

Sylvana Freyberg, Jörg Ritter & Martin Stricker (Eds.)

# Rotting Skin

and other quirks of German Science Fiction 2024

I'm free,  
take me!



ANDROMEDA SF MAGAZIN 159  
SCIENCEFICTIONCLUBDEUTSCHLAND.EV

*Stricker*



Sylvana Freyberg, Jörg Ritter & Martin Stricker (Eds.)

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German Science Fiction 2024

**Andromeda SF Magazin 159**

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*Illustrator **Meike Schultchen**, born in Hamburg in 1972, studied graphic design in Braunschweig and graduated as a qualified illustrator in Hamburg. She now lives and works there as a freelance illustrator and lecturer/teacher for art and illustration. For her cover for COZMIC Vol. 02 she was awarded the Kurd Laßwitz Award in the category "Best Graphics for SF". Her output is mainly comics, escape games, science fiction, and fantasy. [www.meikeschultchen.com](http://www.meikeschultchen.com)*

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"Clipper" by Franz Miktis

# Preface

LonCon3 / the 72nd World SF Convention was the first occasion for Science Fiction Club Deutschland (SFCD) to issue a non-German or Bilingual Edition of its Andromeda SF magazine. This is the 5th international edition, issued on the occasion of the 82nd WorldCon in Glasgow / EuroCon Erasmuscon 2024 in Rotterdam. Its task (apart from being a pleasure to read) is to showcase what's happening in German SF, be it current topics, literature of all kinds, art or comics, not to forget some important technical details and—last but not least—the history of our club.

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*Illustrator **Franz Miklis**: Born in 1963 in Oberndorf near Salzburg/Austria, my passion lies in the science fiction and fantasy scene, which I have been involved in since 1980. My own publications, and hundreds of book and magazine covers have been created so far (see [www.isfdb.org](http://www.isfdb.org)). My work became internationally known primarily through the "Game of Thrones" trading cards from Fantasy Flight. In 2024, cards of the Perry Rhodan trading card game (<http://prks.de/>) for "The Red Universe" will be published, and paintings for the series "Beyond the Event Horizon" are planned for exhibitions in observatories and planetariums.*

*I live and paint in Nußdorf near Salzburg, am married, with 2 children and 2 grandchildren.*

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You will probably take away from this magazine that German fantastic literature in general, and SF in particular, is alive and kicking. However, there is a local challenge: German SF is nowadays issued mostly by smaller or even micro-publishers. Those are—to a large degree—dependent on wholesalers who buy and stock their titles in order to deliver them to bookshops all over the country. Imagine what happens if the biggest of those suddenly a) delays paying invoices, b) then drops those smaller publishers altogether, and c) ships back unsold titles, asking for a full refund (which they are contractually entitled to). This leads to an immediate cash drain, and at the same time deprives those publishers of a very important distribution channel. If nothing changes, not every publisher will survive the coming years. On the other hand, the fact that fantasy is still on the rise here and SF is comparably sidelined is nothing new.

And then there's AI. This is either a blessing or a curse, both in general and for authors and artists. Ask three people and you'll get four opinions; we trust you're all well aware of the current debate. We have therefore asked award-winning German author Dirk van den Boom to offer some thoughts on the topic in general; technical details have been omitted entirely, as this highly innovative sector is constantly evolving.

As his books are a little too weighty for our small magazine, we have asked Dirk to talk about his "Emperor's Men" series of novels instead. The first story arc is available in English

from the big A. Short stories are another story: Aiki Mira, Ju Honisch, Yvonne Tunnat and Carsten Schmitt are present with one each.

The final part of this magazine is reserved for a segment called "Science about Fiction". For the piece on AI, see above. Yvonne Tunnat is taking apart the numbers of German SF Short Stories (if you would like to use her figures for a cross-national analysis, she will be happy to send you an Excel file). And Lian Stollenwerk-Gans tells you how to not offend as a writer: Breathe, and get help = consult a sensitivity reader.

We have tried to make this issue colorful. Many thanks to the artists who have contributed; you'll find their work both on the cover and in the individual chapter breaks. And many thanks to the makers of "Der kleine Perry." As we write this, it is still not clear (or official) whether there will be an English version of this retelling as graphic novel of the world's largest SF Series: PERRY RHODAN. If you don't know Perry and his crew, you can read about it in one of the articles below. Issue 1 of the graphic novel has been a big seller in Germany, let's hope this success translates into other languages.

