



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](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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