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The 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.

Stephan Lamby (2022): *Entscheidungstage. Hinter den Kulissen des Machtwechsels.* [Decision days. Behind the scenes at the handover of power.] Munich: C.H. Beck, 382 pages, EUR 22.

In this book, Lamby once again works in the style of an unobtrusive documentary maker, putting together sequences and allowing the audience to think for

themselves. Apart from his brief description and his quotations, he provides little in terms of interpretation; there are no lengthy theoretical treatises on the essence of politics. Yet he also expands his field of vision, interviewing not only professional politicians, but also actors in civil society, such as pianist Igor Levit. He provides commentary on the surreal mood during the pandemic and attempts to interpret the period from the point of view of a dedicated artist. Even the voice of one of the early covid deniers is heard, providing a basis on which to gage how far totally new movements in society are able to influence political events – and the extent to which they feed off a sense of mistrust in the established parties, in this case the CDU. [...] In his cool, unobtrusive style, Stephan Lamby has successfully produced a book that delivers exactly what others merely promise – a comprehensive story of our times. It describes the political status quo with frugal means, and is the novel on the center of power that everyone has been waiting for.

Nils Minkmar: Chronist des Chaos. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 7 December 2021

Cerstin Gammelin (2021): *Die Unterschätzten. Wie der Osten die deutsche Politik bestimmt.* [The underestimated. How the East shapes German politics.] Berlin: Ullstein, 305 pages, EUR 23.

This book is not only fascinating in terms of content – it is also a clear, deliberate attempt by the author to write a new, positive history of the East Germans. Gammelin makes it clear right from the foreword that her book is not one whose descriptions are far removed from their subjects: She herself was born in Freiberg, Saxony, and her personal experiences are frequently woven into the text. She knows the disruption that is part of so many East German biographies. It is obvious when reading the book that the idea was to write not about people who moan all the time, but about people who have achieved something and whose achievements have been underestimated, as the title suggests. Cerstin Gammelin's book attempts to tell stories that are otherwise seldom told, to give new insight into the five East German states, and to build bridges. It is recommended not only for those born after reunification, but also – perhaps especially – for those who were born in the West while Germany was still divided and who themselves remember the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Katharina Hamberger: Wählergewicht. In: Deutschlandfunk, 16 August 2021

Natalie Amiri (2021): *Zwischen den Welten. Von Macht und Ohnmacht im Iran.* [Between two worlds. On power and powerlessness in Iran.] Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 256 pages, EUR 22.

Natalie Amiri – a German journalist of Iranian origin – reported from Iran as ARD correspondent for six years, until 2020. She has now described her experiences in an outstanding book: *Zwischen den Welten – von Macht und Ohnmacht im Iran.*

What gave her, a young woman who had grown up under Western values and codes of behavior – the strength to risk all her personal and professional freedoms and to report as a correspondent from a country in which almost all foreign media has been banned and where those who remain in the country live constantly in the shadow of repression? The author's answer is short: her love of the country and its people. Fortunately, Natalie Amiri does not appear in the book merely as a correspondent in love with her country, but instead clearly sets out her own viewpoint and ensures absolute transparency by disclosing her data, figures and results of her research and interviews. She explains that she works within the priorities of the ARD news magazine as a German public service broadcaster and covers the news and topics that appear important in this context. No more, no less.

Fahimeh Farsaie: Eine heikle Liebesgeschichte. In: Iran Journal, 19 March 2021

Anna Clauß (2021): *Söder. Die andere Biographie.* [Söder. The other biography.] Berlin: Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, 176 pages, EUR 20.

Anna Clauß, who worked as a journalist for *Der Spiegel* for many years, has written an extremely interesting book about Markus Söder that is well worth reading. [...] In it, she outlines with great precision a portrait of a power and attention seeker who has burning ambition, seeks success without considering others, is hard on himself and others, and is highly flexible. Who has used all this to achieve his goal of becoming Chair of the CSU and Minister President of Bavaria – despite enormous resistance from both inside and outside the party and despite clear weaknesses in terms of content. And, in my view even worse, despite a clear lack of interest in other people.

Dem Zeitgeist hinterher. Ein Gastbeitrag von Philipp Lengsfeld. In: Cicero, 6 May 2021

Patrick Budgen (2021): *Einsiedler Krebs. Wie ich aus dem schlimmsten Jahr meines Lebens das Beste machte.* [Hermit crab. How I made the best of the worst year of my life.] Vienna: Edition a, 208 pages, EUR 20.

