

Translated excerpt

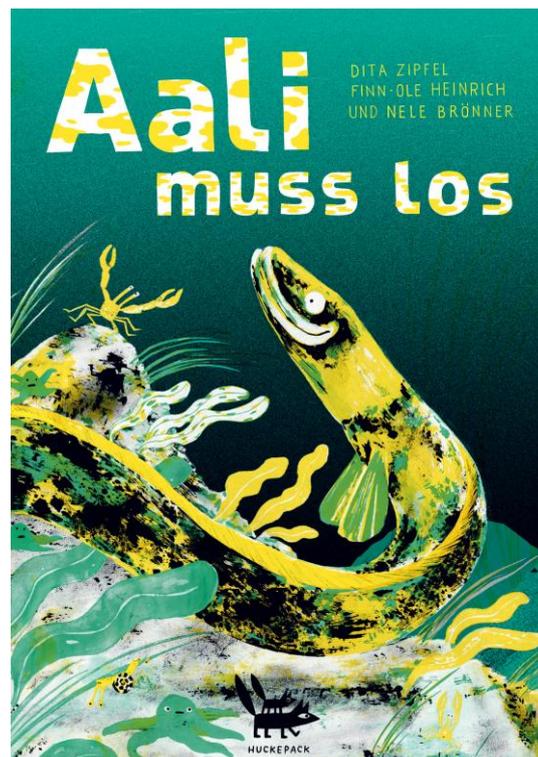
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Aali muss los

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Eely has to go

Translated by John Reddick



Eely must get going

Think of the North Sea for a moment. Its jagged coastline makes it look as if a great bite has been taken out of the continent of Europe and more particularly out of this bit of land right here: North Germany - a lowland plain formed by gigantic glaciers that receded 12,000 years ago and left behind the vast, gentle downland of Schleswig-Holstein with its network of ditches and watercourses. And here, in the ancient moraine landscape between Stapelholm and Dithmarschen, the landscape is divided in two by a canal: the Kiel Canal.

Right here of all places, in this unprepossessing spot, on a drizzly morning in early autumn, one of the planet's most incredible stories has its beginning. The water is cold and turbid. A couple of fish are doing their morning rounds in the shallow waters amongst the reeds and rushes. Eely, a European eel, has lived in the canal here for almost twenty years - a slender, yellowish-brown freshwater eel that enjoys slithering through muddy puddles and feasting on delicious, crunchy ramshorn snails. Then there's his faithful friend, Frank, a bream that for years has unfailingly accompanied him on his early-morning rounds. Neither of them could say exactly when they had decided to go through life together, but that doesn't matter anyway; fish always live in the present moment, and thus far that has always meant being lifelong friends. But today the present moment somehow feels a bit different. And the first sign of this is when Frank takes a close look at his pal and says "Hey, Eely, your eyes have a strange look to them. Is everything okay?" I swear that if Frank had had a magnifying glass he would have made use of it right there and then. It's true - Eely's eyes were bigger than usual. Much bigger. And different somehow. "You look a bit like a pop-eyed goldfish, old chap", said Frank. "How about some nice tasty breakfast? I spotted a whole bunch of water lice back there amongst the reeds yesterday. Really big, juicy ones!" Eely almost choked. He had always been the quieter of the two, and accordingly he stayed silent at this point - but: 'breakfast'? The very idea more or less made him puke. What with the canal and Frank's arrant cheerfulness, it was all making Eely feel bottled up, closed in. He felt a heaving sensation in his chest, a sort of trembling that went coursing through his entire body. As if he didn't have enough water around him, even though he

was busily swimming in the middle of the canal. He had to..., he absolutely had to... Well, what then? “Let’s get swimming”, mumbled Eely. “Just get swimming.” At this particular moment neither Frank nor Eely realised the truth, namely that Eely was in the grip of a radical metamorphosis from ‘glass eel’ to ‘silver eel’. ‘Metamorphosis’ – really? So is it like in some ancient fairy-tale where a magician waves his wand and, hey presto, Cinderella turns into a princess? Well, not quite. But it’s a real metamorphosis all the same, and all the more impressive for that:

