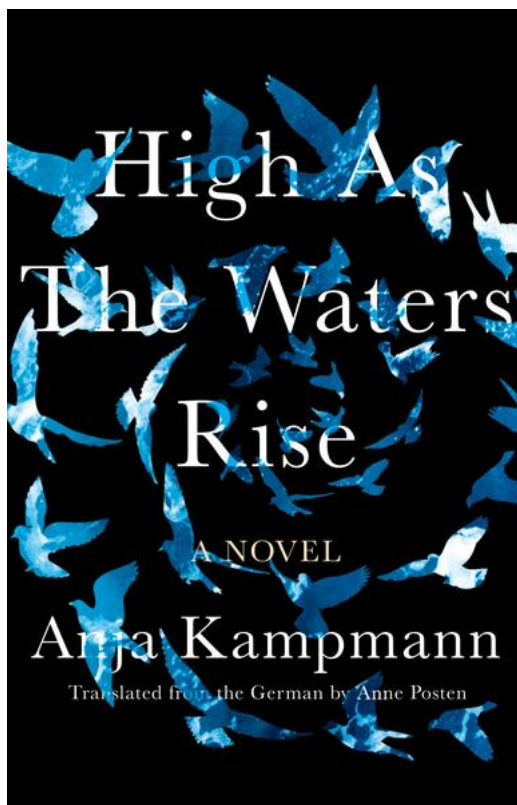


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## Anja Kampmann, *High as the Waters Rise*

Reviewed by [Fiona Bell](#)

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The sea is an abiding motif in queer literature. “I remember that life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea,” recalls the protagonist of *Giovanni’s Room*, James Baldwin’s novel about an affair between an American man and an Italian bartender in Paris. In this shared room, “time flowed past indifferently above us, hours and days had no meaning.” The sea evokes the fear, disorientation, and unmooredness that accompany the experience of queerness in a heterosexist world. At one point, Baldwin’s narrator yearns for heterosexuality as a weary sailor aches for land: “I wanted a woman to be for me a steady ground, like the earth itself, where I could always be renewed.” But to be on the open water is also to be free, to escape social mores and moorings, to be taken up in an eternal flow that feels something like love. Beyond metaphor (or, more likely, preceding it) is the historical prevalence of all-male social spaces in maritime labor. Readers of *Moby-Dick* remember the famously homoerotic scene in which the crew members, vigorously rubbing hands in a barrel of whale spermaceti, discover an unmoored ecstasy.

In her debut novel, *High as the Waters Rise* (Catapult, 2020), translated from the German by Anne Posten, Anja Kampmann renews these metaphoric and material traditions for our times. Waclaw, her protagonist, works on an oil rig off the coast of Morocco with his partner, Mátyás. One day, after a shift, Waclaw notices that Mátyás is missing. He is never found, but he is also never looked for. Everyone assumes that he fell off the rig in a storm. In a conciliatory meeting with Waclaw, the boss says Mátyás’s name “in the middle of sentences that sounded like a list of things that were no longer needed.”

After his employer sends him to shore, Waclaw begins wandering through Europe, revisiting his sacred moments with Mátyás and reflecting on all the lives that aren’t held sacred.

It is unexpected to encounter a modern-day *Moby-Dick* with the same dangerous stakes, but, for workers under global capitalism, the sea remains as treacherous as ever. Capitalism’s disregard for human life is as deadly now as it was on the *Pequod*. Kampmann’s novel is not a love story with a capitalist backdrop, then: it’s a story about capitalism, one that began long before Mátyás’s fall.

Best known as a poet, Kampmann uses her gifts not to make the ugliness of global capitalism palatable, but to resist it, in the tradition of Audre Lorde. Here the sea again rises into view: besides its role as a symbolic and material locus of queerness and as a site of capitalism's ravages, the sea is also a common metaphor for writing. Langston Hughes, himself the author of a memoir called *The Big Sea*, describes Baldwin's prose: "he uses words as the sea uses waves, to flow and beat, advance and retreat, rise and take a bow in disappearing." Ilana Masad lauds Kampmann and Posten for a novel in which "memory moves in and out of the present like the tides."

Hughes and Masad identify an oscillating quality in these works: rushes of information and emotion, followed by restraint. This sort of "watery" writing, in which language and narration mimic the movements of the sea, is a revolt against linearity in all its guises. By abandoning narrative linearity, *High as the Waters Rise* rejects capitalism's linear trajectory, its myth of infinitely increasing efficiency and growth. It also refuses the linearity of heteronormativity, in which the individual experience of love is expected to work overtime as the ideological basis of social reproduction. This modernist, circular narration might not seem like a radical form—it is over a century old and, in that time, has been plied by countless reactionary writers (Faulkner, Bely, Mann, Hemingway, Nabokov, among others). Still, as long as the tenets of linearity have not been rejected, these sorts of novels remain necessary. They propose a way of living that, like the sea, resists limits: in time, space, gender, and love.

