

Books

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The top 10 of book journalism

Recommendations for books by journalists

A project by the University of Vienna's Department of Communication, the idea of selecting and presenting the best books by journalists was co-founded by Hannes Haas (1957-2014) and is compiled by Wolfgang R. Langenbucher and Fritz Hausjell. The first edition was published in 2002 in the quarterly journal *Message*, founded by Michael Haller. When that journal ceased publication, the book recommendations were documented in the magazine *Der österreichische Journalist* [The Austrian journalist] from 2015. This was interrupted in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. In 2022, a new place of publication was found: *Journalism Research*.

Translation: Sophie Costella

Places 1 to 3

1. Evelyn Roll (2023): *Pericallosa. Eine deutsche Erinnerung*. [Pericallosal artery. A German memory.] Munich: Droemer Verlag, 428 pages, EUR 26.

Evelyn Roll made her debut as a book journalist with her biography of Oskar Lafontaine in 1990, before rising to fame as a deskman at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, where she was a member of the Berlin editorial office and regularly sketched Chancellor Angela Merkel throughout her long premiership. Her reportages on a diverse range of topics won a host of prizes and were highlights of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* legendary page 3. But followers of her work could not have guessed that, alongside this, she had shifted into scientific journalism and become an expert

on the brain. »Why do I know all this? Why did I become kind of obsessed with brain research in the years before my own brain exploded? Pure coincidence probably. But an interesting coincidence« (p. 19). The illness forced upon her a terrible journey of suffering and rehabilitation that lasted more than a year; but it brought us readers a unique journalistic piece.

Journalists have written autobiographical books about all kinds of illnesses. But has there ever been anything like this before? A writer with deep knowledge of modern brain research who is able to see what is happening, to understand the details of the operation, from the inside out – rather than as an external observer? Another fascinating aspect is the way that this process of illness and healing opens up the »catacombs« (p. 433) of her memory and reveals a family history that extends from the Nazi era, through the early days of the Federal Republic, to the present day. The book thus has three layers: It is about the pericallosal artery in the brain and miracle of her operation and recovery; it explains leading modern research into the human brain (»Almost everything we know about the brain today would have been considered unimaginable thirty years ago« (p. 157)); and, in a totally different genre, it is a novel about a family tragically caught up in contemporary events.

On the question of what we owe to this journalistic work, which can only be described as spectacular, Evelyn Roll puts it this way: »Writing always goes a step further than remembering« (p. 319). The ability to do so goes beyond the »usual« journalistic craft (which Roll certainly learned, including in an academic context) and can be placed alongside the rare gifts of art, music and literature.

2. Herbert Lackner (2023): *Als Schnitzler mit dem Kanzler stritt. Eine politische Kulturgeschichte Österreichs*. [When Schnitzler fought with the Chancellor. A political and cultural history of Austria.] Vienna: Ueberreuter, 206 pages, EUR 25.

Herbert Lackner began his career at the social democratic *Arbeiter-Zeitung* (1981–88), before moving to Austria's leading news magazine *profil*, initially as a head of department. He then spent 23 years as Chief Editor until 2015, playing an enormous role in shaping the magazine. With a doctorate in journalism, even then he often complemented his pieces on Austrian domestic politics with contemporary history topics. Since his retirement, Lackner has published his latest journalistic achievements predominantly between the covers of books – although there have been some exceptions, including pieces for *Zeit* and his old stomping ground, *profil*. His work *Die Flucht der Dichter und Denker. Wie Europas Künstler und Wissenschaftler den Nazis entkamen* [The flight of poets and thinkers. How Europe's artists and scientists escaped the Nazis] was published in 2017, followed in 2019 by *Als die*

Nacht sich senkte. Europas Dichter und Denker zwischen den Kriegen – am Vorabend von Faschismus und NS-Barbarei [When night fell. Europe's poets and thinkers in the inter-war years – on the eve of fascism and Nazi barbarism] and, two years later still, *Rückkehr in die fremde Heimat. Die vertriebenen Dichter und Denker und die ernüchternde Nachkriegs-Wirklichkeit* [Return to the foreign homeland. The exiled poets and thinkers and the sobering post-war reality].

