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ELISABETH STEINKELLNER

The Hans Christian Andersen Award 2026
Austrian Section of IBBY

Author



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Biographical Information

Elisabeth Steinkellner

Elisabeth Steinkellner, born in 1981, grew up in the district of Neunkirchen (Lower Austria). In Vienna she attended a college for social education and studied cultural and social anthropology. Since 2010 she writes poems and stories for children, young people and adults.

Her books were translated in several languages and awarded many times. Elisabeth Steinkellner conducts readings, workshops on literary and creative writing for children and adults.

www.elisabeth-steinkellner.at

Elisabeth Steinkellner lives with her family in Baden.



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Elisabeth Steinkellner
performing for children

Reasons for Nominating the Author Elisabeth Steinkellner for the Andersen Award

Ever since the release of her first book, »An Herrn Günther mit bestem Gruß« (To Mr. Günther, Sincerely), Elisabeth Steinkellner's works can regularly be found among Austria's literary prizewinners – and rightly so in every genre. Steinkellner is an author who in many ways resists classification; she writes texts for readers of all ages – board books for the youngest, children's books, and YA novels – and is equally at home in poetry and wordplay or in coming-of-age novels. And always, her formal language defies readers' expectations while her commitment to diversity and inclusion in children's and young adult literature has pushed the thematic boundaries of the genre.

Steinkellner's instinctive ear for language and its melodies is extraordinary, as she has demonstrated again and again in her fleet-footed and humorous wordplay (»Die Kürbiskatze kocht Kirschkompott« – The Calabash Cat Cooks Cantaloupe Compote, »Vom Flaniern und Weltspaziern« – Of Strolling and World-Walking) and in her complex, highly poetic verse (»Zwischen türkisen Tapeten« – Between Turquoise Walls) in which she quietly and compassionately transcribes feelings into language.

This compassion is also present in the respect and understanding that she brings to her readers' respective life phases. In her picture books, Elisabeth Steinkellner speaks to younger children about the joyful and care-free exploration of the world we live in (»Guten Morgen, schöner Tag« – Good Morning, Beautiful Day), in which it is possible to live together in our diversity (»Papilos Welt« – Papilo's World), and in which outsiders can find one another and stand up for themselves without denying their differences (»Pepe und Lolo« – Pepe and Lolo).

Her YA books in contrast focus on the crises in young people's lives. Steinkellner is interested in transitional moments, in caesura, and in dysfunctional families; in the traumas of this time of uncertainty and of not feeling at home. Her literature for young adults is also a showcase for the virtuosity that Steinkellner brings to the miniature and shorter literary forms. Here, her formal and aesthetic skill is just as present as in her poetry and wordplay.

»Esther und Salomon« (Esther and Salomon), for example, is a novel in verse. The short stanzas in which the story unfolds have their own rhythm, coming together to mirror the intense moments of teenage life. Steinkellner has chosen this form deliberately – form and content are intertwined in all of her works. She has a firm grasp of literary traditions and varies them playfully. Her work encompasses linear narratives as well as hybrid forms that bring together different types of text. In »Rabensommer« (Raven Summer) for example, shopping lists, dreams, and text messages are interspersed in a narrative arc that integrates snapshots of the present with memories of the past, creating a densely-woven exploration of what it means to grow up. All the while she moves with trance-like certainty between what is said and what is implied. Not

everything needs to be stated explicitly in her texts – readers are encouraged to fill in gaps with their own ideas, to write themselves into the text.

In Elisabeth Steinkellner's literary world, growing up is portrayed as a time of maximum fluidity and indeterminacy. Nothing is black and white, her characters are radiant and multi-hued. »Dieser wilde Ozean, den wir Leben nennen« (This Wild Ocean That We Call Life) made her one of the first authors to write about homosexuality without problematizing it. The young people in her texts are allowed to be however they are – homosexual, asexual, heterosexual, or bisexual – and they need neither explain themselves nor defend their choices. They do not need to fight to be included, it is their natural given right.

The author's work moves beyond the gender binary and its subsequent gender roles – often her figures are not given any clear »gender« at all. In this way, she evades stereotypes, presenting diversity as a matter of fact. In »die Nacht, der Falter und ich« (The Night, the Moth, and I), which combines poetry and prose, the literary »you« and »I« have no assigned gender, creating an understated but strong voice against rigid categorization and for an exploration of gender beyond normativity.

Elisabeth Steinkellner's commitment to diversity and inclusion is also manifest in her novel »Papierklavier« (Paper Piano), whose protagonist proudly rejects social norming, conventional ideals of beauty, and traditional gender-specific behavior. The novel does not describe growing up in a sheltered environment, but shows that it is possible to make the best out of life despite a difficult situation. Steinkellner's characters reject the idea that they must integrate and ingratiate themselves to combat the marginalization against which they must fight every day. Instead, they question the norms that exclude them – a new and exciting nuance in emancipatory YA literature.

That – alongside her extraordinary writing, the precision of her narrative and her empathy – is perhaps Elisabeth Steinkellner's contribution to contemporary children's and YA literature. A nuanced portrayal of possibilities: »Anything goes / no pressure / no plan / anything can happen« (»Esther und Salomon«, p. 236)

Awards and Other Distinctions

- 2012** The Feldkirch Poetry Award
- 2014** Lucky-Hans-Award for the manuscript of Raben (Raven)
- 2016** Outstanding Artist Award
- Vienna Award for Children's and Juvenile Literature for Die Nacht, der Falter und ich (The Night, the Butterfly and Me)
- 2017** Austrian Children's and Juvenile Book Award for Die Nacht, der Falter und ich (The Night, the Butterfly and Me)
- Vienna Award for Children's and Juvenile Literature for Die Kürbiskatze kocht Kirschkompott (The Pumpkin Cat Prepares Cherry Compote)
- 2019** Vienna Award for Children's and Juvenile Literature for Vom Flanieren und Weltspazieren. Reime und Sprachspiele (About Strolling and World-Walking. Rhymes and Wordplays)
- 2021** Austrian Children's and Juvenile Book Award for Papierklavier (Paper Piano)
- Vienna Award for Children's and Juvenile Literature for Esther und Salomon (Esther and Salomon)
- 2022** Vienna Award for Children's and Juvenile Literature for Guten Morgen, schöner Tag! (Good Morning, Beautiful Day!)
- Award of the Jury of Young Readers / Literaturbagage for Esther und Salomon (Esther and Salomon)
- LesePeter / June for Papierklavier (Paper Piano)
- 2024** Thomas-Jorda-Award / Lower Austrian News
- LeseLenz-Award / The Thumm Foundation for Young Literature
- Board-Award / Austrian Library Association for Guten Morgen, schöner Tag! (Good Morning, Beautiful Day!)