Writing in the style of a diary, Budgen tells of the shock and fear that came with a life-threatening illness, the treatments and their side effects, his doubts and hopes – and his absolute incredulity at the fact that, at exactly the same time, the lives of everyone else in Austria had also slowed down – and ultimately stopped altogether – as a result of the pandemic. Suddenly it was not only he, the invalid, who was wearing a mask – everyone else was too. Not only was he keeping his distance: staying six feet apart was now a question of health for everyone. Journalist and »news junkie« Budgen fastidiously followed every twist and turn of the pandemic and, at first, could not decide whether being so seriously ill during the covid-19 pandemic was especially bad, or actually the lesser of two evils. On good days, he writes in the book, he thought that »at least he wasn't missing anything.« There was a happy ending for Patrick Budgen: He responded quickly to chemotherapy and the side effects were not too extreme – and he did not catch covid. In his words, his book is a mixture of »self-therapy and an attempt to encourage others in the same situation.«

Petra Stuiber: Happy End eines Horrorjahres. In: Der Standard, 14 April 2021

Gabriela Keller (2021): *Bereit für den Untergang: Prepper.* [Ready for the downfall. Preppers.] Berlin: Das neue Berlin, 224 pages, EUR 18.

Gabriela Keller is an experienced journalist. As a reporter, she travelled to Syria and Yemen, Iran, and Lebanon – countries that either have suffered upheaval through war or are at least plagued with chronic instability. In her book *Bereit für den Untergang: Prepper*, however, the prize-winning German author reports on the growing number of people – largely men – who are preparing for the end of their reality in Germany, with its running water, heating, and well-stocked fridges. For a cosmic apocalypse, civil war, or even just a widespread blackout lasting many weeks, to lead to killing, looting, and the disintegration of human society. This is the end of civilization for which the preppers, whom Gabriela Keller found to be »normal, average Germans with normal, average lives« during her research, want to be prepared.

Gabriela Keller has succeeded in producing a comprehensive and readable analysis of the state and troubles of being a German prepper. [...]

While retaining a critical distance from the excesses of prepping, Keller still manages to avoid judging her protagonists. Their post-apocalyptic visions often

appear to glorify past times, she says. »What many of them share is the longing for a purer, clearer world that they believe has been lost.« In her view, prepping is therefore always also a form-critical analysis of the present. Preppers should therefore be taken seriously, as their preparations for societal collapse say a lot about the state of the world in which we live.

Andreas Förster: Durchschnittsdeutsche. In: Freitag.de, 18 March 2021

Aiko Kempen (2021): *Auf dem rechten Weg? Rassisten und Neonazis in der deutschen Polizei.* [On the right path? Racists and neo-Nazis in the German police.] Munich: Europa Verlag, 240 pages, EUR 20.

Kemper succeeds in getting close to this shadowy world. A particularly interesting section of the book explains how their experiences in everyday policing can turn police officers into racists. Once policeman is quoted by Kempen as saying that some colleagues become radicalized in their role. Through their work, police officers are confronted with a very unfavorable section of the population, some of whom have an immigrant background. This results in »experience-based police knowledge,« which is always applied as a matter of course and ultimately turns into racial profiling – common police practice, despite being banned by the courts. The police are simply not a reflection of society, argues Kempen: There are not enough women or people with immigrant backgrounds in uniform, with the police instead attracting those with more authoritarian characters. This occurs not least because police trainees become part of an insular »police family« right from day one, which has high potential for identification and, due to shift patterns, quickly becomes the main point of contact for trainee police officers. Their team solidarity – so crucial during operations – comes at a high price: strategic ignorance and failure to call out colleagues. This binds the team together, but also means repercussions for those who break the »omertà.« This is another reason why the author conducted his numerous interviews with both current and former police officers almost exclusively under total anonymity.

Lena Kampf: Ziemlich viele Einzelfälle. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1 August 2021

Dirk Laabs (2021): *Staatsfeinde in Uniform. Wie militante Rechte unsere Institutionen unterwandern.* [Enemies of the state in uniform. How militant right-wingers are infiltrating our institutions.] Berlin: Econ, 449 pages, EUR 24.

