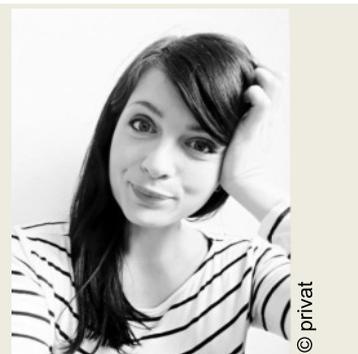


Anja Baumheier

THE LAND OF CRANES



Wunderlich
432 pages
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Growing up in 1960s East Berlin, the Groen sisters could not be more different. Charlotte, the elder, is as fiercely committed to socialist ideals as their father Johannes, whose Stasi career is going from strength to strength. Artistically inclined Marlene, on the other hand, frequently rubs others up the wrong way. She falls for Wieland, the son of a pastor who criticises the communist system. With every day that passes, the young couple's yearning for a life in freedom intensifies. When they decide to flee to the West, Marlene's father makes a fateful decision.

Decades later, the youngest Groen sister Theresa is surprised to find herself as the inheritor of Marlene's house, who she had been told had died in an accident before she was even born. What's behind this mysterious inheritance? Theresa starts investigating and uncovers a network of lies, guilt and betrayal. Suddenly, she is forced to question everything she thought she knew about her family and herself...

Told through the prism of the Groen family story, *The Land Of Cranes* looks back at 80 years of German history, from the post-war years through the founding of the GDR and the building of the Berlin Wall up to the Wende, or great change, of reunification.

Recommended by *New Books in German* (Goethe Institute).

Anja Baumheier was born in Dresden in 1979 and spent her childhood in the GDR. Today she lives with her family in Berlin, teaching French and Spanish at a school there. *The Land Of Cranes* is her debut novel.

Then (1936)

Jaksonów

Finally, eight. Johannes threw back the covers, jumped out of bed and ran down the stairs, still in pyjamas, his hair tousled. A weak light fell through the window and into the hall of the old farmhouse. Johannes had been really looking forward to his birthday. His mother had promised to spend the entire day with him. He wouldn't even have to go to school, she had said. He sprang from the bottom step into the kitchen. In the centre of the small room stood a table made of coarse wood, shelves of crockery lined the wall, and an ashbin sat next to the wood-burning stove. But his mother wasn't there and the adjoining sitting room was empty as well. Johannes could guess what that meant. His mother would not be getting out of bed today.

Her bedroom door was ajar. On entering, he was met by the long-familiar smell of valerian, alcohol and damp wood. The coarse linen curtains had been closed carelessly. Through a gap, Johannes could see the driving snow outside the window, made somewhat eerie by the pale morning light. Carefully, he sat down on the edge of the bed. His mother's eyes were closed, her long black hair lay in a tangle on the pillow, and her chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. With her pale mouth, her cracked lips and her pallid skin she looked to be made of wax, almost as if she were not there at all. Now, so close to her, Johannes could smell her sweat and the putrid breath from her half-open mouth. On the bedside table lay boxes of tablets with Latin names that meant nothing to him. Behind them, leaning against the wall, was a jagged-edged photo that had been taken before Johannes was born. He struggled to recognise the woman in the bed as the one from the photo. The woman in the picture was smiling at the photographer, one hand propped on her hip. Her fair skin glowed, her black hair was cut short. He picked up the photo and turned it over. *Charlotte – 1916* was written in cursive handwriting on the back.

His mother opened her eyes. They were red-rimmed and dull. "Happy Birthday."

Johannes leant forwards to hug her, but she pushed him away. "No, Hannes, I can't breathe when you do that. You know that."

Johannes drew back and nodded. His throat felt tight. He looked away and gazed around the room. But he couldn't focus on anything. Finally, his eyes settled on the painting above the chest of drawers. It showed a snowy landscape, and he suddenly felt as though dark shadows would break free from the vast whiteness and reach out to grab him. Johannes looked down. I know she's not well. But it's my birthday, she could at least have tried, he thought, yet did not

say it aloud. He had already made that mistake once before. It had caused his mother to burst into tears. Do you think I asked for this? That's what she had said.