Five Important Titles Submitted to the Jury

Papierklavier

Paper Piano

With Illustrations by Anna Gusella

Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 2020

Esther und Salomon

Esther and Salomon

With Photos by the Author and Illustrations by Michael Roher

Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2021

Guten Morgen, schöner Tag!

Good Morning, Beautiful Day!

With Illustrations by Michael Roher

Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2022

Die neue Omi

The New Granny

With Illustrations by Michael Roher

Wien: Jungbrunnen, 2011

An Herrn Günther mit bestem Gruß!

To Mr. Herman with Kind Regards

With Illustrations by Michael Roher

Wien: Jungbrunnen, 2010



Die neue Omi

My New Granny

With Illustrations by Michael Roher
Wien: Jungbrunnen, 2011



Roher's illustrations soften the difficult moments of Steinkellner's story, first published in Austria, in which a beloved grandmother goes from cooking »exotic dishes« and criticizing her granddaughter's expressive hairdos to needing constant supervision as a dementia patient in her daughter's home. Though Roher limits himself to a sepia palette, he imagines a complex life for the family, drawing spaces full of keepsakes and clutter. Fini takes Granny's strange new behaviors in stride, remaining unruffled when she falls asleep under the table (»We agreed that we would all help out,« reproaches Fini's mother when Fini protests that she had only briefly left Granny alone). And Fini stays patient when Granny can no longer feed herself (»the spoon doesn't want to go into her mouth«) or has to have her hair combed (»That can be my job,« she says). Fini has some realistic moments of frustration, too – dementia is hard even for adults to cope with. The portrait of Granny and her loving household serves as a memorial to all such grandparents and their families.

Publishers Weekly

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/9781620872239>

Touching and unforgettable.

Barbara Cramer, Eselsohr

Elisabeth Steinkellner tells ... in a sensitive and warmhearted way, how the family and Fini learn to cope with the changed situation. Michael Roher has ... created loving and humorous pictures.

Uta Trinks, Freie Presse

The story of her grandmother's dementia is told very sensitively from the perspective of the girl Fini. The word is not used, it is far too abstract for children. Instead, Fini shares with the reader and viewer her experience, how the old grandma became a new one in short time.

Kai Agthe, neues deutschland

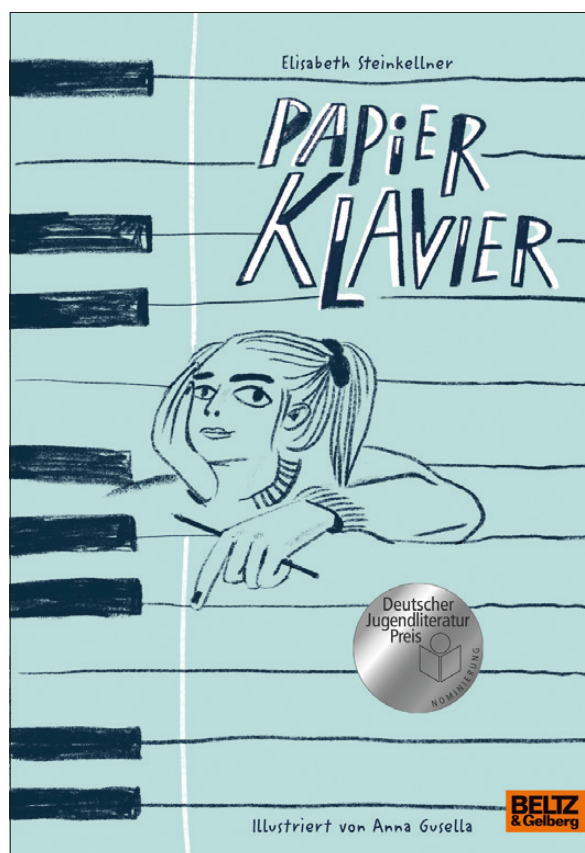
An all-round successful approach to growing old.

Marlene Zöhrer, 1000 und 1 Buch

Papierklavier

Paper Piano

With Illustrations by Anna Gusella
Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg, 2020



Feelings can be expressed in different ways. Sixteen-year-old Maia does so in words and pictures, recording her life in a diary that is also a sketchbook. In »Papierklavier« (»Paper Piano«), Elisabeth Steinkellner and the illustrator Anna Gusella raise through this young heroine a strong voice for more diversity.

Maia holds her head high and defies social norms, that dictate conventional ideals of beauty or traditional role-specific behavior. She wears a size 42 dress, which she comments with a defiant »And?«. Without concealing the fact: »For me, the calculation follows the logic of being overweight: $0 \times 6 =$ still virginal.« She doesn't attach any importance to outward appearances, apart from that, she can't follow expensive dress codes anyway, because she simply doesn't have enough money. Her single mother does everything she can to keep herself and her three daughters afloat, but it's still not enough. The fridge often has nothing but light and mustard in it. For the past year Maia has been working twice a week after school in a juice store to contribute to the family budget – as the eldest, she has taken on the role of substitute mother for her two little sisters.

This is certainly not a youth in a safe space, but Maia manages to lead a happy life despite all the difficult circumstances. She has retained an eye for »the small doses of everyday happiness that often don't fill more than a thimble« – because she is not alone. »Being a class freak is actually quite okay. As long as we're in the majority.« What counts is the quality and not the quantity of relationships: with her feminist schoolmate Alex and the slightly older Carla, who is usually called Engelbert at work and at university, Maia has got two extremely strong friends, who support her when things get bumpy, who help her to focus on the positive when she herself is blind to it. Or vice versa, when – for example – Carla is beaten up by some idiots.



»Paper Piano« tells the story of female puberty in all its contradictions and does so in a formally unusual way.

