



by Lena Schätte

S. Fischer

March 2025 / 192pp

Fiction

🏆 Nominated for the
German Book Prize 2025

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The Grime on My Father's Hand

Das Schwarz an den Händen meines Vaters

review

Told through a series of vignettes that juxtapose the narrator's childhood memories with the more recent past, this unflinching portrait of the impact of alcoholism on a family packs a gut punch. Not straightforwardly chronological, but thematically ordered, these vignettes show how intergenerational trauma can occur as it is slowly revealed that the narrator has inherited her father's addiction.

As a young child, Motte, as her father used to call her, adored her dad. She recalls times when they played games of hide and seek and he thought up original answers to her questions. But he also has another side, going completely off the rails. Some of the worst episodes include the time he frittered away the family's paltry savings in a betting shop and crashed the car into a local bakery. Despite this, Motte's love for her dysfunctional father is unshakeable.

Unfortunately, her mother is unable to provide much support to her children in this fragile family constellation. She, too, has a history of alcoholic men in the family and seems resigned to her husband also being an addict, which manifests in bouts of depression. Only Motte's brother is a reliable source of comfort. Nevertheless, the brother and sister feel a disconnect from their peers because of their family circumstances.

During a sleepover, Motte's friend comes across her father passed

out drunk in the bathroom. Flash-forward to the more recent past: the narrator herself is passed out in a drunken state by her front door, unable to fumble her key into the lock. In turn, a small child finds her and the past repeats itself. But when her father is diagnosed with a terminal illness, Motte, now a grown-up, grapples to find a way to break the cycle.

Tenderly written, and with a deep respect for the flawed nature of the characters portrayed, this book's pared-down style is reminiscent of authors like Celeste Ng or Donal Ryan. The title refers to the father's job in a factory hall – the black on his hands is from machine oil – thus placing class at the centre of this literary exploration of addiction.

about the author

Lena Schütte was born in 1993 in Lüdenscheid, and made her debut in 2014 with the novel *Ruhrpottliebe* ('Ruhr Valley Love'). In the years that followed, she worked as a psychiatric nurse in the Ruhr area and then began studying Literary Writing at the German Literature Institute Leipzig in 2020. Today, she cares for people with addiction issues in Lüdenscheid – and writes. An excerpt from *The Grime on My Father's Hands* was awarded the W.G. Sebald Literature Prize in 2024.

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