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Top 10 of book journalism

Recommendations for books by journalists

The idea of selecting and presenting the best books written by journalists is a project of the Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Vienna, co-founded by Hannes Haas (1957-2014) and compiled by Wolfgang R. Langenbucher and Fritz Hausjell. The project published its first recommendation list in 2002 in the quarterly journal *Message*, founded by Michael Haller. After the journal's discontinuation, the selections were documented in the magazine *Der österreichische Journalist* [*The Austrian Journalist*] starting in 2015. In 2020 and 2021 the publication of the recommendation list had to be temporarily suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The collecting of relevant books, however, was not: more than 100 copies were sent in for review during this period. With *Journalism Research*, a new medium for publication has been found where these Covid-19 related gaps will be closed at least partially. Starting in 2023, the project will return to a normal rhythm, publishing a recommendation list three times a year, each one containing three new books by journalists and one translated work, which will be reviewed in depth, as well as seven books which will be reviewed in briefs. For the selection of books published in 2020 and 2021 we will proceed differently since these books have already resonated with an audience, receiving (often journalistic) criticism. Therefore, we will summarize characteristic quotes of book reviews by daily and weekly newspapers.

Jens Bisky (2019): *Berlin. Biografie einer großen Stadt*. [Berlin. Biography of a great city.] Berlin: Rowohlt, 976 pages, 38 Euro.

»The post-reunification period forms the last major chapter of the book. It is a meticulous monograph and chronicle of the town, beginning at the end of the Thirty Years' War. Bisky himself says that he approaches his subject with

›sympathetic curiosity.« Hence, the reader needs leisure time, patience, and a ›special interest« to study him. But the reader will be richly rewarded as she/he will be able to solidify some half-knowledge with facts and make sense of a great number of names which may be familiar from street signs or may have been unknown to this point [...].

Bisky guides the reader in great detail through Berlin around the time of the founding of the German Reich. Neither the introduction of the first gas ovens nor the horse-drawn omnibuses nor the invention of the advertising column [the so-called Litfaßsäule] go unappreciated. He presents this all in a calm manner that does not vie for a punch line and with a stoic attitude pays tribute to everything that was significant to the lives of Berliners at the time [...].

Over the centuries, a proud repertoire of names for Berlin has been accumulated, Bisky says at the beginning of the book: Spree-Athens, Spree-Chicago, Parvenopolis, Babylon, Metropolis, drill ground of modernity, showcase of freedom, Pompeii of contemporary history, workshop of unity. Bisky's goal is to do historical justice to all these exaggerations. The result is a book of Berlin history that constantly deals with myths, but is careful not to mythologise itself. For that, the reader needs a lot of patience. But Berlin nights are known to be long ones.«

Katharina Teutsch: Deutschlandfunk Sendereihe »Büchermarkt« [program series »Book Market«], February 16, 2020.

Alexandra Borchardt (2020): *Mehr Wahrheit wagen: Warum die Demokratie einen starken Journalismus braucht.* [Daring more truth: Why democracy needs strong journalism.] Berlin: Dudenverlag, 224 pages, 18.50 Euro.

›Does civil society really want to afford an increasing threat to press freedom? For many years Alexandra Borchardt has been pondering the challenges facing the journalistic profession, not least in regard to a reanimated right-wing radicalism. Reading her book in the newsrooms as a little, daily guide should certainly ensure that the profession of journalism is once again seen for what it is: pretty great. And that readers and users will then also acknowledge the trust that has been shored up beyond Covid – that is something we can all wish for our democracy and for all of us.«

Beatrice Fischer: Neryt uns nicht mit »Lügenpresse«. [Don't bug us with »lying press«] In: Sächsische Zeitung, Dresden, April 14, 2020.

Judith Brandner (2019): Japan. *Inselreich in Bewegung*. [Japan. Island empire on the move.] Salzburg: Residenz, 224 pages, 22 Euro.

»Why is this book particularly worth reading? First and foremost because it is informative, entertaining, and stylistically excellent. Then there is the author's great empathy for her interviewees, the sympathy with which she describes people. But even more important than that is the fact that she holds up a distant mirror to us from Japan. All the topics she addresses concern us as well: the dangers of nuclear power and the ageing of society, dealing with one's own history and the question of the essence of one's own culture, the attitude towards strangers, and the imprints of a life laced with constant dangers and risks.

But it is precisely a mirror that seems so distant and thus distorted that brings the viewers closer to themselves than it seems at first glance. Judith Brandner has achieved this in an excellent and convincing way with her book on Japan.«

Vladimir Vertlib: Von Hiroshima bis Fukushima. [From Hiroshima to Fukushima.] In: Die Presse, Wien, February 8, 2020.