The fourth volume in this series focuses on the »culture wars« in Austria over the last 100 years or so. Often fierce, the battles occurred both in the elite cultural sector and in popular and lifestyle culture – on the one side conservatism, Catholicism, Austro-fascism, national socialism, and antisemitism; on the other, democratically-minded people who wanted a freer way of life and progressive options for shaping it. In 18 chapters, Lackner provides enlightening insights for a broad audience in an easily comprehensible form. He refers to specialist literature from various disciplines of cultural science, although the list of references at the back of the book shows that he omits the subject he himself studied. However, Lackner also makes intensive use of the full text search in the comprehensively digitalized newspaper and magazine library at the Austrian National Library (»Anno«), enabling him to provide numerous personal links between the individual scandals and conflicts.

The story to which the book's title refers provides encouragement for threatened art and culture (and presumably also press freedom). The year is 1929. The Federal Chancellor of the time, Ignaz Seipel of the Christian Social Party, set about intensifying his »fight against filth and trash.« He invited authors like Arthur Schnitzler, whom he had subjected to fierce antisemitic slurs a few years before, to the Metternich-Saal hall, presumably to test the possible reactions of his opponents. Schnitzler was supported by some fellow campaigners and argued with the Chancellor in a civilized yet decisive way. As a result, the government made no further attempt to intensify the »Filth and Trash Act« (p. 42-49).

3. Isabel Schayani (2023): *Nach Deutschland. Fünf Menschen. Fünf Wege. Ein Ziel.* [To Germany. Five people. Five journeys. One destination.] Munich: Verlag C.H.Beck, 319 pages, EUR 26.

In the book's epilogue, Isabel Schayani – a television and online journalist for WDR, presenter of the ARD program *Weltspiegel*, and winner of multiple prizes for her work – identifies seven pieces of a jigsaw that could help to resolve an enormous issue facing humanity, namely »flight and displacement.« In part, she contributes one of these pieces herself, with former judge at the European Court of Human Rights, Angelika Nußberger, telling her: »Our work as journalists, reporters, photographers can help by reporting and making situations visible. So that the exceptional does not become the norm, and the violation of law becomes clear.« This is

exactly what Schayani does in and through her book. On the first 220 pages, she uses a clear structure and a great deal of detail to describe the very different refugee experiences of five people whose lives she has followed often for years. The portraits transmit great closeness, are the result of great curiosity, and bear witness to both the journalists' empathy and her ability to meet people on an equal footing.

But the book offers even more than these outstanding, deep insights into world of experience that are largely unknown to most of us. Schayani not only wants to provide points of access – she wants to use her journalism to explore solutions. She therefore asks four relevant actors (from politics, justice and academia) the same five questions:

- »1. How significant is the issue of flight and migration for the future? Which values should guide us in dealing with it?
2. Who should be granted protection and who should not?
3. Which routes should people use to reach us?
4. How high should the walls be?
5. Do you have models or positive examples from which we can learn? Which solutions are effective and humane?» (p. 236f.)

At the start of the penultimate section, Schayani writes: »My son Kilian then said, if an equal footing and constructive thoughts are really important to you, why don't you let the five that have been refugees speak here?» (p. 281). She was clever enough to put this idea into practice. These pages are a very worthwhile read. In the final epilog, her multi-level work forms the basis for the aforementioned seven jigsaw pieces that can be used to find solutions to this challenging issue. Stretching to 15 pages, the footnotes provide numerous sources, while a reference section lists useful literature and websites for more detailed information.

With this book, Isabel Schayani has succeeded in creating a masterpiece of constructive journalism that we recommend both to young journalists at the start of their careers and to those with responsibility in politics and administration.

Numbers 4 to 10

4. Harald Fidler (2023): *So funktioniert Österreichs Medienwelt. Mechanismen, Machtspiele und die Zukunft der Medien.* [How Austria's media world works. Mechanisms, power games, and the future of the media.] Vienna: Falter Verlag, 231 pages, EUR 24,90.

