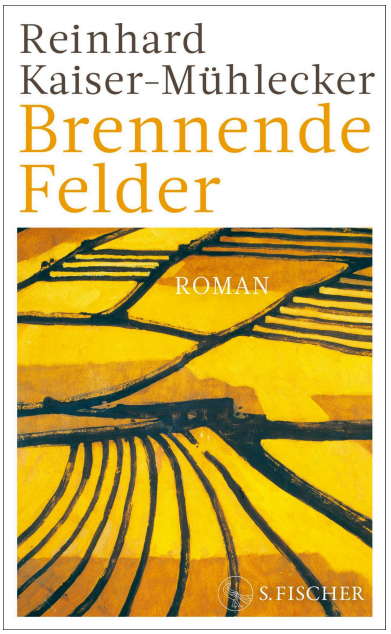
Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker

Burning Fields

August 2024 . 368 pages



Darkness lurks behind the rural idyll

At 18 Luisa Fischer learns that her father Bob is not her biological father and realises that the affection she feels for him goes beyond a daughter's love. She leaves her home and her family and after restless years in various cities, settles in Hamburg. Many years and two children later, Luisa's stepfather suddenly appears on her doorstep; he has decided against the family and in favour of a life with her. Luisa returns with him to Austria, where he single-handedly wants to bring about compensatory justice: Bob robs farming families that were involved in National Socialism in order to donate the looted profit to Israel. But he is killed during one of these robberies. Luisa then starts a relationship with Ferdinand, an old childhood acquaintance, who lives alone with his son Anton. Luisa and Ferdinand want to build a new life together, however, doubts about each other's sincerity arise time and time again, they stalk each other and tension becomes unbearable.
Can the shadows and burdens of the past be shed? And is it possible to reinvent oneself in every new phase of life? Who are we when we renounce our past? Luisa's answer to all these questions leads to her decision to become a writer, and she begins to tell her own story.

"*One of the greatest living German-language authors*." Christoph Schröder, Hessischer Rundfunk

"*Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker transforms the world he lives in into quiet and at the same time magnificent literature.*" Rainer Moritz, Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Reinhard Kaiser-Mühlecker was born 1982 in the Krems Valley, Austria. He studied in Vienna and runs the family farm. Kaiser-Mühlecker has won numerous awards for his literary work.
Siegfried Lenz said of Kaiser-Mühlecker's work, "wonderful the way you write" and Peter Handke sees him "in a row with Stifter and Hamsun"

Sample Translation: Alexandra Roesch

1

The sky looked as though there had just been a gentle rainstorm; it stretched high and wide in a uniformly fresh, bright blue. The mountains stood sharply outlined in a sweeping arc along the horizon, while in the densely wooded foothills, you could make out the tips of individual dry firs. Only in the east did a band of clouds traverse the blue expanse, its edges frilled like the delicate interior of a seashell, so that you wanted to touch its mysterious softness and explore how it felt Even through her sunglasses, the band of clouds seemed to have an intense shade between orange and pink, a hue the sky typically took on during the evening hours of these unusually warm autumn days, though typically in the west rather than the east.

Every few minutes, a deep red lorry could be seen amidst the flow of other vehicles – cars, motorbikes, mopeds and tractors pulling trailers. It was only these lorries that captured her attention; they were the sole reason she shifted her gaze from the celestial panorama above, watching them thunder northwards towards the planes, laden with clay and rust-coloured earth only to return empty and disappear from her sight as they navigated the roundabout further ahead. She didn't know why she focused on them and only vaguely registered that she was even doing it.

Gradually the light began to wane, as if receding into the very essence of things or the heavens above or the earth below, or everywhere all at once. The ringing of the church bells roused her from the wordless reverie in which she had been lost for the past hour – or was it two? She often forgot the time, even the year. She glanced at her watch and then at her arm: her summer tan had not yet completely faded. Even though the sun was quite weak now, the hours she spent outdoors had renewed it a little. She got up and left the terrace or whatever it was called: actually just the tarred flat roof of the garage attached to the house, accessible via a balcony door where two

new-looking deck chairs had been set up. Before crossing the threshold, she paused, leaning against the unplastered, partly-crumbling brick wall, and wiped the soles of her feet, dislodging tiny pebbles that had stuck to them. Then she walked down the landing and went down the long, open-plan staircase where not a single step creaked.

She almost jumped when she saw him lying on the sofa in his suit, black shirt and gleaming polished shoes, his hand folded on his stomach, as if he were the person who was to be mourned. But when she got closer, she saw that his eyes were open and his gaze was wandering slowly back and forth across the village that spread out beneath them beyond the wall of glass.

