

Books

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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. It found its new home, *Journalism Research*, in 2022.

1. **Antonia Rados (2022): *Afghanistan von innen: Wie der Frieden verspielt wurde*. [Afghanistan from inside: How peace was thrown away.] Vienna: Brandstätter, 328 pages, EUR 25**

»The fronts are everywhere« was the title that Antonia Rados gave to her two lectures on the poetry of journalism as the University of Vienna's Theodor Herzl Lecturer (Picus Verlag 2009, ed. Hannes Haas). A legendary reporter with decades of experience in travelling to and researching one of these fronts – Afghanistan –, she now reports on this oppressed country in the style of a contemporary history chronicle. The result is a magnum opus that not only demonstrates the exemplary work of this well-known Austrian television reporter, but also bears witness to a generation of international women war reporters who have gently shaped our understanding of a – largely unpeaceful – world over the last few decades. Rados' story begins with the Soviet forces' invasion of Afghanistan and

ends many decades, many crises, and many changeovers of power later with the withdrawal of the Western military and aid workers and the catastrophic consequences of this decision. There have been few quiet times along the way – and many dangerous ones for journalists. Some of the passages describing what they have faced take the reader’s breath away, as we see how survival can depend on professional experience or even just luck. Journalism can be fatal, as Reporters Without Borders regularly reports. Having survived all these dangers herself, Antonia Rados has developed an almost encyclopedic knowledge over the decades. With her dramatical journalistic experience and an admirable presence, she has now transformed this enormous knowledge into a book that is a fascinating read despite its large scope and format. Reading the book, it is tragic to learn how the disaster in which the country now finds itself is the result of a long succession of political mistakes and failures. It is impossible not to wonder whether journalists might not have a better idea of what to do, given their more comprehensive and sensitive perception of the situation. Their truth is certainly confronted with that of the army of press officers and press spokespeople who flood the Western audience »with persistent rain and announcements and videos« (p. 195) and »misused facts« : »Manipulation is the norm« (ibid.). The book’s final chapter is entitled »Run for your lives« and documents 2021’s undignified evacuation (including many photos, as throughout the book). Kabul fell to the Taliban once again. Yet Antonia Rados ends on an optimistic note: »The sun rises in the East.« Her final sentence: »Yesterday is not over in Afghanistan.«

2. Erhard Stackl (2022): *Hans Becker O5. Widerstand gegen Hitler*. [Hans Becker 05. Resistance against Hitler.] Vienna: Czernin Verlag, 416 pages, EUR 28

Once you know it is there, the sign on the outside wall of St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna is impossible to miss: O5. Most people pass by without noticing. But the symbol is actually part of a dramatic chapter in Austria’s unhappy history. It is the symbol of a resistance organization that emerged in late 1944, centered around Hans Becker (1895-1948). A group whose aspirations were bold and, under the murderous Nazi regime, potentially fatal. They saw themselves as the core of a future Austrian government and wanted to gain the attention of the world. Even today, many decades after the end of the War and in a democratic age, this group and its protagonists do not receive the kind of recognition they deserve in Austria – the kind that is afforded to other groups such as the White Rose in Germany, for example. Former *Profil* and *Standard* journalist Erhard Stackl saw this as good reason to conduct broad-based research into the topic of »resistance against Hitler.« With the skill of a storyteller, he organizes an impressive quantity of content chronologically, tracing the life of Hans Becker: pilot officer,

scientist, head of public relations for the Dollfuß government in the corporative state (Vaterländische Front [Fatherland Front]), prisoner in Dachau and Mauthausen, organizer of resistance against the Nazi occupation and, after the War, his country's ambassador to Chile, where he was murdered at the age of 53. His wife then had to fight a shamefully long battle to force the Austrian government to provide financial support for her and their children. A major part of the book's appeal is its enlightening and significant discoveries, such as Becker's description of a coincidental attendance of a speech by Hitler in Munich before 1933. Becker calls Hitler a dangerous semi-fool who attracts loser types over anyone else. He also accidentally ends up at an upscale evening event where he observes that even wealthy, genteel members of the bourgeois had fallen under the spell of the »hysterical man.« Similar passages teach the reader to remain vigilant even today. With so many changes of role, Becker is not an easy »hero« for a biographer. But he is an appealing figure whose old world charm allows him to attract people to him even in Chile – just as, in the most difficult of times, he succeeded in winning over so many Austrians to the resistance.

