

# The Columbus Dispatch

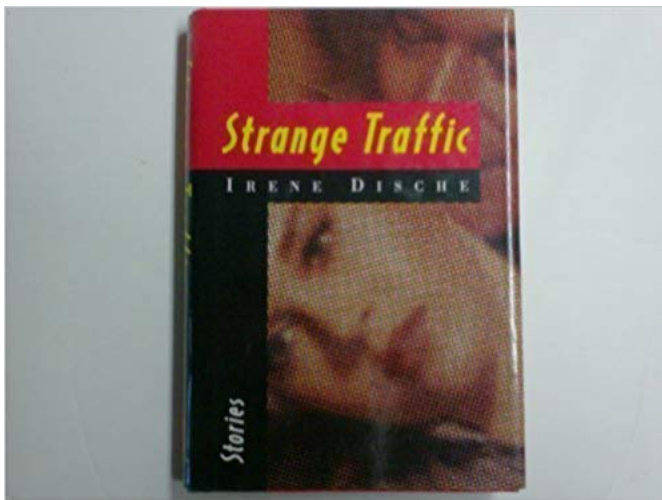
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## **DISCHE INVENTS QUIRKY CHARACTERS HAUNTED BY GHOSTS FROM THE PAST**

*Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch*

Irene Dische is an American who lives and writes in Berlin. She was in Libya during Moammar Gadhafi's 1969 coup. She worked for anthropologist Louis Leakey in Kenya after she dropped out of high school, and she later studied anthropology at Harvard University. Her novel *Pious Secrets* was a best seller in Germany, Italy and Holland. *Strange Traffic*, Dische's first short-story collection, is written with a quirky sense of humor, a provocative use of language and a reassuring attention to detail.

In these 11 stories, Dische flaunts her intelligent, witty style. Her prose, with its odd twists and turns, is almost as eccentric as her characters' lives. The characters themselves yearn for connection, love and stability in the chaos of the modern world.

The title story, *Strange Traffic*, is about Charles Allen, an American Jew whose father returns to Germany to reclaim property that was lost during the Third Reich. The father promises to return to America soon, but Charles and his mother never hear from him again. Many years later, Charles travels to Germany to claim the inheritance left to him

by his father. While there, Charles falls in love with Esther, the odd woman who manages his father's antiques shop. Esther's mother later reveals a shocking secret about her daughter's life.

In *A Prior Engagement*, middle-aged restaurateur Oliver Weinstock is forever scarred by his first love affair. He always carries in his breast pocket a love letter that he wrote in his youth but never sent to his lover. "What counts," Oliver says, "is not who loved you, but who did not love you. And how they did not love you."

*The Passion of Nanny Jackie* is the story of a young Irish nanny dispatched by a British agency to care for an aging, famous poet in New York. Hired by the poet's ex-wife on the basis of her photograph, nanny Jackie is told only that her assignment will be "unusual." The agency has slyly omitted from its records the statement made by a previous employer of nanny Jackie: "She suffers a premenstrual tension that could knock the Russian forces out of Afghanistan."

Herr Stein, an East German professor in *Portrait of a Defection*, plans to defect, not for political or financial reasons, but to escape the smothering attentions of his aged mother. Dische is a wholly original writer. Her stories are dark, strange and full of ghosts from the past that haunt her characters' lives. Her storytelling is pleasing in surprising ways: an unexpected kindness, a loathsome self-discovery, a dual capability for both virtue and malevolence.

Dische illuminates for readers her characters' inescapable histories, their uncertainties about the present and their fears of the future.

Columbus writer **Nancy McAllister** is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.