



by Birgit Mattausch  
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Fiction

## Until We Become Forest

*Bis wir Wald werden*

### review

A slender, poetic novel about a family of Russian-Germans, *Bis wir Wald werden* is the debut of former pastor Birgit Mattausch. With striking imagery, a warm tone and unusual stylistic devices, it offers a view of a little-explored community, interrogating themes such as memory, migration and the natural world.

A non-linear narrative divided into six thematically distinct parts, *Bis wir Wald werden* begins with an embroidered quilt used to carry Nanush, the first-person narrator, to her new home. She and her family are ethnic Germans who were deported to Siberia, then fled back to Germany to escape forced labour; they now live in a sixteen-storey high-rise along with other members of their community. The matriarch of the family, Nanush's great-grandmother, Babulya, is nearing the end of her life; soon, the same embroidered quilt will be used to cover her body. Between these two events, Nanush sifts through her memories like family photos, sharing her thoughts in a quiet, intimate narrative.

Despite the concrete that surrounds the family now, the natural world – and trees in particular – play an important role, as suggested by the title. The forest is used to represent what life used to be for Nanush, and the significance of her roots in helping to shape her personal identity. In stark contrast to the forest, plastic defines the family's life in Germany, both as a marker of economic aspiration and as a symbol of the new, perhaps even artificial way in which they live.

Though we only ever get a glimpse into lives other than Nanush's, the characters in *Bis wir Wald werden* are well drawn and believable. Most live in the high-rise, but a few have been left behind in Russia. Spanning different generations, they make a vivid portrait of a family scattered, with the kitchen as its literal and symbolic heart. Mattausch also employs an unusual stylistic device: poem-like lists that detail various family members' experiences, thoughts and memories. These snippets of insight are an unconventional way of approaching character and also serve to deepen our understanding of individual pasts.

With beautiful imagery and a thematic rather than plot-driven narrative, *Bis wir Wald werden* is a lyrical debut that portrays one specific community while offering a quiet meditation on memory, migration and the places we occupy in the world.

Find out more:

<https://www.klett-cotta.de/produkt/birgit-mattausch-bis-wir-wald-werden-9783608986938-t-8377>

## about the author



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Birgit Mattausch studied German and Protestant Theology. For ten years she was a priest in southern Germany, working with a community that included many emigrants from the former Soviet Union, and living with them in a tower block.

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Klett-Cotta, Frauke Kniffler

f.kniffler@klett-cotta.de

+49 711 6672-1257