

by Lukas Hartmann
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Fiction

🏆 #1 on the Swiss
bestseller list – 20,000
copies sold

Martha and Her Kin

Martha und die Ihren

review

Based on the author's own family history, *Martha and Her Kin* is a compelling work of historical fiction by one of Switzerland's best-known novelists. An assured voice that crosses the divide between deeply personal histories and universal themes, Lukas Hartmann's latest work is sure to strike a chord with readers of literary and historical fiction.

Martha (based on the author's grandmother) is born into poverty in early-twentieth-century Switzerland. When their father dies in an accident at work, she and her siblings are separated and sent to live with foster families as indentured child workers. This practice – the children were known as *Verdingkinder* – was widespread in Switzerland until the 1960s, but was largely unrecognised until the early 2000s when several former child labourers decided to speak out. Aged eight, Martha is expected to carry out menial tasks and also accompany the family's violent, mentally ill son on daily walks. Though a teacher helps her to get work in a weaving mill and she eventually saves enough to buy a bicycle, it isn't until she marries shoemaker Jakob that she gains a degree of freedom.

When Jakob dies young, leaving Martha and their two children destitute, history appears ready to repeat itself. As war looms, the family struggles on, and the two boys grow up and marry. Both have their own issues to contend with; only the next generation (which includes the author-narrator, Bastian) manages finally to realise its

potential and form healthy relationships. Traumatized by her experiences and exhausted by life's challenges, Martha remains emotionally distant. At the end of the novel, however, Bastian visits her in a nursing home, where grandson and grandmother tentatively reconcile.

Though it ends on a note of hope, *Martha and Her Kin* is a profound and moving exploration of social injustice and conflict, particularly in the context of their impact on children. Highlighting a dark episode in Switzerland's history, yet engaging with universal themes and the emotional toll of struggling to survive, Hartmann's accomplished style and expert craft make this an absorbing and memorable novel.

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press quotes

'Lukas Hartmann explores his family's social advancement, dissecting its underbelly and its tragic consequences without moralising. His prosaic tone make for a haunting read. Martha and her Kin merges the biographies of ordinary people into an extraordinary narrative about Swiss society, told from its very core.'

Alexander Sury / Der Bund, Berne

'Lukas Hartmann's autobiographical novel Martha and her Kin is precise and moving, telling the story of the Swiss mentality in the 20th century.'

Hansruedi Kugler / Basler Zeitung

'A novel that teaches us a lot about Switzerland and its development in the 20th century.'

Dorothee Meyer-Kahrweg / hr2 Kultur, Frankfurt

'From a gently distanced perspective, Hartmann tells the story of Martha. As an eight-year-old, a few years before the First World War, she was given away in servitude to another farming family near Berne, because her own large family was destitute.'

Alexander Kluy / Der Standard, Vienna

'Lukas Hartmann writes as a chronicler, his tone almost objective, without accusation, without any grand political and social analysis: The touching story of a woman who knew nothing in her life but work – for whom work was the only road to safety, to freedom.'

Jutta Jutta Duhm-Heizmann / WDR3, Cologne

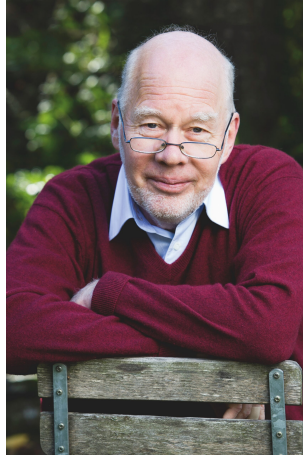
'Hartmann recounts the story of his own family straightforwardly and simply, demonstrating once again what an empathetic observer he is.'

Renata Schmid / Kulturtipp, Zurich

'In fact, it's puzzling that such an everyday story should have such a pull. Maybe it's because reading it makes you happy that times have changed.'

Gabriele Weingartner / Die Rheinpfalz, Ludwigshafen

about the author



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Lukas Hartmann was born in Berne in 1944, and studied German and Psychology before going on to be a teacher, journalist and media consultant. He is now a freelance writer, lives in Berne, and writes books for adults and children. He is one of Switzerland's best-known authors and his novels regularly feature on the bestseller lists.

Previous works: Into the Unknown, Diogenes (2022), Shadow Dance, Diogenes (2021), The Singer, Diogenes (2019), A Picture of Lydia, Diogenes (2018), A Suitable Tenant, Diogenes (2016), On Both Sides, Diogenes (2015), Goodbye to Zanzibar, Diogenes (2013), The Convoy, Diogenes (2013), A Robber's Life, Diogenes (2012), Dark Bliss, Diogenes (2010), Pestalozzi's Mountain, Diogenes (2009), The Plague, Diogenes (2009), To the End of the Sea, Diogenes (2009).

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