

Nadine Schneider

What Truly Matters

Novel

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Nadine Schneider's novel *What Truly Matters* is a sweeping mother-daughter story spanning four generations, a book about farewells, new beginnings, and the work of life.

It is late summer, and the grapes are ripe in the garden when Christina inherits her grandmother Anni's house. Here, in a small village near Nuremberg, she grew up with Anni: Anni, who fled Romania for Germany in the mid-1960s. Anni, who raised her child and grandchild all by herself, packing boxes for a mail-order giant to survive in a booming post-war economy. Who fought loneliness, poverty, and alienation with tenacity, strength, and a sense of duty. Was this the life she had dreamed of? Or did she miss out on life while living it?

Christina hesitantly says goodbye to Anni and her house. In the quiet warmth of the last days of summer, she sinks deeper and deeper into her memories, comes across surprising finds, and also drives to the now abandoned site of the Quelle mail order center. She has canceled her planned vacation, and only occasional emails from work reach her. Gradually, she realizes what she really owes her grandmother: the freedom to let go and find the place where the good life is at home.

"This language achieves something: it tells a story that is breathless and yet full of tranquility." Zsuzsa Bánk



Summary

Christina, the first-person narrator, is a young woman stuck in a job she dislikes in Berlin when she inherits her grandmother's house in a Franconian village near Nuremberg. After her grandmother's sudden death, the house stands empty, but for Christina, who returns there, it is full of memories. This is where she grew up with her grandmother.

Her grandmother, Anni, comes to Germany from the Banat region of Romania in 1967 and gives birth here to her daughter, Helene, Christina's mother. From the very beginning Anni fights to build what she imagines a good life to be. She struggles with the realities of living alone in a foreign country, with poverty and the stigma of being both a single mother and an immigrant. She tries to fit in and to meet every expectation, and she pays a price for it. Anni finally takes a step out of her isolation when she applies for a job at the Quelle mail-order company in Fürth. The work is hard, but it restores her sense of purpose and visibility. Anni has great admiration for the Schickedanz family, who own the Quelle mail-order empire. In particular, Grete Schickedanz, whom she meets in person once, is for her the epitome of a woman who has "made something of herself". Yet Anni's life continues to be marked by losses. Her only child, Helene, emigrates to the United States as a young woman and, in doing so, follows Anni's example of choosing for herself where the good life might be found. A few years before she can retire, Anni then also loses the job at Quelle that has meant so much to her.

Christina tries to settle into her grandmother Anni's house, but she finds it difficult. It is late summer. She has cancelled the holiday she had planned to take with her friends and, apart from work emails, little from the outside world reaches the quiet, shady house. She realises she is not yet ready to clear the place out and say goodbye. Instead, she begins to piece together Anni's life from memories, documents, and conversations with relatives. She comes across puzzling objects, visits Anni's grave, and drives out to the now deserted site of the former Quelle distribution centre.

Then, unexpectedly, her mother Helene comes to visit. Their relationship is tense and distant, but on their last evening together Christina finally manages to open up. When she tells her mother how heavy the work in a PR agency feels to her and threatens to pull her away from her real abilities and wishes, Helene makes it clear to her how free she is in her choices. Unlike Anni, who pushed own needs aside in order to climb the social ladder, Helene and Christina have the privilege of being able to choose more freely. They are not like Anni and do not have to be, and that is something they owe to Anni. In the end Christina leaves her grandmother's

house knowing that she can sell it and use Anni's legacy to pursue her own idea of what a good life might be.

What Truly Matters tells the story of four generations of women marked by the search for a better, truer life. These women face painful losses and difficult new beginnings. For all they share, they arrive at different ways of living. They are women who stay with the reader, full of strength, tenacity, and longing (Anni), individuality and defiance (Helene), and quiet, searching self-awareness (Christina). Nadine Schneider tells their moving stories in clear, luminous prose that recalls Zsuzsa Bánk, yet has a voice entirely her own.



**Sample translation
by Alexandra Roesch**



Chapter 1

I don't want to be here. This is what I think with every step. With each one I push my feet harder into the gravel, stamping, scuffing little stones back. Anni turns to look at me, her eyebrows raised.