There's more. And even more people whom we would like to thank for their contributions. You can find them all in the table of contents or in the CVs next to the pictures.

All international issues of Andromeda Nachrichten are free to take with you. However, there's a limit to our print runs as well as to space in your luggage. Therefore, we have created an English landing page where you can download all issues. You can access it at <https://sfcd.eu/publikationen/andromeda-sf-magazin/english.html> or by scanning the QR Code below. If you are interested in other publications and information about the SFCd, feel free to browse our entire website.

Last but not least: We would be delighted to hear from you. Where did you get this issue?

Did you happen to have an interesting conversation at our table in Glasgow or Rotterdam? What did you like about the magazine, what would you like to know and see next time? Comment on <https://www.facebook.com/sfcd> or <https://bsky.app/profile/sfcd.bsky.social>, drop us an e-mail at [chefredaktion@sfcd.eu](mailto:chefredaktion@sfcd.eu). We will collect and evaluate the responses and perhaps even publish excerpts in our quarterly magazine "Andromeda Nachrichten".

This editorial wouldn't be complete without an additional mention. Claudia Rapp, SFCd chairperson, has selflessly agreed to chaperone our translation efforts (yes, we know, "supervise" or "oversee" might be more precise, Claudia, but let us have our whim). As she does this for a living, WE have called on her for numerous parts of this magazine, and SHE has thrown herself into the task with abandon. Thank you, Claudia, at least one drink in Glasgow is on us.

And now: Enjoy your deep dive into the current German SF scene! ■

Sylvana, Joerg and Martin  
April 2024

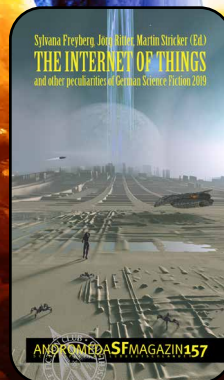
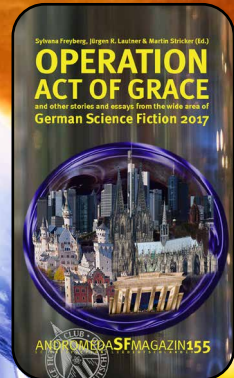




# Science Fiction Club Deutschland e.V.



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“Die Stadtbewohner” (The City Dwellers) by Michael Marrak



# The Editors

**Sylvana Freyberg** works for an academic publishing company, and there is no shortage of things she could do in her spare time: Sylvana likes reading, photography, watching movies and series, hiking and travelling. Sometimes she even creates nice pictures (see page 64). If only there were more hours in a day.

Of course, there is more. She is co-editor of Future Fiction Magazine (see pages 64–66 for more information) and has also edited two anthologies, one with First Contact stories written by German SF authors (“Unsere Freunde von Epsilon Eridani”, Begedia Verlag), and one with South Korean SF stories translated into German (“Die Sterne leuchten am Erdenhimmel”, Memoranda Verlag).

In 2021, Sylvana took over the role as editor-in-chief of ANDROMEDA NACHRICHTEN, the



Jörg Ritter and Sylvana Freyberg. Photo by Udo Emmerich

magazine of the Science Fiction Club Deutschland e.V. (SFCD) Together with her team she publishes four issues per year. And occasionally, there are special issues, called ANDROMEDA SF MAGAZIN, of which you are reading the latest.

When she is not writing emails to authors to discuss articles or great stories with them, or working on the layout of the next issue of AN-

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*Illustrator **Michael Marrak**, born in 1965 in Weikersheim, Tauber-Franconia, studied graphic design in Stuttgart and came to prominence as an author, editor, and anthologist in the early 1990s. After several years as a freelance illustrator, Marrak dedicated himself to writing starting in 1997 and has received several awards for his novels, stories, and cover graphics. Translations of his texts have appeared in France, Greece, Russia, China, and the USA, among others. From 2006 to 2012, he was responsible for the story development of the computer game “Black Prophecy.” Although his main occupation is as a writer, new illustrations and covers also regularly find their way to the public, most recently the cover illustrations for the new ten-volume US edition of Charles Platt’s novels. Michael Marrak lives and works as a freelance writer and illustrator in Schöningen am Elm.*

Literaturport: <https://www.literaturport.de/lexikon/michael-marrak/>

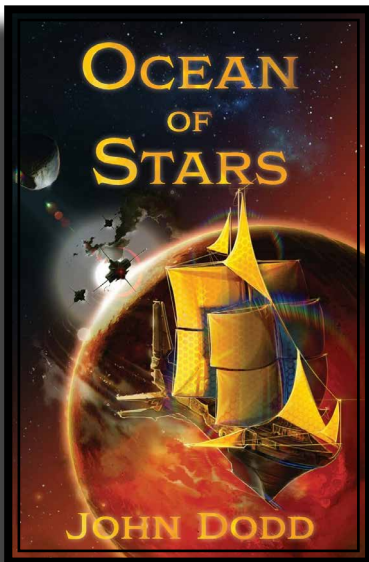
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DROMEDA NACHRICHTEN, she disappears into the world of books, or plans her next trip abroad to see what is going on beyond her desk.

