

# GRANTA

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- [Philip Oltermann](#)

## Interview: Charlotte Roche



There's a theory about German culture that goes something like this: Germans are very good at all sorts of things – making films, making cars, making beer – but in order to be truly popular with a people that like to consider themselves intellectuals, you have to write a book.

Thirty-year-old Charlotte Roche, born in High Wycombe but raised in Germany, has been a recognizable face in her adopted home country since she started working as a presenter on Viva, the German equivalent of MTV, in the mid-1990s. She went on to write and present programmes and late-night talk shows for Arte and ZDF, and won the highly respected Grimme Prize for television in 2004. But only now that she has written her first book are people ready to take her seriously.

*Feuchtgebiete*, which translates roughly as 'wetlands' or 'moist patches', was published by Cologne's Dumont Verlag earlier this year. It is narrated by eighteen-year-old Helen Memel, an outspoken teenager whose childlike stubbornness is paired with a premature

sense of sexual confidence. After a failed attempt to shave her intimate parts, Helen ends up in the Department of Internal Medicine at the Maria Hilf Hospital. She doesn't leave the ward for the rest of the novel. Surrounded by surgical instruments and humming X-ray machines, she reflects in ever more uncomfortable detail on the eccentric wonders of the female body. It's an explicit novel, often shockingly so, but also a surprisingly accomplished literary work, which evokes the voice of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the perversion of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* and the feminist agenda of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*.

*Feuchtgebiete* hasn't been out of Germany's newspapers since publication, selling half a million copies. In March, it became Amazon's worldwide bestseller, the first German book to do so since Amazon made its sales figures public in 2004. As English-language publishers are engaged in a bidding war for *Feuchtgebiete*, *Granta* contributing editor Philip Oltermann caught up with Roche for an interview.

*PO: You had a very successful career in television – why did you decide to write this book?*

*CR:* First of all, the themes that appear in my book – the body, illness, hospitals, masturbation – are themes that I have always been fascinated by. I dare say they're my hobbyhorses. Whenever someone at a dinner party says that they've had an operation, I'll be the first person to shout: 'Come on, let me see it then!' So it's really the case that these issues are close to my heart – it's not like I decided to write a shocking book first, and then just wrote down the most disgusting things I could imagine. I enjoy thinking about these sort of things in detail.

I'm convinced that in contemporary society a lot of women have a very messed-up attitude to their own bodies. We're obsessed with cleanliness, with getting rid of our natural excretions and our body hair. So I wanted to write about the ugly parts of the human body. The smelly bits. The juices of the female body. Smegma. In order to tell that story, I created a heroine that has a totally creative attitude towards her body – someone who has never even heard that women are supposedly smelly between their legs. A real free spirit.

*From the way you talk about Feuchtgebiete, it sounds more like a manifesto than a novel. Is it fair to say that there are two books competing against each other in one?*

Yes, I think that's right. Originally I wanted to write a non-fiction book. At the heart of it was always a general feeling: I was really jealous of the fact that men have this whole range of different names for their sexual organs – beautifully detailing what state of arousal they're in – while us women still don't really have a language for our lust. For example, I think a lot of women still don't masturbate, simply because they don't know how to talk about it.

I wanted to write in a creative way about the female body: exploring it, but also making it strange. I used to shut my eyes when I wrote, trying to shut out all that worn-out vocabulary we have about our physicality and come up with new words for each body part. 'Cauliflower' for Helen's haemorrhoids, 'pearl trunk' for her clitoris, and so on. Someone had to do it!

I wanted to point out how a lot of the emancipatory principles from the '60s and '70s have not yet arrived properly. In that respect, this book really is a manifesto, and I do think it has a serious message.

*How did the manifesto turn into a novel?*

I started to suspect that I was writing a very arrogant book – something very ‘top-down’ rather than ‘bottom-up’. ‘Charlotte Roche tells Germany’s women how to appreciate their sexual organs’. That wasn’t right. I know that I have my own limits, my own taboos too, when it comes to talking about sex, and I realized that I could only really go full throttle if I voiced these ideas through a fictional character.

*Had you done much writing before?*

Not at all. Only the lines for my own TV show.

*But you must read a lot, surely?*

I don’t, actually. I used to read a lot in my early teens, even some of the classics, but it was all ruined for me by those German classes in which we had to take writing apart. It was so dull. And now that I’m a mother – my child was born five years ago – it’s just very difficult to find the time for reading. The only book I have read recently is the *The Great Gatsby* and even that took me almost three years.