There was a knock at the front door. Johannes pushed himself up from the bed, went into the hall and opened the door. Ida Pinotek, who owned the neighbouring farm, stood on the doorstep. She had a scarf tied round her head, was wearing a checked cloth apron and holding a large plate bearing a chocolate cake. "Hannes, sweetheart. Happy Birthday. I hope chocolate cake is still your favourite?"

As Johannes nodded, Ida Pinotek pulled him to her. She was petite and expecting her third child. Her belly was so large that Johannes' face only briefly brushed against her chest.

And then he couldn't hold back the tears.

Ida Pinotek stroked his cheek. "Is Charlotte in bed again?"

He nodded.

"Oh, my poor boy." She wanted to say more but bit her bottom lip. "Don't you worry. It'll pass. Now chop chop, off to school with you. Hubert and Hedwig are already waiting."

Johannes thought briefly of his mother's promise, of the fact that she actually wanted to spend the day with him. "I'll be right there, Frau Pinotek." He went back to his mother's room and glanced in. She had gone back to sleep. Quickly, Johannes dressed, threw on his coat and satchel, and followed Ida Pinotek outside.

When he returned home in the afternoon, his mother was still in bed. He went into the kitchen, where he had left Ida Pinotek's chocolate cake. Although Johannes was hungry, the sight of it made him feel sick. He picked up the cake, sneaked behind the house and threw it onto the compost heap. Gingerly, he used a branch to push some rotting rubbish on top of it. He didn't want to disappoint Frau Pinotek.

Hubert and Hedwig Pinotek were sitting at the large table in the sitting room, decorating biscuits. Johannes was lying on the sofa, watching wax dripping onto the wooden floor from one of the candles on the Christmas tree.

"Don't you want to join in, Hannes?" Ida Pinotek lay her hand on Johannes' shoulder.

“No, thanks, Frau Pinotek, I’d rather stay lying here.”

“That’s ok, my boy. I’m sure your mother will feel better soon. And you’ll see, next year you’ll be celebrating Christmas together again.” She stroked his dark curls and went back into the kitchen to take another tray of biscuits out of the oven.

Two weeks had passed since Johannes’ birthday. His mother had been lying in her bedroom ever since. On the way to school one day, Johannes had told Hubert and Hedwig. That evening, Ida Pinotek had appeared on his doorstep. In a tone that told him she would not take no for an answer, she had instructed Johannes to pack a few things and come to their house. Johannes had stood rooted to the spot. And his neighbour had promised that he only had to stay until his mother felt better again. Since then, Johannes had been living with the Pinoteks.

With a hiss, the candle went out. Johannes sat up and looked around. And that was when he saw, through the window, that a light was on in his mother’s bedroom opposite. All day long, he had been waiting and hoping that he would be able to spend Christmas Eve with her after all. He leapt up and ran across the yard in his socks. But by the time he entered the hall, the light in her room had gone out. Johannes stood still and listened to the silence. Then he heard a crash in the attic. What was that? Was his mother up there? Johannes took the stairs two at a time and, out of breath, arrived at the old wooden door. He tried to open it, but it was locked from the inside. “Mother?” Johannes was tentatively pushing against the door when he heard Ida Pinotek’s voice from below. “Hannes, what are you up to? Out in the snow in your socks. You’ll make yourself ill, my boy.”

“She was awake, Frau Pinotek, I saw, I really did. But she’s not in her bed.” He leant over the banister and looked down.

“What are you doing up there then?”

“There was a crash, but the door’s locked. It never normally is.”

Ida Pinotek slowly climbed the stairs. She supported her back with one hand. The baby was due in four weeks and walking was becoming more and more difficult. The steps creaked under her feet. When she reached the door to the attic, Johannes stepped back. Ida Pinotek threw herself against the door with all her strength. But nothing happened. On the third attempt, she finally managed to open it. Johannes pushed past her.

The attic was dark, he couldn’t see a thing.