In recent years, investigations by state prosecutors have confronted parts of Austria's media world with serious allegations of corruption, leading to the

resignation of both Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and his press officer. Some of these allegations regarded generous advertising contracts awarded in feudal style to those media that took a line in favor of the government. Two chief editors and one ORF state director were forced to resign after becoming compromisingly close to leading politicians. The Constitutional Court ruled that parties' influence over appointments to the steering committees of public service broadcasters must be reduced. Two daily newspapers have closed over the last year, reducing diversity to just twelve titles. At the same time, large waves of redundancies at ever shorter intervals are creating a great deal of uncertainty at most media houses.

The country's most influential and best-informed media journalist, Harald Fidler, works at daily newspaper *Der Standard*. He invited colleagues to write pieces covering the widest possible range of topics, in order to record the status of journalistic media in Austria today. At the same time, the book attempts to explain to a wide audience why journalism is still needed despite the multitude of new channels providing information of all kinds. An important book and one that we can only hope has not come too late.

5. Erich Kästner (2023): *Resignation ist kein Gesichtspunkt. Politische Reden und Feuilletons*. [Resignation is not a standpoint. Political speeches and features.] Edited by Sven Hanuschek. Zurich: Atrium Verlag, 239 pages, EUR 23.

Significant birthdays often give rise to journalistic publications, especially when, as here, they coincide with the anniversary of a death. This is not always cause for celebration, given the tendency to simply repeat content. But this year, both 125 years since the birth and 50 years since the death of Erich Kästner, we are treated to a very worthwhile volume from Zurich's Atrium Verlag. Kästner was a journalist and theatre critic in his younger years, and must have written »many thousands of articles already by 1933.« As he grew older, his focus increasingly turned to feature writing. This new volume offers 43 texts that show him as a political author (and speaker). Details on this are provided in the »Editorial note« on page 203f., while the editor offers useful information on Kästner's early journalistic achievements on pages 193-199.

As Sven Hanuschek fittingly states, »[d]espite the undoubtable historicality of the texts, [Kästner] repeatedly addresses topics that are still relevant to us today – questions of satire and censorship, populism and increasing nationalism, war, armament, and forgetting.«

6. Christoph Franceschini, Artur Oberhofer (2023): *Das Geschäft mit der Angst. Die Fakten und Hintergründe zum Masken-Skandal. Ein Südtiroler Wirtschaftskrimi.* [The business of fear. The facts and background on the mask scandal. A South Tyrolean financial crime story.] Bolzano: edition arob, 606 pages, EUR 28,50.

Reading this South Tyrolean financial crime story, which extends into Austria and Germany, paints a nightmarish picture. Its 606 (!) pages set out deals for procuring materials urgently needed to fight the covid-19 pandemic from spring 2020. Many of the materials were damaged and thus are assumed to have endangered the health of medical staff and people at risk of infection.

The book is well structured with fascinating illustrations. Reporting in a purely objective way, the two authors – two renowned journalists from South Tyrol – leave readers to draw their own conclusions: »We simply tell what happened« (p. 10). Their writing is based on data from more than 10,000 pages of documents, hundreds of hours of telephone recordings, and countless WhatsApp messages – investigation material gathered by the Carabinieri special unit NAS from numerous house searches, phone taps and seized cell phones.

7. Paul Krisai, Miriam Beller (2023): *Russland von Innen. Leben in Zeiten des Krieges.* [Russia from the inside. Life in a time of war.] Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 200 pages, EUR 24.

A thin book, but packed full of information on the question everyone has been asking themselves regarding media reporting since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: »How does one work under censorship?« (p. 28). The admirably brave answers come from two ORF correspondents who worked in Moscow until 2023. In the epilogue, they state openly that »in the time during which we experienced Russia from the inside, this country turned into a belligerent dictatorship« (p. 194).

Frightening questions: For how long will they – and the numerous representatives of other media – still be able to report as openly as they did before? Are they, and their successors, safeguarded enough during their postings in Russia, so that they do not need to fear Putin's unjust justice?

8. Peter R. Neumann (2023): *Logik der Angst. Die rechtsextreme Gefahr und ihre Wurzeln.* [The logic of fear. The far-right threat and its roots.] Berlin: Rowohlt Berlin Verlag, 208 pages, EUR 22.