Just as Maia loves her friend Alex for her principles »and the small, fine cracks that run through them«, the diary only provides a complete picture, when you look at the handwritten words together with the drawings. The precisely formulated text remains rather reserved in its emotionality on the surface, while the wild-looking black and turquoise chalk illustrations and lettering take up a lot of space, breaking down the boundaries of the page, expressing Maia's feelings in a multifaceted way.

It is a welcome change to have a young literary protagonist who is an outsider and also struggles with her family situation, lack of money or being overweight, but who does not suffer endlessly and desolately as a result. She doesn't want to overcome her marginalization by conforming to the norms, but instead questions them. The book's variety of topics – bullying, transgender, poverty, gender equality, body positivity – is quite dense. And yet this book fits together into a homogeneous whole, because the first-person narrator doesn't make a fuss about herself. For her, those issues are not »problematical«, for her it's simply her life. And it's not even worth mentioning; that she selflessly looks after her little sisters or works extra shifts at the juice store, so that Heidi can have piano lessons. Just as she is quick-witted and self-confident and takes the initiative with boys, even if she doesn't look like a model. In view of the current mainstream, this is a refreshingly different design of femininity.

With this novel in words and pictures, the two artists have added a new and exciting nuance to emancipatory youth literature. »Papierklavier« is a manifest for »feeling comfortable in your own skin, in your own life, even if doesn't comply with standards. Where, if not here. Who, if not us?«

Karin Haller, Ö1 ExLibris



Steinkellner tells in a casual, unagitated way about what is difficult in life. The fact that she does it in such a reduced form gives the texts additional power (...). Where the words are artificially reduced, the reader has to fill in the gaps himself. Which has an interesting effect: You read these texts more quickly because of their brevity, but they still have a longer lasting effect. **Katrin Hörnlein, DIE ZEIT**

A plea against perfectionism and, above all, for recognizing the small moments of happiness that can enrich and enchant life!

Ute Wegmann, Deutschlandfunk

An Herrn Günther mit bestem Gruß!

To Mr. Herman with Kind Regards

With Illustrations by Michael Roher
Wien: Jungbrunnen, 2010



There are books, which not only tell a story but try to transmit feelings, values, ideas, suggestions, plans ... »To Mr Herman With Kind Regards« is one of those books with a »message included«. Elisabeth Steinkellner tells the story of three friendly and mischievous girls: Yasmina, Valeria and Noemí. Three great friends with different backgrounds, which is no obstacle to having fun, playing, snacking and spending the afternoons together on Mustard Street. But one day they cross path with Mr Günther, a grumpy, cautious man, who is capable of throwing cigarette butts on the sidewalk, protesting when he trips over Pablo's wheelchair in the street or yelling at his wife every day at the slightest problem.

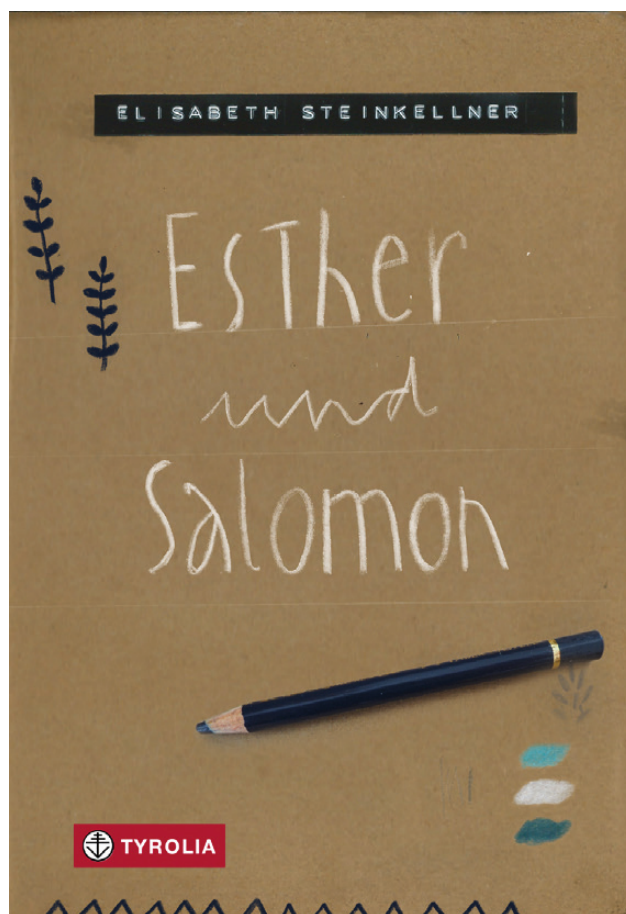
That is why one day the three friends come up with a strange plan, which we will not reveal in this review of course, but with which they will manage to change things and bring harmony and good vibes back to the streets of Mustard Valley.

Friendship, tolerance, cooperation are words suggested in this book which also contains illustrations by Michael Roher, who illustrates the story with ease and manages to capture the interest of the readers. A simple book of ideas and feelings. A good choice for tolerant and curious young readers.

Esther und Salomon

Esther and Salomon

With Photos by the Author and Illustrations by Michael Roher
Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2021



14-year-old Esther is spending a summer vacation with her family in an all-inclusive hotel by the sea. Her parents are mainly preoccupied with arguing about the end of their relationship and so she and her 5-year-old sister Flippa have to pursue the typical vacation activities alone, such as playing in the sand or eating ice cream. On the beach she meets Salomon, who is looking after Aisha, also 5 years old. While the two little girls become friends, a tender first love develops between the two teenagers, that even goes beyond their vacation.

At the end of the vacation, the story changes perspective – while previously the experiences were told from Esther's point of view, in the second part of the book we are immersed into Salomon's everyday life and therefore also in his emotional and mental world. We learn about his tormenting longing for Esther, his traumatic past and the tragic circumstances under which Aisha became part of his family.

In this book for young people Elisabeth Steinkellner manages to tell the story of entire worlds with just a few precise words. Esther and Salomon, whose origins could not be more different and who are confronted with different problems, feel a unique bond. The sensitive, poetic texts impressively reflect the emotions of the young people. The moods are also underlined by the book design – in the case of Esther, who is enthusiastic about photography, in the form of Polaroid photos, whereas for Solomon drawings from his sketchbook are used.

A touching book for young people which, despite partly severe topics such as taking refuge or various family problems (parents' separation or the serious accident of a mother), is mainly about growing up and an extraordinary first love.