I don't want to be here. It is summer and so hot that yesterday I sat down on the steps in my great-grandmother's cellar, in the semi-darkness, and pulled one of the watermelons into my lap. I wrapped my arms around it, hunched my back, and rested my forehead on the cool rind. Upstairs they were calling for me, and I closed my eyes, the heat throbbing in my temples. I don't want to be here, not today or any other day. I cannot remember ever having liked coming here.

Anni walks fast; she is in a hurry. Anni is always in a hurry to see the dead. It seems to me that she is more desperate to see the dead than the living. Every time it is the first thing we do here, a visit that must not be postponed. Hungry and shaky from the long journey, our limbs stiff from sitting on the coach, we stand at the graves, and the only reason we were not here yesterday was me, hiding in the cellar from the heat and from the landscape that broods in the sun behind the house and stretches so far that your gaze cannot fix on anything. I also hide from my great-grandmother, who somehow manages to grow older and older. I have never known her as anything but old, and yet in the months when we do not see each other a new kind of age steals into her face. Every time we say goodbye I think that this time will be the last.

Anni half-turns again – I am not walking fast enough for her. She is outraged by the fact that I do not share her urge to visit the dead. A bead of sweat burns at the corner of my eye; I wipe it away with my knuckle. I don't want to be here, and I know that Anni doesn't want to be here either, but she would never admit it. Every summer and every winter she gets on the coach to Romania, seventeen hours there and seventeen back. In summer her fingers swell during the journey and she struggles for breath in the stale air; in winter she wears two pairs of socks and never takes off her fur coat. She will not stop making these trips as long as my great-grandmother is still alive. My great-grandmother is a gentle, acquiescent woman, and I can hardly believe she has anything to do with Anni, anything to do with us at all. Only in one respect does she refuse to give way. She will not come to Germany with us. She wants to stay where she is, in her low house with its long



rooms. She wants to die here, she says, and once Anni answered, 'Then you'll die on your own,' and my great-grandmother swallowed and glanced down into her lap. 'Yes,' she said, 'yes.'

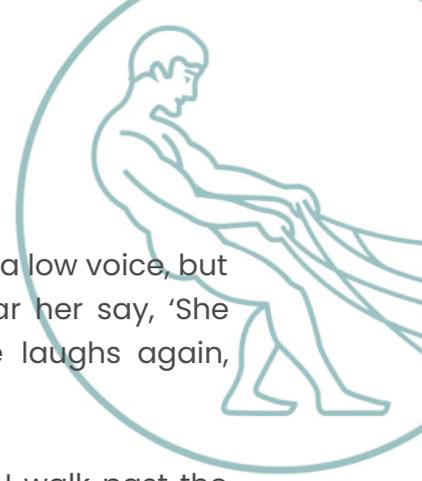
I don't want to be here. This is the last time, I swear it. Angry, I stare at Anni's back; her steps are brisk. She walks to the dead as if she were going to a wedding, wearing a cream-coloured cocktail dress with black spots, walking steadily over the gravel in her heels as if it were the level floor of a ballroom. On the shaved nape of her neck I see beads of sweat that are not rolling down, not yet, but when we get back to my great-grandmother's house we will both be soaked in sweat and Anni will put her feet in a bucket of water from the well, close her eyes, and fan herself. My great-grandmother will hold the heels up and say, you will ruin your good shoes here, and Anni will not answer, will not say that the shoes were only factory seconds anyway, like the dress and the handbag, all of them seconds from the mail-order company where she has worked for more than thirty years.

The cemetery lies outside the village, surrounded by nothing but fields, the sky stretched above it like a thin, bright blue cloth. We turn off the road onto the dirt track, and I almost walk straight into Anni's back because she has stopped so suddenly that she briefly loses her balance. For a moment one of her heels buckles under her, but she flings both arms out to the sides and steadies herself.

What is it, I say, and look past her. A few metres ahead of us I see a cow. A thin boy is walking beside her, holding her by one horn. She plods along slowly at his side, her body too heavy in the heat.

