



by Verena Güntner
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Fiction

🏆 Nominated for the
SPIEGEL Book Prize 2025

Medulla

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review

Verena Güntner's 'Medulla' is a bold and provocative exploration of female autonomy, relationships, and complex decisions. Güntner's fictional consideration of the emotional implications of women's reproductive choices will resonate with fans of Sheila Heti's writing.

Set in present-day Berlin, the novel follows three women in their late 30s and early 40s – Siv, Leyla, and Esther – as they each confront the personal and societal consequences of an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy. The result is a fearless and darkly humorous narrative that examines what happens when women reclaim ownership of their bodies and refuse to conform to external expectations.

Structured in three parts, 'Medulla' follows each woman and her partner in turn: Siv and Jan, Leyla and David, Esther and Jacob. Although these couples are loosely connected through friendships and social circles, their relationships are all very different, shaped by distinct temperaments and life histories. The story is told through a third-person narrative, shifting fluidly between perspectives to provide insights into each character's life.

Siv is a musician in an open relationship with her image-conscious partner, Jan. When she unexpectedly becomes pregnant, her decision to have an abortion fractures the seeming harmony between them. Meanwhile, Leyla, a former aid worker, and her partner David

have been through years of unsuccessful fertility treatment. When Leyla becomes pregnant and realises she doesn't want a child after all, she silently disappears from David's life and gets an abortion, upending his world. Esther, eight months pregnant and miserable, finds herself repelled by her overly devoted partner Jacob and drawn instead to a younger man with whom she begins a secret affair.

Güntner's characters are impulsive, flawed, and completely believable. The novel's scenes range from the absurd to the deeply affecting: a dinner party climaxing with a drunken monologue about infertility accompanied by the throwing of cabbage; an online forum where Jacob pretends to be a pregnant woman; and a secret forest retreat where the three women ultimately reclaim a sense of control over their lives.

'Medulla' offers an unflinching portrayal of female desire, refusal, and care – on women's terms. Intimate and occasionally discomfiting, the novel challenges traditional depictions of motherhood, partnership, and femininity. Güntner writes with sharp insight and moments of surreal, visceral beauty, crafting a novel whose urgency is both contemporary and timeless.

'Medulla' is a daring, necessary work of literary fiction that challenges conventional depictions of motherhood, partnership, and femininity and will resonate with English-language readers interested in feminist narratives, body autonomy, and the radical power of saying no.

Find out more:

<https://www.dumont-buchverlag.de/buch/verena-guentner-medulla-9783755811329-t-7702>

about the author



Verena Güntner was born in 1978 in Ulm. After finishing drama school she spent several years on stage at different theatres. Her debut novel, *Es bringen*, was published in 2014. Her second novel, *Power*, was nominated for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize in 2020 and won the Schubart Literature Prize in 2021. With the feminist literary collective LIQUID CENTER, Verena Güntner published the collective novel *Wir kommen*

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together with Elisabeth R. Hager and Julia Wolf in 2024. She lives with her family in Berlin.

Previous work: *Power*, DuMont (2020)

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