Effi Briest – in simple language

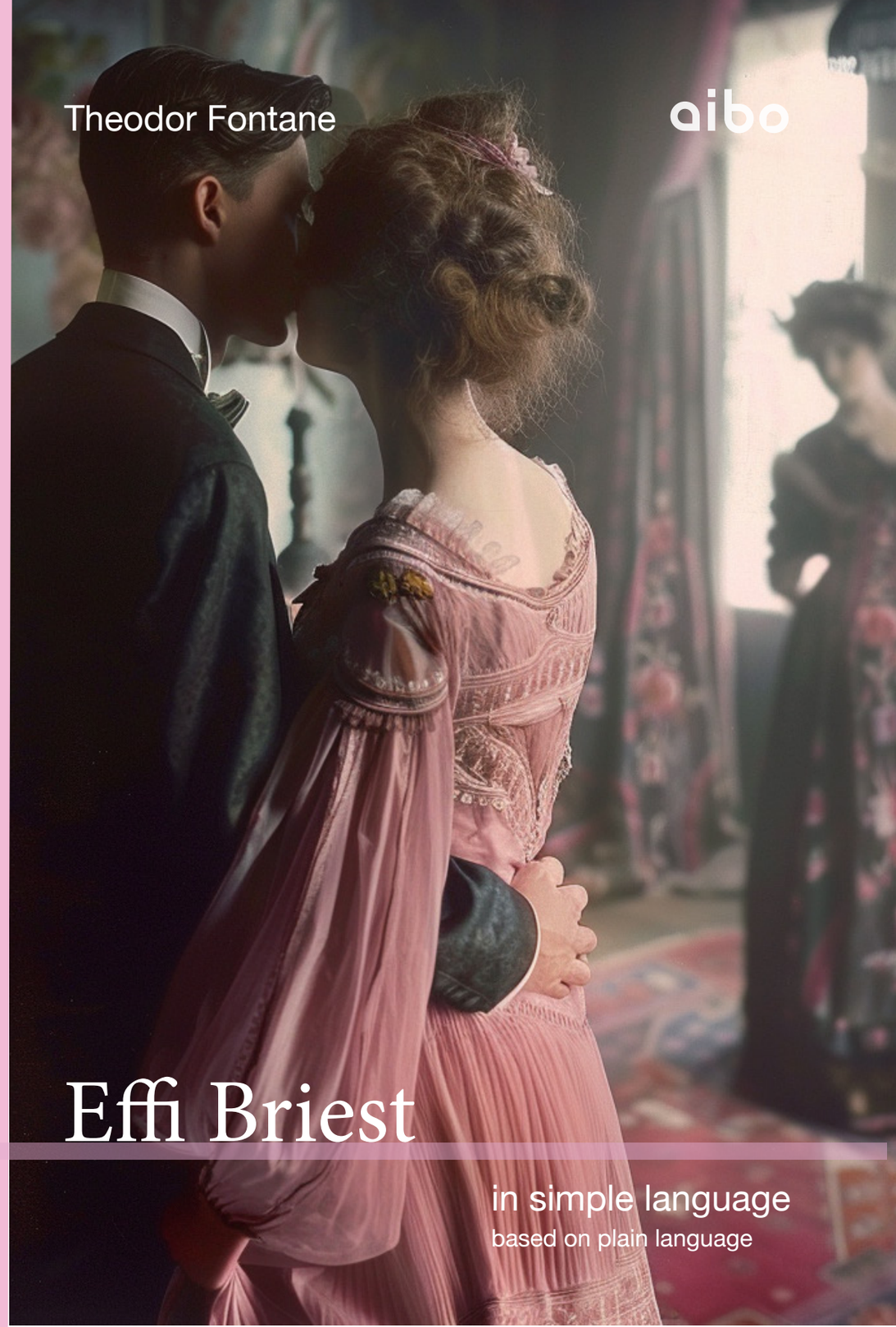
Theodor Fontane‘s best-known novel is published in simple language for the first time. It largely complies with the ISO 24495-1:2023 plain language standard. The content is also typographically designed to be particularly reader-friendly. The book is suitable for readers with limited reading ability and English as a second language.
This means that as many people as possible can enjoy reading and understanding one of Germany‘s most famous novels.

