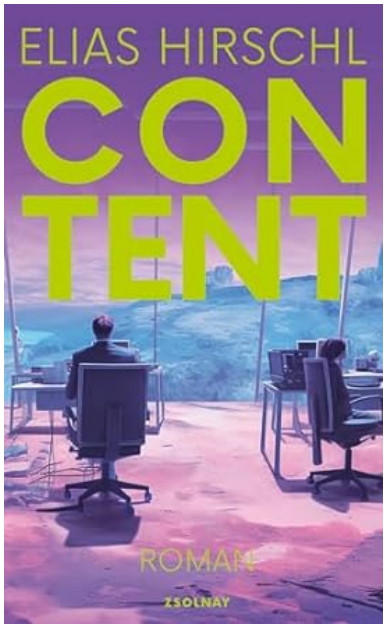


by Elias Hirschl
Paul Zsolnay Verlag
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Fiction

Shortlisted for the Austrian Book Prize 2024

Content

Content

review

‘Content’ is a surreal, deadpan, postmodern satire of social media and meaningless jobs in the era of deindustrialisation.

It’s a novel in which a lot happens, with many events designed to emphasize the book’s satirical take on the kaleidoscopic meaninglessness of digital culture. The novel’s nameless female narrator works as a listicle author at a content farm (Smile Smile Inc) and lives near her office in an ex-mining region left geologically unstable by collapsing mineshafts. The narrator’s colleague, Karin, has a mental breakdown at work. The narrator visits Karin during her recovery and observes her obsession with Twitter. She also casually dates Jonas, an optimistic start-up founder.

Journalist Finn Gerber is keen to find out more about Smile Smile – why it produces so much content when none of it appears to be monetised, who actually owns the firm, and why no one is allowed in the basement. It emerges that Smile Smile is owned by a Russian subsidiary of Chemiurg, a chemical company that is itself a subsidiary of Hoff, a mining conglomerate that was once the main employer in the region. A digital company called Rabbiz – a sort of cross between Amazon, Deliveroo, and Uber –?sets up a new logistics centre nearby, and we hear about its employees’ unionisation efforts and their ultimate replacement by drones.

The narrator loses access to her social media accounts only to

discover that a doppelgänger is posting updates on them. The doppelgänger gets married and travels the world. The narrator's apartment burns down and she moves in with Karin, then trains some bots to write listicles and is able to stop working. One day she accidentally enters the old mine shaft under the office and discovers a giant, pulsating tumour in an underground cavern, which she later realises is an experimental organic AI. It emerges that Smile Smile exists purely to feed the tumour with data.

When Karin's tweets catch the attention of a US comedy writer, she accepts a job in New York. The narrator follows Karin's new life from her laptop, as Karin and the online doppelgänger have a one-night stand, and the doppelgänger dies of an overdose. In a final surreal twist, the narrator attends her doppelgänger's funeral.

As well as being a gifted comic writer, Hirschl is an astute observer of the linguistics of the digital economy –?sending up everything from start-up names and corporate jargon to social media and the language of listicles. Hirschl's perceptive, humorous approach to his material results in a novel that is entirely in keeping with modern-day digital life, reflecting its short attention spans and bizarre juxtapositions.

Find out more here:
https://www.hanser-literaturverlage.de/en/buch/elias-hirschl-content-9783552073869-t-5238

press quotes

> *'It's as if Franz Kafka had arrived in the digital age … Hirschl exaggerates contemporary clickbait journalism and the superficiality of the internet, and that makes [the book] fun to read.'*

Karin Cerny, profil

about the author



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Elias Hirschl was born in Vienna in 1994, and he lives and works there as a writer, slam poet and musician. He won the Reinhard Priessnitz Prize in 2020. His novels include Meine Freunde haben Adolf Hitler getötet und alles, was sie mir mitgebracht haben, ist dieses lausige T-Shirt (‘My Friends Killed Adolf Hitler and All They Got Me was this Lousy T-Shirt’) (2016), Hundert schwarze Nähmaschinen (‘One Hundred Black Sewing Machines’) (2017) and most recently Salonfähig (‘Socially Acceptable’) (2021), published by Zsolnay.

Previous works: *Salonfähig*, Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2021.

Find out more: eliashirschl.com

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Paul Zsolnay Verlag

Contact: Annette Lechner

annette.lechner@zsolnay.at

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