

The top 10 of book journalism

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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

Numbers 1 to 3

1. Franziska Augstein (2024): *Winston Churchill. Biographie*. [Winston Churchill. Biography.] Munich: dtv, 615 pages, EUR 30

The days in which Franziska Augstein was defined as the daughter of *Der Spiegel* founder Rudolf Augstein are long gone – the journalist and historian's own journalistic oeuvre is too large and impressive for that. Her latest book, on the British Prime Minister of the years 1940-1945 and 1951-1955, has been the subject of lyrical celebrations in the German-language feuilleton – and rightly so. It is the same reason why the work is in first place here, too. The *Berliner Zeitung* calls it a »brilliant book« that is »pure pleasure« to read: »The reader does not even notice how much he is learning, because he is constantly laughing out loud over the author's sophisticated humor and the biting sarcasm of the legendary British Prime Minister.«

»Franziska Augstein has produced a magnificent biography of this politician,« writes Wilhelm von Sternburg in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*: »She has knowledgeably embedded Churchill's life in contemporary history. Linguistically, reading it is a pleasure.« In Vienna's *Presse*, Günther Haller writes that the new biography »captivates with empathy and distance.« He continues, »With his 150th birthday coming up at the end of November, we will read a lot about Winston Churchill this year, about his unfaltering heroism and about the no small number of characteristics worthy of criticism. The German-speaking world already has the enormous joy of a Churchill biography for which it is hard to imagine how it could be better.« The author, Haller goes on, has succeeded in achieving »a brilliant balancing act between empathy and critique.«

In his discussion of the book in the Bonn *General-Anzeiger*, Kai Pfundt notes that Augstein has withstood two »temptations«: »Firstly, she does not put the main character on the pedestal of infallibility. Quite the opposite. Again and again, she applies herself to the flaws in Churchill's character and the unassuaged ambition that accompanied him his whole life, his opportunism, and his sometimes disastrous decisions.« Secondly, he continues, she does not condemn the »politician born in Victorian England [...] by today's standards«: »He does not think much of women in influential positions, he does not question the class barriers of British society, he treats the non-white inhabitants and politicians of the countries of the global British Empire with contempt. Augstein states all this clearly, without condemning Churchill for it as a child of his time.«

Like many other reviewers, Werner Vogt refers in his piece in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* to the enormous wealth of literature that already exists on Churchill, albeit 90 percent of it in English. »In the last three decades, there has not been a German Churchill biography that could compete with this in terms of quantity and quality.« Vogt is also impressed with the language that historian and journalist Augstein uses to convey her comprehensive research: »Augstein's book reads like a novel.« »Franziska Augstein is a meticulous history writer, always places what she is describing in a greater context, and knows how to sketch the characters of the protagonists memorably. In this book, she has succeeded in finding the perfect balance between empathetic understanding and sober distance.«

2. Rainer Hank (2023): *Die Pionierinnen. Wie Journalistinnen nach 1945 unseren Blick auf die Welt veränderten.* [The pioneers. How female journalists changed our view of the world after 1945.] Munich: Penguin, 367 pages, EUR 28

»These journalists paved the way for a ›feminism,‹ even though, or perhaps because, they did not make their gender and their disadvantage a subject of

discussion. They did not need to work to appear tough. They had no choice but to assert themselves in the male world. Their voices radiated something new that had never been heard before. Today's journalists of all genders stand on their shoulders without even knowing it,« writes Rainer Hank in the prolog to his book, appealing for more historical awareness in journalism (p. 13f.). But there may also be other reasons for the way Hank feels these pioneers are dismissed. For one, the media industry in the first decades following 1945 appears to have treated female journalists as second-class citizens when awarding prizes for journalism. Secondly, biographical research in journalism studies and communication sciences (then known as newspaper studies) has also focused disproportionately on the male journalistic elite.

Anna von Münchhausen notes in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*: »None of them was guided by old role patterns. Solidarity with women? They were not interested. Instead, their goal was equal rights, as part of a broad-based effort to achieve emancipation in the young Federal Republic in the years leading up to 1968.« In her discussion of the book in the Swiss newspaper *Weltwoche*, Germanist and journalist Dagmar Just makes an accusation against the author: »But the longer one reads, the stronger the impression becomes that the whole thing is intended as a polemic against the modern zeitgeist. A cunning attempt to play yesterday's women off against today's women and thus to position the Grandes Dames of journalism against what seem to be the author's three favorite enemies: feminist activists, cancel culture, and the anti-American attitudes of some in the '68 generation.«

