

## Books

Martina Thiele / Boris Romahn

### Must read: Books by journalists

The idea of presenting books by journalists to an interested specialist audience originated at the Vienna Institute for Journalism and Communication Studies. In 2002, Hannes Haas and Wolfgang R. Langenbucher put the idea into practice and published short reviews in the journal *message*, and later in the magazine *Der österreichische Journalist*. After Hannes Haas' death in 2014, Fritz Hausjell took over. Since 2020, *Journalism Research* has been the place where books by journalists that are worth reading are discussed.

Now, five years later, it is time for another change. Although the publication location remains *Journalism Research*, and the book journalism project is still an Austrian-German one, but with Martina Thiele (University of Tübingen) and Boris Romahn (University of Salzburg) now at the helm, two avid readers, who, on the one hand, want to continue promoting books written by journalists, but on the other hand, are less competitive and will therefore dispense with the term »Top Ten« in the future. After all, it is not about ranking and who occupies first or tenth place, but about making 10 books, whether specialist books or fiction, better known with each new issue of *Journalism Research* and providing an initial well-founded and at the same time subjective assessment and reading recommendation. In this respect, we are continuing the great work of Hannes Haas, Wolfgang Langenbucher, and Fritz Hausjell, and we would like to express our sincere thanks to them for their passion, love of reading and writing, and their ongoing interest in book journalism and what we write about it in *Journalism Research*.

We are MT and Bro. You can tell who wrote each brief review by these initials. We hope you enjoy the reading, and we look forward to your feedback and encourage you to send us review copies!

Here are our first 10 book reviews:

**Paul Lendvai (2025): *Wer bin ich? Über die Identität* [Who am I? On identity]. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 123 pages, 25.95 euros.**

The factual answer to the question posed by the great Austrian publicist in his latest autobiographical book is: Hungarian, Austrian, staunch European. Born in 1929 in the Kingdom of Hungary under Admiral Horthy, Lendvai narrowly escaped the Holocaust. Communist Hungary after 1945 offered him no home either. Like so many others, Lendvai decided to go to Vienna after the suppression of the 1956 uprising. There he edited the *Europäische Rundschau* for 47(!) years and wrote numerous books and journalistic articles as a defender of liberal democracy. Although there are already autobiographical works by Paul Lendvai, he hopes that his search for his identity »between Austria and Hungary, Judaism and Europe in the mirror of recent events« will »not be boring and perhaps even instructive for younger generations« (p. 14).

This is especially true for readers »with a migration background.« For what Lendvai brilliantly describes is the feeling of belonging and yet remaining a stranger; it is a story of inclusion and exclusion that is well worth reading albeit more interesting for those who, like Lendvai, are Austrian and European and who recognize the names of the nearly two hundred writers, journalists, and politicians listed in the index. (MT)

**Volker Resing (2025): *Sein Weg zur Macht. Die Biografie* [His path to power. The biography]. Freiburg, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 224 pages, 22 euros.**

**Mariam Lau (2025): *Merz. Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Mitte* [Merz. In search of the lost center]. Berlin: Ullstein, 336 pages, 24.99 euros.**

**Robin Alexander (2025): *Letzte Chance. Der neue Kanzler und der Kampf um die Demokratie* [Last chance. The new chancellor and the fight for democracy]. Munich: Siedler, 384 pages, 25 euros.**

No sooner has Friedrich Merz been elected chancellor after two attempts than the first books by journalists are already available about »his path to power« (Volker Resing), his »fight for democracy« (Robin Alexander) or Merz »in search of the lost center« (Mariam Lau). All three are renowned political journalists and write for the newspapers *Die Zeit* (Lau) and *Die Welt* (Alexander), and the magazine *Cicero* (Resing). The latter has also written a biography about Angela

Merkel. Resing quotes the former chancellor, who responded to *Der Spiegel's* question about Merz's character by saying, »Anyone who has come this far must have certain qualities that enable them to do so.« Resing is certain: »Chancellor Merz will be different from the Merz we have known so far.« (p. 216)

Mariam Lau makes it clear in her introduction: »This is not a biography. I have pursued the questions that interest me about Friedrich Merz without regard to chronology or completeness.« Lau therefore asks, for example: »Does Friedrich Merz have a problem with women?« She discussed this with the chancellor's wife, Charlotte Merz, among others.

And Robin Alexander, in addition to his many appearances on political talk shows, still finds time to portray Friedrich Merz as the savior of democracy. Not only must he oppose autocrats in foreign policy, but in domestic policy, too, only the Merz' party can keep the AfD in check. But this will probably require a few more upright democrats. (MT)

**Joachim Wagner (2025): *Stresstest AfD: Wehrhafte Demokratie und Rechtsextremismus* [Stress test AfD: Defensive democracy and right-wing extremism]. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 256 pages, 29 euros.**

Joachim Wagner is still known today as the head of the political TV magazine *Panorama*, the ARD studio in London, and as the presenter of the TV program *Report from Berlin*. Before his journalistic career, Wagner, who holds a doctorate in law, was a scientific advisor in the Federal Chancellery, among other things. For his latest publication, Wagner read and evaluated more than 150 verdicts on proceedings by the right-wing party AfD »in full text« (p. 13) and conducted interviews with political actors. His central finding: »In the history of the Federal Republic, there has never been a party that has filed lawsuits as frequently and purposefully as the AfD« (p. 35).

