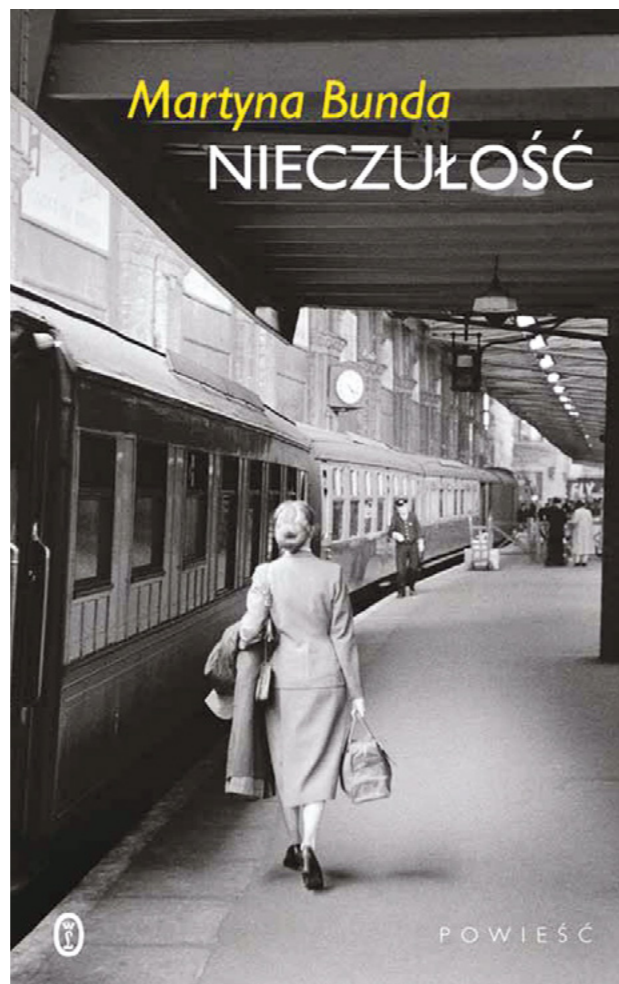


Unfeeling



A picture of true closeness – that between women

The protagonists of this women's saga, the action of which extends from the Second World War to times closer to the present, are three sisters: reliable and responsible Gerta, Truda, who yields easily to the call of the heart, and rebellious Ilda, as well as the head of the family, Rozela, who raises her daughters in the Kashubian village of Dziewcza Góra [Dziewcza Hill]. The structure of the novel, divided into seasons, designates subsequent years in the lives of the three sisters, their mother, husbands and children. Each new season brings a change in the fate of the main characters – they learn about love, give birth to children, lose a loved one, mature, and inevitably grow old and say goodbye to one another.

Each of the sisters chooses their own path, assuming (most often mistakenly) that it leads in the opposite direction to the one chosen years ago by their mother, Rozela. However, no matter how far Gerta, Truda and Ilda move away from home, they always come back to it, with anger, with tears in their eyes, with joy, longing or pain. They return to tell their own stories,

to confront what has been left unsaid over the years of the war, and finally to find out that they are not so different from their mother Rozela, from grandmother Otylia and from all those women who still have to deal with the passing of love, parents, children, dreams and ambitions.

Unfeeling is a story about how many subconscious fears, doubts, and wounds are carried over generations in the history of one family, and how women, the guardians of identity, guarantee its endurance over time. It shows women as repositories of traditions handed down from generation to generation, bearing the memory of the family history and traumas that they inherit. Bunda, under a layer of insensitivity and dryness, and through the bubbling emotions of the heroines, creates a picture of true closeness – that between women.

Magdalena Brodacka, translated by Katarzyna Popowicz

It must have been Truda, the middle sister, who thought of putting the roses in a bucket of ink for the night. A bit of colour for symbolic value, she said. As they're burying him last. It must have been Gerta, the eldest, who added that their bouquet had to be on top. Before the service she shoved fifty zlotys in the sexton's pocket to remind him whose flowers should be uppermost. The sexton, the illiterate one who dragged his feet, acquitted himself well, and respectfully spread the ribbons on either side of the coffin. Written on them was the message "Miss Unfeeling".

Winter; a wet, protracted February. The year 1979. The tinted roses and two pieces of white plastic tape had ended up at the very top of the pile, above the lilies with the inscription "Your Faithful Wife" and heaps of flowers for the "Great Sculptor," the "Pride of the Region," the "Perfect Artist," the "Noble Son of Pomerania." How could all that compare with "Miss Unfeeling?"

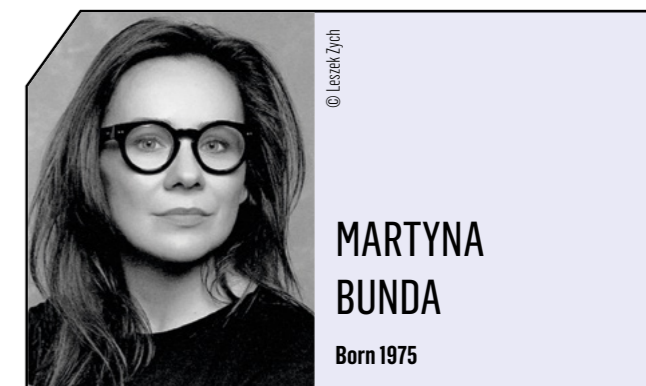
And then came the sisters, arm in arm, shoe in line with shoe, the older girls supporting Ilda, the youngest. On her left was Truda, the middle sister. Usually at the centre of the universe, with earrings dangling in all directions, now she was focused and quiet. On the right was Gerta. Always so sensitive to what people would say, that day she stood the straightest of all, like a ramrod. Between them Ilda, oddly small and fragile that day, despite her truly impressive bust, still remembered in town from the days when she crammed it into a one-piece leather suit. And ahead of them went he, Tadeusz Gelbert, in a mahogany coffin with silver fittings.

And so the cortege proceeded in the greyish-white snow, with a cross swaying rhythmically in the sexton's hands, with the Ever Loving Wife on the ribbons and at the front, with the local mayor, the bank manager, all Truda's old underlings, the neighbours, the notables from the sculpture studio, the loyal customers for gravestones, the shopkeepers, the kiosk attendants, and both Kartuzy's taxi drivers – for nobody in this town could possibly miss such a major event – while the sisters moved up step by step, ever closer to the coffin. And it was the eldest, Gerta, who took the next row of mourners from the right, and it was the middle one, Truda, who took them from the left. So it was, just in front of the freshly dug grave, not by striding but only casually gaining speed, they caught up the Legal Widow. Over the coffin they stood face to face. And then, from the small handbag she'd received

from him, Ilda took out the lipstick, a gift from him, and coated her lips. They'd been counting on a show, and they got one.

Before darkness had fallen, the three sisters were sitting together at table in the house below Dziewcza Hill.

Excerpt translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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Martyna Bunda has worked as a journalist and a reporter. *Unfeeling* is her literary debut.