Brigitte Giraud

A Year Abroad

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BIOGRAPHY *A Year Abroad* reflects the distinctive intimacy of Brigitte Giraud's fiction whilst breaking new ground in its exploration of the world and human nature. For when a language proves impossible to grasp because the codes by which a group of people operate, and the ways they function remain opaque, it's the world itself that seems to be conspiring against you, constantly receding out of reach and thwarting your attempts to live your life.

PUBLICATIONS Brigitte Giraud's recent publications include: *L'amour est très surestimé* [Love is Very Overrated], Stock, 2007 (Goncourt Short Story Prize, 2007), J'ai Lu, 2008; *J'apprends* [I'm Learning], Stock, 2005, LGF Paperback, 2007; *Marée noire* [Oil Slick], Stock, 2004, LGF Paperback, 2005.

When she goes to Germany to work as an au pair, seventeen-year old Laura discovers she doesn't know the language of this unfamiliar land as well as she thought. Then there are her uncertainties about her host family. Is she there to look after the children, help around the house, improve her German or simply grow up at long last? They are a seemingly ordinary family, with fewer tensions and secrets than the one she's left behind, but this doesn't mean they don't have mysteries of their own. She finds herself longing to discover the truth about these individuals, and make sense of them in a way that will finally allow her to fill in the gaps and silences of her own interminable adolescence. When she comes across a copy of *Mein Kampf* at the house of the children's grandfather's, she is tempted to draw over-hasty conclusions and, with a mixture of repulsion and fascination, almost involuntarily starts reading this banned work. Then the children's mother falls ill. As the days pass, the father seems to be making evermore insistent overtures. What does he want from her? Laura begins to wonder what price she will have to pay to become a woman, face up to her future and leave this house so that she can return to hers.

All this takes place in a cold German winter. I get off the train after travelling over six hundred and twenty five miles. Mrs Bergen is waiting for me at the end of the platform, a tall, serious, beautiful woman. Our first conversation is brief and stilted. I'm not sure I understand every word she says, but I nod anyway as a sign of goodwill. I don't exactly know why I'm here. My home situation isn't that easy to explain either. Let's just say, for simplicity's sake, that the official plan is I'm going to improve my German, which I studied at school. I am here to learn. So let's not waste any time; here I am, ready and willing. And, as if on cue, despite the fact I feel I'm about to conk out from exhaustion, the learning process begins immediately. I learn you can't walk on ice in trainers. I also learn that, despite doing four hours of German a week, I can't understand a single sentence all the way through. I put my bag in the back of the family vehicle, a Volkswagen minibus, and blow on my freezing fingers. I haven't slept for twenty-four hours, but I'm young and resourceful, as my parents are always saying. All this takes place in a port by the Baltic Sea. I have just celebrated my seventeenth birthday.

Mrs Bergen drives slowly, while I concentrate on not falling asleep. She asks me a question in which I recognize the German for 'supermarket.' Clinging onto the word, I concur, but it turns out not really to be a question, more a piece of information. Even if I didn't agree, my vocabulary wouldn't be up to conveying in a clear and inoffensive way that there's only one thing I want to do, and that's go to bed. We cross a river whose name Mrs Bergen tells me before expressing surprise that I'm not commenting on the scenery, so I say '*das ist sehr schön*' (It's very beautiful). I don't know if it is, but I don't dare remain silent. My overriding impression is that it's a long way from home. It's also incredibly white: the pavements, the trees, the sky. We drive past the commercial port and Mrs Bergen explains something, taking her hands off the steering wheel as she

does so. I think she's telling me about a canning factory where a relative of hers works, but I'm not sure; at any rate I imagine that's what she's saying, maybe a brother of hers who packs herrings into cans, unless it's her husband, or her husband's brother. Then we turn up a steep alley and stop in a virtually empty supermarket car park.

Mrs Bergen buys slices of liver for the evening meal after checking that I like liver. Of course, I nod again, smiling to hide my mounting anxiety. I am afraid I'll regret coming here to eat slices of liver with a family I don't know, who live hours by train away from the family I do know. We go to the checkout and I carry the bag of potatoes and the rye bread. It's only three in the afternoon but already it's getting dark. Mrs Bergen is excited at the prospect of me meeting the children who are waiting for us at home: Thomas and Susanne, 14 and 9, as it said on the form I was given before I accepted this position. I hesitated for a moment when I saw the boy's age, but in the end I decided it wouldn't make any difference.

I hadn't realized the house wasn't in the town. We take a motorway and drive for about twenty minutes in the dark alongside a snow-covered forest. Mrs Bergen puts on the radio and talks to me about the results of the elections. I don't know which elections she's referring to, but resolve to buy a newspaper tomorrow to keep informed about all the ins and outs of my new German life. We turn off onto a wet road and I take in some of the differences between Northern and Southern Europe as we drive along with the windscreen wipers and headlights on. Finally we pull up in front of a large, secluded house by a railway. A dog puts its paws on my hips and sniffs my shoes and bags while the children stay parked in front of the television. I stand in the hallway with wet feet and eyes shining with tiredness. I'm Laura, the au pair, and this will be my native land for the next six months. I am probably making a mistake coming to live here. I don't know yet, but, whatever happens, there's no getting out of it now.