And so, as "time flow[s] past indifferently," Waclaw wanders the world. His employer is a centripetal force that can send for him at any moment, but, especially once he loses cell service, Waclaw is moved by the centrifugal, nonproductive force of grief, which hurls him away from the site of Mátyás's death. No matter where he goes, however, he sees other people being treated the way the rig management treated Mátyás. In one striking episode, Waclaw notices a dead porpoise on the coast of Tangier:

The wind was warm. He saw the sand on the skin that had torn over the mouth, blisters had formed, the carcass lay on its side. The sea spit out what it no longer needed [...] He tried to breathe slowly, to suppress the nausea. There was a tug in his jaw, and his stomach cramped as if everything wanted to squeeze itself out of him. A cloying hum mingled with the smell of salt water. He turned away. For a second he saw an afterimage of the body, then he walked a bit farther and leaned against the cliff.

In this porpoise, Waclaw sees his own broken back, the diseased lungs of his coal-miner father, and Mátyás's lost body.

Waclaw soon realizes that the death of Mátyás is "intertwining with another disappearance, for which he'd long lacked words." He speaks of the deprivation of a full life in a world that has little regard for people like him. For Waclaw, work on the oil rig is a literal deprivation of life: "And in the midday heat, a smell emanated from the oilskin, the boots, the helmet: a smell of machines and oil and the mud of the seas, a smell he knew, a smell that had always been with them. What did it smell like. Like all the time they would never have."

Unlike Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, which Garth Greenwell proposed as a contender for the title of "[The Great Gay Novel](#)," *High as the Waters Rise* depicts working class characters. And, unlike *Giovanni's Room* or E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, it is not a romance between a rich man and poor man. This is not a story in which a wealthy man's queerness forces him to look for love at class margins. Nor is it a liberal fantasy of love bridging cultural difference. Instead, *High as the Waters Rise* is about two working class men whose love is made possible by their intimate understanding of the abuse each has endured through labor. The dominant force impinging on Waclaw and Mátyás is capitalism, not heterosexism. In fact, their queerness allows them to withstand the forces of capitalism longer than usual. Since they work together, there is no separation of industrial and domestic realms. Neither is there a separation between present and future, nor a deferral of pleasure to a later time. Waclaw and Mátyás snatch joy back from their employers, even while on the clock:

Some platforms were connected to each other by metal bridges the men called widowmakers. There were old images of burning rigs that they carried around with them forever, *Piper Alpha*, the *Alexander Kielland*, which went down with two hundred men, an indeterminate fear that followed them all those years. Fatigue fractures in the iron braces, flames that couldn't be extinguished. When Mátyás came it seemed less important, their eyes always found each other first.

Unlike the woman waiting for Waclaw on land, Mátyás understands the toll of this work on the person he loves. Their bodies are ravaged in the same ways. Throughout the novel, Waclaw often shifts between his own and Mátyás's subjectivity, as if their identities have coalesced from years of loving one another.

Part of this identification, of course, is their shared background. Waclaw and Mátyás are both white, though their post-Soviet origins "other" them in Europe. When they are stationed beyond Europe, though, their whiteness often precedes their class in the eyes of locals. In a confrontation with a fisherman in Mexico, Mátyás repeats, "*No es nuestra culpa*." The fisherman quietly responds: "Boy, what are you doing out

here?” In this well-drawn scene, Kampmann highlights yet another type of circularity: the violence-ridden routes of labor and commodities that have been developing since the seventeenth century. After all, African enslavement and the seizure of indigenous land is what enabled the development of the white working class in Europe. It’s what enabled Waclaw and Mátyás to exist as they do, however miserably.

These are the spirals and links, connections and currents, that form this whirlpool of a novel. Grief is indistinguishable from love, but love rebuffs the capitalist order that has caused so much grief. Like all good love stories, *High as the Waters Rise* imagines love as a force that precedes and proliferates beyond a central pair of lovers. In embracing one another’s subjectivities within a reifying system, Waclaw and Mátyás model a greater, utopian love for all the beings who suffer under this economic system. The novel’s very title hints at the dual forces of love and capitalism. This phrase evokes claustrophobia, urgency, the threat of sinking. But it also suggests buoyancy, the imperviousness of love to the linear threats of capitalism and death. By living up to its title, this novel fulfills the essentially radical task of poetry.

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