Anni takes a small step to the left, sidestepping. Is she afraid of the cow? I do not want to ask, I just want to get to the cemetery, quickly, and then back to the house, I want to sit in the cellar with the potatoes and melons until the sweat on my back turns cold and makes me shiver.

As I walk past Anni she calls my name in alarm, calls, Christina!, and I see how the boy grabs the cow more tightly and tries to pull her off the path to the left, away from me. Before I have time to be afraid I am already at the cemetery gate. I pull it open and close it behind me as slowly as I can. The cow has stopped. Her eyelids are black with flies and she starts to shake her head. For a moment she slips from the boy's grasp and I hear Anni gasp. The boy reacts quickly, grabbing into the fur at her neck with one hand and seizing her horn with the other. The movement of the heavy head runs through his whole upper body, but he does not let go again. For a second our eyes meet and I notice that my hand is still on the handle of the gate. I pull it back and am about to turn away when he says something to me. He says something about the cow, that much I understand, but I cannot answer. I



open my mouth and search for the right words, start a sentence in a low voice, but then Anni answers for me, quickly and with a laugh, and I hear her say, 'She doesn't understand. She can't speak Romanian,' and then she laughs again, sounding embarrassed.

I lower my eyes. I can still hear them talking behind my back as I walk past the chapel. Straight on, then the fifth row on the left. We have been here so often that I know the way in my sleep. When I reach the grave, I do not stop, I do not fold my hands. I sit down on the stone slab, which is so hot that I almost jump up again. I rest my forearms on my knees, and wait for Anni.

Chapter 2

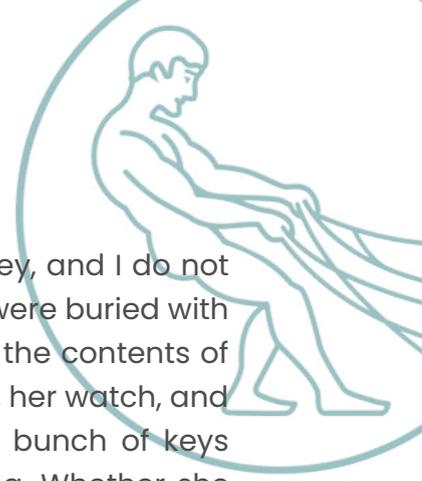
Why am I thinking of this now? Of the boy with the cow. And of my great-grandmother's last summer. It must have been the last one, because my memory of her stops after that. It was the only summer when Anni and I travelled home separately. School was starting again for me, but Anni had to stay because my great-grandmother had fluid retention in her legs and could hardly walk. I no longer remember how I said goodbye to her. But I remember that hot day in Romania, the walk to the cemetery, and the moment when the cow shook its head, a heaviness that held so much strength.

Only I do not understand why I am thinking of it now, of all times. Maybe it is the quiet here, which I am no longer used to. Or the heat that has had all day to seep into the asphalt so that now the warmth comes from below and above, from the ground and the sky. Sweat runs from my hairline. I just want to get there at last, and I am almost relieved when I see the house on the corner, crouching between the new-builds.

The wheels of my suitcase click rhythmically over the paving slabs. I am too loud here, among the birds and the hiss of a lawn sprinkler, the soft clink of Sunday crockery and the single chime of a bell marking a quarter-hour in the evening. I am tired and hungry, but there will be something in the house, something in a jar, something I can eat on the terrace, which must already be in the shade by now.

Someone greets me. I turn my head; a neighbour is looking me over. He does not recognise me. I smile, and he takes so long to return the smile that I look away.

I slip my hand into my trouser pocket. The key, to make sure I haven't forgotten it, to make sure it's the right one. On the train I had to keep taking it out, checking it,



