

by Norbert Gstrein
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Fiction

Shortlisted for the Leipzig Book Prize 2026

Longlisted for the Austrian Book Prize 2026

The English language translation rights to the book have sold.

This page will be updated once an English language translation is published.

At First Light

Im ersten Licht

review

A life story that stretches from the aftermath of the First World War into late old age, Gstrein's novel follows its central character as he moves through a century shaped, and misshapen, by mass violence. Opening with a brutal act that spares him military service, it leaves him carrying both the physical consequence and the moral question of that reprieve.

The book is built as a sequence of intense encounters, each section orbiting a person who alters the protagonist's path and forces him to look again at what he thought he understood. A friendship with a disfigured veteran becomes an education in shame and public cruelty. Later, as a teacher, he is confronted by a former pupil whose matter-of-fact confession reveals the everyday mechanics of atrocity, and collapses the comfortable distance between 'history' and the present tense of responsibility.

In the later sections the frame shifts to Britain, where another family story reopens old wounds, this time around a soldier executed for desertion and the long, private aftermath of official verdicts. The English setting sharpens the book's interest in how nations narrate violence, and how the living learn to live with what they cannot put right.

Gstrein's approach is deliberately unsentimental. The central character is passive in a way that feels psychologically truthful, a man

who often cannot act, but cannot stop watching, and replaying. The novel's moral weight comes through accumulation rather than declaration, with memory itself treated as unstable, sometimes consoling, and sometimes treacherous.

The three main sections are substantial and carefully balanced, with a shorter final coda that catches the protagonist in old age as public reckonings return in new forms. This underlines the book's central idea that a life can feel like something you witness as much as something you steer.

This serious, readable war novel avoids heroics and focuses instead on complicity, silence, and the quiet ways people excuse themselves. Readers of Ralf Rothmann's *To Die in Spring* (tr. Shaun Whiteside) and Arno Geiger's *We Are Doing Fine* (tr. Maria Poglitsch Bauer) will recognise the same interest in private lives crushed, and shaped, by the politics of the twentieth century.

Find out
more: https://www.hanser-literaturverlage.de/en/buch/norbert-gstrein-im-ersten-licht-9783446282971-t-5846

Rights sold: Croatia (Leykam), France (Bourgois), Poland (Czarne).

press quotes

Norbert Gstrein is one of the most elegant stylists among German-language authors. His winding, finely rhythmical, and consistently lyrical sentences possess a seductively lulling quality – so much so that one often only realises in retrospect what unsettling truths the author occasionally slips past his readers.

SWR

For years, Norbert Gstrein has been one of the most dependable sources of literary excellence.

NDR

At First Light is an elegant novel – stylistically impeccable – about a life lived at the edge of the great catastrophes of the twentieth century.

Kurier

Norbert Gstrein excels with a book that dares to make a new beginning. At First Light is the story of a man who glorifies war—because he never had to experience it. Due to its masterful structure, the novel has the narrative power of the greatest historical novels of the past twenty years. […] Norbert Gstrein's novel oscillates between light and twilight, constantly exploring the relationship between the visible and the not-yet-recognizable, between the obscured and the misperceived.

Deutschlandfunk

about the author



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Norbert Gstrein was born in Tyrol in 1961, and lives in the North of Germany, close to the Danish border. Recent publications with Hanser include the novels *Als ich jung war* ('When I Was Young', 2019), *Der zweite Jakob* ('The Second Jacob', 2021) and *Vier Tage, drei Nächte* ('Four Days, Three Nights', 2022) as well as the collection of essays Mehr als nur ein Fremder ('More Thank Just a Stranger, 2023).

Previous works: *Mehr als nur ein Fremder*, Hanser (2023); *Vier Tage, drei Nächte,* Hanser (2022); *Der zweite Jakob*, Hanser (2021); *Als ich jung war*, Hanser (2019)

Translations: *A Sense of the Beginning*, MacLehose Press (2015); *Winters in the South*, MacLehose Press (2012); *The English Years*, Harvill Press (2003)

rights information

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