



Reviews

Elisa Diallo

Französisch verlernen. Mein Weg nach Deutschland

Folding brochure, 160 pages, 14 €

Berenberg Verlag

Writing memoirs has become extremely popular in recent years. Many people seem to believe their lives are so interesting and significant that others can't wait to read about them. This often turns out to be a misunderstanding. But it is well worth reading Elisa Diallo's *Französisch Verlernen* as it is more than just a memoir, but also a view of society and a political analysis. It explores highly topical issues revolving around identity and everyday racism. Elisa Diallo was born and raised in Paris, studied in Holland, and has lived in Germany for more than ten years now. Her father hails from Guinea; her skin is brown.

Aside from all the other benefits of *Französisch Verlernen*, there is one thing about this book that particularly touched me: it has a positive outlook. Nothing is sugarcoated. While Diallo sees racism as commonplace in Germany, she believes that the country has made great progress in the past twenty years. She asks. "Why can't we become a society in which cosmopolitanism, diversity, and complexity are positive values again? Right now, I see no reason not to believe this can occur. So I believe it can."

Edgar Rai



Mithu Sanyal

Identitti

Bound, 432 pages, 22 €

Hanser Verlag

Since it was published two months ago, *Identitti*, the debut novel by cultural scientist and journalist Mithu Sanyal, has been on everybody's lips. There are two main reasons for this: The novel tells an exceptionally original story, and it is all the rage because it is centered on the identity debate; one could even say its center *is* an identity debate.

The heroine of the story is college student Nivedita, a person of color who has never really felt like she belonged or was recognized and accepted by a community. That changes abruptly when Saraswati enters her life. She is also a POC and a professor of postcolonial studies. Rhetorically brilliant Saraswati is omnipresent, on television, on the radio, in podium discussions. The professor is revered by students as a savior, and thanks to her many people seem to understand who they are for the first time. Until the day (we will reveal this much) when it turns out that Saraswati is not a POC after all, but a white woman. What follows is a sort of identity debate 2.0, in which every self-image is quickly questioned and which tears down all boundaries, including the boundaries of shame.

Identitti does not make things easy for readers, and that is intentional. If you want to stick with it, you have to make an effort. However, it is always fun to watch the protagonists work on each other, and the reader comes away enriched with many clever thoughts.

Edgar Rai



Hengameh Yaghoobifarah
Ministerium der Träume (Ministry of Dreams)
Bound, 384 pages, 22 €
Blumenbar

Female, lesbian, unattached, 40 years old, of Iranian origin, fled her home country as a child after her father was murdered in Iran for political reasons, grew up in Lübeck, Germany, in the 1980s and 90s with her single mother and her sister, was a bouncer in a queer club in Berlin's Neukölln district.

This is how the main character Nasrin introduces herself in Hengameh Yaghoobifarah's debut novel *Ministry of Dreams*. She is brash and uses queer slang, is skeptical based on her experience, and ready to combat social and day-to-day hostility.

But then an accident occurs that kills her sister, Nush, in her burning car. Nasrin, who was very close to her sister, becomes the guardian of sister's daughter Parvin. In addition, she sets out to find the reasons for Nush's untimely death. What unfolds is a suspensefully constructed story of present events and flashbacks to homelessness, racist attacks, and fatal encounters.

Her adolescent niece Parvin gives her a hard time, is secretive, and has her own way of getting through life as a post-migrant student without parents.

The novel, which is around 400 pages long, explores the very complex and human character Nasrin, whose identity consists of much more than the what is ascribed to her externally.

A tour de force!

Katharina von Uslar



Hernan Diaz
In der Ferne (In the Distance)
Bound, 304 pages, 24 €
Hanser Berlin

California at the time of the gold rush. Håkan, who wants to emigrate from Sweden to New York with his brother, finds himself on the other side of the American continent. Alone, frightened, and with no knowledge of English, but equipped with Scandinavian height and unusual strength, he is taken in by an Irish family who, like so many, hope to find gold in California. With the goal of finding his brother again in New York, he heads east. Thus begins a lifelong odyssey through deserts and over mountains, always riding in the opposite direction on the settlers' track toward the west, tormented by hunger and cold, threatened by gangsters and looters, but also always helped by new companions who teach him how to live. At the same time, the myth of HAWK gradually emerges, a legendary figure from the desert who is said to have bear-like strength and to have murdered a group of religious settlers. This is the second identity of Håkan, who fights to dispel this reputation until the end, although he has long since become a myth in his own right.

An adventurous, magnificently written, thoroughly realistic migration story that dispenses with settler romanticism yet caters to a longing for a Wild West hero. At the same time, it investigates the issue of projection and reality, of a human being's origins and development and his connection to his so-called IDENTITY.

Katharina von Uslar