

Translated excerpt

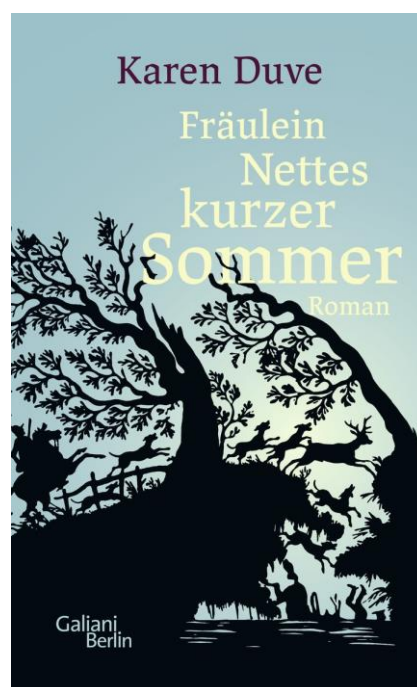
Karen Duve
Fräulein Nettes kurzer Sommer

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Karen Duve
Fräulein Nette's Brief Summer

Translated by Alexandra Roesch



Chapter 1

Born Prematurely

Annette von Droste-Hülshoff was a pain in the neck. Her parents' distress began with her birth. On a piercingly cold January morning in 1797, her pregnant mother, Therese von Droste-Hülshoff, an authority on all issues of propriety who normally shied away from any form of conspicuous behaviour – such bourgeois bearing – had come up with the fanciful notion of skating once round the frozen moat surrounding the Hülshoff family's castle all by herself and had promptly slipped. Red-faced, peering around to see whether anyone might have observed the embarrassing mishap, she picked herself up, brushed the snow from her skirt and, shamefaced, headed back to her chambers. Therese's contractions started shortly afterwards, two months early, and she gave birth to a minute, puny creature with even tinier hands, fingers like sparrow claws and fingernails like barely perceptible little skins. They had been hoping for a son and already had a daughter – Jenny – so what was the point of having another? Clemens-August II. von Droste-Hülshoff, the unfortunate father, was only allowed to keep the inherited castle along with the tea house, park and lease income from the one hundred or so surrounding farms on a total of 750 hectares if he sired a son with a Catholic wife. These were the conditions. Which is why he'd allowed himself only a brief period of mourning after the early death of his first wife and had soon canvassed all the convents in the surrounding area, in order to buckle down to the business of procreation with Therese. And here now was this female scrap. Nobody believed that the child would survive. The mother was too weak to nurse it. By good fortune, a weaver woman in the nearby village of Altenberge, Katherina von Plettendorf, had also just given birth, unjustly to a son, but what could be done. She moved into the castle and saved the little baroness' life. The baby had been two months early, and you didn't exactly get rosy cheeks from the constantly swirling fog around the Westphalian moated castle.

As Annette grew up, her fragile constitution was combined with an impetuous and stubborn nature. She showed little inclination to bother with appropriate pursuits, roaming around the muddy moor landscape, returning with caked boots and hems, and skipped the lessons with the private tutor that she was permitted to take together with her sister, and

with the brothers who, much to everyone's relief, were eventually born. Mathematics, Latin, Greek and French were not obvious school subjects for a young lady – French was just about acceptable, Maths however not at all. Girls' education usually consisted of allowing them to grow up in demure boredom and crippling their intellect with mindless needlework. Even Rousseau had recommended it. Piety and innocence instead of knowledge, gentleness instead of algebra. In addition, they should be forbidden as many things as possible. That way, young ladies wouldn't get any silly notions and would develop the ideal submissiveness and tolerant resignation that they would require throughout their entire lives. But the aristocracy didn't take such a narrow view of it and, as well as Rousseau, Annette's mother also read the works of the progressive educationalist Overberg. She knew Overberg personally, had drunk the occasional pot of coffee with him and, for the late feudal era, maintained a decidedly modern approach to education. The siblings were even permitted to address their parents by their first name. Sometimes Therese von Droste-Hülshoff wondered whether she might thereby have unintentionally sown the seed of nonconformity and impertinence, the insolence and forthrightness in Annette's character. The child did have a few small talents, she played the piano reasonably well and rhymed little things that could be recited on birthdays and other festivities. But did a twelve-year old have to rhyme in hexameter and cast bored and know-it-all glances at the grown-ups who praised her for it? The baroness tried to counteract her daughter's peculiarities with quiet pursuits such as knitting, crocheting or painting. And when a letter from a certain Mr Raßmann arrived one day, asking Annette to submit a contribution to his *Poetic Diary* for 1810, Therese von Droste-Hülshoff immediately decided to make the letter disappear and not tell anyone about it – especially not Annette. Overberg, who was having tea with her when the letter arrived, agreed.