Institut für Jugendliteratur



Linguistically and emotionally a very great show.
Michael Wildauer, Bibliotheksnachrichten

Two young people, two different fates, which Steinkellner captures in all their facets and packs them into words and pictures. Brilliant!
Deutsche Akademie für Kinder- und Jugendliteratur

A tender, touching love story [...] with a keen sense for the emotional world of teenagers.
Rosa Schmidt-Vierthaler, Die Presse

Translated Excerpt

Esther and Salomon

Translated by John Reddick

We go down to the beach - on our own.
It's teeming
like an ant heap
and I din it into Flippa
that she mustn't run off
as I'd never ever find her
amongst all the people.
She nods, obedient, and I know at once:
she'll keep her word:
we make a good team, the pair of us do.
Every row between Mum and Dad
pulls them further apart
and us closer together.

Sitting near us
are a couple of girls
much the same age as me,
constantly pulling out their mobiles
and taking photos
of themselves.

I watch them
and wonder:
what matters more to them –
the actual moment
each photo aims to catch,
or the moment
their post clocks up
its hundredth Like?

Flippa's found a
playmate,
they're digging in the sand,
making channels,
piling up ramparts
then tamping them down.
They keep dashing to the sea
to fetch more water
in their cheerful little buckets.

Then they stand
by their castle
slathered with sand
from top to toe
gesticulating wildly -
deciding no doubt
which princess
should have which room,
and whether the dragon
in the nearby cave
is nice or nasty.

»So where are your parents then?«

The little girl gives me
a cheery glance and
vaguely, briefly
points a finger.

»Aisha and me
are already best friends!«
Flippa scampers about
in such delight
that I forget at once
how bored I'd been
all afternoon.

»Aisha? What a pretty name!
So where's she from?«
»That hotel over there«,
says Flippa,
»And guess what:
they don't get
pineapple for breakfast there!«
She looks at me, indignant,
and I want to take her in my arms
and tell her
how much I love her.

Instead
I stroke her hair.
»I meant, what country
does Aisha come from?«
Flippa shrugs.
»Greenland praps?
Or Sandland?
Anyway:
tomorrow I'm bringing her
some pineapple!«

She trots on ahead
and the blissful spirit
she trails behind her
wafts right back to me
embracing us both,

and vanishes only when we
reach our hotel and glimpse
the stressed-out faces
of our parents.

If only I could stick Mum and Dad
in the audience
and make them watch
their very own tragedy
unfold before their eyes:

the strident rows,
reproachful silences,
angry accusations,
contemptuous glances.

I'd like to watch
as horror spreads
across their faces,
then ask them:
Do you see now
how much this hurts us?
Do you realise now
how much your volleys of bitter words
wound us, the bystanders, too
– Flippa and me –
and how deep the wounds are,
ripped open time after time
and far too big to be improved by
handy little sticking plasters
heedlessly applied?

People can suffer inner death,
soundlessly and unobserved.

Quiz question:

Who or what
bears the greatest blame?

the daily grind
boredom
an excessive workload
inattentiveness
stress at work
their parents-in-law
Dad getting fat
Mum's orange-coloured skin
Dad's female colleague
Mum's male friend from her schooldays.

Or is it in fact

us two kids?

who have to be cared for
who are always in the way
who constantly need things:

your time
your understanding
your love

She's racing to the beach
at such a pell-mell pace
that I can scarcely
keep up with her.

In her hands
held tight as tight
a bowl
of pineapple pieces.

Flippa and Aisha are so happy to see each other,
they dancing for sheer joy.

My mobile pings:
a text from Valerie
to say she's missing me.

For a second
– honestly,
just for a second –
I consider
sulking
as she's left it for days
before bothering
to answer.

But then I type
a whole line of love-hearts
and tell her
I'm missing you too.

It's not that they
actively avoid me at school.

It's just that
no one seeks me out.

It's probably
not the case
that they just don't like me.

It's probably just
that they think I'm odd
for being so fond of my ancient Polaroid
and so genuinely interested
in schoolwork.

Anyway, who decides
what's normal and not normal?

I wish
I could go to school
with Valerie.

I'll be spending
eight hours a day
on two hundred days per year
for another four years
at a place where I'm always
lonely.

That's quite a big chunk
of my life.

»Hi!«

Glancing up,
I see him,
and get it straightaway.

»Are you Flippa's sister?«

I nod my head
much longer
than any normal person would,
and feel that tiny earth-tremor
that triggers something
completely new.

»I'm Salomon.«

»I'm Esther.«

To begin with
that's all we can
think to say.

The biggest adventures always start
when you least expect it.

Guten Morgen, schöner Tag!

Good Morning, Beautiful Day!

With Illustrations by Michael Roher
Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2022



A day in the life of a child has a lot to offer!

Especially if you start off as dynamically as the little child in the new picture book by Elisabeth Steinkellner and Michael Roher: »Good Morning, Beautiful Day! What's Going to Happen Today? I'm curious and suggest: Let's march off!« Smiling happily, they set off, striding far and wide, the stuffed monkey in tow, with so much energy that cars and socks, balls and toy robots whirl around. But on the very next double page, the child slows down considerably, sits down on steps, looks at a snail and at shadows in contrast to the sunshine. Then it's off on the bus to kindergarten, where it plays until it's picked up again, and in the evening the program includes a bath and cuddling in bed.

In the new collaboration between the power duo Steinkellner & Roher – for the first time in the form of a cardboard picture book – we accompany a little figure with a black fuzzy head through the day, which has a whole series of highlights despite its superficially unspectacular mundanities. Everything can become an adventure, every detail gives rise to creativity and imagination - for example, on the bus you can count, how many of the passengers, who are diverse in many ways, are wearing something on their heads, including headscarves and headphones, Tyrolean hats and chauffeur's caps. The episodic story is told in cheerful, lively rhymes and colorful pictures. It clearly shows the curiosity and impartiality of children, how they are able to face the day, when they – like the child in this book – experience security and protection.

Exploring numbers and opposites, recognizing colors and shapes, naming animals and everyday things - all of this happens here for the very little ones as if by chance and with the same effortless ease with which language and pictures are convincing. A wonderful book to look at together – and a stimulus to review the day together, to tell each other about the highs and lows.