THE FOUR LIVES OF AN EEL

Being an eel means having four distinct lives! This entails undergoing three total metamorphoses whereby not only the creature’s outward appearance changes, but also its entire physical nature. Eels begin life as transparent, flat, leaf-shaped larvae known as ‘LEPTOCEPHALI’, 6-8 millimetres in length. Over a period of between one and three years they float across the Atlantic Ocean, feeding off plankton and growing in size to 6-7cm, and they then turn into GLASS EELS – still transparent, but now eel-shaped and with visible inner organs. Now approximately 7 centimetres in length, they reach the coast of Europe and begin their river-borne life. Now termed YELLOW EELS, they live for between 5 and 30 years in rivers and lakes. Turning a brownish yellow, they grow to a full metre in length, and are permanently hungry. In their final metamorphosis they turn into SILVER EELS, as we shall now see...

And: WOW! – Eely is gone in a flash! With an alacrity that leaves Frank completely dumbfounded. “I’ll see you back by the water lice, bro!”, Frank calls after him, by now feeling really stressed out. “What a thing, and so early in the morning!”, thinks Frank. But Eely can’t really hear him any longer.

Okay then: while Frankie swims off in slow pursuit of his old pal, I need to make it clear that I myself am *not* an eel, nor indeed any sort of fish. I’m guessing that that has probably already occurred to you - am I right? I’m actually a human being, a woman who tells stories. And as a story-teller I seek out the best, loveliest, biggest, funniest,

saddest stories in the world in order to recount them to readers like you. And this is one such - a story with every single element that a really good story needs: a likeable hero, life-threatening predicaments; love, pain, tension and mystery. Although it is an ancient story, it is also happening right now. To my mind it is the mother of all stories. And I'm going to recount it to *you*. So when I say 'Eely thinks this or that', or 'Frank says this or that', then of course I'm making it all up and pretending that I know an eel's thought-processes. Is that a bit brazen of me? Well, indeed it is; but that's what story-telling is all about. And I can promise you: this story is well worth it. And the craziest thing about it is that by and large it's all true.

So let's get back to Eely, our special eel...

When Frank and Eely met up by the juicy fat water lice, Frank steadily gobbled them down one after another, wondering to himself why his pal wasn't doing the same. And this brings us to the next turning point. This is how things stood: Eely just wasn't hungry any more. It wasn't like it is with you when you've overdone it on pizza. It wasn't that Eely was full up: he simply didn't feel hunger at all any more; he had cast off hunger rather as a snake casts off its skin. This was all part of his metamorphosis: no more hunger; ever again. Just try to imagine it - but you won't succeed. For us human beings, hunger is like waves on the sea, which disappear in times of calm but ultimately always return. That's not how it was for Eely. He was done with feeding, once and for all. And this was truly the case: from that day on he would never eat again.

EELY'S LAST SUPPER.

Throughout his many years as a Yellow Eel, Eely had wolfed down everything he could grab hold of. His reserves of fat had steadily grown from 10% of his total body weight to 30%. Now that he had stored up sufficient reserves of energy his metamorphosis into the silver eel stage could begin. A key element in this final metamorphosis in the life of an eel is the total regression of its digestive tract. Its stomach and intestines shrink to one tenth of their previous size. These organs, essential for many years for feeding and digestion, have become superfluous, as he fasting finds his lot from this point

on. His reserves of fat are the only fuel available to him throughout the remainder of his life and throughout the journey of many months that he is now about to embark on. While some things get smaller, other things get larger; his eyes get bigger, for example; his fins grow stronger; and his sexual organs begin to develop. Hello, just a moment! What's this you're saying? Yes, it really is the case that eels spend the greater part of their life as neither female nor male! Their sexual development only starts in this final phase of their life, and is influenced by environmental factors. In regions inhabited by large eel colonies, more males occur, while other regions produce greater numbers of females. These extreme changes in eels' bodies are amongst the most radical in the entire animal kingdom.

It wasn't Eely's personal decision to stop feeding. It's just the way things are. Just as you yourself never took a decision to start breathing; it simply happened. "What's up with you?", Frank asks him; "Why so serious all of a sudden?" And Eely does indeed feel himself to be totally at sixes and sevens: he feels good and terrible all at the same time. "Eely, my dear old friend, are you ill?"

