



by Caroline Wahl  
DuMont Verlag  
April 2023 / 206pp  
Fiction

🏆 German Independent  
Bookseller's Favourite Novel  
2023

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the Swiss-German  
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## 22 Lengths

### *22 Bahnen*

#### review

*22 Bahnen* is an accomplished debut by Caroline Wahl, an exciting new voice in German fiction. A suspenseful and eminently readable story that grapples with serious themes, it offers a sharp portrayal of small-town attitudes and the struggles faced by a young woman on the cusp of adulthood.

Wahl's characters in *22 Bahnen* are well drawn and believable, and the novel has plenty of dialogue that maintains its pace. The first-person narrator, Tilda, is a gifted Maths student who has to care for her younger sister, Ida, as their mother is an alcoholic and their father is no longer around. Besides studying and looking after ten-year-old Ida, Tilda works part-time at a supermarket, so her life is considerably less carefree than that of some of her peers. Sometimes their mother is violent towards Ida, making Tilda afraid to leave home.

The claustrophobic sense of being trapped in a small town where you feel an outsider is conveyed extremely well by Wahl, who makes use of an intimate first-person perspective, short sentences and present-tense thoughts. Though the reader is always in Tilda's head, other characters come to life quickly. One of them is Viktor, a young IT whizz originally from Russia, who has returned to the town to sort out his family's affairs after they perished in a car crash five years previously.

Tilda and Viktor stand out from their peers, including Marlene, Tilda's

best friend, who tend to spend their time getting high and partying. They both swim twenty-two lengths at the local pool each day in a bid to gain some measure of control over their lives. Tilda is encouraged by a kind professor to apply for a PhD in Berlin, but just when things are looking up, her mother spirals out of control and attempts suicide. Tilda herself becomes dangerously ill with pneumonia, prompting Viktor to come and look after her. As they grow closer, they begin to process the past – chiefly what happened the night Viktor's family died – and gradually fall in love.

Ending on a hopeful note, *22 Bahnen* is a credible exploration of a young woman's personal struggles, as well as wider themes such as class difference, privilege, parental neglect and alcoholism. None of these are overstated, however, ensuring that the characters take centre stage and the novel feels relevant and fresh.

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## press quotes

*This story credibly gets across the challenges faced by Tilda, a young woman left to bring up her sister because of her mother's alcoholism. Tilda's lack of self-pity and humour carry the story, which is ultimately heartwarming and positive. It also provides some insights into what it's like to be an outsider growing up in a small provincial community.*

Lucy Jones, translator ([www.transfiction.eu](http://www.transfiction.eu))

## about the author



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Caroline Wahl was born in Mainz in 1995. She grew up near Heidelberg and studied German language and literature in Tübingen, as well as German literature in Berlin. Afterwards, she worked in several publishing houses. *22 Bahnen* is her debut novel.

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