**Jörg Ritter**, born 1961, has always been a science fiction reader. It all began when his stack of Karl May adventure novels was exhausted, and he looked for new frontiers. A member of the SFCD since 1979, he was also involved in fandom for several years, until his job as well as his enthusiasm for chess interfered. After a big leap in time, early retirement made it possible for him to once again attend conventions of all kinds and report on them, e.g. in his Facebook photo albums. He is on the board of the SFCD

as advisor and is a donor to Phantastische Bibliothek Wetzlar (<https://www.phantastik.eu/>), where he also serves as the vice chairman of their support organization.

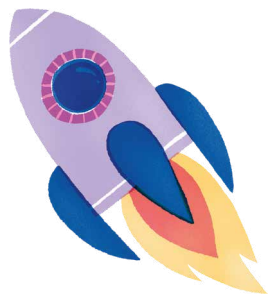
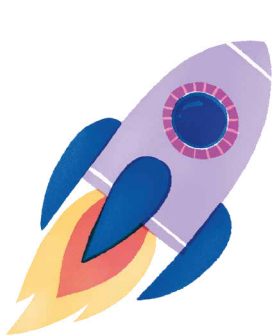
**Martin Stricker** has been an avid science fiction reader since his childhood. He was a member of the German Science Fiction Award (DSFP) committee from 2000 to 2023, its chairman from 2010 to 2015 and again 2021 to 2023, and served one term on the board of the SFCD from 2008 to 2011. This magazine is his third time co-editing. He works in pharmaceutical research. ■



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ENOUGH FOR YOU**



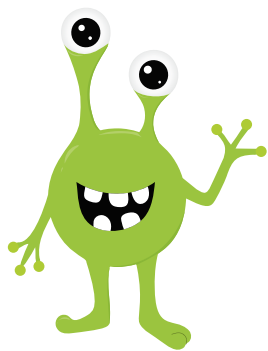
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"Das Tier" (The Animal) by Mario Franke

Claudia Rapp

# MetropolCon Berlin—the Eurocon bid for 2026

## A personal progress report by con chair Claudia Rapp, and the trajectory towards 2026

Do you know what a “Schnapsidee” is? It's a German term for a crazy idea (literally, an idea fueled or aided by the consumption of alcohol), and that is precisely how MetropolCon, our bid for Eurocon 2026 in Berlin, came about.

Some of you reading this were there—you know what you did!

I came to the fan-run con scene quite late, and while I'm all about a rich, sparkling, expansive program, I quickly realized that what I love best about conventions is the community.

---

*Illustrator **Mario Franke** is based in Leipzig. His professional expertise lies in the area of digital maps and their connection to databases. In order to express his creativity, he began to work more intensively with computer graphics. He is also a board member and graphic designer of the FKSFL e.V. (<https://www.fksfl.de/>) and has been awarded the Kurd Laßwitz Prize several times, most recently for his outstanding design of a series of posters on the subject of “Leseland DDR” (Land of Reading: GDR). Together with Aiki Mira and Uli Bendick, he published the anthology “Am Anfang war das Bild” (In the beginning there was the picture) in 2021, which took second place in the Kurd Laßwitz Prize. Further works by Mario Franke can be found at [www.kuenstlichkeit.de](http://www.kuenstlichkeit.de).*

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Therefore, the idea to create a new convention in Berlin didn't come out of nowhere, it came from just that: the sense of community. One magical moment in April 2019, I was sitting exhausted (after a long con Saturday full of input, having taken in as many program items as I could) by the wall of the biggest hall at Eastercon in London-Heathrow. Fantasy author and punk Mike Brooks was the DJ, spinning 80s bangers. People danced, oblivious and blissful, some barefoot, some in costume. Though I myself lacked the energy to move my feet, I felt the fizz and buzz of this particular kind of event. The community-feeling of a convention.