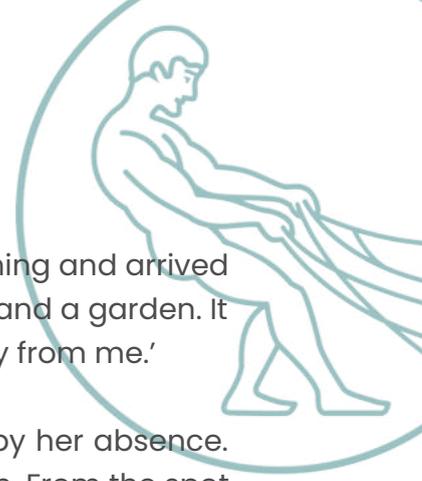
because I simply no longer remember where Anni hid the spare key, and I do not know what became of her own keys either. The thought that they were buried with Anni keeps coming to me, although hardly anyone is buried with the contents of their handbag. From the hospital I took one of her rings, her purse, her watch, and her clothes, but I only realised later that there had not been a bunch of keys among her things, and I wondered if Anni had sensed something. Whether she knew she would not need the key to her house again, whether she simply pulled the door shut behind her on the day she was admitted to the hospital, and took her leave of all those last quiet years, the years I picture as lonely, and all the years before that, which must have been so hard.

Anni's daughter, my mother Helene, left, and left me, the granddaughter, behind with Anni. She had to bring up another child, as if one had not been enough. And no one, she would say, ever thanked her for giving up the good life she could have had, the money she had saved, the nice clothes, the coach trips with coffee and cake, for all this effort. I could have had a life like the Schickedanz family, she used to say, and for a long time I didn't understand, and didn't even ask what she meant by it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Helene will want to know if I have arrived. I do not look at it. I look at the house. The façade glows yellow in the light of the low sun, the grey soot of all those winters hardly visible now. The roof tiles are mossy and dented in one place – something in the roof frame must have sagged, but Anni did not have anything repaired. What for, she said, she was the last of us who would live in this house anyway. Helene and I would only sell it. It meant nothing to us. We weren't attached to it.

If only she had known. If she had known how often, in other places, I looked for the light in this street, for the colour of the sky above the little strip of woods you can see from the bathroom window. How I searched for those moments in the garden that suddenly hinted at another season, for the moments when August suddenly smelt of fallen leaves and February suddenly sounded like a spring morning, when the birds had got their voices back. If she had known how often I thought of her and of us, of our life, of our life together, that had ended so suddenly. I had postponed us, Anni and me, I had thought there would still be time for us. Time to tell stories, to explain, to look back, to understand. Time for Anni's story.

Anni was not born here. Anni did not grow up here either, and 'not here' does not mean in the next village, the next town, or another region. It is a 'not here' that does not even belong to another country, because Anni was born and grew up in a place that, strictly speaking, no longer exists. In that non-place she was a girl, a young woman, before she had had enough, as she so often said later, before



she'd had it up to here and she could not go on. She left with nothing and arrived with nothing, and 'look what I have now,' she used to say, 'a house and a garden. It was not exactly easy, but I have it now, and no one can take it away from me.'

Anni's garden is yellow like straw, bleached by the summer and by her absence. When I step up to the fence I see that the grass is almost knee-high. From the spot where the ripe plums have fallen from the tree and burst open there is a piercing hum. The plastic deer next to the butterfly bush must have been blown over by a storm. It is lying on its side with its legs stuck out stiffly; its colours have faded over the years and the eyes that were once dark are grey, as if the animal had gone blind.

I put my hand on the handle of the garden gate, and when I open it and feel its creak right up into my elbow I hesitate for a moment, because I remember. I remember the moment when I would let myself crash into the gate at full speed on my roller skates, the brief give of the wooden slats under my weight, and how at the same time I was already grabbing the handle and pushing it down so that I rolled on to the paved path through the garden with my last bit of momentum. And then the disappointment when I realised that Anni was in the house and so would not get worked up about how I would end up breaking the gate one day, telling me to stop, and asking how many times she would have to say it.

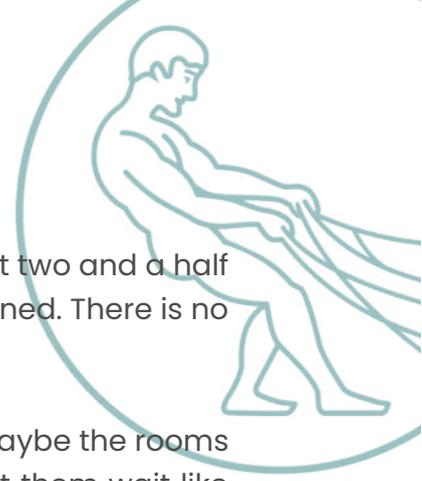
I pull my suitcase through the little gate and close it behind me. You can tell the garden has had enough, that it's in its last throes. Anything that has not been watered in the past few weeks has withered. The hanging baskets hold only the skeletons of geraniums and the soil beneath is carpeted with petals. The scent of the lilac is as overpowering as something that is rotting.

