



by Katja Oskamp  
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Fiction

## The Penultimate Woman

### *Die vorletzte Frau*

#### review

Following the success of her wildly popular *Marzahn, mon amour* (winner of the Dublin Literary Award in translation by Jo Heinrich), Berlin-based author Katja Oskamp returns with a reflective, elegantly written novel about a woman's relationships throughout her twenties, thirties and forties. In concise prose that conveys deep emotions and explores a variety of complex themes, *The Penultimate Woman* is by turns light-hearted and quietly devastating, reminiscent of the autofiction of Rachel Cusk and Annie Ernaux.

The narrator of Oskamp's fifth novel is a writer, whom we first encounter at the age of twenty-three. Her daughter, Paula, is a toddler; her partner is twenty years her senior. She begins an affair with her teacher, a Swiss writer who is also two decades older. When her partner asks her to move for his job, she leaves him, choosing to follow her lover, Tosch, to Berlin.

The anecdotal structure next sees the narrator in her thirties, having made the transition from theatre critic to novelist. When she has surgery, Tosch does not look after her; however, she later cares for him when he is diagnosed with prostate cancer. Her role as a carer gradually consumes her life, until she takes up a new job as a podiatrist and begins to shuttle back and forth between Berlin and Tosch's residence in Switzerland.

Over time, the narrator and Tosch grow apart; he gives her

permission to sleep with other men and begins seeing a younger woman himself. Though content, the narrator wonders how she has ended up as “the penultimate woman” in both her major relationships (her former partner has a new wife, with whom he has a child). She ponders what life may yet have in store for her.

Musing on various seemingly opposed forces – dependency/love, motherhood/career, youth/age, devotion/submission – Oskamp’s novel is a powerful reflection on the big events and minute details that make up one woman’s life. Self-aware and unafraid of physical realities, particularly around sex, illness and ageing, this is a credible and sharply narrated novel that grips the reader through nuance of character rather than plot. Meticulously crafted, moving and relatable, *The Penultimate Woman* displays all of Oskamp’s inimitable skill.

Find out more: <https://www.ullstein.de/urheberinnen/katja-oskamp>

## press quotes



## about the author



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Katja Oskamp was born in Leipzig and grew up in Berlin. After taking a degree in Theatre Studies, she worked as a dramatist at the Volkstheater Rostock and studied at the German Literature Institute in Leipzig. So far, she has published the short story collection ‘Halbschwimmer’ and the novels ‘Die Staubfängerin’ and ‘Hellersdorfer Perle’. In 2019, ‘Marzahn, mon amour’ was published. She and her English translator, Jo Heinrich, won the Dublin Literary Award in 2023 for the English edition.

Previous works: *Die Staubfängerin*, Ammann (2007); *Halbschwimmer*, Berlin Verlag (2005); *Hellersdorfer Perle*, Aufbau Taschenbuch (2029), *Marzahn, mon amour*, Hanser Berlin (2019).

Previous works translated into English:  
Marzahn, mon amour, Peirene Press (2023,  
translated by Jo Heinrich).

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