

Shortlisted for the Prize of the Leipzig Book Fair 2017

Anne Weber
Kirio

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A book that searches in vain for an equal – and possibly in vain for its narrator ...

Who is Kirio: an oddball, a madman, a saint? His trail first appears in the South of France and is lost in the German town of Hanau during the time of the Brothers Grimm. Kirio enjoys walking on his hands – and in fact generally turning everything on its head. He talks to the rocks and the bats as naturally as to other people, works miracle after miracle and never notices. So who is Kirio? And who is the voice telling us about him? Anne Weber's new novel reads like a modern legend of a saint, and as a poetic exploration of the boundaries between heaven and earth.

“Reality does not get the last word.”

ANNE WEBER, born in Offenbach in 1964, lives in Paris as an author and translator from German to French and vice versa. Her work has won numerous prizes, including the Heimito von Doderer Prize, the 3sat Prize, and the Kranichsteiner Literature Prize. Anne Weber writes in German and French, and her books are published in France and Germany.

Translated by Sophie Duvernoy

WHO'S WHO

Who I am? Perhaps it will become clear over the course of this story. At the moment, I can't say so with certainty myself. But I'm hoping I've fallen into the hands of a detective. A reader with a detective's instinct. And preferably a similar kind of author. If I'm lucky and they put their minds to it, they'll track me down. And in the end we'll all know with whom or what we're dealing.

The world travels greatly within me. It could be that I'm a messenger. Only I don't know at whose bidding I might be, or whether I am acting on my own behalf. I feel as if I've always been here. But doesn't everyone feel like that? After all, who can remember how and when they came into the world? It also seems to me that, given the side-world in which I live, I am invisible and inaudible to most. But that may also be true for many others. It doesn't make much sense to puzzle over my identity as long as the story hasn't yet begun in which I play a particular—though not always illustrious—part.

The story can begin right now, and presumably it has a narrator. At least one. But don't think that you've already solved the riddle: that's not me. At least, I'm not the only one. Narrator Number One is still lying in bed. On closer inspection, I must unfortunately note: he is sleeping. And now that I've taken my time to observe him, it's obvious: it isn't a narrator at all. (It isn't a hippopotamus, either.) It's a narratrix. I'll jump in with a few preliminary observations to pass the time until she wakes. Although I've never shaken his hand or talked with him, I know the

hero of this story just as well as if I'd created him myself. And I can assure you that he deserves the name of a hero, and not just a protagonist.

Who is this man?

Until he appeared, I had a rather precise notion of the human species. I saw before me the ingredients from which humans are assembled in varying proportions: evil, good, hunger for love, lust for power, harshness, tenderness, curiosity, greed, fear, and so on. I was sufficiently well-acquainted with the human race in its various designs, male and female, even some intermediary forms; in addition, I had increasingly turned my back on it in recent years and instead immersed myself in the far more delightful and surprisingly diverse phenotypes and life forms of the dragonfly.

Then Kirio arrived. Kirio bowled everything over, beginning with himself. Nothing ever kept him on his two legs for very long. That's why he invented the wheel. Not the touchable, tangible one that had already been invented, but another one that also served for locomotion: as often as possible and when the sidewalk before him was empty, Kirio turned cartwheels, instead of putting one foot in front of the other like everyone else.

Kirio was neither particularly large nor particularly clever nor particularly handsome. At first, he was not particularly noticeable, but he would quickly fall out of line and just as easily out of character. Against all the laws of interpersonal perspective, he would become grander the closer one got to him.

The soon-to-be narrator—no, the narratrix—is lucky; she doesn't yet know what lies in store for her, she is still slumbering sweetly. She will have a difficult task: she could just as well try to catch a cloud with a butterfly net, or scoop out the Red Sea like a borscht with a soup ladle. She might have to break all the rules of grammar for Kirio, invent new words, preferably

completely new letters. A new pronoun might be needed just for Kirio. I you he she it we you they. That's it? That's supposed to encompass everything? Everything's supposed to fit? Even Kirio, who's so different from everyone else? Eight words are supposed to describe billions of people and who knows how many quadrillions of animals, all creatures of this earth and beyond? And every thinkable relationship which each of these apparitions might have with each of the others? Every possible perspective?