The children show me to my bedroom, a little cubby-hole in the basement at the bottom of the stairs. There's a powerful smell of petrol and I want to ask where it's coming from, but I don't know enough words to construct a correct sentence. So I don't ask anything, I simply smile and accept what I'm given. I perch my bag on the bed. Thomas opens the wardrobe and points out the empty shelves and the mirror on the inside of the door. Mrs Bergen joins us and apologises for the reek of petrol. Apparently Thomas parks his moped outside, just by the fanlight. I look up and, sure enough, a bike is visible through the pattern of the curtain. 'Ja natürlich' (Yes, of course), I say, because I don't see what else I could say. 'Why doesn't he park it somewhere else?' for instance. Then Mrs Bergen gives me a tour of the basement. Here's the laundry room with a washing machine and linen hanging up to dry, there's the boiler, and,

opposite my room, what she calls the 'Diskothek,' a wood-panelled room with a bar, high stools, a bench and a little dance floor.

I don't know what to do after putting my clothes in the cupboard and setting up my cassette player on the bedside table. The simplest thing would be to get under the sheets and surrender to the tide of melancholy I can feel welling up inside me, but I am afraid to let myself go. I have to keep moving. I open the wardrobe and find myself facing the mirror, sitting on the little bed. I can't work out how I could have given myself such a horrendous haircut before I left. Hacking away at it in my French bedroom, I cut it so short that my skull is showing in places. I didn't dare come out afterwards and face my mother. When I finally emerged, she asked me with a sort of pity in her eyes why I wanted to make myself look so ugly. Now, as I stare at myself in the mirror in my German bedroom, I realise she had a point. I'll buy some gel tomorrow and try and sort out my new look. What now: go back to the living room where the children have started watching television again, help Mrs Bergen in the kitchen? I climb the stairs just as Mr Bergen makes his entrance. It's only just six, and in no time we're sitting down to eat.

Everyone talks a lot, very fast, in loud voices. I clutch at the odd word that puts me on the right track, then I instantly lose the thread and veer off before rejoining the conversation in a state of complete confusion. I have to get questions repeated, and stare intently with a frown at Mr Bergen when he asks if I'm ok with early starts. The children have to be at school at 7.30 and apparently it'll be my job to take Susanne. Mrs Bergen puts the biggest slice of liver on my plate before I can protest, and I know there's no way I'll be able to eat it. My first meal and already I'm faced with two insoluble problems: how to get through this huge slab of liver whose smell is making me feel sick and how to assimilate the mass of information I'm being given about tomorrow. Something else is making me anxious, the fact that they all must be wondering who on earth this girl is, the virtual mute looking questioningly back at them, a smile frozen on her clueless features. She's hopelessly embarrassed and out of her depth, I can hear them thinking; she's probably perfectly nice—look at the way she's stroking the dog as she picks at her food—but poor thing, she seems like a bit of a lost soul, and that weird haircut, there's definitely something mentally unstable about her. I get up to offer to help Mrs Bergen, tramping off into the kitchen after her, but she immediately tells me to go and sit down, thereby exposing me to the children's questions and her husband's mysterious advice which, to make matters worse, he delivers with a lot of heavily rolled r's. I do my best to distract attention from my slice of liver but no luck; everyone laughs at my lack of appetite. Mr Bergen is so entertained he forgets to wipe off the flecks of grease from his moustache. A good time, it seems, is being had by all. The volume goes up a notch. The parents open their second beers and light cigarettes. The children

play with the dog, which barks without anyone seeming to be disturbed. Like characters in a play, everyone comes on stage and shouts, rather than says, their lines, and I'm afraid I won't learn anything about what's in store for me tomorrow. Everyone's got something to say but no one listens to anyone. No one asks me who I am, where I'm from and why I'm in their house rather than mine.

It's Susanne who knocks on my door at six the following morning, interrupting a night that feels as if it could have gone on forever. The boiler next to my room wheezes noisily. No one is stirring in the house. Susanne gets her breakfast herself and assumes the teacher's role, telling me what I should do. We sit facing one another in the harsh kitchen light, and I sense her observing me as if I'm from another planet. I don't know how to work the coffee machine and have to open all the cupboards before finding what I need. Susanne's words hang in the air like riddles waiting to be deciphered. I get the feeling I'm disappointing her and worry about not living up to expectations. I sense she's judging me and don't know whether she finds me amusing or irritating, but it's obvious she's putting on a show of her savoir-faire and independence. Any moment now she's going to start making fun of me and, until then, she's going to subject me to various tests. Time to regain control of the situation. I ask her to go the bathroom and then get her schoolbag ready, which would be fine except she corrects my German. I haven't yet fully mastered the difference between direct and indirect objects and in German that can soon cause terrible problems. I don't know if her parents are '*schon weg*' (already gone) or '*schlafen noch*' (still asleep). Susanne asks me to get the knots out of her hair, which gives her the chance to writhe in agony in front of the bathroom mirror while shooting me filthy looks. We leave the house and the parents' two cars are still there, in front of the garage. Nothing is stirring in the house.

We walk through the dark to the school bus stop and wait there on our own. The trees on the edge of the forest buckle in the wind, while snow falls in clumps from their branches. When the bus arrives, Susanne gets on without saying goodbye. I don't know how long I'm going to be able to cope with this, setting off at the crack of dawn in the icy wind, while the parents of the little girl I'm looking after are sound asleep in their beds. There's something about it I don't get, something someone may have told me but which I seem to have failed to grasp. I walk back along the railway track, my head sunk in my hood, not knowing what's prompting me to go back to the Bergens and walk through their door, when I'm under no compulsion to do so. I walk along, looking for the first signs of daybreak, but the night seems endless and the only sound I hear is my boots crunching in the snow.