Verena Weigl, *Die Furche*



Essay about the Author's Work

Anything but Black and White – Elisabeth Steinkellner's literary keyboard

by Heidi Lexe

LINGUISTIC PLAY OF COLORS

»Zesty lemon zebra razzle dazzles on the trapeze / zooms with fuzzy fairy floss / And never snoozes. Zzz... .« Holding the sweet alliteration in its hands, zesty lemon zebra zips out of the book. Marking the end of a menagerie of creatures that each juggle a culinary delight to match its starting letter. The acrobatic anteater has eaten applesauce with acai, the calabash cat has cooked cantaloupe compote, and Elisabeth Steinkellner, through her humorous ABC (brought to life by Michael Roher's illustrations) has secured her place in Austria's tradition of wordplay.

It is only fitting that the zebra at the book's conclusion does not have black-and-white stripes. For Steinkellner's literary world is not divided into black and white. The title of her 2013 book, »Zwischen Türkisen Tapeten« (Between Turquoise Walls), is almost prototypical. This collection of miniatures tends towards flowered shower caps, blackberry-colored mary janes, and tilting polyglot princes. In the interstices of the obvious, where Mr. Bassoon snores like a tuba and hats are knitted out of fleeting thoughts, we can see Elisabeth Steinkellner's mastery of the space between language and perception. »Peaceful pirates protect proboscises with.«

DARING DEPICTIONS

Their peculiar skin care routine is less important than their gentle mien; despite their black-and-white striped bathing costumes, these wild sea rovers are anything but binary. Rather they fit right in with the swashbuckling gang depicted in Elisabeth Steinkellner and Michael Roher's »Wer fürchtet sich vorm lila Lachs« (Who's Afraid of the Lavender Salmon), which uses humorous queer writing to undermine the harsh fee-fi-fo-fum of traditional fairy tales. Their wolf is a tattoo-covered hard rock aficionado and a touchingly devoted carer of seven little goats. Rapunzel prefers soft rock and lets down his long beard for rain-soaked Hans to climb up so he can dry off in the tower. And the princess code of conduct is full of so many mood-killing rules that – without necessarily disobeying the (Cucumber) King – »across the globe, no one wants to be a princess anymore.« Today's princesses, in their »undercover life as gunslingers,« are allowed to have »snot hanging out of their noses,« making it clear that the intertextual associations of the author-illustrator couple are not limited to the Grimm brothers and Wilhelm Busch, but also include the queen of Austrian children's literature, Christine Nöstlinger.

Not only when gentle pirates partake of punch and fairy tales are transmogrified do Elisabeth Steinkellner's protagonists leave the path of (hetero)normativity. In her YA novels as well, the characters navigating the fault lines of puberty are never drawn in black and white. Instead, they sparkle

in all the colors of their social, emotional, and erotic humanity:
 »fog gray, bean brown, bonbon polychromatic, velvet red, snow white, bit-player pink, straw blond, titanium silver, grass green, ember orange, jungle green, neon yellow, soot black, chocolate brown, cat blue, gold yellow, marshmallow white, avocado green, ochre brown, peacock blue, mohawk turquoise, red blond, polar white, curaçao blue, flashy chromatic, blueberry violet, sailfin yellow, signal red, ocean blue, lava orange, coffee black, apple green, gorgeous gray«.

KALEIDOSCOPE OF FEELINGS

The kaleidoscope of feelings in Steinkellner's YA novel »Dieser wilde Ozean, den wir Leben nennen« (This Wild Ocean That We Call Life) is mirrored by the color palette of the titles of the chapters told from Simon's perspective. Simon fell in love with Paulus on a train trip, but then lost touch with him. In contrast, the chapters from the point of view of Antonia, whose path crosses Simon's, have titles that are linked to water and to the ocean. Antonia's ocean is not a landscape of longing, but is connected to a loss that she has suffered, leaving her restless and haunted.

Simon's search for Paulus drives the plot, but the question that determines the narrative is what exactly happened to Antonia's brother, Joel. Elisabeth Steinkellner weaves these two perspectives together up until the final watercolors, never moving far from her figures. She also never evades any issues and gives both Simon and Antonia a bodily presence. Neither the bitter nor the sweet is missing, and she manages to allow each of her protagonists to find their own feet while accepting the wounds to their souls.

Evading literary black-and-white does not have to entail equivocation. Elisabeth Steinkellner's YA novels address directly and without hesitation issues that are often circumvented or descriptively paraphrased. Her prose is segmented, situational, and precise. And very aware of the tonality of all that is said between the lines.

»July
 short skirts, short nights
 v
 e
 r
 t
 i
 c
 a
 l
 ly/s/t/r/i/p /e/d honey moon«

In her incomparably beautiful collection of poems and short prose, »Die Nacht, der Falter und ich« (The Night, the Moth, and I), set in the place and time where daytime loses its margins, Steinkellner unfolds youth and adolescence in all of its many aspects. Thresholds are a central motif. Temporally, it lies in the mostly indeterminate border between the times of day, emotionally, in the transition from grief to memory, and topographically, there where a jump from the rickety balcony of a condemned house is the border between childhood and becoming an adult. The texts are introspective; variations on speaking into a silence where an »I« is searching for the words that will help them make sense

of their self. Elisabeth Steinkellner listens closely to her figures' deepest secrets and shares them. These need not be existential, they can also just simply be:

»comparison
the black keys are sad
the white keys are happy
but only together
do they make a piano –
kinda
like me«

Playing both the black and the white keys, Elisabeth Steinkellner is a virtuosa on the formal, aesthetic level. In »The Night, the Moth, and I«, it remains unclear throughout who exactly »I« is. Neither sex, gender, age, race, nor class are explicit, an aesthetic that allows each individual reader to put themselves into the text.

ENJOYMENT OF EXPERIMENTATION

This enjoyment of experimentation corresponds with Elisabeth Steinkellner's erudite desire to reference and build upon traditional children's and young adult literature. Her texts are nuanced, she structures and composes them using references to various media and integrating literary soundtracks. In the narrative space and corpus of her debut novel, »Rabensommer« (Raven Summer), she uses lists and diary entries to reflect the unhappiness and anxiety of the first-person narrator, July. She takes on traditional genres, playing with variations and experimenting with all poetic forms – addressed to adults, teens, and children. A motif found throughout her work is travel – either the longing for the wider world as in the art book »sand unter den füßen statt schnee« (sand under my feet not snow) or summer vacation as a signpost that directs from familiar space to the dreamscape in »Vom Flaniern and Weltspaziern« (Of Strolling and World-Walking).

