



by Patricia Hempel  
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Fiction

🏆 Abandoned Nests was supported with a grant from the Berlin Senate and was nominated for the Alfred Döblin Prize 2023.

## Abandoned Nests *Verlassene Nester*

### review

‘Summer came to the wasteland, and in the middle of it, I turned thirteen.’ The opening sentence of *Deserted Nests* sets the tone for Patricia Hempel’s second novel. It is 1992, and the aftershocks of German reunification are making themselves felt in the small town on the Elbe where Pilly lives. Unemployment is rife, and there are tensions between the townfolk and the new Vietnamese guest workers.

Pilly’s mother has apparently disappeared to the West, and the rest of her family is floundering. Her father Martin spends more and more time drinking alone in the local pub. Her aunts, Katharina and Eli, attempt to fill the gap left by Pilly’s mother. But they are struggling themselves, after Western environmental agencies (‘Worse than the Stasi’, Katharina mutters) raise concerns about water contamination, decimating the business of their popular smokehouse.

Pilly, meanwhile, spends her days with her older friends Katja and Bine. Pilly’s fascination with Katja is by no means platonic, and she willingly puts up with being mortified by Bine in return for intimacy with Katja.

Pilly’s mother returns unexpectedly, two and a half years after she left, and it becomes clear she was being treated for depression. Although Pilly at first refuses to acknowledge her, they gradually grow closer.

Not long after the girls return to school, tragedy strikes. Katja, wanting to avoid paying for a ticket, tries to climb onto the roof of a moving train, but falls and is killed. Despite having grown more distant from Katja in the past weeks, Pilly is grief-stricken. The novel ends with her leaving town with her mother, ready to start a new life.

The chapters of *Abandoned Nests* are alternately written in the first person, from Pilly's perspective, and the third person, detailing the perspectives of various adults. This enables the reader to piece together the secrets that the characters are keeping from each other. Martin has always doubted whether Pilly is his daughter, and their neighbour, Frau Klinge, knows for a fact that Pilly's father is her own estranged son, a minister who was arrested around the time Pilly's mother disappeared. Gradually it becomes clear that these two events are related – and that Martin's revenge for his wife's infidelity was to report on her to the secret police.

This is a beautifully crafted queer coming of age story set against the backdrop of the early days of German reunification. Hempel intertwines the lives of realistic characters and scenes from nature to create a gentle and lyrical novel with a dark heart. With its small-town setting and Pilly's childlike perspective contrasting with its politically charged backdrop, *Deserted Nests* has echoes of Harper Lee's modern classic *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Find out more:

<https://www.klett-cotta.de/produkt/patricia-hempel-verlassene-nester-9783608502237-t-8764>

## press quotes

*'The way Patricia Hempel writes about the loss of innocence and the post-reunification era is an event in itself.'*

Florian Valerius

*'Patricia Hempel is a virtuoso of the hidden depths. In this novel, vitality and the lies we tell ourselves entwine in a menacing tangle.'*

Katja Kullmann

## about the author



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Patricia Hempel was born in Berlin in 1983 and studied Literary Writing in Hildesheim. She is a member of the editorial board of the queer literary magazine GLITTER and a founding member of PEN Berlin. Her novel *Abandoned Nests* was awarded a grant from the Berlin Senate and was nominated for the Alfred Döblin Prize 2023.

Previous works: *Metrofolklore*, *Tropen* (2017).

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