*If not from literature, did inspiration for Helen’s character come from anywhere – or anyone – in real life?*

There is, of course, a slightly autobiographical element to the novel. Some of the bits Helen gets up to – well, that was me as a teenager. Like the bit where she and her friend run drunkenly through the centre of town, snatching glasses off the noses of bewildered shoppers, snapping them in half and then legging it. And that rather sad emotional subplot in the story, about the girl who tries to think of increasingly absurd ruses to get her divorced parents back together – that was me, too. There’s a short prologue to the novel, which is very much my teenage me as well: Every child of divorced parents has this fantasy that they will one day reunite their parents, even if it is to be on their deathbed.

*It is noticeable that none of the German reviews and features on your book tried to make the link between your style as a writer and your style as a television presenter – even though the latter is very original and wordy, and has won you awards. It’s almost as if reviewers tried to deny the fact that you have such a ‘low-brow’ CV.*

You’re right. No one has ever brought it up in an interview, either. When I started out as a presenter, I wanted to do television in a way in which no one has ever done television before. I wanted to find my own style – and that involved annoying a lot of people at first. While I couldn’t stand literature at school, I was very much into drama and made sure that I always got the best roles in my school plays. I could never remember the right facts for my exams, but I always knew my lines for the school play. When I was eighteen, just before my final exams, I quit school altogether and got a job at the music channel Viva. I’m still proud of the work I did in TV – it was an immense achievement

for a young person. Viva launched the careers of some of the people now regarded as Germany's most exciting actors, like Heike Makatsch and Christian Ulmen. But people often assume it was something I did as a sort of glamorous part-time job to support my writing career – that's a very German approach, perhaps.

*A lot of critics have described your book as 'literary porn'. Do you mind that description?*

Not at all. That's fine with me. I wanted to write about the female body in a way that is funny and entertaining, but also sexy. In many ways, these sort of reactions to my book have only justified my views. A lot of men have come up to me and said: 'Hey, some of the bits in your book are really quite sexy, aren't they?' And I'm, like, 'Thanks!', because they are meant to be. But not a single woman has come up to me and said the same thing. 'Wow, that just got me really horny' – it's just not something a woman would dare to say.

But it's more than just porn. For a start, it's not really sexy, it's also quite disgusting. There are the haemorrhoids, Helen's injury to her sphincter, and so on. So when you read the book and you get a bit too excited, you'll immediately get turned off again. I wanted to present the whole package: women aren't just a sexy presentation space, they also get ill, they have to go to the toilet, they bleed. If you love someone and sleep with them, you'll have to face those dirty bits – otherwise you might as well not get started with the business of sex in the first place.

*You blame a lot of the hang-ups young women have about themselves on what you call 'the Americanization of the female' body. You yourself were born in England but have lived in Germany for most of your life. Do different cultures have different body images?*

I'm afraid I don't think England is any better than America in that respect. In terms of body-culture, England is always quick to follow the latest trends in the States. And it always amuses me how Americans and English people will to this day continue to make jokes about German women having hairy armpits. Get with the programme! These days, German women shave themselves too, you know. And don't worry, I don't think just because they read my book they will suddenly stop doing so.

*Publishers are currently bidding for UK and US rights for Feuchtgebiete. Do you think your book will be received differently in the English-speaking world than it was Germany?*

No, not really. I think there will be a bit of hoo-hah in the press, as there has been in Germany, but that deep down most women will be relieved that someone talks about how tough it is to live up to the modern ideals of beauty. After one of the readings I gave in Germany, a woman came up to me and said: 'Charlotte, you're right, there's an unwritten law about shaving amongst women'. She told me that she is scared of having sex with her own husband unless she has shaved her legs the morning before. That's not right, is it?

*If you get published over here in the UK, will it be a bit like a homecoming?*

I was born in 1978, to English parents, in High Wycombe – which is ironic given that that's the place from which all the RAF bombers bound for Germany took off in the Second World War. Unlike every other English person moving to Germany at the time, my dad wasn't a soldier, but worked for Mars and was sent to build chocolate factories for them near Mönchengladbach when I was only one. Since then I have lived in Germany, but all my relatives live in England and I used to come over about six times a year. It was weird: my parents used to completely ignore Germany even though they lived there, so in our house there was only English radio, English TV and English newspapers. And tea.

Recently someone in the audience at a reading suggested that perhaps the war isn't over after all, that the Allies were merely concentrating on getting their offspring to write porno propaganda to confuse the German people. I love that image. Me flying over Germany, throwing sex bombs into people's minds.

*Photograph of Charlotte Roche by Jochen Schmitz*

<http://www.granta.com/Online-Only/Interview-Charlotte-Roche>