



by Lilli Tollkien  
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Fiction

## Two Hands Lifting the Sky

*Mit beiden Händen den Himmel stützen*

### review

Lilli Tollkien's debut novel *Two Hands Lifting the Sky* is a raw, darkly lucid coming-of-age story set in 1980s and 1990s West Berlin. It follows Lale, a foster child raised in a left-wing all-male flatshare in Neukölln, where adult freedom is treated as sacred, and a child's need for safety is treated as an inconvenience.

The book is told in the first person and largely in the present tense, which gives it speed and a lived-in immediacy. Tollkien's sensory writing is precise and unsparing: the smell of different tobaccos, the sweetness of lollies and fizzy drinks, the texture of dirty laundry, the sounds that travel through thin walls late at night. Lale's heightened perception feels less like lyricism than a survival skill, a way of reading the atmosphere before it turns.

Lale's mother is addicted to heroin. Her father is imprisoned after an attempted bank robbery that he and his comrades tried to justify as the redistribution of wealth. One comrade takes Lale out of a children's home and brings her to the commune. The men talk revolution, drift between parties and aid projects, sell hashish in the living room, and cycle through women, dismissing those who complain as 'bourgeois' or mad. On the surface, Lale has limitless freedom: she can stay up as long as she likes, eat sweets, watch television for hours. Underneath, she is neglected, and her

boundaries are repeatedly violated.

Tolkien handles her material with control. Nothing is softened, but nothing is sensationalised. Abuse is described from a child's point of view, with confusion and adaptation sitting alongside fear; the restraint in this makes the abuse more devastating. As Lale grows older, shame and disgust lodge in her body, leaving her feeling exposed, 'too porous', always needing something external, hands, blankets, and later her babies, to remind her where she ends.

The later sections move through adolescence and early adulthood: friendships, first love, music as a lifeline, depression, an abortion, false starts, and finally treatment. But this is not a catalogue of damage: it has a clear emotional engine, in the form of Lale's unyielding insistence on making a life that is more than endurance, and her determination to reclaim her story through writing.

This is voice-led, socially specific fiction with real pull, a vivid and unfamiliar West Berlin milieu, and a narrator who refuses self-pity while insisting on being heard. Its bruised intimacy will appeal to readers of Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* and Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*.

Find out more:

<https://www.aufbau-verlage.de/aufbau/mit-beiden-handen-den-himmel-stutzen/978-3-351-04284-4>

## press quotes

*Lilli Tollkien writes with a ferocity that is almost unbearable – and that is precisely why you have to read her.*

Mareike Fallwickl

*After the first page I was shaken, but after the first chapter I was captivated. A novel of improbable gravity, a rare gem.*

Edgar Rai

## about the author



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**Lilli Tollkien** was born in Berlin in 1980, began various training courses and studied Directing and Music Therapy in Berlin and Heidelberg, among other things. She has worked in a wide variety of professions, including as an addiction counsellor in a prison, a careers coach, and a set designer. In addition to her current profession, she is a photographer and has published in anthologies of her pictures. She lives with her children in Leipzig. *Mit beiden Händen den Himmel stützen* ('Two Hands Lifting the Sky') is her first novel.

## rights information

Aufbau Verlage (Germany)

Prinzenstrasse 85

10969 Berlin

Contact: Inka Ihmels

[i.ihmels@aufbau-verlage.de](mailto:i.ihmels@aufbau-verlage.de)

Tel: +49 (0)30 28394-123

