

by Thomas Melle
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Fiction

Shortlisted for the German Book Prize 2025

Nominated for the SPIEGEL Book Prize 2025

House in the Sun

Haus zur Sonne

review

A German author with bipolar disorder is cancelled on Twitter for writing about the controversial awarding of the Nobel Prize to Peter Handke. His resulting break with reality leads to a new, severely maniac phase during which he squanders the financial and social stability he has managed to accrue since his last successful publication and treatment for his disorder. A flyer for a clinic called Haus zur Sonne (House in the Sun) falls into his hands; it is apparently some kind of psychiatric institution where people can end their lives. Although this is not his intention, he decides to pay it a visit. It feels more like a luxury spa than a clinic: before the end of their lives, ‘clients’ can fulfil their wildest dreams with the aid of a simulator. The narrator’s only desire is to live out the rest of his days in peace and quiet. He engages in conversation with other clients, including a woman called Angel, whose desire is to experience true love before ‘the big departure’ but who complains that the equipment cannot simulate this. Her failure to find love or even to monetise her failure on social media has ultimately led her to the clinic.

The narrator starts to reflect on the very nature of freedom and desire, and what he truly wants. These themes are further explored with a cast of characters in the clinic who are also grappling with virtual love and life. Meanwhile, the narrator senses that something very strange is going on in the Haus zur Sonne – perhaps electroshock therapy or even more sinister practices – and is visited

by unsettling dreams. Things only become worse when he realises there is no way to leave. Whether he ever manages to escape is left open.

Melle is a master of satirical observation about the modern world. Rather than being a straightforward sequel to his acerbically funny and ‘illuminating’ memoir (2023 *New York Times* review) about living with bipolar disorder, his new book takes an unexpected direction. While there are elements of classic European autofiction to his writing, the addition of a dystopian element is quite unique. Despite his dark subject matter, Melle never fails to inject his writing with humour, turning his gaze on modern society and discussing digital and social media, digital surveillance and virtual reality.

about the author

Thomas Melle was born in 1975 and studied Comparative Literature and Philosophy. He is the author of widely performed plays and has translated William T. Vollmann and Quentin Tarantino (among others) into German. His debut novel *Sickster* (2011) was nominated for the German Book Prize and won the Franz Hessel Prize for Contemporary Literature. He followed it up with the novels *3000 Euro* in 2014 and *Die Welt im Rücken* (2016), *The World at My Back*, tr. Luise von Flotow (2023), both of which were shortlisted for the German Book Prize. *The World at My Back* has been translated into 22 languages. Melle’s previous novel, *Das leichte Leben* (The easy life) was published in 2022.

Previous work: *Sickster*, Rowohlt Berlin, 2011; *3000 Euro*, Rowohlt Berlin, 2014; *Die Welt im Rücken*, Rowohlt Berlin, 2016; *Das leichte Leben*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2022

Previous translations: *The World at my Back*, Biblioasis (2023)

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