



by Katja Lange-Müller  
Kiepenheuer & Witsch  
September 2024 / 240pp  
Fiction

🏆 Author's work had been  
translated into 13 languages

## The Hermit Crab

### *Unser Ole*

#### review

An enjoyable yet sobering novel about motherhood, trauma and loneliness as we age, *The Hermit Crab* takes an unusual approach to themes that have long been popular in fiction. Prize-winning author Katja Lange-Müller employs deadpan humour to explore serious issues, while also offering a no-holds-barred look at characters who may not always display great fortitude or compassion.

Firmly anchored in East Germany, *The Hermit Crab* follows the lives of three main characters: Ida, Elvira and Manuela. Ida, an ageing model with a string of failed relationships behind her, befriends Elvira, who lives in a village with her autistic grandson. Invited to live with the pair, Ida moves in but is troubled by Elvira's lack of kindness and empathy towards Ole, her grandson.

Tragically, Elvira suffers a fatal fall downstairs, and Ida has to contact Manuela, Elvira's errant daughter. Unable to relate to her son and having herself been rejected by her own mother as a child, Manuela is unpleasant and treats Ida like a servant. Distressed at having to attend his grandmother's funeral, Ole runs away and is never found, despite a police search. Manuela stays on in the house with Ida as a companion, on the pretext that Ole might return home.

Sparse in its descriptions of characters and events, and with dramatic breaks in its narrative, *The Hermit Crab* is more a series of running commentaries that give the reader insights into the protagonists'

thoughts and feelings. Through this, we learn about their past relationships; key to all three is a lack of maternal compassion, which is replayed in their inability to care for Ole. Nonetheless, the women are also bound by an undercurrent of loneliness, a theme Lange-Müller addresses from an oblique yet effective angle.

Unafraid to examine what it might look like *not* to cope in the face of adversity, Lange-Müller deploys considerable skill in this thought-provoking novel about society and family.

## about the author

Katja Lange-Müller was born in East Berlin in 1951. She has been the recipient of many prizes, including the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, the Alfred Döblin Prize, the Kassel Literature Prize for Grotesque Humor, the Gerti Spies Prize, the Wilhelm Raabe Prize, the Kleist Prize, and the Günter Grass Prize. She has been a Villa Massimo fellow and a fellow at the Tarabya Cultural Academy in Istanbul. Her works have been translated into 13 languages.

Previous works: *Das Problem als Katalysator*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2018), *Drehtür*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2016), *Böse Schafe*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2007), *Die Enten, die Frauen und die Wahrheit*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2003), *Vom Fisch bespuckt*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2001), *Die Letzten*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (2000), *Verfrühte Tierliebe*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (1995), *Kasper Mauser – Die Feigheit vorm Freund*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch (1988).

Previous works translated into English: *Bad Sheep*, *Seagull* (2024, translated by Simon Pare), *Revolving Door*, *Seagull* (2022, translated by Simon Pare).

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Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch (Germany)

Contact: Aleksandra Erakovic

aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de

Bahnhofsvorplatz 1

50667 Cologne