Frank had once saved Eely's life back in the day, as friends so readily do. On this occasion, Eely had been obsessively, hypnotically homing in on a maggot, an irresistibly delicious, rubbery looking morsel that had been dangling around so alluringly in the turbid water looking for all the world as if it just couldn't wait to be incorporated into Eely's subcutaneous fat. Getting fat had been Eely's sole aim at that juncture; he needed to make himself rotund, healthy and extremely well upholstered. Frankie hadn't wanted to fat-shame him, but it was plain for all to see: a thick layer of fat had been building up beneath Eely's glistening skin. And the maggot that on this particular day had been dangling in the canal right in front of our two friends was so round and plump that Eely's brain had completely switched off. For one thing, he hadn't noticed that it made no sense for a maggot to be floating around in the canal, nor that this particular maggot looked somehow jaded and wan. Eely wasn't stupid by any means, but at this moment he was - what shall we say? - so dozy, so addled and out of it, so much under the sway of his stomach rather than his brain, that he completely failed to register the needle-sharp, silvery-gleaming fish-hook on which the maggot was speared.

And if it hadn't been for his old pal Frank, who came cannonading into his mouth at the very last millisecond, then... Well: that would probably have been the end of Eely. He would have been yanked out of the canal, and that would have been the end of him. He would have struggled for a short while in the hands of some jerk from the angling club at Stipsdorf near Bad Segeberg, then copped a couple of hopefully well-aimed blows to his head, and finally - but let's not go there... Good old Frankie was there at the crucial moment, thank heavens. So Eely is fond of his friend, really fond. But today he was animated by something else, by this new sensation. It was strange: it gripped him both inwardly and outwardly. Eely suddenly realised that he had been coming under its spell for several days now. At first it had been like a distant dream - a gentle and constant compulsion in his innermost being. Like a kind of whispering in the water. As if someone had attached a silken thread to his heart and started very gently pulling on it; if truth be told: in a more or less south-westerly direction. It was a sensation at once so new, yet also so familiar as if it had always been lurking within him.

This tugging at his heart-strings had become stronger each day. It had changed from being a vague awareness to being an absolute imperative, from a whisper to a cacophonous command. We human beings have no clear idea ourselves where feelings come from, and nor did Eely. But the feeling was so strong that it amounted to an order: he absolutely had to obey the call. Right now, this very minute. "I don't know what's going on, Frank. I've got such a weird sense of compulsion in my chest. It was very low-key to begin with; I thought it would just go away on its own." "You mean like when we swim too close to the lock gates?" "Yes", said Eely, "sort of; but I feel it everywhere and all the time, even when I'm nowhere near the lock gates." Frank nodded, but looked as if he didn't really have a clue what Eely was on about. "And does this feeling ever go away?" Very occasionally it did, but not often; there are some questions to which there are no correct answers. Eely doesn't want to let on what he knows to be true: that he has to follow this urge; that there's no alternative. It's a fleeting moment, but with massive repercussions: two old friends part, just like that. Ouch. And that's the end of it.

So that's how it all began - with a random conversation one morning; a sudden metamorphosis; an irresistible urge; and then this tricky parting. Even though you are not yet closely acquainted with Eely, you are probably already well aware that Eely has a big heart. And big hearts can harbour a lot of pain. It hurts to leave a friend, even when both parties promise to exchange postcards, to think of each other, and to never forget one another.

Anyway, Eely swam off. And that itself was astonishing, for fish are like humans in the sense that they tend to stay wherever they feel comfortable; as almost all animals do. Why go swimming off into the remote distance and such like? Most creatures stay put wherever they feel comfortable. But not eels.

Okay, so just imagine it for a moment: the lights are at green, so off we go - If only that were possible for us humans as well! If only *we* could re-jig the various bits of our anatomy to suit whatever the prevailing circumstances call for. Make ourselves look like Olympic swimmers? Develop elongated arms and legs? Acquire webbed fingers and torpedo-shaped heads? And what about bakers' wives with their stomachs as big as footballs enabling them to try out any amount of their tasty wares? And as for writers such as me: we'd grow spectacles on our noses, chairs on our backsides, and a few extra fingers to help us with typing. That's the kind of thing I imagine happening if only we were a bit more like eels. Anyway, Eely swims all the way along the canal and finds himself in the estuary of a river. A lock separates the placid canal from the tumultuous river. Tormented with endless questions and still ignorant of what lies ahead, Eely pauses, struggling as though straining at the leash, and with his heart racked with pain. When the massive lock gates open to let a ship pass through, he seizes his chance and slips out through the narrowing gap, just managing to evade the lethal jaws of the gates as they slam shut. The water in the River Eider is wilder in both its taste and its flow-rate - more primeval somehow - and this really appeals to Eely. And at that very moment, just as he was swimming off full of curiosity into this new world, something huge and dark came looming up in front of him out of the deep. He could easily have been stricken with terror, and perhaps he should have been - but since we tend to go a bit doolally when we have no one but ourselves to answer our questions, Eely felt