'No, you mustn't allow it. Absolutely not!'

He placed his coffee cup back on the table forcefully, but silently, and tucked his chin into the standing collar of his jet-black frock coat.

'Keep your daughter away from any form of praise, regardless of how splendid her skills are! Not even you yourself are permitted to praise her – otherwise she will become arrogant and lazy.'

'I would just like to know who told this Raßmann fellow about my daughter,' the baroness huffed. 'If guests allow themselves to be blinded by Annette's impertinent

performances – well, alright, nothing can be done about ignorance. But I will not permit anyone to awaken the delusion in my daughter that she is a meaningful poetic talent. She most certainly isn't that.'

'Most certainly not,' Overberg echoed, raising his cup to his mouth once more, already pursing his upper lip.

'Annette must be protected from the disappointments that such a delusion inevitably entails.'

But then Werner von Haxthausen appeared on the scene. Werner was one of Therese von Droste-Hülshoff's step-brothers. Her own mother had died in childbirth aged just eighteen but her father, old Baron von Haxthausen – young Baron von Haxthausen at the time of course – had remarried shortly afterwards and year after year brought children into the world with his robust new wife, fourteen of whom had made it to adulthood. Seven sisters and seven brothers.

Thirty-two-year old Werner was the fourth son and considered the family genius, even if he was a bit fidgety. He had studied law in Münster and Prague, classic and oriental languages in Paris and Göttingen and medicine in Halle. And because he still didn't feel challenged enough, he had also attended philosophy and science lectures on the side. And so, when Werner von Haxthausen showed himself impressed by the talent of his precocious niece, even going so far as to call her a second Sappho – 'but indeed, we must nurture it, there is no precedent, not among the great poets, at this early age ...' Therese finally conceded that there might actually be some merit in the poetic talent of her younger daughter. Even though she still refrained from praising her, she did allow Uncle Werner to arrange some literary tuition with a nice elderly gentleman in Münster. With its splendid buildings, Münster was not only considered the most beautiful city in the underdeveloped and unimportant province of Westphalia, it was also a place where good manners were still cultivated. People bowed when they encountered the baronial family von Droste zu Hülshoff and maintained this stooped position for quite some time. The Dröste-Hülshoffs could send the child there without compunction, especially as they had a town house in Münster as well. Conveniently, the nice old gentleman lived directly opposite. His name was Anton Matthias Sprickmann, he was a friend of Goethe's and the lyrical Hainbund group, and he

had once been predicted a great future as a poet. However, not in Münster. He'd been laughed at in Münster. Sprickmann had briefly considered emigrating to Tahiti but come to his senses just in time and turned his back on Sturm und Drang and various poet friends and had become a renowned professor of legal history. He could certainly be entrusted with the child.

Sprickmann received Annette in his study, whose walls were papered with books from floor to ceiling. At least three of the four walls were entirely filled with knowledge, the fourth only to three quarters. On the last section of plaster hung a copperplate etching in a simple black frame, depicting a beach full of palms and half-naked natives. The natives were pushing a boat into the sea. Annette paused in front of it and Sprickmann immediately stood next to her.

'Otaheite,' he said. They had already greeted one another. 'Wonderful people there in Otaheite, full of childish innocence, grace and kindness. Their way of life is not as spoiled and over-refined as the European one.' He sighed deeply. 'Well, yes, it was not meant to be.'

Annette already knew that as a young man, Sprickmann had intended to found a colony in Tahiti with several like-minded poets. And he knew that she knew. Half the town probably knew the story. Which was why he carried on without further explanations.

'If we'd gone ahead with our travels, my poet friends and I, the natives would have appointed us to be their apostles and lawmakers, and we could have educated them in the most satisfying way.'

'What would you have lived off – in Otaheite?' Annette asked.

