

ROBERT DEUTSCH

Robert Deutsch was born in 1981 in Köthen and studied illustration and communication design in Halle. He has worked as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer since 2012. His work has been exhibited in Porto, Berlin, Leipzig, and Los Angeles, among other places, and published in numerous magazines, including *Monopol*, *Arte*, and *American Collectors Art Magazine*. In 2014, he was awarded the Giebichenstein Design Prize for Best Communication Design. Robert Deutsch lives and works in Leipzig. *Turing* is his first graphic novel.

PUBLICATIONS:

Turing, avant-verlag, 2017

DIP THE APPLE IN THE BREW, LET ALAN TURING'S LIFE SHINE THROUGH

Robert Deutsch's *Turing* keeps a teddy bear in his night-table drawer, wears a gas mask to protect himself from hay fever whilst cycling, ties a clock to his waist to remind him to stop for teatime, and chains his teacup to his office heater to keep his colleagues from borrowing it. Supposedly captivated by the Disney film *Snow White*, the real-life scientist would also sing "*Dip the apple in the brew, let the sleeping death seep through*" (the song of the evil stepmother) whilst biking through the university campuses of Cambridge and Princeton. But while, in her story, Snow White is saved by love (a prince's kiss), this graphic novel's protagonist is doomed by love in his, as Alan Turing, known to most of us as one of the pioneers of the modern computer and a mathematician whose brilliance saved millions of lives during World War Two, was also a gay man in 1950s England, at a time when non-heterosexual orientation was still a prosecutable offence.

The chronicle begins on June 7, 1954 in Wilmslow, Cheshire. A housekeeper walks up to and through the open door of a house where she finds Turing, lying deceased in his bed. Flashback to Manchester, three years earlier: Turing, standing in front of a cinema, encounters blue-eyed blond-haired Arnold Murray and invites him for a drink. Turing's naïve sensibility quickly becomes apparent as Murray convinces him to foot the bill (he will later steal money from Turing's wallet, the morning after their first sexual liaison). A young boy mercilessly taunts a neighbouring customer's sausage dog from outside the restaurant window, humorously echoing Murray's sway over Turing, whose affection for the young man is immediate and (as we will later discover) fiercely loyal.

The narrative proceeds with Turing's daily life and work at the National Physical Laboratory in Teddington, London where he is building the super-machine, an artificial brain which he hopes one day to put into the hands of the average citizen, enabling them at last, he says, to be on a par with the intellectuals of the day.

A series of strange break-ins at both Turing's home and office (orchestrated by a friend of Murray's) lead us to the crux of the story, when, in trying to protect his lover from being accused of the crime, Turing confesses his romantic affair with Murray to the police. At this point the officials accuse him of being in direct



violation of paragraph 17 of the UK Criminal Law Amendment Act (asserting homosexuality to be an illegal and prosecutable offence). Turing is given the choice between incarceration or hormone therapy. He chooses the latter and, as the treatment takes effect, we see his mind and body progressively disintegrate over the course of the treatment, while his rights to perform research are revoked and his personal life is disrupted by constant surveillance.

Exhausted and exasperated, at the end of the book Deutsch's Turing wanders into the woods where, flanked by his imaginary fairy-tale companions Snow White and the seven dwarves (who appear intermittently throughout the story), he takes his own life by eating an apple that he has poisoned. In reality, the forty-one-year-old Turing took his life with cyanide poison, and, although a half-eaten apple was found by his bedside, no connection between the apple and the poisoning was ever verified.

Robert Deutsch's images are painted in acrylics with a childlike simplicity which seems to echo Turing's character as he depicts it. His use of close-ups, alternate perspectives, and panels spanning across pages reveal his skill in maximizing the storytelling potential of the comic genre. Deutsch's debut graphic novel is a charming, humorous and clever character study of this great mathematician and computer pioneer, focusing less on his much-chronicled accomplishments during World War Two and more on his individuality and courage in the face of unjust prosecution. When we contemplate the influence of Turing's scientific accomplishments in so many aspects of contemporary life in the Western world, this graphic novel also acts as an urgent reminder of the potential consequences to the many when wielding unethical and discriminatory laws against the few.

By [stef lenk](#)

Biography and sample translated by Madeleine LaRue

HAMED ESHRAT

Hamed Eshrat was born in Tehran in 1979 and studied Visual Communication at the Berlin Weißensee Art Academy and Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand. He works as a designer, freelance artist, and author in Berlin. In his first graphic novel, *Tipping Point – Téhéran 1979* (published in French by Éditions Sarbacane), he tells the story of his family's experiences during the political upheaval in Iran in the 1970s. *Venustransit* was selected as one of the ten finalists of the Berthold Leibinger Comic Book Prize in 2015. He draws inspiration for his graphic narratives from theatre, film, literature, painting, and music

PUBLICATIONS:

Nieder mit Hitler! Oder warum Karl kein Radfahrer sein wollte, words by Jochen Voit, avant-verlag, 2018
Venustransit, avant-verlag, 2015

REINVENTING SISYPHUS IN BERLIN

The goals of art and literature should not necessarily be limited to reflecting on what has gone wrong in the world, but should rather extend to examining how we might work towards solving its – and our – problems. In today's intellectual climate, rife with critics, doomsayers and dystopian novels, *Venustransit* offers a refreshing change, speculating on life, love and a possible future for Berlin emerging from the continued evolution of a city already famed for its resilience in the face of oppression.