“There’s no one here, Hannes. Let’s go back to my house. It’s nearly time to hand out the presents”, Ida Pinotek said, and began to make her way back down the stairs.

With his hand, Johannes felt along the wall. He found the light switch. The light bulb dangling from the ceiling lit up, flickered briefly and went out. But not before he had seen her – his mother – and the rope around the roof beam, and the overturned stool.

Now

Berlin

Even through the lid of the foil tray, Theresa could smell what was for lunch today. Mashed potato, roast pork and mixed vegetables. As she carefully removed the lid, loud march music could be heard from the adjoining living room.

“Herr Bastian, could you turn the TV down a bit please?”

“Pardon?” The old man’s voice must once have been very powerful. He had told Theresa that during the GDR era, he had been in the NVA, the National People’s Army. Lieutenant or captain, she couldn’t remember precisely which. Herr Bastian’s eyes always lit up when he talked about those times. Since then his voice had grown weak and could barely be heard over the din of the television’s four-four time.

Theresa stuck her head through the hatch between the kitchen and the living room. “Could you turn that down please?” She pointed to the television next to the beige Sprelacart wall unit – another relic of the GDR era.

Herr Bastian smiled and turned the set off entirely. Theresa placed the lukewarm foil tray on the table. “There you are. It’s roast pork, your favourite.”

“Thank you, Frau Matusiak, you’re a gem. What on Earth would I do without you? Why don’t you sit with me for a minute?”

“I can’t, unfortunately. I would like to. But we’re given so little time.” She went into the hall and returned with a duster. It never ceased to amaze her that people put wall units in their living rooms. Her sister Charlotte had one too, and when Theresa visited, she teased her about it. While Theresa dusted vases, family photos and ornaments, she could hear Herr Bastian, who was sat behind her at the table, chewing at a leisurely pace. His dentures made a grinding noise. He smacked his lips and praised the food in glowing terms. “How’s the exhibition coming along? Have you finished all the paintings yet?”

Theresa put the wedding photo back in the unit. “I still have one left to do, otherwise Petzold will have my head. The preview is in three weeks.”

“You’ll manage it, Frau Matusiak. Things have a way of working themselves out. And at my ripe old age, I know for a fact that’s more than just a nice turn of phrase.”

Theresa shook out the duster. Outside the window the U2-line train rattled by. The first carriage was already disappearing into the tunnel towards Pankow. Theresa enjoyed her work as a care assistant for the elderly, she had grown fond of the old people over the years. But her true passion was painting. Even as a child she had painted, but had never dared to hope that it could ever be more than a hobby. Until she had met Albert Petzold. He ran a small gallery on Oderberger Strasse called *ARTifice*. She thought the name was ridiculous, but was pleased that he was giving her the opportunity to display her paintings there. It had always been her dream, but for a long time she had lacked the courage to show them to anyone other than Charlotte and her daughter, Anna. It was completely by chance that she had met Petzold. Six months ago Theresa had gone to the Museum of Natural History to draw the large dinosaur skeleton in the atrium. She had almost finished when suddenly a man was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. They had started to chat, and Albert Petzold had suggested that Theresa visit him at his gallery in Prenzlauer Berg and bring some of her work with her.

Theresa closed the window and glanced over at the cuckoo clock above the sofa.

“Finished, Frau Matusiak.” Herr Bastian had cleared his tray, not even a drop of sauce was left. He belonged to the generation that always finished their meal, no matter what it was. His cutlery lay at an angle across the foil tray.

Theresa slid into the bath. The warm water did her good, the day had been a strenuous one and her back was hurting. She closed her eyes and looked forward to the quiet evening ahead. She would order in a pizza and work on her paintings a little more. Just as she was about to add more warm water, the doorbell rang. Startled, she wondered who could be calling at this hour. It couldn't be her daughter, Anna, because she had a key and always rang in advance when she wanted to come over. The doorbell rang again. Theresa stood up, wrapped a hand towel round her head, pulled on her dressing gown and went to the door.

“Frau Matusiak, Theresa Matusiak?”

Theresa nodded.