For example, the AfD is suing the Office for the Protection of the Constitution for monitoring it and assessing it as »partly right-wing extremist.« It is also attempting to use legal means to compensate for parliamentary defeats, such as its failed attempt to appoint a vice president of the Bundestag or take over committee chairs.

In doing so, the party deliberately uses the courts as a stage for its political propaganda: »All AfD lawsuits have political roots, and every success in court is also a political one [...] which the party can celebrate as the supposed savior and guardian of the constitutional state.« (p. 35) The already overburdened judiciary is in a dilemma: it must reconcile the protection of democracy with the party's political freedoms.

Wagner asks whether, how, and, above all, how long this will work. He draws striking parallels with the observation of the party »Die Republikaner« by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, compares the AfD's litigation behavior with that of other political parties in terms of quantity and quality, and refers to previous bans on parties and associations. He also discusses current attempts at exclusion, from isolation at the local political level to civil society ostracism to the exclusion of AfD members of parliament from the FC Bundestag soccer team.

Despite numerous encouraging indications, which Wagner interprets as evidence of a resilient democracy, the lawyer and journalist comes to a less than optimistic conclusion and outlook after two hundred pages: the political struggle of the centrist parties against the AfD has largely failed, the ability of the judiciary to function has been severely impaired by the AfD's series of lawsuits, and the other parties have so far failed to find a solution to the AfD's most successful topic, irregular immigration. Wagner's book is nevertheless, or precisely because of this, important because it details how the right wing is occupying the law. (*Bro*)

**Rebekka Endler (2025) *Witches, Bitches, IT-Girls. Wie patriarchale Mythen uns bis heute prägen* [Witches, bitches, IT girls: How patriarchal myths continue to shape us today]. Berlin: Rowohlt, 464 pages, 25 euros.**

Rebekka Endler made a name for herself internationally with her first book, *Das Patriarchat der Dinge. Warum die Welt Frauen nicht passt* [The Patriarchy of Things: Why the World Doesn't Suit Women], published in 2021. In her new nonfiction book, the journalist and podcaster researches in nine chapters – that are sometimes ironically lighthearted, sometimes bitterly serious – the myths that blame women for everything. Endler starts with the texts of ancient mythology written and translated by men: Pandora opens the box, its contents escape, and »Pandora, the stupid bitch, is to blame for all the evils of this world.« (p. 10). The myths and stories in which women appeared either as specters, femmes or filles fatales, and usually ended up as victims, showed women and girls how they should *not* be. The decisive factor here is social norms that are men-dominated. »Patriarchy is not – as many would have us believe – a thing of the past; it lives on in all of us and continues to shape our perceptions to this day.« (p. 11) This means that women have also internalized and reproduced gender stereotypes, according to Endler's (self-)critical assessment. In addition, during the four years it took to write her book, »the situation has dramatically worsened« and there are an alarming number of current examples of women being blamed. But despite the numerous findings on the persistence of patriarchal structures and

the ever-present »same toxic ingredients« in the misogynistic brew, such as »biological understanding of gender, racist claims to superiority [...] and nostalgia for a past that never existed,« Endler does not despair, but returns to Pandora's box at the end of her book. As is well known, it contained not only all the evils of the world, but also hope – although Friedrich Nietzsche saw hope as the greatest evil of all. (*Bro*)

**Hans-Dieter Schütt, Gregor Gysi (2025): *Auf eine Currywurst mit Gregor Gysi* [Eating currywurst with Gregor Gysi]. Berlin: Aufbau, 22 euros.**

If Markus Söder engages in »fetishistic sausage eating« on Instagram and Robert Habeck is not the only one who has recognized that eating is political, how should Gregor Gysi's invitation to a currywurst be interpreted? Journalist Hans-Dieter Schütt, who often accompanies Gysi on book tours, accepted the invitation and explained: »Currywurst stands for: five-minute dialogue; for responsiveness that doesn't weigh every word; for an appetite for snacks; for philosophies that can be summed up on a napkin, so to speak. An offer for those in a hurry.« (p. 12) And so the left-wing elder statesman Gysi and Schütt, who in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was editor-in-chief of the FDJ newspaper *Junge Welt* from 1984 to 1989 and then arts editor of *Neues Deutschland*, talk about God and the world. Yes, really, about God. Gysi says: »Important in every church: the heretics. And: »I don't believe in God, but I fear a godless society.« (p. 49) The two also chat nicely about money, women, smoking weed, Marx and Engels, soccer, anti-Semitism, basic income, jokes, and visions. It's all very insightful and highly entertaining, because Schütt, who has written clever interview books and portraits of Frank Castorf, Stephan Hermlin, Klaus Lederer, Klaus Löwitsch, Friedrich Schorlemmer, and Regine Hildebrandt, among others, asks the right questions at the right moment. For example, what vision has Gysi said goodbye to? His answer: »A world without wars.« (*MT*)