That was the moment I knew I wanted other people to feel that way, too: at home, among like-minded people, belonging, understood, accepted—no matter who they were and how they looked and how they presented themselves. Because that was (and still is) the special thing for me, besides the exciting topics and contents, the cornucopia of knowledge, whimsy, and fun you can find at a convention: the feeling that everyone is allowed to be who they are, or want to be, without judgment, dismissal, scorn. That was and is my motive, my motivation.

I had already asked the crucial question earlier that day, still quite sober. I was talking to Jukka Halme, Chair of the 2017 Worldcon in Helsinki. “Why does nobody do something like this in Berlin?” Jukka put an arm around my shoulders and replied laconically, “You do it.”

At three a.m. that same night, no longer quite sober, the “Schnapsidee” had turned



into the spark of a plan. And the following morning I was sure that I really wanted to try this: to organize a convention along the lines of the international model—think Eastercon, Eurocon, Worldcon—in Berlin; bigger, cooler, more varied and inspiring than anything that had come before ... typical German megalomania, I suppose.

That was in the spring of 2019. In summer (in August in Dublin at Worldcon) and fall (in October at the German Bucon in Dreieich) I gathered my first comrades-in-arms; then pretty soon, Covid happened, but that couldn't last forever, could it?

On Discord, we got together again, brought other interested and experienced people on board, and in March 2021, we finally founded "L.O.K.I. e.V. zur Förderung der Phantastik," the registered association that would carry

the whole thing. I will spare you the further steps through pandemic and bureaucracy here ... and then we went into conceptualizing and planning. We had started with the idea of a Eurocon, but quickly came to realize that we should begin with a "small" Berlin convention, more or less as an exercise for the bid for a Eurocon, which was envisioned for 2026.

The first MetropolisCon was to take place in 2023, and an important aspect was the vision: What do we want, what does our desired event look like, where is our goal, our target, the utopian place to which we aspire? (Our tireless, multi-talented graphic designer Grit once put it this way: "We're aiming for Mars, and if we land on the moon, we'll have achieved a lot.") You can still read the vision we formulated back then on our website: <https://www.metropoliscon.eu/en/about-us/vision-2/>



Figure 1: silent green Kulturquartier, Photo by Dominic Riemenschneider

Now MetropolCon 2023 is history, the decision for Eurocon 2026 is about to be made, and we can do a brief recap of our first edition: How did it go, what worked and what didn't work quite so well, what did the participants like, what do we need to improve, and—did we get to Mars?

### The facts:

- May 18-20, 2023, at silent green Kulturquartier in Berlin's Wedding district (see fig. 1 & 2).
- Space for a maximum of 1000 people; 500 registered people over the 3 days
- 44 publishers, artists, associations, etc. in our dealers' room (see fig. 3)—we even had two tattoo artists on site!
- 120 program items, including panels, workshops, talks, audio and visual content, art and history exhibits, role-playing demo

rounds, a pub quiz, general meetings, an auction, and last but not least: three live music concerts.

### Based on feedback, what did participants like:

- The extensive, diverse program, especially the many program items on science, technology, and the future
- The venue with its special atmosphere, the spacious outdoor areas in combination with the great weather, which invited people to stay outside and chat
- The tattoo artists' booth: about half of the organizing team alone sported a new tattoo at the end of the three days!
- The eye for small, useful details in the planning, such as listing the panels for each speaker on the back of their name tag, the pronoun stickers for the name tags, the hygiene products provided in the washrooms, etc.



Figure 2: The Tunnel. Path to the dealers room, Photo by Jörg Ritter

- The live concerts and interactive program items, such as the pub quiz, the talk on food of the future with small bites for tasting, role-playing demo sessions, etc.
- Mr. Spock (an approx. 130 cm-tall Playmobil figure, see fig. 4, which greeted participants at the end of the access ramp and was auctioned off at the end of the con—the happy new owner is writer Dirk van den Boom)

**What do we want to improve and change for 2026, what are we working on:**

First of all, regardless of whether our bid will be chosen for the 2026 Eurocon or not, we'll do another MetropolCon. The dates are set—July 2-5, 2026. Hooray, bring out the glitter cannons and blast a fanfare!