'Well, I am sure that these generous children of nature would have conceded us the splendid use of their sumptuous goods.'

'Why should they have done so?'

'Why not?' Sprickmann replied somewhat irritated by this precocious girl, this child who dared to question his tropical dream.

'German poets, who came to them with love and benefaction... we would have built them the best nation under the sun. And in any case, the fruits almost grow into your mouth there. These dear people love to share. They share everything.'

His eyes misted over, and he indulged in a brief fantasy in which he bathed with graceful native figures and established a second Brahmin lineage on the paradise island.

‘Is that a woman?’ Annette asked and leaned forward.

She often had trouble seeing things properly, only when she bent over something, so close that she almost touched it with the tip of her nose, could she suddenly see clearly again.

Sprickmann blushed. Why had he allowed himself to be convinced to tutor this recalcitrant aristocratic child?

‘No,’ he said gruffly, took two big strides over to the opposite wall, quite randomly pulled books from the shelves and stacked half a fathom of Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe and Byron on the desk.

‘Right! Read these! Return and bring your own!’

Annette looked at him, perplexed. Sprickmann circled his hand across the back of the brown book cover with gold letters, plunged down on one like a hawk and handed her a volume of Byron.

‘Read first, otherwise there is no point us talking. Goodbye.’

He knew that he was being rude. But if his new student felt affronted by his brusque behaviour, she didn’t let on. In any case, he didn’t care. If she was going to cancel the tuition – well, all the better. He had more important things to do with his time than to struggle with insolent daughters of the aristocracy.

But Annette didn’t cancel the tuition. She read. And she returned. And she brought her own.

Sprickmann read, smiled benevolently and criticised gently. Not bad at all. Maybe the whole thing wasn’t a waste of time after all. He set the next book.

Annette countered with the tragedy *Bertha oder Die Alpen*.

Sprickmann read, frowned and criticised less gently.

Annette idolised him.

From then on, she came to Münster almost every week. When no one took her in their carriage, she walked, sometimes for two hours, even three hours in bad weather, through the mud and slush across the heaths, moors and fields. Her boots suffered considerably. Her clothes constantly needed washing. And Sprickmann criticised ever more sharply and praised ever more often.

Restless Uncle Werner, however, could no longer monitor his niece's progress, as he had moved on to pastures new. This time he'd taken part in a conspiracy – against none other than the King of Westphalia, Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother. The matter was exposed, and Werner had to flee to London, where he found a job as an assistant doctor in a hospital and prepared to emigrate to Asia. As a ships doctor with the East India Company. From then on, the name of the patriotic brother, brother-in-law and uncle was only whispered in awe in the Hülshoff household.

He was replaced by August von Haxthausen who now came to visit, and who Annette and her siblings found far funnier and more interesting anyway. He was the youngest of her uncles, only five years older than Annette herself and had already frolicked around with the Hülshoff offspring as a child, had ridden out with them and climbed trees. He had enormous hands, was always loud and jolly, always hungry and inclined to corpulence. He studied mining engineering in Clausthal-Zellerfeld, the studies of the future. Once the steam engine had gained acceptance everywhere, tons of coal and iron ore would be needed, as would people who ensured that it could be extracted. In recent times, even sons of aristocratic families were forced to prove themselves in bourgeoisie jobs – especially when you were the youngest of seven brothers.

When August came to Hülshoff during vacation, he brought minerals and fossils with him, whereupon Annette immediately also conferred her enthusiasm for her favourite uncle onto mineralogy. It was like a miracle when he broke open a stone, and a hollow suddenly appeared inside, containing the colourful prongs of another mineral. Or when he split open a flint, which contained the imprint of a shell or a plant that had once stood here, bending in the wind. Of course, usually there was nothing inside, but when there was, it was like a miracle. August told her about long-forgotten geological eras, about the formation of marl, strontianite, green sandstone and slate. Eventually he gave her her own small hammer so that she herself could tap. Annette searched with the eagerness of one possessed, wanting at all costs to find something special to present to her remarkable uncle. Wanting to prove herself worthy of his attention. And when he praised her for the discovery of an interesting quartz, she grinned like a Cheshire cat and tapped away even more wildly at the rocks.