“Effi Briest“ is about love and freedom. A young woman is married at an early age. She is torn between her feelings and the strict rules of society. Her curiosity and zest for life are her destiny. She is caught between two men. They fight a duel. This is no longer in keeping with the times. But they don‘t know better.

The novel is set in 19th century Germany. It can be compared to the Russian novel “Anna Karenina“ or the French “Madame Bovary“. “Effi Briest“ became world-famous and was often made into a film. Theodor Fontane is considered a representative of poetic realism.

Effi Briest – in simple language

Theodor Fontane



Theodor Fontane

Effi Briest

in simple language
based on plain language

The most important characters

Effi Briest:
A young woman from a good family. Effi is sensitive and lively.

Luise von Briest:
Effi‘s mother is loving and understanding.
She cares about her daughter.

Ernst von Briest:
Effi‘s father, often just called “Briest“. He loves his daughter.
He is a bit strict. But he doesn‘t take things too seriously.

Hulda, Hertha und Bertha:
Effi‘s friends from her childhood in Hohen-Cremmen.

Baron Geert von Innstetten:
Effi‘s husband, an elderly civil servant and former officer. He is somewhat strict and lecturing.

Annie:
Effi‘s child.

Major Crampas:
An officer from Kessin and colleague of Baron Innstetten.

Roswitha und Johanna:
Effi‘s housemaids.

Wilke und Kruse:
Their servants.

Gieshübler:
A close friend of Effi‘s and acquaintance from her youth.

“Cousin Briest“:
Effi‘s witty and cheeky cousin (Vetter) Dagobert.
He lives in Berlin.

Dr. Rummschüttel:
Effi‘s doctor.

The most important places

Hohen-Cremmen:
Effi Briest‘s birthplace and parental home is located in the countryside somewhere in eastern Germany. Effi spends her childhood and youth there with her parents and friends. It is a place of security and family life.

Berlin:
Effi and her family visit Berlin occasionally. Effi also spends some time there alone. In contrast to Hohen-Cremmen and Kessin, Berlin is a big city with lots of people and impressions.

Kessin:
Kessin is a town by the sea in the Pomerania region. Effi lives there with her husband. The sea and the landscape in Kessin are wild and varied.

Recreational destinations:
Effi spends some time in the spa town of Bad Ems. They travel a few times, for example to Italy and Denmark.

Content

Chapter 1 - Page 5

Chapter 2 - Page 13

Chapter 3 - Page 17

Chapter 4 - Page 21

Chapter 5 - Page 31

Chapter 6 - Page 39

Chapter 7 - Page 48

Chapter 8 - Page 55

Chapter 9 - Page 60

Chapter 10 - Page 70

Chapter 11 - Page 80

Chapter 12 - Page 86

Chapter 13 - Page 91

Chapter 14 - Page 102

Chapter 15 - Page 106

Chapter 16 - Page 114

Chapter 17 - Page 121

Chapter 18 - Page 129

Chapter 19 - Page 138

Chapter 20 - Page 147

Chapter 21 - Page 157

Chapter 22 - Page 167

Chapter 23 - Page 175

Chapter 24 - Page 185

Chapter 25 - Page 200

Chapter 26 - Page 204

Chapter 27 - Page 209

Chapter 28 - Page 216

Chapter 29 - Page 221

Chapter 30 - Page 227

Chapter 31 - Page 232

Chapter 32 - Page 236

Chapter 33 - Page 247

Chapter 34 - Page 252

Chapter 35 - Page 258

Chapter 36 - Page 266

Chapter 1

The sun was shining on the old house of the Briest family in Hohen-Cremmen. It was midday. It was very quiet on the village street.
Part of the house cast a shadow. The shadow fell on a path with white and green tiles and on a round place. A sundial stood in the middle of the place. Rhubarb and other plants grew at the edge. Twenty steps further on, there was a wall with ivy next to a church. There was a small white door in the wall. Behind the wall was a tower with a shiny rooster on top. The house and the wall together formed the shape of a horseshoe. Inside the horseshoe was a small garden. There was a pond on the open side of the horseshoe. There was a jetty by the pond.
There was a boat on the jetty.

There was a swing next to the pond. It was hanging on two ropes.
The posts of the swing were already a little crooked. There were big old trees between the pond and the round square. They covered the swing a little.