The forgotten pioneers of journalism from 1945 do appear to have been chosen arbitrarily. Few left-wing journalists are represented among those portrayed. That gives rise to a few questions: Did even fewer of them return from exile than among their colleagues? Did the recruitment of young journalists from 1945 focus primarily on bourgeois men? Apart from these questions, Just has a specific criticism of Hank's selection: »Twelve of the thirteen women belonged to the same social class, the wealthy daughters, born between 1900 and 1927, who were able to study and work for pleasure; they did not need to make a living. Three of them were countesses, eleven came from good middle-class or upper-class families, and even later many had solvent husbands or ›breadwinners,« as Hank calls them, behind them. Alice Schwarzer, the thirteenth and youngest, born in 1942, was the only one who, as an illegitimate child born on the bottom rung of society, had to grind out her path to the top of the opinion-leading elite.«

But Dagmar Just also attests a »strength« of Rainer Hank's book: »that it has the courage to polarize with portraits of once-influential women and to inspire the reader to read the original texts with a critical eye.« Perhaps it also provides inspiration to intensify the search for other pioneers.

3. Emran Feroz (2024): *Vom Westen nichts Neues. Ein muslimisches Leben zwischen Alpen und Hindukusch*. [All quiet from the Western front. A Muslim life between the Alps and the Hindu Kush.] Munich: C.H.Beck, 220 pages, EUR 18

Emran Feroz, born in 1991, is a journalist and author of this fascinating book. His reportages and articles appear in publications including the *New York Times*, *taz*, Vienna's *Presse*, and *Profil*. His *Der Spiegel* bestseller 2021 *Der längste Krieg. 20 Jahre War on Terror* [The longest war. 20 years of the war on terror] appeared in 2021 – the same year in which he was awarded the Concordia Prize in the Human Rights category in Vienna. Some refer to Emran Feroz as an »Afghan from Tyrol.« Born in Tyrol, he has lived between the two worlds since childhood. His father came to Europe by bus from Kabul in the late 1970s and, after the Soviets marched into Afghanistan, decided to stay in Tyrol. The son grew up in Innsbruck, spoke Tyrolean, but was still not considered a »real Tyrolean« by many of his contemporaries. Feroz remained the »Afghan in Tyrol.«

His new book, *All quiet from the Western front*, tells the story of his childhood in western Austria. He has known life in Tyrol, especially in the capital, Innsbruck, since he was a young boy, and now examines it closely as he looks back. On the day after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a teacher asked the then nine-year-old, »Emran, your family is from Afghanistan. Do you know why they did it?« – »Osama bin Laden isn't even an Afghan,« he answered shyly in front of the entire class (p. 34-43).

The author observes and analyzes the racism of many people in his home region of Tyrol, contrasting his sophisticated knowledge of »the Afghans« with the prejudiced quarter knowledge of people who also grew up in Tyrol. He describes specific experiences and conversations from his everyday life, for example in restaurants or other places where he can listen to people. Through his memories of his life, he takes the reader along on a fascinating and enlightening journey that clearly showcases the diversity of Afghan cultures. Emran Feroz is an expert storyteller, weaving a huge amount of knowledge on Afghanistan's past and present, and its diverse range of cultures, into the stories of his own experiences.

His father's homeland is known to him largely through research and trips as a journalist. Alongside the biographical introspection, this book is to a large extent a journalistic analysis of the racism against Muslim life experiences that is so widespread in the West. The reader has an opportunity to look further and weaken prejudices.

Numbers 4 to 10

4. Gilda Sahebi (2024): *Wie wir uns Rassismus beibringen. Eine Analyse deutscher Debatten.* [How we teach ourselves racism. An analysis of German debates.] Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 461 pages, EUR 26

Here is another important example of book journalism capable of making a clever contribution to empowering humanity against racism – a form of stupidity that, far from being overcome, is increasingly in fashion. The book is written by Gilda Sahebi, a political sciences graduate and medical doctor who works as a freelance journalist for *taz*, *Der Spiegel*, *Zeit*, and ARD. She was named best political journalist by *Medium Magazin* in 2022.

This volume should become a required text in the training of journalists at all levels. Using a large number of facts, Sahebi analyzes and argues against common narratives in politics and media. The last chapter alone underscores the urgency, its 40 pages remembering 374 people who have died as a result of racism in Germany between 1946 and 2023.

Sahebi's analysis begins in the 19th century and uses examples to address numerous phases of the various racist discourses in Germany. The author draws on relevant scientific studies, looks at examples from the debates conducted in politics and the media, and asks questions of numerous experts and activists.