'Ready?' he asked, without breaking his gaze, which was neither searching nor impatient.

'Yes,' she said, 'I'll be right back,' turned around and went back up the stairs to the top floor. She removed a dark blue checked dress from the cupboard, went into the bedroom and slipped it over her bikini. Then she went into the bathroom and applied some blusher, just a little on her cheekbones, then a little more; she heard the front door open and close again. She put down the brush and the compact, slipped into shoes with a low heel, took her handbag and left the house.

He was already in the car, and the engine was running. She got into the silver Audi that had belonged to her grandfather and pulled the door shut.

'We're late,' he said and set off.

'Yes,' she said; she could smell the scent of cologne.

It had grown dark, and the streetlamps cast their yellow light onto the tarmac, interrupted here and there by swarms of mosquitoes. They parked, got out and hurried over towards the church through the damp evening air, entering through the rear entrance with him leading the way.

They were late: the service had already begun. They sat down in the last row, and although one or two members of the congregation turned their heads almost imperceptibly, it was as if no one had noticed their arrival.

The verger, stumbling over the words every so often as if he couldn't make them out, read from a piece of paper in a monotone voice. He recounted the things that the deceased's family had told him or the vicar. Strangely, in this

speech about a life fully lived, there was more mention of building sites and machines, of things connected to the farm that the deceased had owned, than of the people in his life: his parents, his wife, the five children, who were briefly mentioned. Images of these things were projected onto a screen, obscuring the view of the chapel: the new cattle barn with its three hundred stalls, which later became the breeding barn, 'for self-sufficiency', the Steyr tractor from 1974 with its then-innovative gearbox, the baler imported from the GDR, and the timber trailer that the canny deceased had acquired from the bankruptcy of a local dealer for 'next to nothing'.

She banished the involuntary thoughts about what would be said at her own funeral on some distant day, and which images would be shown if anyone had the bad taste to present such visuals, and thought instead about how little she could recollect about the man who had been her neighbour for many years. She couldn't even remember what he looked like, and the picture that had been put up at the altar did not help her remember, perhaps because it was too far away to see properly; all she could recognise was his bald head, glasses and bright yellow tie. But perhaps it was not only because it was too far away; for although she had reluctantly looked at the projected images, when she had heard of his death a few days earlier she hadn't thought of a face or a voice, only of these tangible objects.

After the reading concluded, the verger folded the fluttering piece of paper, cleared his throat and began reciting the rosary. As soon as he made the sign of the cross, the gathered crowd joined in – around forty or fifty people, almost all with white or grey hair, except for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren seated in the front rows. None of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren wore suits or dresses; instead, they were all in jeans and anoraks. Suddenly, the previously echoing room was filled with a deep rumble that permeated every corner. Reluctantly, they too joined in, and the ebbing and flowing prayers made them sleepy. It felt as though two big evenly approaching waves that she hadn't felt in a long time were rolling through her, like the breath of a different, greater being that was breathing on your behalf, to which she could succumb. It was as if she were being carried back to her childhood, feeling safe there amidst the unity of time and place.

Hadn't it actually been like that, at least right at the beginning of her life? Perhaps; probably; but she could barely remember. All she knew was that her childhood had been interminable and that she had felt ensnared in a world of constant change for everyone else, while everything remained static for her, nothing altering, nothing substantial, not even when things should have been changing. She had stayed a child for so long that she had been teased at school, and then, abruptly on her fifteenth birthday, it was over. Her real memories only seemed to date from then on, as if the end were a beginning, as if the fog had lifted.

The rosary concluded. The screen reverted to white. It was warm in the church; she felt warm. It was like waking up under a thick duvet into which song rang out:

'Lord, I belong to you, / my life belongs to you./ For my salvation and your glory / you have entrusted it to me./ Fatherly, you guide me / along life's paths / towards my destination.'

After the song ended, the verger, who had sat down, returned to the lectern, expressed gratitude on behalf of the bereaved family for people's attendance at the devotions, which were now concluded, and unfolded another piece of paper. The deceased would be escorted to his final resting place at such and such a time, after which personally invited guests and the following would be invited for refreshments. Then he read out a series of names, or rather roles, bade farewell, folded up the piece of paper, and disappeared through the side door to the sacristy with his head bowed.

'Let's go,' he whispered down to her, as he was already standing.

'Yes, of course,' she replied, louder than she had intended, also rising from her seat.