3. **Lars Haider (2022): *Das Phänomen Markus Lanz. Auf jede Antwort eine Frage.* [The phenomenon of Markus Lanz. A question for every answer.] Essen: Klartext Verlag, 320 pages, EUR 25**

There are now so many talk shows on public and private television channels that it is difficult to keep track of them all, let alone watch them all regularly. While they undoubtedly have a loyal audience, many colleagues, intellectuals, media critics, and academics take a more skeptical view, with some even rejecting or hating the programs entirely. The reason? This television format has instigated a problematic development in the culture of political debate. Yet it remains rare for anyone to explicitly address the issue – perhaps because the mass of material has become unmanageable. A short book by young political science researcher Oliver Weber (*Talkshows hassen. Ein letztes Krisengespräch.* [Hating talk shows. A final crisis meeting.], Stuttgart 2019) did attract some attention. Nonetheless, the succession of programs continued, their content and effect changed significantly through the dramatic course of time. It is therefore very useful to analyze at least one of these formats, *Markus Lanz*, in detail. Chief Editor of the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, Lars Haider, whose portrait of Olaf Scholz received widespread acclaim in 2022, took on the time-consuming task. Anyone who has not watched *Lanz* for a while might be surprised by this interest – but this will change once they read the study, which is backed by a rich body of material and intensive research. After all, »this is the story of a transformation that has rarely, perhaps never, been seen before in German television.« In short, a program that few took seriously

has developed in the minds of many into »the best political talk show.« Lars Haider proves this theory by »living with Lanz« constantly for the first half of 2022. What makes the constant stream of visual impressions the experienced political journalist enjoys so passionately into a noteworthy document, however, is the way in which he contextualizes the material. Most significantly, we learn about the unimagined impact that all this talking has on political careers and decisions. Combined with the effect of (anti)social media, this has changed the country's political culture in quite a problematic way – notably by weakening its parliaments. The perfect example of this was the pandemic, during which more than a few parliamentarians and functionaries appeared enthusiastically on *Lanz*, robbing the Bundestag of its dignity.

This book is as surprising as it is commendable. It documents the wealth of aspects involved in a program like this, which one tunes into without much thought and without ever suspecting what an influential part of the modern political system it has become.

4. **Mark Schieritz (2022): *Olaf Scholz. Wer ist unser Kanzler?* [Olaf Scholz. Who is our Chancellor?] Frankfurt /M.: Verlag S. Fischer, 176 pages, EUR 20**

The subtitle of this book by *ZEIT* journalist Mark Schieritz – Who is our Chancellor – has been a recurring question in the public discourse since Olaf Scholz took office. The book's answers focus less on the life and career of Scholz the politician and more on his political thought. Scholz' understanding of politics is reconstructed here, and it quickly becomes clear that this understanding has a system and continuity that inspires confidence. We learn that one does not become Chancellor of Germany by accident, but because one has a universal idea for this country and its future and pursues it with consistent passion. Scholz' philosophy of respect is much more than a campaign slogan – it is a vision of the future to counteract (the failure of) neoliberalism. Mark Schieritz describes how Scholz attempts to turn this idea into practical politics, making the book also an introduction to how to govern under the very difficult conditions of today's media world. Contrary to some prejudices about the silent Chancellor, his political tool is the instrument of negotiation. This often remains hidden in day-to-day reporting. But none of today's problems can be solved without negotiation.