**Norbert F. Pötzl (2025): *Das Schattenreich des Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski – Vom Entstehen und Verschwinden der DDR-Milliarden* [The shadow realm of Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski – The emergence and disappearance of the GDR billions]. Munich: Europaverlag, 288 pages, 25 euros.**

Norbert F. Pötzl, editor at *Der Spiegel* from 1972 to 2013, has made a name for himself as a meticulous and objective, but also gripping author. He has written books about Uwe Barschel, Erich Honecker, and the *Treuhand complex*. In his new book, he takes us into the »shadow realm« of (Dr. iur.) Schalck, as Alexander

Schalck-Golodkowski was usually known in the GDR. As head of the state-owned KoKo (Commercial Coordination), a group of companies managed by the intelligence service and subordinate to the Ministry for State Security and the Central Committee of the SED, he generated billions in foreign currency outside of official foreign trade. Schalck supplied the party elite with Western luxury goods that could not be manufactured in the GDR. And he himself also profited from these dubious deals, which operated successfully according to the motto »there is no rule for dealing with foreign currency shortages.« He led a Western lifestyle in the East that was unimaginable for the average citizen of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The latter proved to be his undoing when the GDR collapsed, because, according to the last chairman of the GDR Council of Ministers, Hans Modrow: »Of course, we also need someone to take primary responsibility for the misery [...] We need someone to blame, someone the people can say lived at our expense [...] That person is Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski.« (p. 41f.)

Pötzl traces in detail the rise and fall of a cool-headed foreign currency procurer who ultimately stabilized the system. He does not let the story end with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but goes on to recount the second life of the »refugee« Schalck at Lake Tegernsee, financed by business friends and marked by countless interrogations by the BND (German Federal Intelligence Service), which, on instructions from the very top, were largely not allowed to be recorded.

The book reads like true crime, but does not fall into *Ostalgie*. Pötzl proves that a significant portion of the foreign currency was generated through forced labor by prisoners, selling stolen art and antiques, and illegal arms deals. And the author does not fall into the trap of trivializing Schalck, who died in 2015, as a victim of the times or political circumstances. A single sentence in the epilogue suffices: »Schalck's grave is only about 50 meters away from that of Peter Fechter« (p. 276), whose agonizing death at the Berlin Wall in 1962 shocked the world. (*Bro*)

**Eren Güvercin (2025): *DITIB und der ferngesteuerte Islam in Deutschland. Warum wir eine religionspolitische Zeitenwende brauchen* [DITIB and remote-controlled Islam in Germany. Why we need a turning point in religious politics]. Munich: C.H. Beck, 18 euros.**

The author and critic of organized Islam in Germany describes himself as a »German Muslim.« Güvercin begins by describing how much this self-designation irritates him and how he finds himself caught between two chairs as a journalist who not only writes about religion and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's politics for various media outlets, but is also a participant in the German Islam Conference, a founding member of PEN Berlin, and the founder of the German-Muslim

Alhambra Society. In 2012, Güvercin wrote »Neo-Moslems,« a worthwhile »portrait of a generation.« In his new book, he addresses the problem that Islamic associations and organizations such as DİTİB are closely intertwined with the governments of Turkey and Iran in terms of personnel and structure, and that they spread an image of Islam that does not do justice to the reality of life for the 5.6 million Muslims living in Germany. Güvercin speaks openly about what is going wrong and calls for, first, a reorientation of the German Islam Conference, second, a European strategy against Turkish influence, and third, a long-term strategy against Islamism. The committed journalist and profound expert on political Islam in Germany appeals to the government and all of us: »The purpose of religious policy is religious freedom.« (MT)

**Nina Schedlmayer (2025): *Hitlers queere Künstlerin. Stephanie Hollenstein – Malerin und Soldat* [Hitler's queer artist. Stephanie Hollenstein – painter and soldier]. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 301 pages, 28 euros.**

It is well known that National Socialism met with broad approval. But when an avowed lesbian becomes enthusiastic about Hitler, joins the NSDAP, and writes anti-Semitic texts, it causes astonishment. Even more so when the background story goes like this: a woman from a farming background, born in 1886 in Vorarlberg (Austria), joins the First World War disguised as a man, is discovered, becomes a war painter at the front, attends art school in Munich, lives openly as a homosexual, earns her living with expressionist painting, and is a co-founder of a feminist artists' group. Nevertheless, Hollenstein is not exactly a feminist *role model*, according to historian and cultural journalist Nina Schedlmayer, who has written an insightful book about the seemingly contradictory artist, enriched with a wealth of background information. Chapter headings such as »Gender Fluidity and Patriotism: Soldier Stephan Hollenstein,« »Network of War Criminals,« and »Eliminating Harmful Elements: Nazi Cultural Policy« pique the reader's interest in learning more about the painter, who was queer in every sense of the word, and her work. Some of her works are reproduced in the book. The cover of the carefully designed book shows the portrait of a soldier – a self-portrait of Hollenstein? (MT)