Did he think she wanted to stay? Was that why he was almost pushing her out of the pew? She hadn't attended Mass frequently enough as a child for the rituals of standing, sitting and kneeling to be ingrained, as they apparently were for everyone else. But she knew to genuflect and make the sign of the cross before sitting down in the pew and after leaving it, even if she had merely gestured the genuflection hastily when they arrived. So she did it again now, while in the other rows, the first members of the

congregation were leaving their seats. She briefly bent her knee and glanced ahead, and there, directly facing her genuflection, she saw that someone else seemed to be in even more of a hurry, adjusting his pace on account of her and even stopping. She didn't know him, or didn't recognise him, as she didn't recognise many of those present, but she was embarrassed that her genuflection, this gesture of humility, appeared to be directed at this stranger, the same age as her. It was disconcerting that he noticed it so keenly, unable to do anything other than observe it precisely if he did not want to look away or close his eyes. The almost imperceptible smile on his lips made it even more disconcerting. It all happened in a matter of seconds, or perhaps one single second; in any case, the situation unfolded too swiftly and unexpectedly for her to process, and then she felt how the other man, the not-at-all unfamiliar figure, brushed past her and hurried out along the path they had come in on, and she hurried out behind him.

She was relieved when she finally got into the car. All she wanted was to get home. Although it was still early, she yearned for her bed. It was the time of year that always made her tired - or maybe not the time of year, but rather the absence of light. The lack of daylight hours sapped her energy. Lying out on the terrace at any opportunity didn't change anything, and if a cold front was approaching, as it was now, her exhaustion was even deeper.

A short way into their journey, she realised he had taken a different route home and was heading south out of town.

'Where are we going?'

The air that forced its way through the open window carried a faintly sweet, almost exotic scent, and a continuous beeping could be heard. She had lost her bearings after the numerous turns they had taken. It was only when they drove – very slowly, almost at walking pace – onto a gravel track and passed a cornfield being harvested by an enormous, brightly-lit white-green combine harvester, with a tractor and two trailers parked nearby, their outlines barely visible in the darkness, that she grasped the source of the scent and the beeping.

'Do you know him?'

Or why was he leaning out of the window in the middle of nowhere?

‘Hello?’

‘What?’

‘What are we doing here?’

‘What are we doing here? Nothing.’

3

Every child loves their father, and girls often idolise theirs. Fathers instil in their daughters a flawless archetype against which future men must struggle, until eventually the daughters begin to see their fathers’ countless shortcomings. As a child, Luisa naturally loved her father, though somewhat secretly, as if there were something not quite right about it. This might have been the influence of her older brother Alexander, who had turned away from their parents early on. Luisa often fantasised about marrying her father after her mother had died young, succumbing to some terrible illness that had confined her to bed. She imagined the ceremony in great detail: riding through the village in a carriage pulled by two grey horses, one with a star on its forehead, the other with a white stripe, accompanied by the music of the eight hooves. They would drive down the hill and back up, stopping by the church, where the coachman in a dark cloak and a wide-brimmed hat that concealed his face would bring the horses to a halt with a click of his tongue. A large, festive crowd would await them, and red and white rose petals would rain down incessantly from the church tower. Such fantasies were not uncommon for little girls, and it was probably equally common that she found her brothers to be nothing but ridiculous and embarrassing compared to her father, and certainly thoroughly unmanly. This was especially the case with Alexander, who, after years in boarding school among cassock-wearers whom he emulated as if there were nothing more beautiful than wearing such a cassock, suddenly wanted to disguise his unmanliness by wearing a soldier’s uniform and by constantly displaying his unexpectedly very

muscular arms as if that proved anything. And Jakob, even though he was still very small, seemed beyond help - he was and would always be neither boy nor girl, simply a backward something or other. No, none of this was unusual. What was unusual was only that Luisa's feelings persisted even when she finally became a woman, when her body, her voice, her view of the world changed. And when on Luisa's fifteenth birthday, of all days, her mother had started a fight with her and insulted her, saying she didn't actually belong here, she didn't really belong to this 'cursed family' at all, because Bert wasn't her real father and she was an 'accident', the product of a quickie between two drunks at a masquerade ball or rather the car park behind the ballroom; one of these drunks was her, the mother dressed as a chimney sweep, who wanted to get back at Bert because he had 'screwed' some waitress at their wedding. Luisa took this differently than her mother had intended, if she had intended anything at all and it hadn't just slipped out. It took her a while to process her thoughts and, above all, her feelings. To get used to not saying or thinking Daddy or Dad any more, but Bert or Robert or Rob or even Bob, which she grew to like more and more over time, because it sounded so damn cool, so American, and because no one else had ever called him that. When the new situation was no longer entirely new, Luisa sought a moment to talk to him. When she finally found him on a rainy afternoon, which he was spending in the shed with the old, junk-laden, jacked-up manure spreader, missing its tyres because they had been needed for something else at some point, she confessed to him without reserve that she loved him. He was silent for a moment before saying that she was mad and tried to leave without giving her another glance, but she reached for his hand and held it firmly and told him what she knew, what her mother had told her, and asked him to move away with her, 'somewhere' and start a new life. Again, he just said she was mad and if she didn't let go of his hand right away, he would slap her, and then he said she should put on some proper clothes. Then he broke free and left; he was missing for days and, when he finally resurfaced, he avoided her. She was upset and would have wanted to disappear, but she couldn't, where was she supposed to go? Then she calmed down, told herself she had done her bit and now needed to do