It is a book capable of breaking the habit of racism for its readers and beyond.

5. Bartholomäus Grill (2023): *Bauern sterben. Wie die globale Agrarindustrie unsere Lebensgrundlagen zerstört.* [Dying farmers. How the global agriculture industry is destroying the basis of our existence.] Munich: Siedler, 236 pages, EUR 24

In his latest book, the journalist – now 70 and having traveled widely through his work – in one sense returns to the place of his birth, the then very rural Oberaudorf am Inn, a mountainous region of Upper Bavaria. The most important continent of his career was Africa, where he worked for *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*. His books from this period are masterpieces of journalism on Africa that are still read to this day. In addition, numerous other works on various topics – for example 2014's *Um uns die Toten. Meine Begegnungen mit dem Sterben* [The dead all around us. My encounters with dying] – show this classic foreign correspondent to be an exemplary book journalist who uses the medium to get to the bottom of the lasting current affairs of the epoch. Industrial agriculture is the result of a long process which Grill describes as destructive, based on his own experiences and thorough research. It is easy to understand the anger and rage that drive his writing.

6. Ciani-Sophia Hoeder (2024): *Vom Tellerwäscher zum Tellerwäscher. Die Lüge von der Chancengleichheit.* [From rags to rags. The lie of equality of opportunity.] Munich: hanserblau, 255 pages, EUR 20

Visiting the author's website, one is met – unexpectedly, given the topics of her journalistic work – by a young woman with a radiant smile who describes herself as a »hopeful pessimist.« Hoeder rose to fame in 2019 as the founder of Germany's first online magazine for Black women *RosaMag*. Her first book, *Wut und Böse* [Anger and evil], was published by Hanser in 2021 to rave reviews – a winning read that combined intellectual enjoyment with strong theories and arguments. Her second book already has critics labeling her a successful author – referring not to a term from the publisher's promotional materials, but to the original journalistic craft of Ciani-Sophia Hoeder. The book is dedicated to the class structure of our society – something that tends to be denied. Her analysis and reporting of it is so lively, open-minded, and vividly case-based that the book becomes a systematic rebuttal of common clichés and prejudices.

7. Uwe Ritzer (2023): *Zwischen Dürre und Flut. Deutschland vor dem Wassernotstand: Was jetzt passieren muss.* [Between drought and flood. Germany facing a water emergency: What needs to happen now.] Munich: Penguin, 302 pages, EUR 20

The last few weeks of summer 2024 served to make this book dramatically topical. Uwe Ritzer is a multi-award-winning, long-standing member of the editorial office at *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He achieved lasting fame through his continuous reporting on the case of Gustl Mollath – a tragic failure of the justice system. His work as an investigative journalist, sometimes with co-authors, made him a best-selling author of half a dozen books.

Ritzer's main occupation is as a business correspondent – a fact that also shapes his style, with its careful research into the results of relevant sciences, sober analysis, and realistic proposals for reform. The issue of »water« will remain on the disaster agenda; and this book teaches us how we can and must deal with it.

8. Sabine Böhne-Di Leo (2024): *Die Erfindung der Bundesrepublik. Wie unser Grundgesetz entstand.* [The invention of the Federal Republic. How our Basic Law came about.] Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 218 pages, EUR 23

Following a degree in the subject and an impressive career with a wide range of quality media, Sabine Böhne-Di Leo has now been Professor of Journalism and Politics at Ansbach University of Applied Sciences for fifteen years. As this book shows on every page, she has remained a journalist at heart despite her academic context: in the originality of her research, her characteristic racy historical reportage, and her fascinating style of storytelling. Her work reconstructs a story that was already dramatic enough: the meeting of the Parliamentary Council in Bonn – 61 men and four women who were to write a constitution, including Social Democrat Carlo Schmid, Christian Democrat Konrad Adenauer, and Liberal Theodor Heuss.

Their work formed the foundation of a stable democracy. Sabine Böhne-Di Leo explains passionately why we need to defend it and its constitution against all enemies.

9. Julian Hans (2024): *Kinder der Gewalt. Ein Porträt Russlands in fünf Verbrechen.* [Children of violence. A portrait of Russia in five crimes.] Munich: C.H.Beck, 253 pages, EUR 18

It is one of the most important traditions of journalism, and not only in Germany: Foreign correspondents gather so much knowledge and so many experiences that current journalism becomes too narrow for them. Many become book journalists while still in the host country. When it comes to authoritarian regimes and dictatorships, this is a good idea anyway, in order to report without censorship. In Julian Hans' case, both apply. He has reported on Russia and Eastern Europe for more than 25 years, including for *Zeit* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

His book is based on an ingenious methodological idea: case studies of everyday crimes in Russia that leave a harrowing impression on the reader. How can violence and humiliation suffered by so many people ever stop?