One of the texts in that book is »mail from on the road« in which a lyrical narrator sends greetings from A to Z from around the world. The last missive is from Zimbabwe, where they count a zebra's stripes. A literal double meaning that is illustrated by the drawings, for the zebra's white-and-black stripes cannot exist one without the other. They are inextricably linked, just like content and form in Elisabeth Steinkellner's work, or often also text, illustration, and book design.

Especially when lyrical elements determine the language, sound cannot be ignored. For example the sound of summer, which comes up again and again while »Esther und Salomon« (Esther and Salomon) are falling in love. In this book, the perspectives of the narrators are not intertwined but follow one another, providing variations on a common theme: family relationships. Esther's family is currently not very happy. In concise lyrical prose, her days are turned tragic by her parents' holiday quarrels, but the nights belong to Esther and Salomon, the brother of the girl her happy-go-lucky sister Pippa met on the beach.

Esther's story is accompanied by fragmentary polaroids that she completes with commentary. One of these photos, in the middle of the novel, reveals a plot-twisting fact about Salomon. At night, (skin) color is irrelevant, but in Part II these colors are seen from Salomon's perspective and are linked to questions of belonging. In the second half of the book, the lyrical prose is augmented with handwritten letters and drawings by Michael Roher that give visual voice to a young character who rarely articulates his thoughts in words.

BRINGING TEXT TO LIFE

This hybrid YA novel seamlessly follows Steinkellner's trendsetting »Papierklavier« (Paper Piano), a work that is almost a prototype for the merging of novel and graphic novel. In the form of a diary (including doodles) belonging to the narrator, Maia, it moves the narrative plane from *histoire* to *discours*. Each double page has been designed by Anna Gusella so that text and image reflect Maia's thoughts, descriptions, notes, sketches, and drawings. The illustrations and typography impart a moving intensity to Maia's femininity and physicality, a leitmotif in Elisabeth Steinkellner's story. »Isn't there SOMEWHERE in the world you can order thick skin in PLUS SIZES?«

In her visual depiction of Maia's question, Anna Gusella changes stripes and a tiger wraps itself around Maia, although the story began with a zebra. The zebra's black-and-white stripes correspond to the black-and-white keys of the piano. The diary was a present from Granny Sieglinde, the neighbor who has just died when the book begins. The hole left by her death is mirrored by the loss suffered by Maia's younger sister, Heidi, who can no longer play on Granny Sieglinde's »zebra.« Instead, she must make do with a paper piano: »It's actually a wild, happy piece, but the way Heidi is humming it now, so slowly and quietly, it sounds almost like a funeral march.«

In the spring of 2021 there was quite a bit of noise about this book, which deals with death, but is first and foremost about the question of how life can be lived well. The Permanent Council of the German Conference of Bishops refused to honor the jury's decision to award Paper Piano the Catholic Children's and Youth Book Prize. A conflict arose on social media over the payment of the forfeited piano tuner's fee and the words spoken on the »porch in full moonlight« were anything but romantic. But for Elisabeth Steinkellner, »[s]omehow none exactly fit« and she retreated. Between turquoise walls. And jokingly claimed that from now on she would only publish board books. True to her word, one year later, she published »Guten Morgen, schöner Tag« (Good Morning, Beautiful Day). There's no question about it: on the black-and-white keys of literature, Elisabeth Steinkellner can also make cardboard sing. Nevertheless, we should all eat an extra-large portion of fuzzy fairy floss to celebrate the return of the zesty lemon zebra to the literary arena.

Interview with Elisabeth Steinkellner

»A small window into the soul of another person«

by Elisabeth Eggenberger

The Austrian author Elisabeth Steinkellner (b. 1981) writes picture books, poems, short stories, and YA novels. Creating moods, encounters, and relationships between characters with words is her main focus. Steinkellner spoke with Buch&Maus about writing and about her new YA novel.

Elisabeth Steinkellner, you're from Lower Austria – what's your connection to the ocean?

Elisabeth Steinkellner: As a child, when I went with my parents to Italy or Croatia on vacation, I was fascinated by the snails and seashells, and collected them with a passion. That fascination has held to this day. I don't like to be IN the ocean really, I'd rather be AT the ocean. Like other great phenomena, the starry sky for example, the ocean simultaneously gives us a sense of how small we are and a sense of unfathomable infinity.

Throughout your YA novel, »Dieser wilde Ozean, den wir Leben nennen« (This Wild Ocean That We Call Life), the sea functions as a metaphor. Simon has never been to the ocean and is searching in a strange city for Paulus, with whom he has fallen in love and who takes underwater photos. For Antonia, the ocean is linked to a traumatic family event. Both figures let themselves be carried through the city as if they were riding waves and they meet each other by chance. In your texts, encounters between people often play a central role. What makes them so important?

ES: Chance encounters – when something comes into your life that you weren't expecting – open up little windows, into the larger world, into the soul of another person. And often when we encounter something by chance it starts things rolling. It's not so much an explosion, more of a small push. Simon not only meets Antonia, but also Vero, the concierge, and Fritz, who gives Simon his telephone number. They open windows which he hadn't been expecting because he was so fixated on Paulus. These encounters do something with him, they stimulate something.

In the short stories and poems in »Die Nacht, der Falter und ich« (The Night, the Moth, and I) »you« and »I« are neither named nor assigned a gender. In This Wild Ocean That We Call Life, readers also need a couple of pages before they can identify the two first-person narrators and keep them apart. What do you want to achieve with this openness?

ES: The publisher and I talked about whether the names should show up earlier. But it was important to me to leave it open for a while. Not in order to intentionally confuse readers, I simply wanted to first create a mood before revealing who's behind it. The two figures have very different moods: there's a gentle yearning about Simon, while Antonia struggles with hard feelings of anger and blame. And I also wanted to form a contrast between Simon, who yearns for connection with Paulus, and Antonia, who repeatedly pushes away anyone who comes close to her.

