



by Thomas Hettche
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Fiction

🏆 Longlisted for the
German Book Prize 2014

This book is outside of the five-year window for guaranteed assistance with English language translation. We suggest getting in touch with the relevant funding body for an informal conversation about the possibility of support. Please refer to our recommendations page for

Peacock Island

Pfaueninsel

review

Thomas Hettche's novel is both a refined flight of imagination and a fascinating glimpse into nineteenth-century Berlin.

One of the novel's protagonists is Peacock Island itself: once a commercial rabbit warren known as Rabbit Island, but by the early nineteenth century a pleasure ground for the Prussian royal family. The other protagonist is Marie Dorothea Strakon, a young woman of dwarfish stature, imported along with her brother Christian to join the island's curiosities. The pair live with the royal gardener Ferdinand Fintelman and his sister-in-law.

In the opening chapter Queen Luise, King Friedrich Wilhelm III's famously popular wife, encounters Christian and screams in horror and surprise: 'Monster!'. The description is devastating to young Marie, who had previously thought that her title of Royal Lady of the Castle conferred real status on her. Now she is sadly aware of her deformities, and fears that her love for Gustav, a well-trained horticulturalist, cannot come to anything. It can and does, but Gustav has their baby taken away when he is only months old, before marrying a woman of normal stature and having several more children with her.

Only once, when in her sixties, does Marie almost have another love affair – with a cook who is visiting the island. After Queen Luise's early death, the King marries Auguste von Harrach, who is presented enjoying two orgies on the island. Marie is required to watch the first, and her brother Christian dies in the course of the second, held in the

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Palm House.

Marie's spirits soar when she thinks she identifies a visitor to the island, an engineer from Ceylon with a Tamil wife, as her long-lost child sent away by Gustav. When the couple have left, she goes to sit in the derelict Palm House, and a spark from her cigar sets fire to the place. Marie dies in the blaze.

Almost all the novel's characters are based on real figures, and some of the events, such as the 1880 fire in the Palm House, are historical fact. Marie's story is sad and touching and, alongside the intriguing activities of botanists and zoologists in the novel's background and foreground, *Peacock Island* becomes a microcosm of nineteenth-century views on nature combined with human desire.

press quotes

'You have to search far and wide in recent German literature to find such a strong, well-written novel.'
– *Frankfurter Neue Presse on Woraus wir gemacht sind*

about the author

Thomas Hettche was born in 1964 at the edge of the Vogelsberg, and after several years in Frankfurt and lengthy visits to Krakow, Venice, Stuttgart, Rome, and Los Angeles now lives in Berlin. His 1989 debut novel *Ludwig muss sterben* was highly acclaimed and his novel *Der Fall Arbogast* (2001) was a bestseller that was translated into 12 languages. *Woraus wir gemacht sind* was shortlisted for the German Book Prize in 2006. Hettche most recently published the novel *Die Liebe der Väter*, which was longlisted for the German Book Prize 2010, and the autobiographical essay collection *Totenberg* (2012) for which he was awarded the Literature Prize Düsseldorf 2012. Rights to his previous works have been sold to Denmark, Estonia, France, Italy, Great Britain, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Spain, Sweden, and the USA.

Previous works include:

Der Fall Arbogast (2001); *Woraus wir gemacht sind* (2006); *Die Liebe der Väter* (2010); *Totenberg* (2012)

rights information

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Kiepenheuer & Witsch was founded in 1949 and was an independent publishing house until 2002, when it became part of the Holtzbrinck Group. A new imprint, Galiani Berlin, was founded in 2009. KiWi is one of the leading German publishing houses and is known for a broad list of German-language and international authors. KiWi focuses on accessible literature, (bestselling) commercial fiction, including crime, women's fiction etc. and contemporary non-fiction titles that often have an impact on political/societal debates. Its authors include Maxim Biller, Michael Kumpfmüller, Christian Kracht, Eva Menasse, E.M. Remarque, Uwe Timm as well as Julian Barnes, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nick Hornby, Gabriel García Márquez, Zadie Smith – to name a few.