10. C. Bernd Sucher (2023): *Unsichere Heimat. Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland von 1945 bis heute.* [An unsafe homeland. Jewish life in Germany from 1945 to today.] Munich: Piper, 272 pages, EUR 24

If one is looking for a prototypical book journalist, few could provide as much material as the now 75-year-old C. Bernd Sucher. His first book, in 1977, was

his dissertation on *Martin Luther und die Juden* [Martin Luther and the Jews]. He then became a journalist, particularly well-known as a theater critic for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In the 1990s, this profession resulted in an astonishing number of books on actors, theater lexica, cultural reportages, and biographical portraits. He was then appointed to the film and television school HFF Munich and successfully developed a series of literary lectures entitled *Suchers Leidenschaften* [Sucher's passions], the success of which was to be long-lasting, take him to many countries, and lead to the publication of many more books (as well as CDs, television programs, and audio books).

This is all the exemplary life's work of a journalist – and of a Jewish life in Germany. In *Unsichere Heimat*, Sucher takes us along with him in this, with lively journalism and critical commitment, through personal experiences and many conversations. In 2023, it became a book of the hour in tragic circumstances. With his latest work (*Rahels Reise*), published in 2024, he has now switched into the role of novelist.

Extra: Book journalism recently translated into German

Simon Shuster (2024): *Vor den Augen der Welt. Wolodymyr Selenskyj und der Krieg in der Ukraine*. [The Showman: Inside the Invasion That Shook the World and Made a Leader of Volodymyr Zelensky.] German translation by Henning Dedekind, Karsten Petersen and Thomas Stauder. Munich: Goldmann, 526 pages, EUR 26

How will journalism one day look back on Ukraine's wartime president Volodymyr Zelensky, when the war is far in the past? It is a question that brings this top 10 full circle. These two authors will not live to find out, although hopefully they will see the end of this terrible war. In his discussion of the book in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Thomas Speckmann makes the link right at the start: »Some see him as a new Winston Churchill, the leader of the free world. Volodymyr Zelensky is the unrelenting adversary of Vladimir Putin. But will he be as successful as Churchill was against Hitler? Will the anti-Putin coalition support the Ukrainian president like the anti-Hitler coalition supported Britain's wartime Prime Minister? Doubts are growing, both inside and outside Ukraine.«

The book is undoubtedly an impressive journalistic snapshot of a moment in time, and one that is unable to take the kind of journalistic bird's eye view that Franziska Augstein does in her analysis of the political personality of Churchill.

Simon Shuster is the ideal person for this kind of interim appraisal, having reported on Russia and Ukraine for more than 15 years, the majority of the time

as a correspondent for the US news magazine *Time*. One side of his family comes from Ukraine, the other has Russian origins. His father grew up in Central Ukraine and met his mother in a suburb of Moscow. Simon Shuster himself lived near Moscow until the age of six, when the family fled to the United States in 1989, two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By its very nature, book journalism, especially when it is to be translated, is necessarily less up to date. When Shuster completed a draft of his Zelensky biography in summer 2023, no one could say what a Ukrainian victory would look like, if there was to be one at all. Shuster quotes some observers, including Valerii Zaluzhnyi, who was then Ukraine's top military commander and has since been fired by Zelensky, as fearing that the war may never end: »Given everything that I know about the Russians first hand, our victory will not last. Our victory will be an opportunity to regroup and prepare for the next war« (p. 486).

»History is written not by victors, but by eye-witnesses, and they deserve more recognition for this book than I do,« notes journalist Shuster at the end of his enlightening work (p. 491). He thanks hundreds of people, many of whom spoke to him multiple times and for many hours. The »Acknowledgements« and »Notes« sections also demonstrate the large number of additional contributors and sources involved in a journalistic book project of this kind.

Despite journalist Shuster's close relationship with Zelensky, *The Showman* does not shy away from criticism. In terms of content, it ticks multiple boxes: It is a reportage and war chronicle, a biography and psychological profile of a man who, after years of success as a comic, has now taken on the most difficult role of his life: that of a wartime president who attempts as a communicator to generate confidence in the population despite the large numbers of casualties, and needs to expand the help received from other supporting governments.