

A mystery inside an enigma: *von Schirach explores reality and illusion*

Suspended Sentences

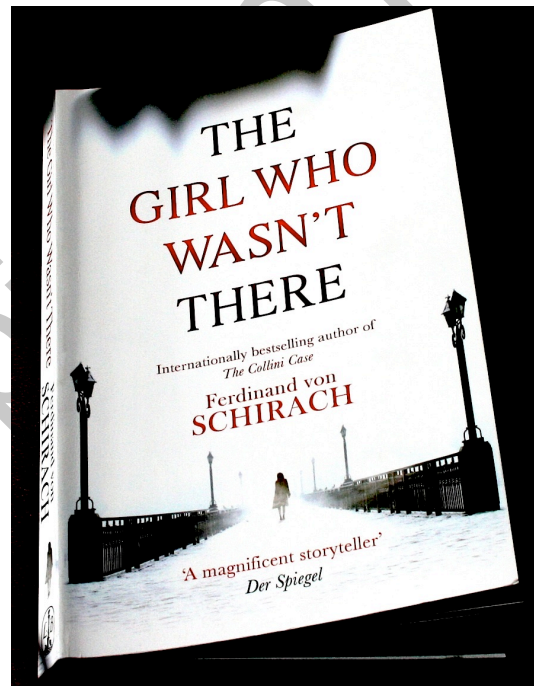
by Jim Napier

All crime fiction is designed to entertain; but some works aim also at enlightening the reader, raising complex issues and challenging our understanding of the world around us. Ferdinand von Schirach's latest work, *The Girl Who Wasn't There*, falls into the latter camp, tracing its roots to the nuanced philosophical traditions of Existentialism, not coincidentally a point of view that has its origins on the European continent, and most directly, within Germany, where the tale is set.

The story begins in Eschburg, near Munich. At one time the Eschburg family had been wealthy enough to own a paperworks and spinning mill; but they lost most of their family fortune during the financial collapse of the 1920s. By the time Sebastian von Eschburg is born the family is itself on the brink of ruin, both economically and psychologically. There is no love in the family, and a minimum of affection.

Unknown to him, Sebastian has a unique way of perceiving the world around him: he perceives the colours of the world around him differently from everyone else. Letters, too, are seen only as colours, and carry distinctive fragrances. But Sebastian assumes everyone sees the world this

way. As he comes to realize that they do not, he withdraws into himself, only marginally relating to others.



In keeping with family tradition, Sebastian is sent to a Swiss boarding school at the age of ten. Later, on a school holiday, he goes hunting with his father and watches him kill and gut a deer. That evening, after returning to their house, Sebastian hears a noise and goes to his father's study. His father had shot himself with the same shotgun; there is nothing left of his head.

After the funeral Sebastian's mother puts the house and its contents up for

sale. All his father's personal possessions are discarded into a rubbish skip. He begins to question what is real, and what will become of him.

Sebastian spends several more years at the boarding school, almost all of it in the library. When a school official takes him to see a famous doctor, who dismisses him as someone suffering from visual hallucinations Sebastian is determined to be more circumspect: he will still converse with Odysseus, Hercules, and Tom Sawyer, but he will keep it to himself.

After obtaining his school leaving certificate Sebastian looks up a fellow alumnus now a well-known photographer. Realizing that it offered a means for him to create other worlds he takes a job with the man, learning the craft. But after four years he moves on. He rents a two-storey factory building, and gradually commissions come in. When one client, a well-known actress, recommends him to others he begins to do well.

Sebastian organizes the first public display of his work. The exhibition is a success, and for the first time in his life, he doesn't have to worry about money. His success prompts him to have another exhibition. Playing with the very notion of what is real he creates an elaborate sequence of images of various models that morph into one another, referencing several famous female images of the past before dissolving into a single line from Nietzsche: *Smooth lies the soul and the sea.*

But then Sebastian's life takes a sudden and precipitous change. A young woman phones the police, saying she is being held in the boot of a car. She gives them the name of her abductor, and his address. When the police arrive they find a torn and bloodstained dress in a dustbin. After securing a search warrant they enter the premises and find a treasure trove of incriminating evidence including sadistic porn films, handcuffs, whips, chains, scalpels, and an electric bone saw. Traces of blood found in the boot of a car rented by the occupant are matched to the dress.

The occupant of the building is Sebastian von Eschburg. After first denying any involvement, he finally confesses to the crime. The body is nowhere to be found. Has the man who spends so much time in private worlds of his creation finally gone over the edge? The ending is in keeping with the work, yet manages to come as a surprise.

The tone and style of *The Girl Who Wasn't There* is extremely spare, reinforcing Sebastian's almost total isolation from the world around him. At times the novel reminds us of a painting by de Chirico, the landscape bleak and barren, the images puzzling. Film buffs will note a resemblance in tone to Alain Resnais' 1961 film *Last Year at Marienbad*, with its enigmatic narrative, calling into question the relation between truth and fiction, reality and illusion.

On one level von Schirach could be considered a surrealist, if not a fabulist, challenging the reader's sense of what is real and what is not. But he moves from the metaphysical to the ethical plane when he addresses themes such as what is guilt? Is it ever acceptable to torture people in an effort to learn the truth? And is it

really possible for people to change? It is this aspect that gives his work its existentialist flavor. Its measured pace and austere style will not appeal to all readers, but the well-drawn atmosphere and character-driven plot will reward those in search of a carefully crafted and thoughtful exploration of a challenging subject.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



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