“If you could just sign here, please?” The postman passed Theresa a registered letter.

She signed the form, thanked him and closed the door. Hesitantly, she turned the envelope over in her hands. Why had she received a letter by registered post? The sender was

marked as a notary's office on Schönhauser Allee called Herzberg and Salomon. Impulsively, Theresa tore open the envelope.

Dear Frau Matusiak,

I am writing to inform you that Frau Marlene Groen entrusted her last will and testament to our firm. Following Frau Groen's death a week ago, we are obliged to notify you that she named you and Tom Halász to inherit the property in Rostock. Please contact us immediately in order to make the necessary arrangements.

Please accept our condolences.

Yours sincerely,

p.p. Dr Kai Herzberg

Theresa let the hand holding the letter drop to her side. Marlene had only just died? That couldn't be right. The letter didn't make any sense. Her elder sister had lost her life back in 1971, in a boating accident. Marlene had drowned while out sailing with their father, Johannes, on the Baltic Sea. She was just seventeen when she died. The pain of Marlene's death had been unbearable for her parents at the time, and even years afterwards, they had barely spoken of their late daughter.

Theresa went to the window. Her wet feet left damp footprints on the floorboards. Lost in thought, she stopped in front of her paintings, which were leaning against the wall. The canvases showed melancholy faces somewhat reminiscent of Modigliani. Theresa ran her fingers over the cheek of a woman, pale-skinned and wearing a large hat. Her parents, Johannes and Elisabeth Groen, had had three daughters. Theresa, Marlene and Charlotte. Charlotte was the eldest, and Theresa the youngest. Theresa had never known Marlene, who had died before she was born. After Marlene's death, Elisabeth had unexpectedly fallen pregnant again and hadn't been able to bear the idea of not keeping the baby.

Theresa tore her gaze away from the paintings and scanned the letter again. The words "property in Rostock" made her falter. Property? She hadn't properly registered that part before. Theresa unwound the towel from her head and turned her thoughts to the house in Rostock that had once belonged to her parents. They had sold it after reunification. And now it seemed that the house had belonged to Marlene the whole time? Marlene, who had supposedly already been dead for years by then?

Theresa's throat felt dry. She went into the kitchen and took a gulp of water straight from the tap. Then she picked up her mobile from the table and called her sister. Charlotte, the older one, the sensible one, the one who always had a solution. Maybe she could shed some light on this.

“Groen?”

“Lotte, it's me. Have you got a minute?” Theresa went back into the living room and looked out of the window.

“A minute, yes, but that's all. I'm travelling to Magdeburg tomorrow morning for a training session, and haven't packed yet. What's up?”

“Well, I've just received a letter. It's about Marlene. She ... apparently she was still alive until a week ago.”

From the other end of the line, all Theresa could hear was Charlotte's breathing.

“Are you still there?” asked Theresa.

“Yes. That ... that can't be right. Marlene's dead, has been for years now.”

“Exactly. That's what's so baffling about it all. And the strangest part is that Marlene seems to have left me the house.” Theresa sat down on the chair in front of the easel by the window.

“What house?”

“The one in Rostock. You know, the house that Dad sold to an investor in '92. Lotte, I just don't understand it. Can you make sense of it?”

“No, unfortunately not. It's just as much of a mystery to me as it is to you. I think you'll have to ask Mother, though that probably won't be easy.”

“I will do. First thing tomorrow. Perhaps it's all a misunderstanding, a mix-up, who knows.” Thoughtfully, Theresa looked at the letter, which now lay on the easel in front of her. “Lotte ... just one more question. Do you know someone called Tom, Tom Halász?”

“No, that doesn't ring any bells, why?”

“Oh, nothing, just a thought. I'll let you know as soon as I've found out more.”

The next morning, after Theresa had spoken with the secretary at Herzberg and Salomon and arranged an appointment, she took the S-Bahn to Lichtenberg, where her mother, Elisabeth, had lived for the last five years in a care home for people with dementia. There had been a time when Elisabeth would frequently go for walks in the nearby zoo with Theresa and Charlotte, and the two of them hoped that the time spent there would curb the fading of Elisabeth's memory. Or that the mornings when the carers took her for walks around the grounds would at least bring back part of her memory.