5. **Danny Schlumpf, Mario Nottaris (2022): *Das Rentendebakel. Wie Politik und Finanzindustrie unsere Vorsorge verspielen. Und warum kaum Zeit für Reformen der zweiten Säule bleibt.* [The pensions debacle. How policymakers and the financial industry are gambling away our pensions. And why time is running out to reform company pensions.] Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 219 pages, EUR 28**

This might be a thin book about the pension problems of a small country, but the issue of pensions and security in old age is much more universal. The ongoing protests in France are proof of that, and pensions are a constant issue in Germany, too. The political debate largely centers around two key aspects: the pension age and democratic change. Both call the current principles of the system into question. Switzerland introduced fundamental reform four decades ago: Since 1985, anyone who undertakes paid work in Switzerland has to pay into an old-age pension fund. This results in enormous sums being accumulated on an annual basis and in total. The two journalists – Danny Schlumpf from *SonntagsBlick* and Mario Nottaris from SRF ZV – subject this system, which policymakers have regulated and controlled too little over the decades, to merciless critique. Pension issues in every country are so complicated that few non-experts can understand them. This book demonstrates the useful role journalism can and must play in this regard.

6. **Bettina Dyttrich (2022): »Es hilft, dass ich Leute anschreien darf«. Schweizer Popmusiker:innen erzählen.** [»It helps that I am allowed to shout at people.« Swiss pop musicians tell their stories.] Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 271 pages, EUR 44

Bettina Dyttrich, born in 1979, is an editor at the »left-wing« (its own description) weekly paper *woz – Die Wochenzeitung* published in Zürich. Her previous books have looked at environmental topics, but she has been interested in pop music, specifically in Switzerland, since her youth. The result is an astonishing work: comprehensive, informative, and fascinating to read, thanks to having been produced with all the proven means of journalistic research and presentation. Even those who have never delved deeper into the culture of pop music, but are now trying to understand it as a signature of the times through its omnipresence, will find all the facts and background on this musical world here. The status of pop music has long been demonstrated by the relevant music critique found in many quality media today, and is now honored monographically for Switzerland in this book by Bettina Dyttrich. The photos by Florian Bachmann and Tatjana Rüegegger make it truly enjoyable to read.

7. **Daniel Kalt (2023): *Staat tragen. Über das Verhältnis von Mode und Politik.*** [Wearing the state. On the relationship between fashion and politics.] Vienna: Verlag Kremayr & Scheriau, 216 pages, EUR 24

As a cultural technique, journalism has tried-and-tested ways of addressing pop culture phenomena – as demonstrated by this book from Daniel Kalt, editor at daily newspaper *Die Presse*, on the relationship between fashion and politics. Anyone who regularly, or indeed occasionally, watches political programs on television will be able to picture all the notable manifestations in the relationship between fashion and politics without much thought. Using the style of an ambitious essayist and a wealth of information, Daniel Kalt gives us an enlightening, sophisticated view of the targeted design of modern politics, which is all too often defined more by image than by content.

8. **Stefan Ulrich (2022): *Und wieder Azzurro. Die geheimnisvolle Leichtigkeit Italiens.*** [Azzurri again. The mysterious lightness of Italy.] Munich: dtv Verlagsgesellschaft, 366 pages, EUR 13

Stefan Ulrich actually holds a doctorate in law, but he made his first successful forays into journalism as a college student and joined the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* at a young age, holding various roles before being appointed Rome correspondent in 2005. This post was to define his future writing destiny. Every one of the books he went on to publish in quick succession was a success and helped many people to get their bearings when travelling to Italy. The same can be said for this title, in which he makes yet another fresh start in the country, this time spending two months travelling north to south from the Brenner Pass to Sicily (a journey of 4,012 kilometers!) in order to answer a question from his daughter: »Why are you so passionate about Italy?« Structuring his answer in 29 chapters, he takes the reader with him on a literary (Goethe...), cultural, culinary, and sociological journey of discovery that has a huge amount more to offer than the usual travel literature. Stefan Ulrich is an enthusiastic journalist who knows exactly how to entertain and enrich his audience.