relieved once he realised that this monstrous apparition was nothing but a fish, a gigantic fish with a huge mouth. It was an ancient catfish. As an opening gambit, Eely just said “Hi!”. Catfish have a grumbling, rumbling, roaring, thundering sort of voice that comes from somewhere deep down inside them. And it made itself heard at this point. Ringing out, it made the very water tremble. “I’m the king of this river!”, came the catfish’s stentorian reply. “Oh, that’s wonderful, how splendid that...”. “Kiiiiing!” “Your servant, Majesty, of course.” “I’m a catfish. I’m as strong as an ox, and older than you can possibly imagine.” Eely wished he had something to hold on to, the whole River Eider was suddenly in turmoil and the entire mass of water was rushing towards the catfish’s mouth as the venerable old king opened it to speak. And it’s only because Eely was on the very edge of despair that he himself ventured to speak: “A question, if I may, King Catfish...” For he needed someone to help him and to reveal his own feelings to him, and as there was no one else around except this terrifying, mountainous fish, he dared to seize his opportunity and make his own tiny voice heard. “Well”, said Eely, “you look as if you know what’s what around here.” And at this point the look in the catfish’s eye suddenly changed: he appeared to calm down. “That’s quite right!”, he thundered, nodding his head, and the eddies that this nodding generated made Eely feel as if his skin was being gently stroked. Eely told him about the compulsion he was under, about his feeling that he was being summoned somewhere, but without any sense of where he was supposed to be going; about feeling forced to leave home, but without having any idea why. “It was as if there were some kind of invisible presence”, he explained, “a sort of whisper from somewhere far away murmuring my name.” Had the catfish ever experienced anything like that? he wondered. “Everything!”, the catfish snorted. “I’ve heard absolutely everything at some point in the past. There’s not a single sensation that I’ve never experienced. And I know exactly what sort of creature you are – you are one of life’s seekers.” Eely felt such a huge sense of relief. What a mercy that he was now about to find out what was up with him. “And *this*”, thundered the catfish, “is what you’re searching for!” And he opened his mouth with such energy that the force of it went coursing through the river like an earthquake. It was as if someone had pulled a plug out ready for everything to drain away through a wastepipe deep within the catfish, and as if the entire outfall from

the canal was rushing into its bowels. The water went rushing and tumbling into the catfish, and Eely was dragged in with it. Do you know that sensation when you're in the sea and suddenly you lose your footing because a wave has taken your legs from under you? That sort of thing anyway? The maelstrom pulled Eely in and dragged him down into the depths, into the murk of the catfish's gullet, the black abyss of perdition. And there was no Frank on hand to save him, just Eely frantically thrashing around. Perhaps Eely's fins had grown bigger and stronger in readiness for precisely this moment. Without them he would perhaps have had no means of prevailing against the strength of this huge king-creature? But as it was, Eely swam with all his might against the force pulling him down, he fought and battled and did his utmost - and managed to escape just in time. Life isn't easy, we might say; it's a struggle in which dog eats dog. There was nothing bad about the catfish: he was just hungry. A creature like Eely absolutely isn't my thing, I would never dream of eating one; but from a catfish's point of view, Eely would count as a tasty morsel.

Eely's heart was beating like mad, I'm guessing that fish show the same response as we humans do. Blind with panic, Eely hurtled through the murky water of the Eider, away from the catfish's cavernous mouth, until - bump! - his head collided with the embankment of the river. And then something happened that I myself can scarcely believe: Eely came flying out of the water and flopped onto the land, right in the middle of a patch of rain-sodden grass.