nothing more than to wait for him to come, and she would, for the rest of her life if necessary. She tried one more time to talk to him, and this time he did actually hit her. And her mother did the same, because a true enmity had developed between them while all this was happening, and when her mother told her it would be better if she, Luisa, didn't continue to live here and instead moved to the house of a friend in the village whose father had just died, Luisa replied that it was amazing that even stupid people could sometimes have good ideas. That was when her mother had hit her very hard, so quickly that Luisa couldn't even raise her hand to protect herself. She had actually meant it seriously: it was a good idea. She, too, would rather not see her mother, nor him, every day. What was said was said; it was no longer a secret. He knew, and now it was up to him.

And twenty years went by until he suddenly stood in front of her, at the door of her Hamburg flat on the third floor of a rented house in Eppendorf. A bulging violet-pink Adidas sports bag from the nineties hung over his shoulder, as if he had only now understood what she had told him. At first, she was not at all happy about it. Of course not. She had lived her life without him and had long since accepted that he would not be the part of her life that she had wished for so fervently back then. Yes, back then. How long ago was that, and how little of it was still true? And yet everything said back then, never revoked, hung in the air together with him. She felt overwhelmed and couldn't handle the fact that suddenly everything was supposed to be different from how it had always been. His presence was a shock to her, even before he had said why he was there. She had been home so often and had waited for some sign from him, but it never came, because he acted as if she had never said anything or as if what she had said was without significance, without weight, because mother had assured him what she had said about conceiving Luisa wasn't true. But at some point, when it came to the inheritance, the truth had come to light. From then on, he actually looked at her differently; there was desire in his gaze, and then she felt her long-cherished wish begin to dissolve, and in the time that followed, she had barely thought of him.

'What are you doing here?'

'You know what I want.'

'I don't.'

'I want what you want.'

She laughed nervously and didn't know where to look.

'I just want you to leave.'

'Do you love me?'

'Of course, you're my father.'

'No, Luisa, I'm not. And you're not my daughter.'

His words left her speechless, as if what she had known for so long and he had realised some time ago, only became real in that moment. The past, her waiting, her persistent thoughts that her desires were madness, and that she probably was mad because she was wasting her life on a foolish dream while maintaining a semblance of normalcy on the outside – it felt like an insurmountable chasm.

'Let me in.'

'You're too late.'

'Rubbish. As long as you're alive it's never too late.'

She hesitated before allowing him in, feeling uncertain and distrustful – of herself and of him - and filled with fear. Her heart raced; she was almost trembling, and so as to hide it, she said nothing. It would have been much simpler to shut the door again, to carry on living as before, so much less risky.

But soon, apart from countless fleeting sensations, none of that remained. Naturally, it took time for them to completely relinquish their previous roles, whatever they may have been. They were not related – and he had never really behaved as a father, not just towards her, but also towards her half-siblings – yet for many years, they had lived as though they were. In a sense, they both had to learn to see each other in a new way, to become reacquainted, and that's what they did, each in their own way, with curiosity and joy. The somewhat distant and indifferent atmosphere of Hamburg provided an ideal backdrop. By the end of the process, they had forged something new, something uniquely theirs, a private realm filled with experiences and memories. Everything outside this realm seemed alien to

them, no longer relevant to their lives. The past was neither beautiful nor ugly, and it no longer bore any connection to their present or future.

A blissfully carefree period began, though Luisa remained acutely aware that it would eventually come to an end, that it was unlikely to last long, because nothing had lasted long in her life thus far. Yet she pretended otherwise, pretending that things would never change.

