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Reader's Guide



Swallowing Mercury Wioletta Greg

Translated by Eliza Marciniak

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About the author

Wioletta Greg is the author of six volumes of poetry and a novella, *Swallowing Mercury*, translated here into English for the first time. Her poetry collection, *Finite Formulae & Theories of Chance*, was shortlisted for the 2015 Griffin Poetry Prize. She was born in Kozięglowy, Poland in February 1974. She lives in Essex.

About the translator

Eliza Marciniak, who was born in Poland in 1974, is an editor and translator living in London. Her recent projects include *Swallowing Mercury*, by Wioletta Greg, translated from Polish.

About the book

Wiola lives in a close-knit agricultural community in 1980s Poland. Wiola's father was a deserter but now he is a taxidermist. Wiola's mother tells her that killing spiders brings on storms. Wiola must never enter the seamstresses's 'secret' room. Wiola collects matchbox labels. Wiola is a good Catholic girl brought up with fables and nurtured on superstition. Wiola lives in a Poland that is both very recent and lost in time.

Swallowing Mercury is about the ordinary passing of years filled with extraordinary days. In vivid prose filled with texture, colour and sound, it describes the adult world encroaching on the child's. From childhood to adolescence, Wiola dances to the strange music of her own imagination.

Discussion points

The book is set in a rural village in Poland in the 1980s and told from the point of view of a young Polish girl. A translator's note at the end of the novel explains the historical and cultural context of the novel but otherwise the reader is simply immersed in Wiola's world, which is very different from our own. To what extent did the novel feel unfamiliar as a result? Did this unfamiliarity change your reading experience?

To what extent would you describe this novel as a Bildungsroman? What lessons, if any, does Wiola learn?

What are Wiola's relationships with different members of her family like? What interested you about the relationships between groups of men or groups of women? What relationships are the most important in Wiola's life?

The novel is written from Wiola's point of view, except for a chapter in the middle, 'Strawberry', which is the voice of an older man talking to Wiola. What effect did this chapter have on your reading experience? What is this chapter doing, narratively?

What is the dominating tone of the novel – humour? melancholia? nostalgia? Or none of these things?

Themed reading

Evie Wyld *All the Birds Singing*
Kelly Link *Get in Trouble*
Joni Murphy *Double Teenage*
Thomas Hardy *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*