



by Arno Frank
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Fiction

Headfirst *Seemann vom Siebener*

review

An engaging multi-perspective novel that tells the story of one summer's day at an outdoor swimming pool, *Headfirst* is the second novel by Arno Frank. With precise prose, narrative panache and a tapestry of voices, it examines how the past can influence the present, sometimes with a good deal of urgency.

In the provincial town of Ottersweiler, a hot day brings a colourful cast of characters to the Freibad, the local outdoor swimming pool. The six main figures on whom the novel centres are Lennart, a California-based photographer who has come home for the funeral of an estranged friend, Max; Renate, a heavy smoker who sells entrance tickets to the Freibad; Kiontke, the lifeguard and caretaker, who takes pride in his work but is processing the trauma of finding a young man's body in the pool; Josephine, widow of Lennart's friend Max, with whom Lennart was – and still is – secretly smitten; Isobel, an elderly woman who does daily laps and was friends with Kiontke's late mother, Gerda; and an unnamed teenage narrator (the novel's only first-person voice) who longs to beat depression with a jump from the seven-metre diving board, closed to swimmers since an accident years ago.

An entire cross-section of society, in other words, with a supporting cast on hand to offer moments of levity and even more varied perspectives. Frank displays a keen ear for dialogue, yet it is the internal lives of his characters that give *Headfirst* its momentum. As

they dive into the water, laze in the sun, seek shade beneath the linden trees and eat nostalgia-inducing Flutschfinger (a kind of popsicle), we want to know what will happen to them next, but also what shaped their past.

Isobel, a passionate reader of Proust – whose work clearly influenced Frank himself – slips in and out of memories, while Lennart battles with an existential crisis. He still hasn't got over his teenage yearning for Josephine; desire is also present in Renate's thinly disguised interest in Kiontke. Underpinning these personal dramas is the sure yet almost incidental knowledge that a terrible tragedy has taken place in the Freibad – Frank scatters clues throughout the novel, lending a thriller-like aura to his literary sociotope. Striking a cool, detached tone while still portraying his characters with remarkable empathy, Frank illuminates the dark side of small-town life even in the bright light of summer.

Beneath the specific, languorous magic of the community swimming pool, Frank's other key theme is the past: how easily memories can resurface to influence the present, and how hard it can be – as it is for Lennart – to return to the places we've tried to escape. With its clean, evocative prose that often borders on the lyrical, *Headfirst* is a paean to Freibad culture, the German answer, perhaps, to John Cheever's 'The Swimmer'.

Read more on the publisher's website

here: https://www.klett-cotta.de/buch/Gegenwartsliteratur/Seemann_vom_Siebener/677966

press quotes

A single, shimmering summer's day at the swimming pool, and an enormous amount of reading pleasure. Arno Frank has written about leaving and returning, about extraordinary events and about love.

Jacqueline Masuck, Buchhandlung der divan, Berlin

about the author



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Arno Frank was born in Kaiserslautern in 1971. He studied art history and philosophy before graduating from the German School of Journalism in Munich. After an eleven-year stint as an editor for *taz*, he now works as an essayist, author and freelance journalist primarily writing on culture for *Spiegel*, *taz* and *Deutschlandfunk*. His first novel, *So, und jetzt kommst du* was published in 2017. Arno Frank is a founding member of PEN Berlin and lives in Wiesbaden with his family.

Other works: *So, und jetzt kommst du*, Klett-Cotta (2017). Rights sold to: Denmark, Straarup.

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