Perhaps that was why she was initially upset when, one morning, he started speaking about moving. She interpreted it as discontent, even rejection, and felt hurt. Did he not like her flat? True, it wasn't very big, maybe it wasn't even nicely furnished, but that could be changed if that was what bothered him. And the location – Eppendorfer Landstraße – was really good; there were countless bars and restaurants nearby, and even a cinema. That was not the issue, he said, standing by the window looking out onto the street; he just missed the trees. The air here was killing him, he felt like he wasn't getting enough oxygen. She told him she understood. She had felt the same way at first in cities; at least she suddenly felt that way, and then she remembered how, at home, he had left hardly any of the gnarled, mistletoe-covered, but only partially withered fruit trees standing. He had rammed them down one by one with a borrowed loader and left them to Jakob to deal with. They began to look for another flat, the search extending further and further from Eppendorf. But was that really important? There were bars, restaurants and cinemas elsewhere too. She was certain it wasn't his plan to keep looking at more and more distant flats and houses, but that he was simply gripped by homesickness like a little child and he didn't want to admit it, not to her nor to himself. And in a way, she understood. What was actually wrong with going back home if he didn't feel at home here, at least not permanently? Every day he looked through the death notices from home. In truth, she sometimes thought - and wasn't even surprised by the thought - there wasn't much against it. She didn't have many friends here, hardly anyone. No, there was no one she met up with regularly. Then one day – on that bitterly cold day when the gas boiler broke down – when he came up with the advertisement for the villa, she said it:

'We could take a look.'

No, she wasn't his daughter, and he wasn't her father, so there was at most something confusing, but nothing scandalous, about them buying the house and moving in. And who would it have bothered? Although it still wasn't a big place, people here were living more and more urban or rather suburban lives. And that wasn't about the fact that there was now even a kebab shop, but that they lived without real relationships with each other or with ever-weakening relationships. Connections were unnecessary as there were plenty in all directions. And when you went to the supermarket, you didn't know if the other customers were villagers, workers or employees of the companies that were devouring the surrounding countryside year after year, sealing off the heavy, fertile soil forever, or just people who had taken a detour from the motorway for a few minutes to buy some food and stretch their legs.

She hardly knew anyone here, and hardly anyone knew her. Of course, there was still something like an old core, a kind of community where people knew each other and were closed off, but for most people this community no longer played a role because they didn't need anything from it, nor were they dependent on it in any way. Occasionally, Luisa encountered a glance that seemed strange to her, but that had been the case everywhere she had lived. It happened to everyone; it was normal and she attached no importance to it.

No one here had ever been close to her, including the deceased, whose wake they had attended. In essence, no one else had ever been close to her anywhere else, or not for longer than a moment, a fleeting connection - not even the men she had lived with, not even the fathers of her children. Sometimes she thought: not even the children themselves. Yet she was almost torn apart with longing every times she video-called for a few minutes once or twice a week, and she told the children that. But afterwards, there was never anything left of that longing, just a stale feeling that became even more stale as the children reacted less and less to her words as they grew older.

'Do you hear, Eric? I love you, my baby! I'll be back with you very soon.'

'Yes, mum. But I still need to go now, it's time for dinner.'

Closeness. My God, how much time had she spent in her life wondering why she couldn't feel it? How distant others seemed. Distant like stars. But not just others. When she stood in front of the mirror, she often couldn't believe it was really her. She disliked almost everything about herself, at least at some moments, though she had been told often enough, and was still told, even here, that she looked more attractive than most women. Now she avoided the mirror completely when she was naked, and if her gaze happened to see her softened thighs while putting on her stockings, she would almost cry with sadness and anger. She had stopped going to the swimming pool a long time ago, because there, observing the old women, she got to see that it would only get worse. But perhaps that was also a kind of closeness? Otherwise, wouldn't she just be indifferent to how her thighs looked or would look? Only to the child she had been, standing in the fog of her memory, did she feel closeness and unbreakable affection. Sometimes it seemed as if she had never really become anyone else, that she was still that child, that sweet little girl, with whom she often took refuge. There was no one she could talk to about it. She had tried once, but it had failed. What did she, who had always attracted plenty of men, actually want, she had been asked. No one understood her. Because even if what the person had said was true, that didn't help. Since she could remember, she had devoted so much energy to winning over men – any men, sometimes random men she had just met – without ever really knowing why she did it. Nothing of it remained, only the too short, too fleeting satisfaction of doing a little more than just pleasing this one and that one. Was it unlikely, then, that she should actually feel closeness to him, Bob, to a single person in the real world - real and lasting closeness? Could it be more than just wishful thinking, mere daydreaming, even fantasy? And if this, the thing she simultaneously hope and feared, were true, wouldn't it be the cruellest, the very cruellest thing in the world (the world which was so desolate and empty, which excluded her so much) if he felt differently from her or – tick, tick, tick – began to feel differently and eventually dropped her like the proverbial hot potato or as if she were just another one of his 'ideas'? He had had countless ideas over the years and little had ever come of them

and surely the same would be true of his latest one – who needed a cable car over the village anyway?