



Across

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While many novelists continue to rehash the nihilism of Samuel Beckett and other celebrated postwar figures, the Austrian writer Peter Handke is exploring new territory. His art is uncompromising, but in the service of a vision of harmony--harmony between man and nature, and the inner harmony which so many modern writers have pronounced unattainable.

ACROSS, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim, the dean of American translators, is narrated by Andreas Loser, a teacher of classical languages. (The school where he teaches is roughly equivalent to an American high school.) When his story begins, he is living apart from his wife and children on the outskirts of Salzburg. This separation is only one sign of his estrangement: He has been given a leave of absence from his job, having knocked down a man who jostled him on the street.

That much is clear-cut; what happens next is not so unambiguous. Loser tells of a dreamlike incident in which he discovers an old man defacing trees and rocks, painting swastikas on them; he throws a rock at the man with deadly intent, and indeed kills him. Or does he? There are strong suggestions that the entire episode takes place not in the realm of everyday reality but in the realm of stories.

As an amateur archaeologist, Loser is fascinated by thresholds, which he has studied intensively. A threshold, he comes to see, is not merely a boundary but a "place in its own right," a place between separate realms, suggesting the possibility of transformation. A story is a kind of threshold.

In this extraordinary novel, Handke himself occupies a threshold, between the tangible and the intangible, between perception (which registers physical reality) and imagination (the product of consciousness). From this vantage, the reader is invited to see a mountain ridge, an airport terminal, a bridge over a medieval canal with an uncanny clarity that yields joy and wonder.

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