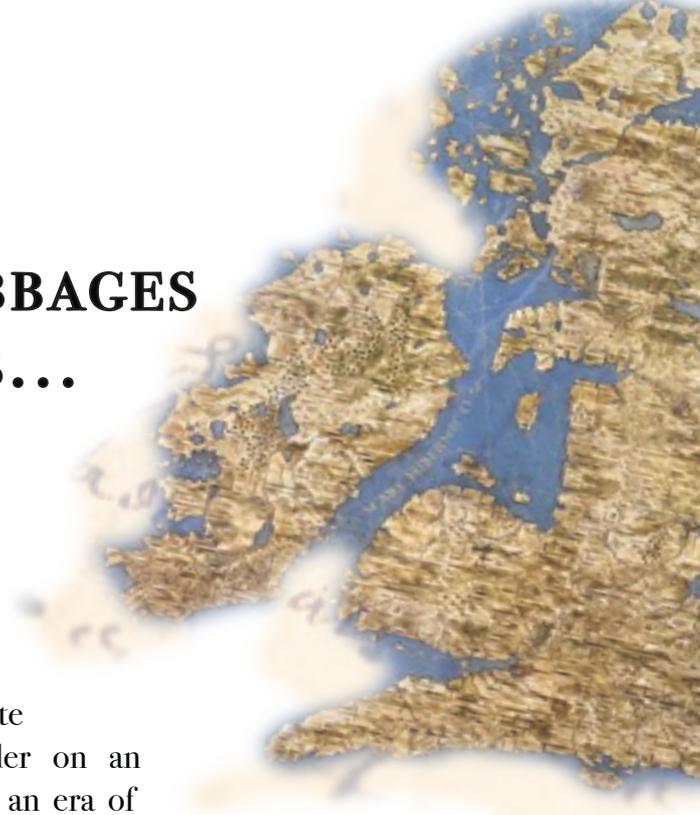
Sophie Schönfeld

An unlucky Saxon polyglot who involuntarily embarks on the journey of a lifetime, an ambitious Catholic spy, the Queen's court astrologer, and his cunning former assistant who is looking to turn his fate around: *Die Sprache des Lichts* takes the reader on an adventurous journey across Europe in 1582. It is an era of religious conflict and paranoia, with little space for eccentricity. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, it is also the heyday of occultism.

In these uncertain times, Jacob Greve, a former teacher whose extraordinary linguistic abilities have cost him his position at the school of Pforta, is set up by his new companion Edward to access and decipher a mysterious book in the library of the controversial Englishman John Dee. The urge to unveil its secrets sends him on a search for answers across Europe. Meanwhile, in the French Béarn, Margarète Labé, a fresh member of a Catholic secret society planning to free the region of Protestantism, is desperate to prove herself to be taken seriously within this male domain. Soon enough, the protagonists get involved in the contemporary obsession with the original, divine tongue. Jacob's mysterious talents may be the key to its discovery – but they do not remain secret for long. He finds himself caught up in the plans and intrigues of various groups who would like to make use of the magical properties of God's language to reach their goals through the power of creation.

I was at first somewhat worried that the strong focus on language might render the work rather monotonous and take away from the overall reading experience. For me, that concern turned out to be groundless: The author has woven language into her work in such manifold and highly creative ways that I found myself quite fascinated with this unusual style of storytelling. Rather straightforward is the use, discovery, and translation of different tongues as part of the plot. Yet, there are also more subtle levels, ranging from sheer speechlessness to ulterior motives hiding behind seemingly innocent words. Through the lens of language, *Die Sprache des Lichts* offers an extraordinary perspective on Elizabethan Europe, which surely enthralls every linguaphile.

The downside is, of course, the possibility of less linguistically inclined readers getting bored of this constant motif, quite unable to share Jacob's enthusiasm upon encountering the unusual grammatical features of Bulgarian or his frustration with sign language. It is

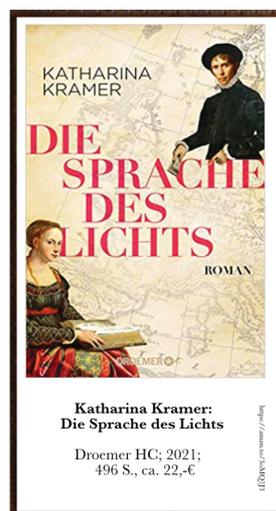


important to note that this novel does not captivate its audience by being particularly suspense-packed (although this does not mean that there are no dramatic situations whatsoever). However, other qualities make the reading highly enjoyable: The unusual combination of topics that characterize this work plays a role, but even more so how Kramer ties together events. Her endless creativity, fine humour and love for detail played a big role in keeping me interested up until the last page. The manners in which intrigues play out and in which lies and truth, as well as human mistakes, are uncovered, both subtly and blatantly, have been written magnificently and allow the reader to feel empathy with the main characters without them being portrayed as overly lovable. They have flaws and these flaws are not concealed. They have emotions that are neither overstressed nor downplayed but fit into the plot organically. They do not work towards a greater good - or they discover in the course of the story that they do not - but are sometimes quite selfish. It is this fundamental humanity, this antiheroism that strikes even those who want to become heroes that makes the characters both relatable and unique.

Much praise is also due to the author for the vast amount of in-depth research that has gone into her debut novel, some of which she details in the appendix

of the book. The knowledge that was necessary to create such a credible plot includes not only historical and geographical features but also a great deal of linguistic expertise, as well as knowledge of such extraordinary matters as early modern occultism in Britain and historical deciphering methods. Even seemingly insignificant details that are only mentioned briefly in the course of the story are truth-based, creating a 16th-century one can mentally enter or even expand for oneself with some additional research.

The majority of the characters are based, if loosely, on historical models; they have an identity beyond the pages, which Kramer duly elaborates after the main story. The presentation of facts, circumstances, and relationships is at some points quite dense but never overwhelming. The book remains on a digestible, enjoyable level inviting its reader to dig deeper. Guaranteed enjoyment for history fans!



Kramer's debut work *Die Sprache des Lichts* is a delightful and highly recommended novel for every lover of languages, history, and riddles. It may not be for everyone, but it takes those who can access its unique way of narration and its key topics on a journey that allows them to see the 16th century with new eyes entirely.