Nora Bossong
Rules of Engagement - Novel

Literal translation of German title: Protected Area

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Longlisted for the German Book Prize 2019

»You don’t even know what people are capable of when they’re not crying.«

About

2017: After postings with the UN in New York and Burundi, Mira is working for the United Nations Office at Geneva and mediates talks on the reunification of Cyprus. At a reception at the luxury hotel Beau-Rivage, she encounters Milan, with whose family she lived for a few months after her parents’ separation in 1994. Even though Milan is married with a son and is soon going to move his family to The Hague, the two begin an affair.

2012-2017: During her years of working for the UN, Mira has often asserted herself against the doubts of her superiors and was deployed to conflict areas time and again. One of her talents has helped her with that: Mira gets the most tight-lipped people to talk – generals, militiamen, important politicians who unexpectedly confide in her. During her time in war-torn Burundi, Mira covered for a general who had taken part in a massacre for months because she believed that he could be an important agent in the democratic restoration of the country. But in light of the renewed crisis the country finds itself in, her decision seems all the more unjustified. Her actions in the past could not just have ethical but also legal consequences in the present.

Rules of Engagement is told in premonitions and flashbacks from Mira’s perspective. In her masterfully crafted novel, Nora Bossong explores fundamental questions in private relationships as well as on the grand stage of politics in a clear-sighted and empathetic manner and juxtaposes the conflicts
of the past with the hopes for reconciliation. What do trust and responsibility mean? In what way are protection and authority intertwined? How does testimony relate to truth? Who sits in judgement on that? And is peace a corruptible makeshift solution or something that can succeed permanently after all?

Praise

»A book about loneliness, in which yearning is allowed to do its work quietly, it is not at the forefront, yet it shapes every moment, every scene, silently in the background. The juxtaposition of an international conflict and the intimate-private microcosm, the way they belong together but always remain irreconcilable radiate from this novel very vividly and authentically.« Tom Tykwer, Film Director, Producer, Screenwriter (Perfume, The International, Cloud Atlas, Babylon Berlin)

»Have you ever read a novel about the United Nations, about people who work in this institution? Of course not. But why have you never wondered why such a novel doesn’t exist? [...] Nora Bossong wrote it. Now you can no longer say that it doesn’t exist. It took a long time for this material to become the subject of a story. It took courage to embrace this material, it took skill to handle it in a narrative. For this I admire Nora Bossong, who has become a world-class storyteller with her novel Rules of Engagement.« Robert Menasse, author of The Capital

»In her impressive novel Nora Bossong talks about a world that won’t settle down and about the search for a truth that holds up despite everything. A gripping text about global conflicts and suppressed European guilt.« Milo Rau, Theatre Director & Journalist

»An alert, highly intelligent author who has the courage and the means to confront the big sociopolitical questions of our times.« Marion Poschmann, author of The Pine Islands

»Where others might still be searching for the appropriate language to capture and describe the mess of the big wide world, Bossong has found it in that very place.« Süddeutsche Zeitung

»Nora Bossong finds poetic images for the dilemmas of our time.« Frankfurter Rundschau

»Nora Bossong is one of the intellectually most stimulating and curious voices of her generation.« Denis Scheck

»Rules of Engagement oscillates between the fatalistic realisation that, at worst, everything is possible when humans are involved, and the vague hope that, despite all the irrationality of our actions, a pacified space can be possible. A complex novel, a complex read.« Christoph Schröder, Süddeutsche Zeitung

»Rules of Engagement is not a bildungsroman about a young activist, it doesn’t depict the experiences of a strong woman. It’s a book about disillusion. There is no prospect of reconciliation. Instead, Bossong takes her readers on a journey beneath
the surface of the official global moral optimism and switches a light switch down there. Ghosts live there, in the pits and caves: complacency, purposeful misrecognition, erroneous idealisation.« Thomas E. Schmidt, DIE ZEIT

»One has no choice but to admire the agility with which Nora Bossong develops her subject, her sense for the significant detail and the concise subtleness with which she shields her heroine’s internal world from all the impositions of globality.« Thomas Thiel, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

»This book is topical in a good because productive sense; it’s not a so-called trending topic that is being hashed and rehashed, it’s not the injustices of this world that are bewailed, this novel contains none of the naïve ideology of self-affirmation that can unfortunately be found increasingly in contemporary literature. Instead, Bossong’s text is a warning to political propagandists not to use terms like ›responsibility‹ or ›truth‹ all too flippantly. Rules of Engagement has earned its place on the longlist of the German Book Prize and it would be desirable for the readership that this novel wins.« Carsten Otte, taz. die tageszeitung

»You’re devouring the lines, impressed by a text that succeeds in putting the mess that is globalization to paper […].« Thomasz Kurianowicz, Die Welt

»How should one pursue diplomacy these days? That ist he question that hovers over Nora Bossong’s powerfully eloquent novel Rules of Engagement. […] Big questions, impressive answers.« stern

»An intelligent and brilliantly worded novel.« DIE ZEIT, Literatur zur Frankfurter Buchmesse

»Bossong wants to convey the very big picture with all its futilities, wants to move beyond terms like truth or reconciliation. That’s intellectually stimulating […]« Gerrit Bartels, Der Tagesspiegel

»The way the author creates garlands of sentences without full stops and captures the atmosphere of very diverse places and regions is an essential characteristic of this artistic, intelligent novel.« Rainer Moritz, Deutschlandfunk Kultur

»Ruthless candour is at the heart of [Bossong’s] literary programme that tangibly brings the conflicts far away from the comfort zone of the West into our consciousness.« Björn Hayer

»Nora Bossong’s brilliant novel Rules of Engagement dares to venture to the field of conflicts within global politics.« Stefan Kister, Stuttgarter Zeitung

»Nora Bossong’s multifaceted novel Rules of Engagement depicts the life of a UN-worker torn between the private and the political, bureaucracy and deployment with the blue helmets, European mentality and African reality. An important and demanding read.« Wolfgang Schneider, Deutschlandfunk

»Seeing the big picture in details – that’s the opportunity in literature and the appeal of this brilliant novel.« Matthias Schümann, NDR
»A book in which it becomes clear that, in the end, all of us – regardless of how tall or how short or how misguided our attitudes, beliefs, and convictions may be – are aching for love. It is remarkable how longing and politics, ideology and passion, hope and fatalism find a shared literary home here.« Tom Tykwer on 36.9° (Gramsci’s Fall)

»With Mira, Nora Bossong has created a literary figure in which the explosive questions of our time are reflected and refracted and that puts her hopes on the power of discourse and reconciliation in the face of adversity.« ORF

»In her complex, intellectually stimulating novel Rules of Engagement, Nora Bossong talks about the disillusioning routine in the UN-universe clear-sightedly and poetically.« Jeannette Villachica, Wiener Zeitung

»[Bossong has] created a complex book about the delicate intricacies of power and language.« Hendrik Werner, Weser Kurier

»Nora Bossong connects happiness and failure on both a personal as well as political level in the most elegant way; the life of ›expats‹, the UN’s staff working abroad, with bloody conflicts and the genocide in Burundi, the former colony of German East Africa, with a contemporary love story.« Cornelia Zetzsche, Bayern 2

»Bossong narrates with linguistic finesse without sounding pretentious, is contemplative without overwhelming us with hypotheses. A truly good story – and one of the best novels this autumn.« Maja Beckers, emotion

»It’s the associative and poetic style that creates this hypnotic pull that penetrates into the deeply human swamp of bureaucracy behind the grand stage of world peace politics.« BÜCHERmagazin