

CULTURE

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Butter wouldn't melt?

Don't believe it. Charlotte Roche has written the most shocking book about women's bodies

Arts

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Cheeky GIRL

Charlotte Roche — a dainty, giggly brunette with the manners of a countess — does not look like the sort to commit the phrase “rectal goulash” to print. She does not look like the kind of woman who could write a novel set entirely in a hospital proctology department. She does not seem capable of describing, in nauseating detail, the picaresque sexual adventures of Helen, her precocious, bacteria-loving 18-year-old heroine, who is laid low when an intimate shaving injury becomes infected. No, Roche, 30 — dressed in a demure floral dress and brown penny loafers — looks as if she should be filing index cards at a public library.

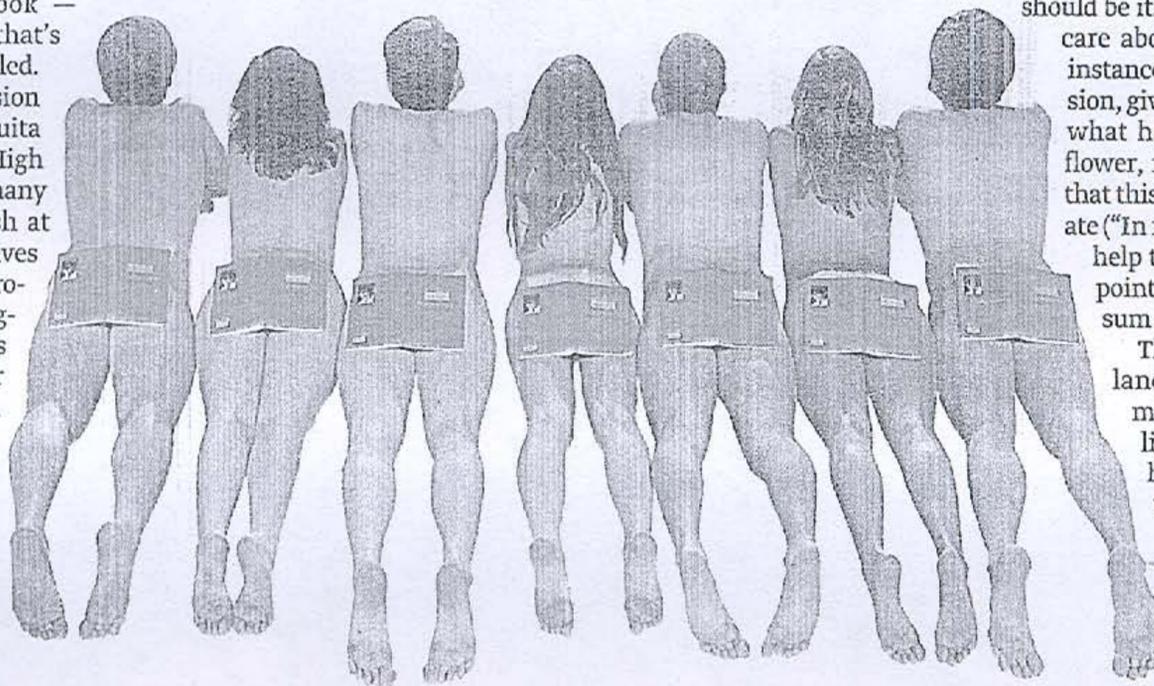
If Roche looks wrong for her new role as the author of Germany’s most shocking book — *Feuchtgebiete*, or *Wetlands* in English — that’s hardly surprising. She is not easily pigeonholed. For 12 years, she was a lightly famous television presenter on the music channel Viva: a Miquita Oliver or an Alexa Chung. She was born in High Wycombe, but her parents took her to Germany as a one-year-old, where she spoke English at home and German at school. Now she lives in Cologne with her husband, a television producer, and five year-old daughter. Yet her English has developed endearing faults: she says “bits and blobs”, mistakes “screamish” for “squeamish” and calls her retired father a “pensioneer”.

Her book caused a delicious outrage when it was published in Germany last year. Women fainted at public readings. Critics praised it as a feminist masterpiece or denounced it as a “masturbation pamphlet”. Either way, everyone read it — at the last count, almost 1.5m copies of *Wetlands* had been sold in Germany. And if they haven’t read it, they’ve seen it: a stage adaptation sold out for weeks in the respectable market town of Halle. In short, Roche is Germany’s most famous author. Imagine JK Rowling had written *Hairy Trotter* and you get the idea.

Roche never dreamt of writing a novel. She’s not even much of a bibliophile: in the five years since her daughter was born, she has read only one book, *The Great Gatsby*, and its influence on *Wetlands* is slim. In fact, the first words of fiction she ever wrote (“As far back as I can remember, I’ve had haemorrhoids”) became the first line of the novel — a novel sparked by a Damascene moment in a local pharmacy, where Roche saw the vast array of feminine hygiene products on display and decided to write a manifesto about “how stupid we women are about our own bodies”. Her only plan was a five-word checklist she kept on her desk, which read “smegma, shaving, spots, masturbation, menstruation”.