Roman Deininger (2020): *Die CSU. Bildnis einer speziellen Partei*. [The CSU. Portrait of a special party.] München: C.H.Beck, 352 pages, 24 Euro.

»It has long been common knowledge that the CSU party presents a special phenomenon in the European party landscape; that the party claims to have invented Bavaria and the white-blue sky along with it; that it unites a sense of power and hypersensitivity, rowdiness and whininess, faith in progress and folklore like no other party. And yet the essence of the Christian Social Union has hardly ever been so finely observed, cleverly analysed, and brilliantly written down than by Roman Deininger, who has achieved a rare feat with his book, *Die CSU – Bildnis einer speziellen Partei* [The CSU – Portrait of a Special Party]: It's a non-fiction book which is exciting and a pure pleasure to read.«

Peter Felkel: Profunde politische Reportage. [Profound political report.] In: Passauer Neue Presse, September 14, 2020.

Hans-Ulrich Grimm (2020): *Food War*. München: Droemer Knaur, 256 pages, 19,99 Euro.

»*Food War* is an English but catchy title for a German-language book. It does not refer to war between countries, but rather to the fact that food companies and

pharmaceutical giants put the health of their customers at risk in favor of their profits, at least according to the well-researched thesis of the author [...].

Grimm speaks of »auxiliary troops of sick, overweight, diabetic mothers who bring the bad products of Nestlé and Coca-Cola to the people in the favelas of the world,« as he summarizes the sore spot. And in doing so, he also doesn't give any credit to the German consumer either: »A person in Germany spends \$160 a month on food. But \$450 on health.« [...]

If the reader follows his line of argument, she/he develops a strong suspicion that there is a lot of corruption involved here, which, however, is not named in this way; after all, it must not be legally contestable.«

Uwe Spille: Knackige Abrechnung mit der Lebensmittel-Industrie. [Firm reckoning with the food industry]. In: Südkurier, March 26, 2022.

Elfriede Hammerl (2020): *Das muss gesagt werden.* [This needs to be said.] Wien: Kremayr & Scheriau, 240 pages, 22 Euro.

»This needs to be said. Again and again – even if it may sometimes be sad how little really changes. But some things do change now and then, even for the better. Since 1984, Elfriede Hammerl has been writing in *profil* about equal rights and discrimination, about part-time work and fools, about women and men and children and the rest of life.«

An »anthology of columns from the past ten years [...] that does a good job of showing what has changes and what hasn't during this time and how to face the situation confidently, i.e. with unwavering courage.«

N. N.: »Ich gebe ganz gern meinen Senf dazu«. [»I rather like giving my two cents.«] In: profil, Vienna, August 23, 2020.

Alice Hasters (2019): *Was weiße Menschen nicht über Rassismus hören wollen aber wissen sollten.* [What white people don't want to hear about racism but should know.] Berlin: hanserblau, 224 pages, 17 Euro.

»Alice Hasters is a journalist. That's where her hands-on style comes from, her eye for the concrete, the everyday. Her book *Was weiße Menschen nicht über Rassismus hören wollen aber wissen sollten* [What white people don't want to hear about racism but should know] is not an intellectual analysis of postcolonial imprints and attitudes. Alice Hasters, born in Cologne in 1989, starts with her own

experience of being a Black woman: the Capital letter B signifies that it is not simply an adjective, but a commitment [...].

Alice Hasters' autobiographical book makes clear how much the perception of the world still depends on skin colour today. At no point does bitterness or whininess arise: Hasters describes in a matter-of-fact way how difficult it was for her to find her identity [...].

For Alice Hasters herself, it was a painful but helpful process to publicly reflect on her identity. Her readers also benefit from this.«

Bettina Schulte-Böning: Fremde Frauen greifen ihr gern in die Locken. [Strange women like to touch her curls.] In: Badische Zeitung, October 12, 2019.

Emilia Smechowski (2019): *Rückkehr nach Polen*. [Return to Poland.] Berlin: Hanser Berlin, 256 pages, 23 Euro.

»*Return to Poland* is the title of Berlin journalist Emilia Smechowski's second book. And yes, one can certainly find parallels to Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims*. Like the French author and philosopher, Smechowski examines the political and social conditions in Poland, the country she left with her parents as a five-year-old a good 30 years ago. She wants to understand the contradictions of society, the rift in the country, which – to put it casually – can be divided into right and left, top and bottom, winners and those left behind. And it is a very personal search for her own Polish identity that the 36-year-old longs for today.

At the end of Smechowski's stay, the mayor of Gdansk, Pawel Adamowicz, is murdered. He stood for a united, cosmopolitan Europe, for Poland as a country where refugees are welcome, women are not second-class citizens, and homosexuals are not sick people. The perpetrator was a Pole, a convicted bank robber who believes he was wrongly imprisoned. He blames his imprisonment on the Civic Platform, which is now an opposition party but once governed, and to which Adamowicz also once belonged. [...]

