



by Jana Volkmann  
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Fiction

## The Best Day in a Long Time

### *Der beste Tag seit langem*

#### review

In this immersive story, animals unexpectedly start appearing everywhere and humans adjust to accommodate them. Austrian novelist and poet Jana Volkmann's novel starts with a riderless horse and goes on to touch on animal-human relations, animal rights and exploitation, self-determination – and its limits.

In the fairytale opening, two women happen upon a horse wandering about in the city centre of Vienna. It appears to have escaped from a riding stable and is in a poor state of health. Although they have no idea how to look after horses, they bring the mare home and care for her in the garden of their dilapidated villa – much to the annoyance of the neighbours, who are advocates of civilised law and order. The two women research how to minister to the horse, whom they name Isidora, and she thrives in her new environment.

We see this from the perspective of Maja, the aunt of Cordelia, one of the women. Maja inherited the house they live in early in life. She works sporadically as an academic ghost-writer, including on a text on the history of the smallpox vaccination in the 18th century. This leads to a digression on the etymology of the word vaccine – it derives from *vacca*, meaning cow, thus linking animal research to human health.

Things quickly escalate, with more animals appearing, including pigs and dogs that have escaped from vivisection laboratories: the house

soon turns into a menagerie. Not all of the animals are as endearing as the white horse: white rats turn up, too, on a person, in a car and in a pizza box. The women are divided on how they should react to this large-scale animal rebellion. Cordelia joins a cell of activists who have founded a group called MORPH and who are prepared to resort to violence; Maja prefers to keep her distance. At a summer school out in the woods, Cordelia starts to train animals in defence tactics such as pretending to be asleep because 'while you are sleeping, there can be no exploitation'. By this point in the book, the fairytale sheen of the story has taken on a more sinister and critical appearance. And the world seems to be populated solely by animals.

This acerbically funny story is told with verve and a touch of magic realism. It is a modern-day *Animal Farm*: a timely reflection on ecological problems, the industrial treatment of animals and alternative communities.

Find out more:

<https://www.residenzverlag.com/en/buch/the-best-day-in-a-long-time>

## press quotes

*“Jana Volkmann’s novel is a book about responsibility for the animal world and solidarity between all life forms, indeed all of existence.”*

SWR Bestenliste

*“A sensitive, humorous and reflective book that balances on the divide between inner and outer, human and animal, and yesterday and tomorrow.”*

Miku Sophie Kühmel, RBB RADIO EINS

*“Jana Volkmann tells how an abandoned horse brings two women to a new and more commendable attitude towards all creatures; her tone is almost casual but always consistent, and never agitated. This is precisely what gives it its impact.”*

Bettina Baltschev, Deutschlandfunk and MDR Kultur

## about the author



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Jana Volkmann was born in Kassel in 1983, studied European Literature in Berlin and published her first prose texts there; she has lived and written in Vienna since 2012. Numerous publications, most recently: Auwald ('Alluvial Forest', a novel, Verbrecher Verlag 2020) and Investitionsruinen ('Investment-ruins', poems, Limbus 2021). Auwald won her the 2021 Bremen Literature Prize and the 2022 Reinhard Priessnitz Prize. As a journalist, she writes for publications including Der Freitag and Tagebuch and has long been concerned with the question of whether animals (have to) work. Her most recent publication with

Residenz Verlag is Der beste Tag seit langem ('The best day in a long time', 2024).

**Previous works:** Das Zeichen für Regen. Roman. Edition Atelier, Wien 2015; Auwald. Roman. Verbrecher Verlag, Berlin 2020; Der beste Tag seit langem, Residenz, Salzburg 2024.

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