9. **Raimund Löw (2022): *Welt in Bewegung. Warum das 21. Jahrhundert so gefährlich geworden ist.*** [World in motion. Why the 21st Century has become so dangerous.] Vienna: Falter Verlag, 224 pages, EUR 22.90

Some new publications that fall under book journalism are compilations of texts, reportages, editorials, comment pieces, and any number of other journalistic

genres that have already been published in periodicals – a process sometimes sarcastically termed ‘bookbinder journalism.’ Raimund Löw, born in 1951, shows here in impressive form how one can republish one’s work from a decades-long career in such a way that it gains current, topical value. The book is structured by theme and brings together the wide range of different worlds from which the long-standing ORF correspondent reported. His technique turns daily news items into political events on the world stage with a historical depth of focus, and sets them in the context of the situation and time in which they were written. This is not Raimund Löw’s first book, but it is one that places him firmly among the legendary generation of great foreign correspondents who shaped, and continue to shape, our view of the world.

10. **Armin Thurnher (2023): *Anstandslos. Demokratie, Oligarchie, österreichische Abwege.* [Without complaint. Democracy, oligarchy, how Austria has gone astray.] Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 126 pages, EUR 19**

Armin Thurnher has long since reached retirement age. But it is not a limit that applies to journalists, especially when the times and the politics are turning the kind of pirouettes that would not have been imaginable just a short time ago. An Austrian political critic who has long been a legend in his own right cannot stay silent when something that he has been castigating for decades in his Vienna weekly newspaper *Falter* and his many books is coming to a head. When it comes to those in power today, an expletive is the only word he can think of. But there is one small glimmer of hope: The state of the uncomplaining is running out of people; »no state can endure this kind of weakness at the top forever« (p.126).

Extra: a translation

Wojciech Rogacin (2022): *Selenskyj. Die Biographie.* [Zelensky. The biography.] Polish-German translation by Benjamin Voelkel. Berlin u.a.: Europaverlag, 256 pages, EUR 20

With the situation in world politics remaining precarious, not only the works of English-language journalists are regularly being published, but also – decades after the translation boom by Ryszard Kapuściński (1932-2007) – the latest book by a prominent, renowned Polish journalist, Wojciech Rogacin, born in 1968. With his biography about Zelensky, he has written a work in a genre that has become a journalistic classic in many political cultures. Astonishingly, even people just starting out on their political careers receive the honor of a biography

today. The Ukrainian President, too, is still relatively young, but the unprecedented fate of this country has made him a figure about whom people want, indeed need, to know as much as possible. Rogacin's book meets this need with an overwhelming wealth of information, voices, observations, and interpretations, in part fed by his geographical proximity. Given that Ukraine has not enjoyed great prominence in public and journalistic perceptions in recent years, there was not a great deal of archived material to choose from. That makes the number of sources that Rogacin found to combine with his research even more impressive. We learn a great deal about Zelensky's years as an artist and businessman in particular, and his great successes in cabaret, on the stage and on television («Ukraine's richest showman,« p. 91), before he decided to pursue a political career. That career got off to such a promising start that critical observers both in Ukraine and abroad were rarely surprised by the quite exemplary way in which he mastered the change in role forced upon him by Putin's attack. Just as he had played the stages of his country with the greatest of success during his existence as an artist, he now made use of every modern instrument of communication to turn the world into a stage for himself and his country. This transformation and new start were no coincidence, argues Rogacin convincingly in his analysis; it was our Western lack of knowledge, indeed ignorance, that failed to see this unique Ukrainian culture. Anyone who consumes the current reporting should be familiar with this richly illustrated biography. It teaches us more about the background that makes this war unique: the self-delusions of a dictator and the political impact of a great stage talent. What will happen in the future is frighteningly unknown. But this unusual President, Rogacin believes, is already a »world-class personality« (p. 249).

Translation: Sophie Costella