



by Juli Zeh

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Fiction

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Unterleuten

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review

Juli Zeh's latest book is a social novel that examines contemporary life and the fraught legacy of German reunification in a pacy and impressively crafted plot of intrigue, feuds and murder.

At the end of *Unterleuten*, a body is found at the bottom of the storage unit that supplies the village of Unterleuten – a fictional location on the outskirts of Berlin – with its water. Unbeknown to the villagers, they have been drinking from the last resting place of Gombrowski, owner of the agricultural business that was once an East German farming collective and still operates as the village's main source of income and jobs. A journalist is sent to investigate.

The earlier chapters in the novel turn out to be the stories collected by the journalist, narrated from the perspective of eleven central characters who are bound together in a web of loyalties, conflicts and debts. There is an old feud between Gombrowski and committed communist Kron, the abduction of a child or possibly two, a road traffic accident in which a new resident in the village is nearly killed, a savage attack on a car mechanic, a workers' strike, and dubious dealings with property speculators. Newcomer Linda is engaged in a plot to dupe Gombrowski into supporting her plans to set up a business next to a bird conservation zone; Gombrowski's wife is convinced that her husband is having an affair with a woman who allegedly abducted Kron's granddaughter; and Kron and Gombrowski are pitted against each other in an ideological and personal battle that leads to both their deaths. These individual plotlines combine to tell

two bigger stories: the proposal to build a wind farm that divides the villagers, and an attempted murder twenty years earlier that has its roots in East German history.

Unterleuten combines the stories of numerous colourful characters to tell the history of a village which serves as a microcosm for society and of the recent German past. It blends contemporary questions about environmentalism, neoliberalism, twenty-first-century ethics, and the urbanrural divide with an exploration of Germany's divided past and united present. It also tells age-old tales about love, hatred and betrayal. *Unterleuten* is a wonderful state-of-the-nation book that will find an enthusiastic English-language audience among readers of such novelists as Jonathan Franzen and John Lanchester.

about the author

Juli Zeh was born in 1974. She studied law in Passau and Leipzig and took her PhD in the field of European and International Law. This was followed by longer stints in New York and Kraków. Her debut novel *Eagles and Angels* (2001) was an international bestseller. Since then, her books have been translated into thirty-five languages. She has been awarded numerous prizes for her work, including the Carl Amery Literature Prize and the Thomas Mann Prize.

Previous works include:

Nullzeit (2012); *Corpus delicti* (2009); *Schilf* (2007); *Spieltrieb* (2005); *Adler und Engel* (2001)

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Luchterhand Literaturverlag was founded by Hermann Luchterhand in 1924 and has been known for its literary list since 1954, with Günter Grass's novel *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*, 1959) being an early and triumphant success. The programme offers literary fiction and poetry as well as carefully edited complete editions of

selected writers' works. Authors include Ernst Jandl, Pablo Neruda, António Lobo Antunes, Frank McCourt, Annie Proulx, George Saunders, Michael Cunningham, Hanns-Josef Ortheil, Terézia Mora, Saša Stanišić and Karl Ove Knausgård.