After researching and visiting several other potential venues in Berlin in the aftermath of the first convention, we decided to go with 2023's venue, silent green, again: The former-crematory-turned-cultural-center is centrally located, well connected to public transport, and boasts a special, very “Berlin” atmo-

sphere, with its historic buildings and underground surprises in concrete and spotlights. Thanks to the experience we've gained with our first edition, we now know which aspects to improve and enhance. We'll be working with the venue's team on those, taking the convention feedback on board. We already have several ideas how to better integrate the dealers' area and incorporate it into the con action, because the underground hall proved to be a bit of a weak point (again in combination with the wonderful weather)—the participants simply did not stop by there as much as we would have wished. We also want to make the bar area in the venue cozier and more inviting, so that this room can become the center of the action. And we want to improve the venue's accessibility wherever possible. We'll put together an access FAQ once we know what we can and cannot implement.

Content-wise, of course, the program for a Eurocon has to be mostly in English. In 2023, only about one sixth was in English. We are aiming for at least 75% for 2026. Also, we almost

offered too much, too many program items at the first edition. We want to thin it out a bit and also include more low-key, hands-on, entertaining, and “fannish” content.

But even more fundamentally, we want to make sure that more people get to know the Eurocon model in the first place. We hardly need to convince the people who



Figure 3: The dealers' room, Photo by Jörg Ritter

make the pilgrimage to every Eurocon anyway, but to everyone else who may not be in the know, we want to introduce and explain things like the ESFS Awards, or the concept of “membership instead of ticket purchase.” This is not as common in Germany as it is elsewhere.

Finances are always an issue: We will try again and even more intensively to apply for funding and/or find sponsors. We would like to use that money to keep the costs for members as low as possible, while in the best case, we hope to offer some form of compensation to the presenters. In the first edition, we had limited success in raising money. We are also planning to woo possible hotels to partner with, hoping for room blocks or special rates.

The lower the cost threshold for participation, the more likely we can expect fans from all over Europe as well as a younger, more diverse audience at our Eurocon. We are very keen to court underrepresented groups and con newcomers more actively, because we all know the “core” scene is getting older and stagnating ...

Since we found that the software we were using for ticket purchase as well as program display were not necessarily the best, we are looking into more user- and admin-friendly alternatives for 2026, both for registration/membership management and for the program schedule.

Concurrently, the website will be cleaned up and redesigned for 2026, and we are working on smaller events to keep us on people's radars until the next MetropolCon: a regular online format is in the works, and there will be readings and roundtable discussions in Berlin, so that we can both establish ourselves locally as a “household name” or “brand” and reach out

to our followers and more people all over the web, in Germany and Europe. We will post regular updates on the website, on our social media channels, and in our newsletter, whose subscriber numbers we would like to increase. Our YouTube channel features videos from the 2023 edition, and we will host our live online format there as well.

We hope to recruit more team/committee members and volunteers. If you're interested, please don't hesitate to contact [volunteers@metropolcon.eu](mailto:volunteers@metropolcon.eu)—even if you aren't sure how you could help or support us, rest assured we'll find a job for you.

Parallel to all this, we are returning to our original vision and trying to sharpen it by taking into account our collected experiences and the feedback on the first MetropolCon; perhaps formulating it more clearly, adapting it, refreshing it. We are keenly aware that a spelled-out, written-down vision is an ideal, a list of signposts for a target that is then aimed for, approached as closely as possible. Reality, the practical organization and implementation of plans, consists of



Figure 4: Spock and the Chairs Constanze, Ralf and Claudia, Photo by Lucie Lukačovičová

compromises in order to be able to act at all.

For example, we had formulated in our vision: “MetropolCon considers itself an inclusive, accessible, diverse, and sustainable event. It strives to provide a safe space for all participants, guests, and members. We want to foster exchange, discussion, networking, and all-around inspiration based on mutual respect, openness, acceptance, and consideration.” We tried to approximate this during implementation. What did that look like in concrete terms? In the run-up to Metropolcon 2023, the organizing team completed a workshop on the topic of “communicating in ways that appreciate and acknowledge diversity.” For the convention itself, we made sure we had as many different needs as possible on our radar:

- When communicating with the program participants and in the ticket-purchase process, we asked about access needs and whether people needed special support of any kind.
- We designated the cinema room as “quiet space” several times during the convention (and also listed those times in the program) to provide a retreat for neurodivergent people and anyone who might be exhausted from the hustle and bustle; this could be expanded next time by offering a retreat space all the time
- We had a group of listeners on stand-by in multiple shifts to take care of code-of-con-

duct violations, unwelcome and problematic situations. The inbox of the dedicated email address was also constantly monitored. The planned procedure for on-site reports was as follows: All organizing team members (identifiable by large buttons) were available to be approached at any time and were instructed to refer the reporting person to a listener if necessary. A room slightly removed from the main event was available for any confidential discussions. Furthermore, we had three people (chair, substitute chair, treasurer) taking turns as “boss on duty,” i.e., they would apply house rules in the event of serious violations and, for example, expel people from the con.