At the front of the house was an area with plants and chairs.
Sometimes the sky was cloudy. Then it was pleasant there.
You could have a good chat there. Sometimes the sun was too hot.
Then people preferred to sit in the back garden. The woman and her daughter also preferred to be there today. They sat in the shade.
Behind them were windows with plants. Next to them was a small staircase. The stairs led to another part of the house.

Mother and daughter were busy. They sewed a carpet for the altar.
They put it together from many pieces. There were many woolen threads and silk threads on a table. There were also plates and a bowl of berries.
The women sewed quickly and accurately. The mother only ever looked at her work.

The daughter was called Effi. That‘s short for “Josefine“. Effi sometimes put her needle down. Then she stood up. She did gymnastic exercises. She liked to exercise and did it with love. She would stand there and slowly raise her arms. Then she put her hands together above her head. Mom looked up briefly from her handiwork. But she only looked secretly. She loved her child very much. But she didn‘t want to show it so directly.

Effi wore a dress made of blue and white fabric. A belt narrowed her waist. You could see her neck. A large collar lay on her shoulders. Effi was cheerful and pretty to look at. Her brown eyes shone with wisdom and joy. Everyone called her “the little one“. Because her mom was taller. She had to put up with that. Effi stood up and turned left and right. Her mom looked up from her work and said: “Effi, you could be a trick rider. Always on the trapeze. Always in the air. I think you‘d like that.“

Effi replied: “Maybe, Mom. But who‘s to blame? I got it from you. Or do you mean from Daddy? Why do you dress me in a smock like a boy‘s? Sometimes I think I‘ll soon have to wear short dresses again. Then I curtsy like a young girl again. And when adult visitors visit, I sit on their laps and play horse. Why not? It‘s your fault. Why can‘t I have nice clothes? I‘m dressed like a boy. But I‘d rather be a woman like you. Why don‘t you make a lady out of me?“

“Is that what you really want?“

“No.“ Then she ran to her mom. She hugged and kissed her tightly.

“Don‘t be so wild, Effi. I get worried when I see you like that.“ Mom wanted to say more. But then three girls came into the garden. They greeted Effi and quickly went to their mother, Mrs. von Briest, to greet her. Mrs. von Briest asked a few questions and asked the girls to stay

longer. Then she said: “I still have something to do. Young people like to be among themselves. Goodbye.“ She went up the stone steps. The stairs led from the garden to the side wing.

The young people were now alone. Two of the girls were short and round. They had curly, reddish-blond hair and freckles. They were always in a good mood. They were Cantor Jahnke‘s daughters: the twins Bertha and Hertha. The third girl was Hulda Niemeyer. She was Pastor Niemeyer‘s only daughter. She was finer than the other two. But she was boring and conceited. She had blonde hair and big eyes. Her eyes were always looking for something. Someone had said: ‘Maybe she‘s waiting for the angel Gabriel? Effi thought so too. But she treated all three friends the same. Especially at that moment.

Effi put her arms on the table and said: “This boring embroidery. Thank goodness you‘re here.“ Hulda said, “But we sent your mom away.“

“No, you didn‘t. She said she was going. She‘s expecting an old friend. I‘ll tell you a love story about him later. It‘s about love and renunciation. You‘ll be amazed. He‘s a district administrator. And he‘s very manly.“

“That‘s important,“ said Hertha.

“Yes, that‘s important. Women should be like real women. Men like real men. Dad says that too. Now let‘s clear the table. Otherwise there‘ll be trouble.“

They quickly tidied up. Then Hulda said: “Now tell us the story, Effi. Is it bad?“

“It‘s a story of sacrifice. And that‘s not a bad thing. But Hertha shouldn‘t stare at the gooseberries like that anymore. Take as many as you want. We can pick more later. Don‘t throw the skins away. Put them on the

newspaper. We'll make a bag out of them. Mom doesn't like to see shells lying around. You can slip and hurt yourself."

"I don't think so," said Hertha. She was now eating lots of gooseberries.

"Me neither," said Effi. "Think about it. I fall down a lot. But I've never broken anything. A strong leg doesn't break so easily. My leg certainly won't and neither will yours, Hertha. What do you think, Hulda?"

"You shouldn't gamble with your luck. Overconfidence can lead to a fall."