I leave the suitcase where it is and walk further into the garden. When I catch a movement out of the corner of my eye my heart thuds and I flinch, before I realise that it is me, that it is my reflection in one of the two windows where the shutter is only half pulled down. For a moment I rest a hand on the rough plaster of the house wall, still warm from the afternoon sun, and breathe out.

There is no one here, I tell myself. No one left.

Chapter 3

She does not want to be here. Anni folds her fingers in her lap. Five more minutes. In five minutes she'll get up and leave. She is not going to be taken for a fool and



sit here any longer. She has been sitting here like an idiot for almost two and a half hours and nothing has happened, not even a single door has opened. There is no one else here, no names are called, nothing.

Maybe, she thinks, there is not even anyone behind those doors, maybe the rooms are empty and they just make people come here for fun. They let them wait like idiots, hour after hour, until they give up or dare to knock on one of the doors, only to find that the rooms are empty, that no one has worked there for years. It would fit so well, she thinks, it would fit this country that has been gathering dust for years, like a room that only pretends it still has any meaning.

Five more minutes, then she will go.

Anni's stomach rumbles. The hunger is the worst thing, the constant hunger. She used to be able to work four or five hours from breakfast onwards without getting hungry. Now she cannot go anywhere without first wrapping a slice of bread in a handkerchief, without having four or five ladyfingers in her coat pocket. She pulls out the biscuits wrapped in paper, takes one and pushes it into her mouth, chews twice, and swallows. Not enough. She wants to reach for the next one and stops herself.

How long? How long am I supposed to wait here, you bastards?

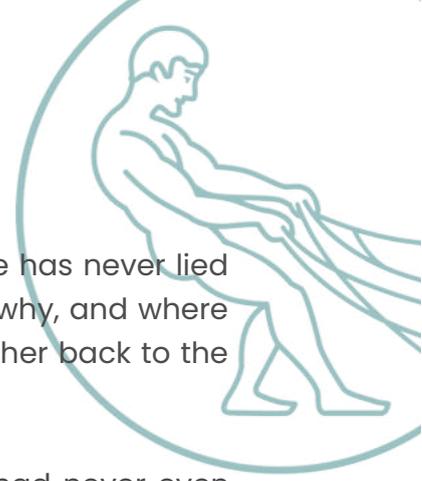
A door opens and Anni is suddenly aware of her heart; all at once she can taste its pounding on her tongue.

'Anna,' says the man standing in the doorway, his eyes fixed on a sheet of paper. 'Anna,' he repeats and looks down the corridor as if a hundred people were sitting there. What, she thinks, Anna what? Can you not say my surname without tying your tongue in knots? She gets to her feet.

'Here,' she says, her voice hoarse, and she clears her throat. He looks her over quickly, from head to toe.

Poftiți, he says, stepping to the side of the door and holding it open with his outstretched arm, and Anni walks past him into the room. The furnishings are sparse. In the large window the sky stands like a grey wall. Anni sits down on one of the two chairs in front of the desk and takes the letter out of her handbag. 'I have a travel permit,' she says, 'for three weeks.'

When Anni steps back out onto the street later, the sky releases tiny drops and a thin cold film of moisture settles on her skin. It is done, finally, she thinks, what can



still go wrong now? She lied better than ever before in her life; she has never lied so well even to her own mother. Who she would be visiting and why, and where she would be living, who would pick her up and who would bring her back to the station, which train she would take there and back, and no detours.

No, no, no detours, Anni had shaken her head, as if the thought had never even occurred to her. The only thing she was sorry about was that Uncle Rudi in Germany had had to make himself so ill for her sake, deathly ill. Back home in the village she would go and light a candle for him and pray that he would never really be as ill as he had pretended to be for her. Together with his acquaintance from the Red Cross, he had managed to twist things until it looked as if he really was about to kick the bucket.