You also like to play with gender identities. In »The Night, the Moth, and I«, »you« and »I« can both be read as either a man or a woman. In the new novel too, the first name we learn is that of Paulus, with whom the narrator is in love, which can lead readers to first think that the voice belongs to a girl.

ES: Exactly. During one reading for schoolkids, after the first two chapters I asked the audience who they imagined the narrators to be. They all agreed that it was two girls. But that uncertainty results from the story. In »The Night, the Moth, and I«, I chose it more actively. I wanted readers to be able to imagine whatever they wanted. You can stay within conventional concepts, you can let yourself be inspired to challenge those concepts, or you can simply enjoy the fact that the story offers different options. What I don't want is to force anyone to see things in one particular way.

You've published two YA novels, one collection of short texts for teens, as well as many picture books and word play books. Which comes first: the form or the content?

ES: Actually, I always have ideas for all different types of literature. Which ones get written probably depends on my mood at any given moment. But when I have an idea for a story, from the beginning I know the approximate age of the readers. And whether a story is for children or for teens is often inherent to the issues it touches upon.

But your picture books aren't necessarily for young children, they speak to people of all ages.

ES: Picture books are a category unto themselves, since text and image are so closely linked. And the brevity inspires a concentration of meaning, which in turn becomes interesting for other age groups as well. But the illustrations definitely also play an important role. The illustrator I work with almost exclusively is my life partner, Michael Roher. His has a very unchildish style, that makes it more attractive for people of all ages.

How is working on a picture book or a book of poems different from working on a YA novel?

ES: I'm always thinking about my readers. I ask myself which issues are important to teenagers and young adults, and which are relevant for children. Then of course there's the question of language. For YA literature, I don't have to simplify my language or style much, while for a picture book I try to find a language that fits that age group. I automatically go into the mindset of the age group. How do you think at a certain age? Children like things to be funny—but that doesn't mean they can't sometimes be serious.

In all of your works, your careful use of language is remarkable. Is finding the right words for moods and feelings more important to you than the narrative?

ES: Yes, I think so. At any rate I see everything before me almost like a film and the mood is in the foreground. And I try to capture it. The atmosphere, the inner life of the characters, their relationships to one another—that's what's important to me. I think that's because my writing is not focused on issues, but on sections. It's as if I cut a sequence out of life and then describe the many branches of that life segment, without focusing on any particular issue. Maybe because a lot of what's in my books happens during the writing process. I feel my way forward together with my characters. I know how the story starts and I know pretty much where it's going but everything in between doesn't take shape until I start writing.

What will have the pleasure of reading next?

ES: I really wanted to write a book of poems again, because I very much like the form of the poem. And I wanted to work with a light and humorous touch, and with word play. My book of children's poems, illustrated by Michael Roher, will be published by Tyrolia in spring. This time it wasn't a joint project from the beginning. The texts were pretty much finished when Michael began to illustrate. But of course it's always wonderful to work with him. I like his sense of humor and his pictures continually delight me. I really enjoy making books with another person. Then you can say: This is our book.

Translated Editions

An Herrn Günther mit bestem Gruß!

Para el señor Genaro con nuestros mejores deseos | Spanish | Emilia Conejo López-Lago | Madrid: Hotel Papel Ediciones, 2010

Til Vagn med kaerlig hilsen | Danish | Marie Brocks Larsen | Århus: Turbine, 2011

M m n-i buzurg-i adid | Persian | Nona Afraz | Hoopa, 2011

Al Signor Pasquale Con Tanti Saluti! | Italian | Compagni D'avventure, 2011

Para o Seu Almeida, com Um Abraço! | Portuguese Brazilian | Belo Horizonte: Abacatte Editorial, 2012

Zh ngjiù guài línjū | Chinese | Mao Yuting | Tianjin: Xinlei chubanshe, 2019



Die neue Omi

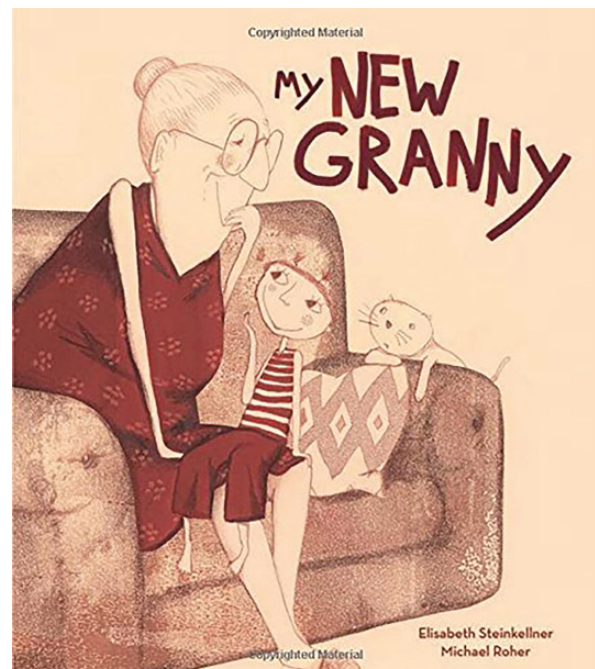
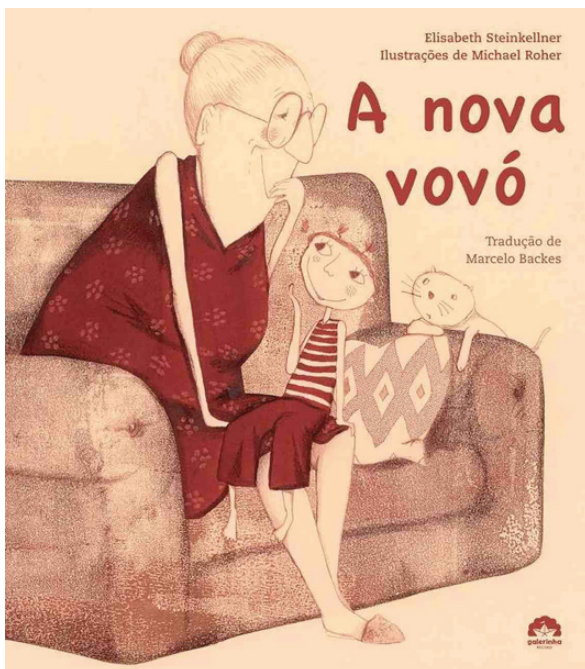
My New Granny | English | Connie Stradling Morby |
New York: Sky Pony Press, 2012

A Nova Vovó | Portuguese Brazilian | Marcelo Backes |
Rio de Janeiro: Galerinha Record, 2013

Una nonna tutta nuova | Italian | Sara Crimi | Milano: Terre di Mezzo, 2015

Xin nai nai | Chinese | Teng Wei yi | Shang hai: Shao nian er tong chu ban she, 2021

Xīn nǎinai | Simplified Chinese | Beijing: Juvenile & Children's Publishing
House, 2023



Guten Morgen, schöner Tag!