Sprickmann was surprised that his student had started to cancel classes. And the last time she'd even brought along her uncle, who had actually used the opportunity to wheedle him out of a collection of old poems and historic songs.

'It is the duty of the aristocracy to collect the traditional body of song,' August had convinced him. 'My brothers Carl and Fritz started years ago. I recently took over the collection. If you don't want these songs to be forgotten, then you must entrust them to me. You'll get them back once I've made copies.'

Sprickmann never saw the songs again. It was no longer the time to concern oneself with the return of loaned items. Greater tasks were lying ahead. Napoleon had experienced a catastrophic defeat in Russia. He just needed to be given the finishing blow and August wanted to help do so, signing up to the Hussars in Bremen-Verden. A lot of students were volunteering for action now. The hatred towards the French occupying forces was strong. The way they had conducted themselves. And now the hundreds of thousands of dead that had been the price to pay for the campaign in Russia. Only 800 of the 27 000 men from Westphalia who had been forced into this war by the French had returned. August's brother Fritzwilm had also fallen, in the campaign in Spain. The news of his death had hit his mother so badly that she had to be carried to bed.

Now away with everything French. There were no longer any differences between the values of the Enlightenment and those of French Absolutism. It had all become one, it was all simply oppression forced upon the German people by this ghastly little Corsican. Werner now also gave up his plans to emigrate with the East India Company and returned from London to stand by the fatherland or rather the numerous fatherlands. Napoleon was defeated within two years and the French occupation finally ousted. Family visits could resume.

Meanwhile Annette had grown up. The young baroness's face had formed into a pale, narrow oval, with a small, prettily curved mouth, a long, delicate, if somewhat crooked nose and large, watery and alas, you had to admit, somewhat protruding eyes, as short-sighted as those of a mole. She could not make out the features of the person facing her from more than two paces and therefore in conversation she pushed her head forward, which was construed by some as intrusiveness. In fact, her entire posture left a lot to be desired. The

prettiest thing about her was definitely her hair, an incredible abundance of long blonde hair that could only be tamed by various knots and plaits, complemented by corkscrew curls behind the ears or little curls on either side of the forehead.

She had almost mastered *Don Juan* on the piano, but often worked herself up into a frenzy. Then she threw her head back exaltedly, her coiffure coming adrift, Nette grew out of breath and panted uncontrollably between the movements, her cheeks blazed, in short, she provided a sight that shocked her sympathetic audience. For a woman at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the risk of upsetting a recognised societal norm was generally already extremely high. It sufficed to talk loudly. Or too much. Or with too low a pitch. Whereby the normal female pitch was in fact considered too low. Noble maidens and aspiring female citizens chirped like freshly hatched little birds. Not Fräulein Nette. Unsolicited, her droning alto would interrupt a circle of gentlemen who believed themselves undisturbed, offending the men's sensitive ears and unsettling their fragile confidence. Perhaps her contact with Sprickmann had possibly encouraged her to believe that other men might also value her opinion. She had been given altogether too much attention. Become conceited by too much praise, too much encouragement – now it was clear what this had led to. August and Werner von Haxthausen had gradually had enough of their pushy niece.

Annette didn't understand. She so wanted the recognition from the uncles she so admired, and therefore she simply got involved, volunteering her tuppence worth on art, culture, the war and the possibility of the country now growing together to form a state based on shared ideals, although no one had asked her for it nor wanted to hear it. The more she tried to gain her uncles' attention, the angrier they grew.

At least Annette was small and delicate, almost spectrally translucent. When her eyes were closed, you could make out the dark outline of her short-sighted eyeballs beneath her eyelids. Also, she was always sick: frailty and coughing, pressure on her heart, prone to fainting, headaches, stomach aches, heat and redness in one cheek, usually her right, high anxiety, an inner trembling and bursts of fever. At least in this way she corresponded with the ideals of the time that yearned for the spiritualisation of the body and were repulsed by all too robust health in women. Novels at the time were teeming with delicate, gushy little personages who were doomed to die. Worrying paleness was an asset.

However, Annette's bad health did not stop her continuing to steal out of the house before dawn, only returning hours later. Her apron would be dirty and filled with either

stones or fossils or with twisted and half-squashed plants, depending on whether she had just been devoting herself more towards mineralogy or botany. It wouldn't be easy finding a husband for her, but the good family name would save the day.