'My uncle, I want so much to see him one more time,' she had told the militiaman, and she had even managed a tear, so vividly did she picture her uncle on his deathbed, but the tear had been wasted, because the man had barely looked at her once during the whole conversation. The loose-fitting coat she had kept on in that room with the grey sky wall in the window had been unnecessary too. So much had been for nothing. She had driven herself crazy over so many details and in the end she hadn't had to vomit under the man's desk the way she had imagined. In the end he hadn't so much as glanced at the empty belt loops on her coat, where the belt was missing, and he had not even seen her tear, which is still in the corner of her eye as she steps out onto the street.

She wipes it away with her knuckle, leaving black mascara on her skin.

She has only gone a few steps when it starts raining harder. She ties her headscarf and curses because she has not brought an umbrella. All she had thought about was the letter, just the letter, and the food, of course, not to leave the food sitting on the sideboard. Without the food, she had thought, I won't make it.

For weeks now almost everything had tasted different. The crust of the bread tasted like soot, so smoky and acrid, the sheep's cheese so sour it made you shudder, and the sweets Anni had shoved into her mouth the other day, just after leaving the house, which she had swallowed before she had properly chewed them, burned bitterly all the way into her nose when Anni threw up. She had been trying to breathe, to take deep breaths, and when she realised it would not work any more she had thought, so what, it does not matter, dropped to her knees, and opened her mouth.

The sweets had landed on the winter grass as a thick mush. Like a little cowpat, she had thought, as she gasped and retched once more, but it was over. There



was nothing left. She had pulled a handkerchief from her coat pocket and wiped her mouth. She had felt that she was drenched in sweat, and the next moment that she was hungry, still hungry.

What tasted least different coming back up were the pickled tomatoes, bland and watery, and the jam, simply sweet, her throat gummy afterwards, and when she cleared it, it tasted sugary. The soups were bearable – liquid that came back up quickly, in great spurts. You did not have to struggle, you did not have to be afraid of choking, unlike with the bread, which forced its way back up in lumpy chunks, still almost undigested, until the tears ran from your eyes and your upper body bent like a branch under a heavy bird.

She often thought that she did not want this any more. That Helene, who was not yet Helene then, should disappear, that she should end up as a bloody miscarriage in the factory toilet. That it should be over, that it should starve, because how was it even possible that it was still alive when Anni was already half dead? During her night shifts she stood trembling beside the machine, hand on her stomach, trying to swallow, trying not to belch, until at some point she ran.

She had always had the strength to run. To the toilet, to the outhouse in the yard, to the metal bucket in the winter kitchen, to the door of the tram, from which she had once jumped while it was still moving. She had heard someone gasp in horror when she yanked the doors open and did not think, just jumped. The impact had stabbed up into her hips, but she had not fallen. She had only staggered for a moment, then hurried across the street and thrown up in the gutter. And she had thought, not even that killed you, you are still here to torment me – tell me, how far do I have to jump for you finally to be gone?

And it is still not gone. She feels ashamed as soon as she has the thought. She lifts her head and blinks the raindrops away. She does not know this part of the city well; she has to pause and get her bearings.

Hopefully she will catch a tram soon, then she will finally be out of this filthy weather. And at home she will quickly stop in at the church to light a candle – best to light one for her boss as well, the one who vouched for her, who wrote how good a socialist she was and how she always worked more than she had to.

She pushes her hands into her coat pockets and feels her stomach. Nothing, still nothing to feel, and yet for the summons she had carefully pulled the belt out of the loops and let the coat hang loose around her, because if they had seen what was going on with her it would all have been over. There would not have been any trip for her.

At last she hears the bell of the tram not far away. Anni walks faster, turns the corner, and sees it pulling into the stop. She starts to run and feels a weight inside her that slows her down. Anni's feet are heavy on the ground and her steps are small, but it does not occur to her to stop and let this tram go, because she is young. Anni is twenty-two years old, and she is used to her legs carrying her wherever she wants to go. It would never even cross her mind to stop mid-run, to bend over and hold her side and gasp for air like an old woman.