"You're always so serious. You're like an old woman without a husband."

"But I hope I still get married. Maybe even before you do."

"If you say so. Do you think I'm waiting for that? I'm sure I'll find someone soon. The other day, little Ventivegni said: 'Miss Effi, can we bet we'll have a party soon?"

"And what did you answer?"

"I said: 'Maybe, maybe; Hulda is the eldest and could get married any day. But he meant someone else. Someone with darker hair than Hulda. And then he looked at me. But I digress and forget the story."

"Yes, you always stop talking; maybe you don't want to."

"Oh, I want to tell the story. But it's all a bit strange and just almost like a story."

"You said he's a district administrator."

"Yes, he's a district administrator. His name is Geert von Innstetten, Baron von Innstetten."

All three laughed.

"Why are you laughing?" asked Effi. "What does that mean?"

"Effi, we don't want to annoy you or the Baron. Innstetten, did you say? And Geert? No one here is called that. But aristocrats often have names like that."

"Yes, that's true. Nobles have special names. They can get away with it. But you're not familiar with them. That's not a bad thing. We're still friends. Well, Geert von Innstetten is his name and he's a baron. He's the same age as mom, to the day."

"And how old is your mom?"

"38."

"That's a good age."

"Yes, especially if you still look like mom. She's beautiful, isn't she? And she always knows how to behave. Not like dad. As a young soldier, I would fall in love with mom."

"But Effi, you mustn't say that," said Hulda. "It's against the fourth commandment. It says: 'You shall honor your father and mother'."

"Nonsense. How can that be against the fourth commandment? I think mom is happy. But she doesn't know what I said."

"Maybe," Hertha then said. "But tell the story at last!"

“Baron Innstetten was not 20 years old. He was a soldier with the Rathenowers. He often visited the estates here. His favorite place was in Schwantikow with my grandfather Belling. But not because of my grandfather. Because of my mother. That‘s how she tells it. I think they both liked each other.“

“And what happened next?“

“What had to happen, happened. He was far too young. Dad was much older. When he came, he was already an important man and owned this house. Effi‘s mother might have preferred Innstetten. But Briest could look after her. Innstetten loved her too. So her mother didn‘t think twice. She married him and became Briest‘s wife. And what came next was me.“

“Yes, that‘s you, Effi,“ said Bertha. “Luckily we have you. What did Innstetten do? He took his own life? No, he‘ll be here soon!“

“No, he didn‘t take his own life. But it was similar.“

“Did he try?“

“No, he didn‘t either. But he didn‘t want to stay here. He didn‘t like the life of a soldier back then. It was peace. That‘s why he didn‘t have much to do and started studying law. He was very keen. When the war came in 1870, he went back into the army. But he joined a different regiment. He also received an award for his courage. After the war, he worked with documents and letters again. Bismarck and the Kaiser liked him very much. That‘s why he became district administrator in Kessin.

“What is Kessin? I don‘t know any Kessin here.“

“Kessin is not near here. It‘s far away in Pomerania. It‘s even in the back

of Pomerania. But that doesn‘t matter. It‘s just a seaside resort. Many places there are seaside resorts. Baron Innstetten wants to visit old acquaintances. He wants to see friends and family here again.“

“Does he have any family here?“

“Yes and no. There are no more Innstettens here. But he has distant relatives from his mother. He also wanted to see Schwantikow and the Bellings‘ house. He has a lot of memories there. He was there the day before yesterday and today he wants to come here to Hohen-Cremmen.“

“And what does your father say?“

“Nothing. He‘s not jealous. And he knows my mother. He jokes about it.“

It was midday. The servant Wilke came to Effi. He said: “Mother wants you to make yourself pretty. Father will be here soon.“ Wilke cleared the table. He wanted to take away the newspaper with the gooseberry peelings.

Effi said: “No, Wilke. We‘ll do it ourselves. Hertha, make a bag. Put a stone in it. Then it will sink better in the water.“ It was a game for Effie. The pond is the sea. Effi wanted to sink the bag in the sea. She said: “We all take a piece of the tablecloth. Then we sing something sad.“

“What should we sing?“ someone asked. Effi said: “Anything. It should rhyme with ‘u‘. ‘U‘ sounds sad.“ She suggested a song:

Flood, flood,
Make everything good again.