The protagonist of *Venustransit*, Ben is an illustrator who makes his daily living as a programmer. Finding himself in a creative lull, all Ben's drawings become populated with the dour character of Sisyphus rolling a huge ball of what seems like yarn up a hill, only for it to repeatedly unravel and roll back down. Here, Eshrat's sketch-like pencil drawings with no formal frames give us the feeling of being allowed small intimate glances into Ben's personal world.

Ben's stress, working overtime, and cynicism are taking their toll on both him and his girlfriend Julia, who, soon after the book begins, has had enough of Ben's depression and insists on having some time apart. Ben, hoping to save the relationship, returns home one night with a conciliatory surprise gift of two flight tickets to India, only to see that Julia has moved out of their apartment and taken all of her belongings.

Devastated, he haunts the city's streets and nightclubs trying to accustom himself to what his friends proclaim to be his "new freedom" but finds himself emotionally unable to move past the break-up. Desperate for a change, Ben heads off to India alone, where three months of chaos, contemplation, and drawing brings him a new kind of inner peace.

He returns to a Berlin that is still in the grip of urban tension and undergoing feverish gentrification. Brooding unrest reaches its peak in a food-fight between neighbourhoods, when hiding behind a symbolically significant Guy Fawkes mask doesn't prevent Ben from being hit with the (decaying) fruits of the conflict. During this time he meets Imma, also an illustrator; the wheels of change start rolling as they get together and Ben quits his much-resented job.



An art competition surfaces, promising €10,000 to the winning artist/s who can incorporate both the theme of "risk" and an innovative use of the massive Haus Der Statistik building at Alexanderplatz in the city's centre into their project. With the help of his friends, one of whom works at the *Tagesspiegel* (a major Berlin newspaper), Ben stages a V for Vendetta style hijack of the media, projecting a false news story on the building's facade that announces a government initiative to implement basic income and what they christen a "dual Sisyphus" reform, where jobs are to be split in two to solve the problem of ever-increasing overtime for some and consistent unemployment for others. This wins them the €10,000, which they use to undertake their own act of regeneration: founding a communal media collective to be run by the people working there instead of the profiteers.

In 1989, a botched (and televised) press conference caused tens of thousands of East German citizens to flock to the borders of the Berlin Wall, overwhelming confused guards who were persuaded to open the gates, and initiating reunification. Here, in a story about people power tailored for twenty-first century Berlin, *Venustransit* insists that the impetus for change in the city still lies in making sure that the (r)evolution will be televised. And in a time where the distribution of fake news by so many of our media outlets is being called the "new normal," the new normal has never looked so promising.

By [stef lenk](#)

Biography and sample translation by Zaia Alexander

HAMED ESHRAT, VENUSTRANSIT [VENUS TRANSIT]

Berlin: avant-verlag, 2015, 256 pages
Sample translation: pp. 14–27

WHERE A DAY IS A YEAR IS A LIFE

Contemporary German writers and comic artists are tackling some of the most challenging issues that humanity faces today. Many of these problems are not to be found on the front pages of the newspapers, but nonetheless affect the lives of us and our loved ones directly, such as the role of the elderly in the wider context of social life.

At the outset of *Der Sommer ihres Lebens* we meet Gerda, a woman quietly living out her golden years in an old-age home, mind flitting restlessly and nostalgically over the events of her past. As she walks through the darkened hallways of the home, trying to remember which floor her room is on, a number on the wall by the stairway catapults us back in time to her school days. An outstanding student with a particular aptitude for mathematics, young Gerda consistently outshines the other (male) students, despite their perpetual teasing and rebuffs. Growing into an immensely talented physicist, she is offered a job as her male professor's assistant (he promptly escorts her to her office in the basement). Ambitious and hard-working, Gerda burns the midnight oil with endless study and an almost manic disregard for all things not work-related.

It is by chance that she meets Peter, a bartender and musician who supplements a world beset by discipline and research with romantic love and emotional fulfilment. But as part of a generation not yet fully liberated from the expected domiciliary role of women in partnerships, Gerda cuts short her career aspirations, turning down an assistant professorship at Cambridge University to pursue a family life with him.

All Gerda's heretofore buried career ambitions resurface upon her discovery that Peter is having an affair. Their divorce is followed by her relentless efforts to catch up with contemporary research and technology, a return to work at the university, and at long last, a life of personal autonomy and happiness.

Der Sommer ihres Lebens draws to an end with an incident in young Gerda's research lab where a colleague tries out his "soul detector" machine on all the scientists present (all men, except for her) to find that only she has a soul. It is this soul that wanders off through peaceful fields as one of the nurses comes into her room to discover that the elderly Gerda has died quietly in her sleep.

Barbara Yelin is not new to narratives with strong women characters who have been nudged to the sidelines of history. Her previous works *Irmina* and *Gift* revolve around women who broke boundaries and laws and then all but disappeared from collective German history, and her work on Channa Maron's biography focuses on this girl star of the Weimar Republic turned dedicated activist. Yelin is thus at the forefront of comic artists filling the gaps of patriarchal history with some of its most significant and interesting women protagonists. Yelin is a member of the Spring Collective, a group of women comic artists who celebrated the tenth anniversary of their yearly self-produced comic anthology *Spring* in 2014, situating Germany as a country with one of the most prominent movements of women comic artists in Europe.

Der Sommer ihres Lebens, illustrated beautifully in washes of watercolour and lively sketch-like pencil contours, has a dream-like quality, and yet takes on universally recognizable themes with compassion and ardour. Both a contemporary parable and a cautionary tale about aging and feminism, the book reflects the rich inner tapestry of the lives of the elderly as well as the potential hazards of familial commitment that intellectually subjugates women in what is still very much a male-dominated world.

By [stef lenk](#)

Biography and sample translation by John Reddick