

by Volker Weidermann
Kiepenheuer & Witsch
June 2023 / 240pp
Non-Fiction

Man of the Sea. Thomas Mann and the Love of His Life

Mann vom Meer. Thomas Mann und die Liebe seines Lebens

review

Volker Weidermann's new book is an exquisite novelistic biography of Thomas Mann, exploring his enduring fascination with the sea. It takes readers on a whistlestop tour through Mann's life and work, beginning with a glimpse of his mother's childhood on the coast of Brazil and ending with an afterword about his daughter Elisabeth's career as an international expert on maritime law.

Thomas Mann's name is familiar to most Anglophone readers, and with *The Magic Mountain* due to come out of copyright in 2024, the time seems right for a revival of the Nobel Prize-winning author in English. Weidermann's accessible, engaging style makes this an excellent primer on Thomas Mann and his fiction.

Man of the Sea opens with a scene that is emblematic of both Thomas Mann's approach to his writing, and his deep-seated connection to the sea. He has taken his family on holiday to the Baltic coast, a place he has known since childhood, and finds himself staying in the same guesthouse as Gerhard Hauptmann, the playwright he has just turned into a character in *The Magic Mountain*. Unsurprisingly, Mann refuses to read aloud from his work-in-progress despite Hauptmann's entreaties. Characters from Thomas Mann's life repeatedly find their way into his fiction, whether it is his own family in

his first major novel, *Buddenbrooks*, or a changing cast of beautiful young men who are immortalised in books from *Tonio Kröger* to *Death in Venice*. The same is true of Mann's love for the sea: for him, it represents both the perfect happiness of childhood, and something deeper and more sinister – a vast, unknowable thing that holds the promise of either renewed lust for life, or the pull of death for weaker, more melancholy souls.

It is Mann's mother, Julia, who introduces her children to the sea, with summers spent at Travemünde on the Baltic coast, not far from the family home in Lübeck. The Baltic coast and the Courland Spit are recurring settings in Mann's fiction. Then comes exile from Nazi Germany, and a voyage across the Atlantic to the USA, where the Mann family finally settles in California. It is also by the sea – in Nordwijk, the Netherlands – soon after his eightieth birthday, that he is diagnosed with the thrombosis that will kill him.

It is a remarkable feat to pack such a rich and varied life into 250 pages, and the thematic thread holds the book together beautifully and gives it a sense of purpose. *Man of the Sea* is accessible narrative non-fiction, assuming very little prior knowledge of Thomas Mann and his work, for readers with an interest in literature and the lives of writers.

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Publisher's website:
https://www.kiwi-verlag.de/verlag/rights/book/volker-weidermann-mann-vom-meer-9783462002317

about the author

Volker Weidermann, born in 1969, was the host of Germany's most prominent literary TV talk show. Since 2021, he has been head of the literature and arts section of Die Zeit. He is the author of numerous books, including *Ostend, Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth* and the *Summer before the Dark and Dreamers*.

Other works: *Ostende*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2014); *Träumer*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2017); *Das Duell*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2019).

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