That's absurd. Let's forget it. Or rather: let's not forget it! Let's not forget *him*. It's time to wake Narratrix Number One. Isn't she already blinking her sleepy eyes?

Where to begin? With the *beginning*.

HOW KIRIO SAW THE SHADOW OF THE WORLD (AND HOW IT WAS LIGHT TO HIM)

Bonjour! (This isn't Kirio speaking, but moi, Narratrix Number One.) All those who hope to peek under the bedclothes of a half-naked young woman in the coming pages, let disappointment be writ large on their faces immediately:

I'm already on the older side.

To be honest, I could be the hero's mother.

To be even more honest: I *am* his mother.

I don't know why you look so astonished. After all, when it comes to the birth of a child, there's nothing unreasonable about first asking its mother.

Well, then. Let's begin immediately.

From the very beginning, the child distinguished itself by not wanting to appear. I knew quite well that it had already been there all through the years in which I had not been pregnant, and I pleaded with it to finally grow and show its face. All in vain. It swam around in my belly, big as a speck of dust, and refused to become an indisputable human. Although I did not grow younger in those years, the child did not age by a day. What was it waiting for? I would finally find out on my thirty-seventh birthday. It was no ordinary child, whose genesis begins with the fusion of two gametes and then simply takes its so-called natural course. It wanted to be announced! And it was announced. On the morning of my thirty-seventh birthday, I received a phone call. An unknown person was on the line who didn't give their name, and whose voice could have been a very low young woman's, or an unusually soft man's voice.

Please forgive me if I'm bothering you, the voice said.

This flower deliveryman has rather peculiar manners, I thought. Or whoever else it might be.

Might I ask if you are standing or sitting right now?, the voice continued.

I was standing.

If you would be so kind as to take a seat.

Surprised by my own docility, I sat down on the kitchen chair.

Do you have good or bad news for me?

In hindsight, it seems to me as if the voice briefly hesitated at this point.

I would like to prevent you from falling into the apples, she finally said, with which she may have meant fainting, if it was in fact a French voice.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, I murmured to myself in my head.

Don't fool yourself! the voice cried. That's exactly why I've called. You're going to have to deal with a special apple.

With a wormy one, you mean?

No.

With one that rolls down the hill the moment it's fallen from the tree?

No.

Then what?

With one that doesn't fall at all.

How so?

You're receiving an apple that will rise.

I looked at the bowl of red, fatty, shining apples that stood in front of me on the kitchen table.

A balloon, you mean?

I received no further answers to this question.

The last I heard of this voice was an odd, antiquated *Fare thee well*.

Nine months later, Kirio was born.

A quick marriage and an impromptu honeymoon to Italy had to be undertaken before then, although the apple had grown to the size of a pumpkin by this point. I was surprisingly well in these weeks and months, and I barely felt my belly to be a weight. Instead, it gave me a kind of gentle tailwind. It was my first pregnancy, and so I did not consider this unknown propulsion particularly surprising.

I sometimes spoke with the child when I was alone—don't all expecting mothers do that? And the child answered. Back then, I thought that all unborn children did. Of course, it didn't speak in long, complicated sentences, it almost only ever used the present, and I never heard it use the subjunctive. But it answered, I'm sure of that. I wandered with him through holm oak woods and along blooming lavender fields in a village in the South of France known as Espeluche (or: Espahloosh), in a time in which stars had not yet graced the region's restaurants, and souvenir shops and spa hotels hadn't yet replaced the baker and the butcher. When the road forked, I often asked it which way I should turn, and it never answered me with left or right, but said "Cross-country," or "Up the hill," or "To the overgrown well," which, by the way, made sense when one considered that its special and changeable state meant that its right and left did not necessarily correspond with mine. I told him the names of the plants as I walked by: cistus, gorse, spurge, curry plants, juniper, and of course, rosemary and thyme, and it was happy and often asked me to pause, to approach one of the plants more closely and smell it, as if it could partake in the fragrances of the Provençal plant world through my nose. Time and again, it would

draw my attention to animals which would I would easily have missed on side paths or in the bushes: a lizard, a yellowhammer, a damselfly, and once even a fat little viper on which I almost placed my right foot.

