



by Ulrike Draesner

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Fiction

🏆 Nominated for the Leipzig  
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## Penetrating Silence

### *Die Verwandelten*

#### review

*Die Verwandelten* is a multi-generational, continent-spanning novel that examines women's experience of war, motherhood and inherited trauma. A lyrical *tour de force* by award-winning German author and poet Ulrike Draesner, it is thematically wide-ranging yet gets to the nub of complex issues with startling clarity. A novel for our times, with echoes of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Anna Karenina*.

Draesner has built an intricate plot around seven female protagonists, whose lives intersect across the span of a century. The novel centres on the Nazi *Lebensborn* programme, under which Aryan women were encouraged to have children who were then given away to Nazi families. One of the protagonists, Alissa, is a *Lebensborn* child, given away at birth and brought up by a wealthy Nazi couple. Her own daughter, Kinga, lives in modern-day Hamburg, where she works as an adoption services lawyer. At a conference, Kinga meets a woman named Dorota who looks remarkably similar to her and seems to know who she is.

Dorota is German-Polish and has an elderly mother, Walla, in Poland. Walla, however, only adopted this name at the age of seventeen: she grew up as Renate. When the Nazi regime fell, Renate fled Breslau with her mother, Else, and was subjected to terrible abuse at the hands of Czech and Russian soldiers. She adopted a Polish identity in order to survive and had children with a Polish official, Witomir, but was later forced to give up her son. A subsequent relationship

produced two more children, including Dorota.

As a young girl in Poland, Dorota was attacked in the street by a group of young men, one of them the son of an official. In the aftermath, Dorota was arrested and questioned by the authorities, and left Poland as soon as she could.

In Hamburg, Dorota and Kinga become friends and untangle their shared history. The key proves to be another main protagonist, Adele, who worked as a cook for Else, Dorota's grandmother, and had an affair with Else's husband. When Adele fell pregnant, she went to a *Lebensborn* home to give birth to her daughter: Alissa, Kinga's mother. A central aspect to unravelling this story is a painting that used to hang in Else's dining room – a simple image of a curtain blowing at an open window. As it passes back and forth between Germany and Poland, much like the women in the novel, it comes to represent the many different identities they are forced to assume.

With its continually shifting first-person perspective, loose structure and dreamlike atmosphere, *Die Verwandelten* also has striking language: Polish and Silesian words are scattered throughout the text and translated in a glossary at the end. These linguistic fragments and the symbolic echoes found in all seven narrators' lives indicate how trauma can be passed down through generations. A powerful examination of the violence women face both in conflict and in peacetime, *Die Verwandelten* is a novel of breath-taking scope and emotional weight.

Read more on the publisher's website here:

<https://foreignrights.penguinrandomhouse.de/edition/9783328601722>

## press quotes

*An absolutely stunning book about women and how they must transform themselves in order to survive trauma, and about how we carry the burdens forward from one generation into another. Despite harrowing details, many of them based on real events, this is a deeply emotional and uplifting book, a testament to the ways in which we can survive even the worst things.*

Feline Charpentier, NBG reader

*A captivating family saga that wrests an entirely new, female dimension from the violent twentieth century.*

Judith Hoffmann, ORF, Ö1

*Ulrike Draesner is both in and within her characters, finding words for silencing, hesitation, slipping out of the world. Again and again she demonstrates that she is also a poet. The way she plays with German, Polish and Silesian words and idioms is virtuosic.*

Katja Weise, NDR Kultur

## about the author



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Ulrike Draesner was born in Munich in 1962. She studied English, German and philosophy in Munich and Oxford, and has worked as an academic, translator and editor. She has published volumes of poetry and essays, short-story collections and seven novels, receiving numerous awards and scholarships, including the 2016 Nicolas Born Prize. She has held the post of visiting professor at institutions in Kiel, Birmingham, Wiesbaden, Leipzig and Biel, among others, and was a visiting fellow at

New College, Oxford, in 2015.

Ulrike Draesner teaches at the German Literature Institute in Leipzig. Her 2020 novel *Schwitters* was featured in nbg, Autumn 2020.

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Other works include: *Eine Frau wird älter*, Penguin (2018); *Grammatik der Gespenster*, Reclam (2018); *Kanalschwimmer*, Mare (2019); *Schwitters*, Penguin (2020); *doggerland*, Penguin (2021); *hell & hörig*, Penguin (2022).

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