One criterion is adhered to rigorously in the choice of publishing products: The product must be by a journalist. This is usually simple to define; overlap with political or non-fiction writing is rare. The author of this book is a professor of security studies, i.e. an academic. Yet his publisher also notes that Neumann writes for the *Spiegel* and the *New York Times*, among others. This clearly has an impact and enables him to be considered a book journalist – as he is here. Similar examples are becoming more frequent, not least thanks to the help of literary agents, editors, and imaginative publishers. We readers are the beneficiaries, gaining knowledge on a controversial topic communicated first-hand in a journalistic style.

9. Adam Soboczynski (2023): *Traumland. Der Westen, der Osten und ich.* [Dreamland. The West, the East, and me.] Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 170 pages, EUR 20.

The book market itself offers further proof of the great extent to which Germany (and Austria) benefit from being an open country of immigrants. It is hard to miss – especially in novels. One person who has contributed to this highly successfully is the journalist Adam Soboczynski, who moved to Germany from Poland and today heads up the Literature department at *Zeit's* feuilleton. A broad spectrum of writing – including this thin volume with its rich content – now testifies to what this migrant journalism teaches us: a deeper, better knowledge of today's society.

10. Bettina Musall (2023): *Das kann gut werden. Wie der Einstieg in den Ruhestand zum Aufbruch in ein neues Leben wird.* [This could be good. How retirement can be the start of a new life.] Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 303 pages, EUR 24.

I must admit that this book also affects me directly: I will be retiring in six months' time, while my co-author Wolfgang R. Langebucher has been professor emeritus for some years. Having worked all my life, I can now kick back and enjoy the fruits of my labor. But it also means making do with less. Bettina Musall was an editor at *Spiegel* from 1985 to 2021 and now, as a freelance author and journalist living in Munich, has successfully transitioned into a new phase of her professional life by researching and writing this book.

She has studied the findings of psychotherapists, sociologists and researchers into ageing extremely thoroughly, consulted relevant celebrities, and asked about the challenges and opportunities that arise with the sometimes sudden start of a new phase of life, with a very different daily routine. The wide range of aspects and options that Musall addresses in the book, and her avoidance of explicit recommendations, means that the guide speaks to readers on an equal footing – a pleasant and absorbing read that is also excellently written.

Extra: A translation

John Vaillant (2023): *Die Bestie. Wie das Feuer von unserem Planeten Besitz ergreift. Fire Weather: The Making of a Beast*. Translated from English by Iris Hansen and Teja Schwaner. Munich: Ludwig Verlag (Penguin Random House), 526 pages, EUR 24.

Who does not remember the images of the fires that destroyed large areas of Europe and the world in the summer of 2023? Or the shocking fire at Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral in 2019? Why are we being overwhelmed by disasters like this? How do they happen? And why can they not be prevented? This extensive book provides answers to these and numerous other similar questions to an encyclopedic, academic standard. Its author is John Vaillant (*1962) – a journalist, bestselling author (*The Golden Spruce: A True Story Of Myth, Madness, And Greed*) and writer for leading English-language magazines who was born in the USA and now lives in Canada. Reaching far into history to examine its subject, his latest book demonstrates the preliminary work that journalism must conduct and the shaping it must be capable of in order to address a topic like this appropriately. A look at the appendix clearly demonstrates this: The notes on the 500 pages of text extend to 37 pages, the bibliography three pages, and the list of interviewees (»Acknowledgements«) four pages.

This monumental journalistic work is dedicated to »scientists and visionaries,« i.e. the central institution of our civilization, to whose service it devotes itself as an intermediary. The facts and knowledge that Vaillant has painstakingly brought together and worked through with the attention to detail of a reporter are worthy of sheer admiration. With the wide-ranging style of a storyteller, he makes the material – which is impossible to ignore – clear and concise for the reader and puts it into context. A topic that simply looks like an incomprehensible disaster when we watch news reports thus becomes a fascinating theory of fire. In science terms, there are still countless questions here whose answers are in need of research. Already, the monster that is fire is leaving behind apocalyptic

devastation greater than that of a hydrogen bomb (p. 128). As the world's population continues to grow, we are creating the technical and climatic conditions that continually give this monster new, more convenient food. Vaillant's descriptions of devastated towns are horrifying – and recognize that fire is taking control of our planet. Every match is a global fire.