The pregnancy was normal and so was the honeymoon, if by normal one means that we fought on the first day of our trip, lost sight of each another on the second, and only bumped into each another shortly before our trip home, purely by coincidence. Of course, we were not in constant contact by phone in those days, and generally everything was only half so bad. When his father went away, I would converse with the child, which never went away: it was there when we ate zucchini blossoms and puntarella, it was there when we gassed up and quarreled, and it was there when we made love, which was sometimes a bit embarrassing for me. There were weeks left until the scheduled delivery date when we slowly made our journey home, which took an equally normal course. A jockey whose horse had thrown him off after the first few meters won the horse race in Asti; this wasn't a problem, since according to the rules of the local Palio the horses either had to be ridden bareback or not at all. In Turin and in our minds, we met Cesar Pavese, Italo Calvino, and Natalia Ginzburg. We weren't far away in Avigliana when Saint Mauritius was given a palm branch from heaven. No particular incidents, as I said, just stopovers. But the Fréjus tunnel had barely swallowed us when the apple child began pulling dreadfully inside me. It was a sunny, warm autumn day, and we were driving into a mountain at a hundred and twenty kilometers an hour, or thirty-three meters per second. The mountain is large, the tunnel is long. Once we had arrived in the middle of the mountain, the child's father stopped the car in a safety alcove, which was unfortunately not soundproof, and so he had to continue to endure my screams. Nothing else must have happened except cars zooming by, but a penguin migration could have taken place next to us and I would have noticed just as little. I

cowered on the backseat and pushed, not as much to get rid of the child as of the unbearable pain, and since the mountain helped and pushed as well, Kirio saw the shadow of the world within a few endless seconds. He was born in the twilight of a long cylinder; the cars gliding past cast a pale sheen on his tiny, blood-smearred face, like a quick side-glance; the shadows flitting over blinded him, and he squeezed his swollen eyes shut, as if he were in the brightest noonday sun.

We had left as two; we came home as three. Because his paternal grandmother came from the Breton town Plogonnec, the boy was christened Kirio. Once it had still not spoken a word in its third year, the father discovered the possibility that the child might not be his, and left me with a few worries and two pairs of hole-ridden socks. At first, he sometimes sent postcards, and once even money in a currency I didn't know; it was a decent sum before I exchanged it. Thereafter, I was only privy to his deafening silence.

The first year of the child's life was normal, if by normal one means that it screamed and spluttered and bit when I wanted to breast-feed it, which was surprisingly painful even with a toothless mouth, but it thrived all the same. Later, I tried in vain to teach him the words "Mommy" and "Daddy"—as long as there was still someone to point at—, but I didn't take it personally, since I didn't have any greater success with "moon," "dog," or "arm." Finally, I tried "differential equation" and "Attention Deficit Syndrome," and indeed, a gleam came into Kirio's by now very large and round eyes; but that disappeared as well. Despite his stubborn silence, it was clear that he understood most of what was said by me or anyone else in his vicinity. And it wasn't just that he understood; he also answered in his mute fashion, so that I saw no reason he couldn't go on to become a nuclear physicist or the conductor-in-chief of the Berlin Philharmonic. Admittedly, I thought he seemed ill-suited to menial labor from the get-go, but

this had less to do with excessive motherly ambition than with the child's already perceptible extraordinary abilities. At three, he could write his name, at four read the *Dauphiné libéré*, and at five he could not only distinguish Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, but also Boötes, Cassiopeia, and Andromeda. And so it was already clear to me how the hearing test he was finally ordered to take would turn out: his hearing was not only excellent but was, like everything else about him, absolute.

Shortly after his seventh birthday, I signed him up for piano lessons at the conservatory of Saint-Paul-Trois-Châteaux. He was standing beside me when the woman who had received us asked me how old he was, if he had already learned an instrument, and a few other things.

I'd rather learn to play the flute, he said.

So I signed him up for flute. Once we were home again, it dawned on me that these were the first words I had ever heard him say since he had been separated from me. From then on, he could speak, that is to say: from then on, he spoke. But above all, he played the flute.