The care home was the best option and prevented the worst from happening. After Johannes' death in 1997, Elisabeth had gained a new lease of life and travelled a lot. During that period, Theresa and Charlotte had rarely seen her. Theresa had been going through a difficult time back then. She and Bernd, Anna's father, had just divorced and Theresa had had to adjust to being a single parent from then on. Charlotte had been busy studying to be a tax official and overcoming her frustration that her qualification for teaching citizenship was no longer recognised after reunification.

But just three years later, Elisabeth had slowly but surely taken a turn for the worse. It began with her forgetting her key when she went out, then she didn't know where her apartment was, then she mixed up her children's names. Finally, there was an occasion when Elisabeth called the police when Charlotte was in the apartment because she had mistaken her daughter for a burglar. The forgetfulness brought with it a change in behaviour that soon made it difficult for Elisabeth's daughters to look after her. She became aggressive, accused Theresa of having stolen her money, and when she eventually started forgetting to eat, Theresa and Charlotte decided with apprehension and a guilty conscience that it was time to hand over her care to professionals.

At the care home, lunch trays were being piled on steel trolleys and wheeled to the kitchen. Theresa registered at reception and entered the lift, which smelt of disinfectant and peppermint tea. She pressed the number four. Slowly the lift doors closed and the mirrored enclosure began to move.

The door to Elisabeth's room stood open and Theresa walked straight in. Her mother was sitting up in bed staring at the picture hanging on the wall of the chocolate girl. It was a scaled-down copy of the famous painting by Jean-Étienne Liotard and used to hang in the living room of Johannes' and Elisabeth's apartment on the Weberwiese. It was as out of place in the

modern, sterile room as the antique chest of drawers with the Meissen porcelain vase, both of which Elisabeth had also brought from home.

In a short time the illness had aged Elisabeth greatly. Her hair was thin, her eyes dull, her mouth a pale line. She wore a beige blouse covered by a chunky cardigan which made her look even more gaunt than she really was. Theresa couldn't help thinking of the wedding photos of her mother. Of the once incredibly beautiful woman, nothing but a shadow remained.

"Hello Mum, it's me", Theresa whispered.

Elisabeth continued to stare at the chocolate girl, only her hand twitching briefly.

On the way over Theresa had wondered how best to raise the subject of Marlene with her mother and had decided to introduce the topic very gently.

"How are you?"

Elisabeth did not respond.

Theresa sat down on the edge of the bed. "I came because I need to ask you something. It's about Marlene. I received a letter yesterday ..."

Elisabeth turned her head and looked Theresa in the eye. "Be quiet."

Theresa flinched. Where had her mother found the strength to speak so loudly? She wasn't even able to feed herself anymore. And such firmness in her voice – Theresa couldn't remember the last time she had heard her mother speak like that.

Elisabeth turned her gaze back to the picture of the chocolate girl. "Marlene has always been one to cause trouble. We had to do something or it would have destroyed our family." Her voice shook.

"What do you mean?" Theresa drew closer to her mother but the older woman did not reply.

Theresa took Elisabeth's hand. It was as cold as ice.

"Anton, he saved her."

Who was Anton? Theresa looked up in astonishment. Her mother had closed her eyes. Slowly, Theresa stroked the back of her hands.

"What are you saying?" Theresa tried again.

But Elisabeth remained silent, even when Theresa repeated the question again.

Then (1943)

Rostock

“When is Father coming back?”

Käthe took Elisabeth’s hand. “Maybe in the spring”, she said, letting go and standing up. Five by five steps, that’s all the space there was. The cellar smelt of mould, the candles would only last another day, and even the food supplies, tins and jars were dwindling. The toilet bucket was full and gave off a terrible stench. Once again, Käthe had tried to avoid the question about Emil. Maybe in the spring. Why had she said that? She was well aware that Elisabeth didn’t believe her. After all, the girl was sixteen now.