“At first, I wanted to write a pamphlet, about how everyone has become a hygiene maniac, then I thought, it’s too boring, and I invented Helen,” Roche says breathlessly. “I invented someone who is much cooler than I am, who is much more free and open-minded than I am, who could explore all the taboos. As I was writing it, I exaggerated all

British-born Charlotte Roche is Germany’s hottest author, but is *Wetlands* more than the sum of its ‘dirty’ parts, asks Ed Caesar



the time, and it got more and more disgusting and hilarious.” Disgusting we can all agree on. The episode concerning an incident of haemoglobin-rich cunnilingus reversed my breakfast.

“Well, that’s a big compliment to me,” Roche says, laughing. “It happens that people faint in my readings. They get so worked up in it — it’s either the sexual stuff or the stuff about menstruation. They are such taboos in people’s heads that, when I go there and keep going there, they can’t take it. I’m proud that I make people faint with words.”

So, Roche wanted to shock people? “No,” she says. “It was just meant to be an honest book about the female body. You know, people are surprised by this, but if I knew someone like Helen in real life, I would be extremely disgusted. I would never say, ‘Let it all hang out and let’s be natural about it.’ I clean myself, which surprises people. I shower every day. I shave all the parts you’re meant to shave as a woman nowadays.”

“Obviously, nobody is like Helen. But the fun in writing the book was getting all the secret stuff out — all the things women are ashamed about. For instance, with my husband,

I don’t leave dirty knickers lying around. I hide them, take them myself to the washing machine. Why am I so embarrassed, even in my own flat?”

“The feminist angle to the book is this: I think women, now, have to have this clean, sexy, presentation side to their body. At any time, you must be available for sex, and you can just strip naked and look super. That’s a high pressure, and the joke in this book is saying, ‘Women shit, too, you know.’ I know there are men who will find that hard to accept, because they are thinking, ‘I want to f*** a clean woman.’”

Wetlands delivers a robust examination of the notion of the “clean woman”, but, as with most novels conceived politically, it fails in what should be its first objective: to make the reader care about its protagonist. Nowhere, for instance, is Helen described — an odd omission, given that I have an indelible image of what her haemorrhoids look like (cauliflower, naturally). Although Roche argues that this lack of essential framing is deliberate (“In my head, she looks like me”), I can’t help thinking it undermines her greater point — that women are more than the sum of their orifices.

There is, however, a subplot to *Wetlands* that, had it been elaborated, might have made for a more compelling narrative — Helen’s desire to see her divorced parents reunited. This theme comes from Roche’s own childhood, which was, she says, desperately unhappy. Her parents — a superliberal mother, who allowed Charlotte to have sex in the house from a young age, and her engineer father — divorced

when she was five, “and not in a good way”. After the separation, her mother hopped from one husband to the next and from one town to the next. She had five children, and adopted one, and now works for an NGO in West Africa.

During her childhood, Roche gorged on every kind of drugs, was arrested for vandalism and skipped school, despite being bright. She says she “absolutely did not give a f*** about anything”. Her break arrived at 17, when she won an open audition to present a rock-music show on Viva, but her troubles were not over. In 2001, three of her brothers were killed in a car accident on the way to her wedding, and the trauma of that tragedy still haunts her. She eventually married Martin Kess in 2007, and is, she claims, the most conservative mother possible. “There was too much excitement in my childhood,” she says. “I don’t want the same thing for my daughter.”

Have her parents read her book? “No,” she says. “I asked them to promise they wouldn’t. I don’t want to talk to them about... all this stuff.” What about her siblings, her friends, the other parents at her daughter’s school? “They all got used to it,” she says. “Although, before I wrote it, I was worried that the headmaster might kick my daughter

Roche: 'I'm proud I make people faint with words.'
Left, actors in the German stage version of her novel

THOMAS RABSCHE/LIME FOTOFESTIVALE

out of the school because of it. I felt, somehow, that I would be ruining our lives if I released the book. I thought it was going to be an outrageous flop that would also ruin my television career."

Even now Roche is celebrated and wealthy as a result of *Wetlands*, she is nervous of how people react to her. "I tried not to read anything when all the madness started," she says. "If a critic has said something really bad, I don't want to read it, because it hurts too much, and I'm such a baby like that. I also don't want to read any readers' letters [thousands have been sent to her publisher], because people see me as a sex therapist. They send me photos of all their disgusting bits and blobs, and I don't want to see them."

Roche is also deeply unsettled by the public nature of her success, which is odd, considering she has spent more than a decade on television. "But I was notoriously unsuccessful, and I thought my life was going to be a well-paid job on a TV show that nobody watched," she explains. "That was okay with me. Nobody was envious, ever. Now people are. I feel like my bank account is public. People know exactly how many books I've sold — you can't hide it and lie, and say, 'I don't have any money.' It makes you go mad, because you think everyone's thinking about it."

"I'm not a person who can say 'F*** them, let them think what they want.' Yes, I am quite loud and self-confident sometimes, but I'm really worried about what people think of me. You might think it's strange that I wrote that book..."

Well, yes, a little. And no, because Roche is such a box of paradoxes, it's hard to know what to think of her. In any event, she has not been so distressed by her sudden fame that she has given up on writing. Indeed, she plans to have a second novel finished by the autumn. And, after the success of *Wetlands*, she has employed the same technique as before — scrawled a few words on a notepad, then launched into the story. What's it about?

"Well, I can't tell you everything, but it will definitely not have any anal sex in it," she says, tittering. "I'm fed up with talking to strangers about anal sex. But it will be a strong subject. And it will be sick, obviously." Obviously. □

Wetlands is published by Fourth Estate on Thursday

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