Since his collaboration with Stefan Aust »*Heimatschutz. Der Staat und die Mordserie des NSU*,« if not before, Laabs has been considered the expert on violent right-wing radicalism in Germany. According to him, the situation is serious. Presenting a great deal of never-before-seen evidence, he takes his shocked readers into a shadowy realm of uniforms. Above all, he says, the bodies responsible for resisting the subversive efforts he has uncovered need to be alerted. At the moment, they are still »only« working towards a day far in the future. But it is vital to remain vigilant and prepared.

Harald Loch: Mit gehöriger Geringschätzung. In: nd-aktuell.de, 8 August 2022

Martin Steinhagen (2021): *Rechter Terror. Der Mord an Walter Lübcke und die Strategie der Gewalt.* [Right-wing terror. The murder of Walter Lübcke and the strategy of violence.] Hamburg: Rowohlt, 304 pages, EUR 18.

Steinhagen, who followed the case at Frankfurt State Court, takes the murder as the starting point for a comprehensive examination of the far-right scene. His book goes far beyond those that usually follow large criminal cases – beyond a detailed compilation of collected court reportages. His greatest achievement lies in putting the murder into context. He repeatedly links the biography of the murderer Stephan Ernst to both the dynamics of the far-right scene and developments in society as a whole. It is a very insightful combination. The reader gains precise insights into right-wing extremism today, its protagonists and their (of course) excellent connections, and its structures that have grown up over decades.

The author is also precise in getting to the bottom of things that have often been discussed rhetorically, such as the phrase »words become deeds.« He provides detailed analysis of what was happening online in the years leading up to the murder, how the mood there bore evil fruit in the real world, and what effect the climate in society can have on those who are essentially willing to commit violent acts. Steinhagen describes all this in a sober, pathos-free tone. Where necessary, he takes the time to make clear distinctions. And the tone is sympathetic where it matters – when he talks about the victims and their friends and family.

Marlene Grunert: Die Gefahr, die immer da war. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 24 August 2021

Joachim Wagner (2021): *Rechte Richter. AfD-Richter, -Staatsanwälte und -Schöffen: eine Gefahr für den Rechtsstaat?* [Right-wing judges. AfD judges, state prosecutors and jurors: a threat to the constitutional state?] Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 194 pages, EUR 29.

Lawyer Joachim Wagner sees political opinions in court rulings as a warning sign. Until recently, he says, judges who were members of political parties remained moderate. Yet now some of them who are members or sympathizers of the AfD are overstepping the mark. In Germany, state prosecutors and judges are allowed to be members of political parties; once they don the robes, the constitutional state trusts them to discharge their duties of jurisdiction with political neutrality.

Now, however, lawyer and journalist Joachim Wagner believes that some lawyers, namely members of the AfD, are attempting to make policy from the courtroom. In his book *Rechte Richter*, Wagner describes cases in which – in his view and sometimes in the view of rulings under disciplinary law – lawyers have gone too far. A former Deputy Chief Editor in the ARD Berlin studio and presenter of ARD's political magazine show *Panorama*, he does not consider this phenomenon a risk to the constitutional state at the moment. »In a sense, the book is a wake-up call to nip this in the bud,« Wagner emphasizes.

Axel Rahmlow: Ein Weckruf an den Rechtsstaat. In: Studio 9, Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 2 September 2021

Bonus: A translated work

George Orwell (2022): *Reise durch Ruinen. Reportagen aus Deutschland und Österreich 1945.* [Traveling through ruins. Orwell's reports from Germany and Austria in 1945.] Munich: C.H. Beck, 111 pages, EUR 16.

The book *Reisen durch Ruinen* is a collection of Orwell's reportages from March to November 1945. As a war reporter for the Allies in Germany, he had a front row seat from which to document the fall of National Socialism. The volume, published by Beck, also includes three of his articles on Germany from 1940, 1943, and 1945. These texts remain absolutely fascinating to this day, describing the situation at the end of the Second World War clear-sightedly and without prejudice.

Many of Orwell's predictions did ultimately come true – for example that the Soviet Union and the USA would come to dominate global politics as superpowers. As early as 1940, he writes in his review of *Mein Kampf* that Hitler must be taken at his word and would go to war against Russia. Adopting the ideas of Thomas Mann, he also clearly determines what made the Nazis so attractive to

people: the total commitment, the eternal break from oneself, for which one is prepared to do anything, up to and including self-destruction.

Juliane Liebert: Rache ist eine Phantasie der Machtlosen. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 17 December 2021

Translation: Sophie Costella