It was already five months since they had taken Emil away. He had known what he was getting involved in when he went to the secret meetings at the port and helped to distribute pamphlets condemning the war. For three months, Elisabeth and Käthe had been living in the cellar – out of fear of the bombing and out of fear that the men in uniform would return. The entrance to their hiding place was behind a bookcase, recessed in a protruding bit of wall. The two lowest shelves weren’t fixed in place. If you moved them aside you could climb down through the opening. Elisabeth and Käthe went up into the house only rarely, to collect water and to check that everything was still in order.

“He’s not coming back, is he?” Elisabeth picked up the last candle and turned it in her hand.

“Oh, Lisbeth, you’re too old for me to hide it from you anymore. I don’t know when your father will come back. I don’t know if he ever will.”

At that moment a siren began to wail. The two women flinched and peered fearfully through the bars of the cellar window to the outside world. It was raining. All they could see was a small patch of pavement. It was dark and flashes of light illuminated the wet cobblestones at ever shorter intervals. Then shoes came into sight. Children’s shoes and clumpy women’s shoes that hurried past in the direction of the air raid shelter. Women were calling, children were crying. Elisabeth held onto her mother tightly.

Käthe laid her hand on Elisabeth’s head. “We’re safe down here and it can’t possibly be as bad as it was a year ago.” Despite her words, Käthe struggled to maintain an appearance of calm. She could still remember clearly that terrible night in April last year. Thousands of bombs had been dropped on Rostock, the sea breeze had helped the flames to spread. After the attack

she and Emil had walked, dismayed, through the ruined streets. Countless buildings had fallen victim to the fire, entire streets had been obliterated, and hundreds of people had been wandering aimlessly having found themselves suddenly homeless. The Old Town was an expanse of rubble, the roof of St Peter's Church had been lost to the fire and the city's theatre, which Käthe and Emil had visited so often, had been destroyed.

When they heard the first shots from the anti-aircraft guns, Elisabeth cried out. She clung onto her mother even more tightly. Käthe's hand shook where it rested on Elisabeth's head. She tried not to let her fear show. At least one of us has to stay strong, she thought.

Outside, all was silent once more. But suddenly they heard the screech of bombs. Then there was a loud blast. The glass in the cellar window shattered, and the shards fell onto the mattress below it. Elisabeth started, and Käthe realised that her underclothes were wet.

It was long after midnight when the attack finally ended and the shots died away. Everything seemed peaceful. Somewhere, a dog barked. Once again, shoes hurried past the cellar window, this time in the opposite direction. The smell of sulphur seeped through the bars. Elisabeth broke away from her mother's arms, cleared away the shards of glass and lay down on the mattress.

"I'll be right back." Käthe stood up, removed the lower shelves of the bookcase and climbed through the opening. Then, she reached down for the toilet bucket and slowly climbed the cellar stairs.

The house was intact, all the windows up there had withstood the bombing. Near the door stood a chest. Käthe took out fresh underclothes, went into the bathroom, soaked the old ones in soapy water and stepped outside the front door. Smoke still hung over the street. On the horizon, towards Rostock port, flames rose into the night sky. Käthe looked around cautiously. There was no sign of anyone. She went down the steps and emptied the toilet bucket down the drain. When she turned around, she noticed something on the step outside the front door. She moved closer and saw a jug of fresh water, candles and a loaf of bread wrapped in a newspaper. Hastily, Käthe picked them up and carried them into the house. Who had enough to spare these days that they were able to share with others? Käthe went back into the bathroom, wrung out her underclothes and hung them on the line.

When she returned to the cellar, Elisabeth was asleep. The coarse woollen blanket lay next to the mattress. She looked so like her father. The blonde hair, the narrow build. Käthe

took the blanket and laid it carefully over her daughter. Suddenly, she heard a noise, a quiet rustling above her head. From outside, a flyer had blown against the bars of the cellar window and was fluttering in the wind.

Käthe stood up, pulled the paper through the bars and read. *Extra! German soldiers defeated at Stalingrad and captured by the Russians as prisoners of war.*