The murder was on the minds of Poles from all political camps. But it did not unite the country. On the contrary, says Smechowski, both sides were using the crime for their own agendas. Adamowicz's supporters say the right now has ›blood on its hand‹ and calls Jaroslaw Kaczyński's national-conservative and EU-critical ruling PiS (Law and Justice) party a ›murderer.‹ The PiS in turn calls the opposition ›scoundrels‹ and ›snitches.‹ The tone is brutalised, one Pole hates the other and vice versa.

Everyone has their own truth, their own media, their own side in which they settle. That is how Smechowski experienced it. She says: The rift cannot be mended. But for the author personally, the year ends surprisingly positive: She has (re)

discovered her Polish identity – at at the funeral march for Adamowicz, of all things. Civil society, its urge for freedom and justice, is still alive. Smechowski senses that. She did not expect that.«

Simone Schmollack. Die Last der Freiheit wiegt schwer. [The heavy burden of freedom] In: Deutschlandfunk Kultur, Reihe Buchkritik [Program for Book Review] July 27, 2019.

Roger de Weck (2020): *Die Kraft der Demokratie*. [The force of democracy.] Berlin: Suhrkamp, 326 pages, 24 Euro.

»One of the best things about Roger de Weck’s polemic on the defence and modernisation of democracy is the Swiss journalist and economist’s spirited way of speaking up for liberal democracy, which is beset by populists«.

The former editor-in-chief of [the German weekly newspaper] *Die Zeit*, and later director general of the Swiss Radio and Television Company, could have adopted Winston Churchill’s well-known dictum from the peak of his experience. In other words, democracy is still the best of all bad forms of government available. Following that dictum, de Weck would have delivered a grumpy account of the imperfect form of state and government called democracy, with all its faults [...].

Roger de Weck is in a combative mood without being polemical. He calls for fighting the New Right, i.e. the reactionary opponents of democracy, with arguments. The second part of his book is dedicated to the backward-looking arsenal of reactionaries, the sometimes plain, often ignorant (keyword climate change), but always vociferous and often vile, hateful positions of the populists, which exhaust themselves in mere opposition and inconsistency, in the discourse of displeasure.«

Cord Aschenbrenner: Liberale Demokratie. Wider die Totengräber. [Liberal democracy. Counter the grave diggers.] In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, August 30, 2020.

Moritz von Uslar (2020): *Nochmal Deutschboden. Meine Rückkehr in die brandenburgische Provinz*. [German soil again. My return to the Brandenburg hinterlands.] Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 336 pages, 22 Euro.

»The appearance of Part One, *Deutschboden. Eine teilnehmende Beobachtung* [German soil. A participant observation], was published ten years ago, the experimental set-up back then very similar to the one now. It’s about a candid admission of mutual strangeness (a West German city reporter in a small East German town)

and it's about not merely exhibiting this strangeness with the dreary routine of distancing that is just as tediously cultivated on Twitter as, for example, on [German TV] RTL II's program *Frauentausch* [Women switching]. The point is to first of all find the strangeness good and then to trust in the reporter's method adopted from the American Gay Talese, ›The fine art of hanging around,‹ i.e. going there, hanging out, seeing what happens, or what doesn't, which is often even more intriguing [...].

Nochmal Deutschboden [German soil again] is simply a good document of our time. To read about how people booze and rabble-rouse in small-town pubs like »Scheißladen« [Shit shop] or in the Schröder restaurant provides a more accurate picture than a mere number on a colour-coded map showing results of electoral districts«.

Cornelius Pollmer: Nach den Rechten sehen. [Looking for the right.] In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, April 16, 2020.

Bonus: A translated work

Ezra Klein (2020): *Der tiefe Graben. Die Geschichte der gespaltenen Staaten von Amerika.* [Why we're polarized] Translated by Katrin Harlaß. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 384 pages, 25 Euro.

»The 36-year-old Ezra Klein is a journalism prodigy: He started out as a left-wing blogger, built up the explanatory section Wonkblog at the *Washington Post* and founded the media company Vox at the age of 29. His study of the polarisation of U.S. society, which is readable despite the many numbers, begins with a fact that has been suppressed in Europe: the 2016 U.S. presidential election was not particularly special.

Klein masterfully summarizes studies by social psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists to explain the growing polarisation. He provides good insights into how Trump was able to conquer the Republican Party, how the U.S. Supreme Court justices became trophies, and what the influence of ›Fox News‹ has been. Klein's tone is matter of fact and he doesn't hide that he is a progressive urbanite [...].

Klein's book certainly won't age as quickly as many Trump biographies.«

Matthias Kolb: USA. Ein Land, zwei Planeten. [USA. One country, two planets.] In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, November 2, 2020.