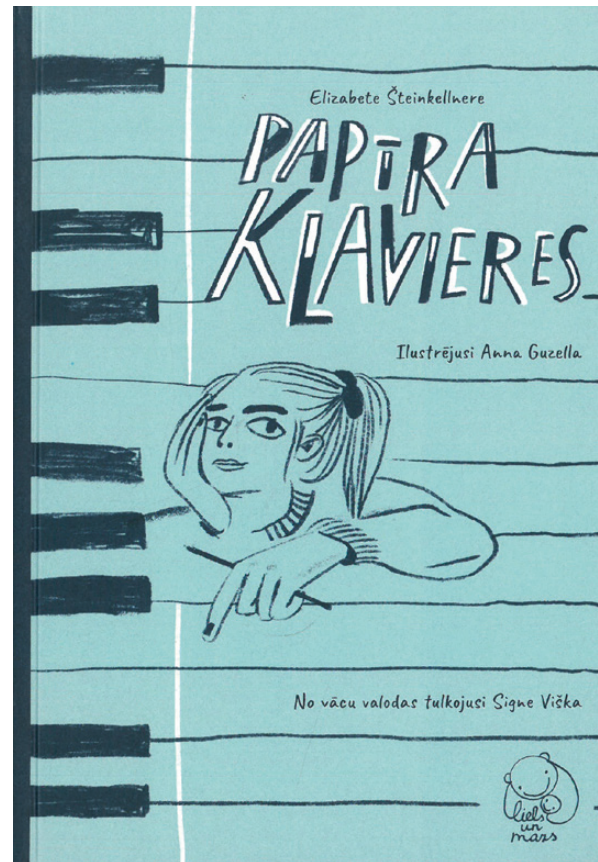
Günaydin, iyi günler! [...] Multilingual Edition | Turkish | Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian
| English | Arabic | Serafettin Yldiz, Filip Kozina, Alexandra Berlina, Mahmoud
Hassanein | Innsbruck: Tyrolia Verlag, 2024

Rabensommer

ṣayf al-ğurbān | Arabic | Ali Audi | Kairo, 2019

Ein Rucksack voller Sand

En rygsæk fuld af sand | Danish | Gry Kappel Jensen | Århus: Turbine, 2013
 Zhuang man sha zi de bei bao | Chinese | Mengying Liu | Xin bei shi yong he qu:
 wei bo wen hua guo ji chu ban you xian gong si, 2018



Papierklavier

Seu mu di pa la da i seu e seo man na | Korean | Eun Gyeong Jeon | Seoul: MOMO
 Agency, 2022
 Papira klavieres | Latvian | Signe Viška | Rīga: Liels un mazs, 2023

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Books by Elisabeth Steinkellner for Children

- 2010** **An Herrn Günther mit bestem Gruß** (To Mr. Günther with Best Regards) | Ill.: Michael Roher | Wien: Jungbrunnen-Verlag
- 2011** **Die neue Omi** (The New Grandma) | Ill. Michael Roher | Wien: Jungbrunnen-Verlag
- 2012** **Ein Rucksack voller Sand** (A Backpack full of Sand) | Ill. Michael Roher | Wien: Jungbrunnen-Verlag
- 2013** **Papilios Welt** (Papilios World) | Ill.: Michael Roher | Wien: Picus-Verlag
- Zwischen türkisen Tapeten** (Between Turquoise Wallpapers) | Ill.: Michael Roher | Wien: Bibliothek der Provinz
- Wer fürchtet sich vorm lila Lachs?** (Who Is Afraid of the Purple Salmon?) | Co-Author and Ill.: Michael Roher | Wien: Luftschacht-Verlag
- 2014** **Pepe und Lolo** (Pepe and Lolo) | Co-Author and Ill.: Michael Roher | Wien: Picus-Verlag
- 2015** **Rabensommer. Roman** (Raven Summer. A Novel) | Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg-Verlag
- 2016** **Die Nacht, der Falter und ich** (The Night, the Butterfly and Me) | Ill.: Michaela Weiss | Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag
- Die Kürbiskatze kocht Kirschkompott** (The Pumpkin Cat Prepares Cherry Compote) | Ill.: Michael Roher | Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag
- 2018** **Dieser wilde Ozean, den wir Leben nennen** (This Wild Ocean We Call Life) | Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg-Verlag
- 2019** **Vom Flaniern und Weltspaziern. Reime und Sprachspiele** (About Strolling and World-Walking. Rhymes and Wordplays) | Co-Author and Ill.: Michael Roher | Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag
- 2020** **Papierklavier** (Paper Piano) | Ill.: Anna Gusella | Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg-Verlag
- 2021** **Esther und Salomon** (Esther and Salomon) | Photos from the Author and Ill.: Michael Roher | Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag
- 2022** **Guten Morgen, schöner Tag!** (Good Morning, Beautiful Day!) | Ill. Michael Roher | Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag

2024**Heupferdchen, hüpf! Das farbenprächtige Pappbilderbuch zum Thema Beeilen, Trödeln und Geduld-Haben**

(Hay Horse Hop! The colourful Cardboard Picture Book on Hurrying up, Dawdling and Being Patient) |

Ill.: Michael Roher | Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag

Poems and contributions to numerous anthologies.

Books by Elisabeth Steinkellner for Adults

2012

sand unter den füßen statt schnee (Sand under Your Feet instead of Snow) |

Ill.: Michael Roher | Horn: Edition Thurnhof

2013

Text/Körper. Lyrik der Gegenwart (Text/Body. Contemporary poetry) |

Schorndorf: Edition Art & Science