- We are very happy to report that there were no reported violations of the Code of Conduct during MetropolCon, and that no report came in via the mentioned mail address either.
- The venue is considered accessible, or “barrier-free,” as far as mobility is concerned. Those who were on site for the con can attest that the term is not really accurate; there-



Figure 5: Tuckerization—At the con’s final auction, special guest Mary Robinette Kowal spontaneously added a wonderful offer: naming a character in her next book after the highest bidder. Both the con chair and the treasurer were excited to see the outcome. Photo by Jörg Ritter



fore, we consciously chose the term “few barriers” (or “barrierearm”) in the German version of our vision, following the advice of affected/disabled people: It would be wonderful and is desirable that all places are barrier-free, but in practice it is also true that we can only strive towards this with all available means. We very much hope that we can work with the venue in this area and improve conditions. And even things that are almost taken for granted, such as putting microphones in the rooms and reminding all presenters to please use them, serve to make an event more barrier-free.

- We were and are aware that the cost of attending a con is a barrier for many people, so we set up a solidarity fund for tickets. When buying tickets, you could donate any amount towards this. In 2023, we collected a total of 447 Euros, which meant that we could give 6 people each a ticket for the full three days.

### My personal conclusion

We reached the moon right away, and we'll set

our sights on Mars next time with additional thrust and new energy—because if there's one thing MetropoCon has given me—and, in fact, the whole organizing team, it's a lot of fuel to keep going!

Three days flew by in a daze, and I was repeatedly told that I didn't look stressed at all, in the midst of the hustle and bustle, constantly on the phone to clarify something, to procure replacements, or in conversation with people because I felt compelled to keep checking whether they were having fun, enjoying themselves, content with what was on offer.

And at the end of it all (fig. 5), I was left with the incredibly awesome feeling that we had accomplished and created something cool; that we had offered the community a new convention that obviously also gave them a bit of that feeling that started it all: community, belonging, being allowed to be themselves in the midst of people with shared interests and passions.

And next time, we'll do it in European! ■

**Claudia Rapp**, born in the small West German town of Jülich, home of pebble bed reactors and supercomputers. Went to university at Lake Constance, in Portland, Oregon, and Honolulu, Hawaii. M.A. in English & German Literature, PhD in American Literature. Translates fiction for a living, writes and edits—preferably dark, weird, and wild stuff. Spent ten years in Berlin, currently living the good life in Vienna. Apart from speculative fiction in all its glorious incarnations, she loves travel, music, kitchen experiments, silly memes, and raccoons. Member of Phantastik-Autoren-Netzwerk PAN e.V., chairwoman of Science Fiction Club Deutschland SFCD e.V. and L.O.K.I. e.V.



Dave Lally and Claudia. Photo by Jörg Ritter



"The Journey to the Center of the Universe" by Thomas Budáč

Constanze Hofmann

## Interview with Cora Buhlert

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Illustrator **Thomas Budach** was born in Göttingen in 1964. Fantasy and science fiction have always held a special place in his heart. The fascinating worlds full of magic and technology fueled his imagination and inspired him to come up with his own creations. In 2015, he had to retire from his position in a precision optics company for health reasons. Although the circumstances had changed, he discovered a new passion that has since been enriching his life: photography and creativity. He has been uploading his photo compositions to the Pixabay platform since 2016. This gives him the opportunity to share his work with a wide audience and connect with other talented artists and photographers. Creating photo compositions is not just a hobby for him, but a way to live out his creative side and share his impressions with others. He has done covers for: Cliff Allister, Michael Hirtzy, Olaf Thumann, J.R. Geoghan, the SF novel series "Sternenlicht" (Verlag Saphir im Stahl), Verlag Belle Epoque, Lübbe Audio.

info@tombud.de, [www.tombud.de](http://www.tombud.de)  
<https://www.facebook.com/thomas.budach.3>

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We haven't had a Hugo winner from Germany in a while. So, I was delighted when Cora Buhlert got the award for Best Fan Writer at Chicon 8 in 2022. Cora is a writer, translator, and teacher from Bremen in the north of Germany. You can find her website at <http://corabuhlert.com>.

**Hello Cora, it's lovely to be able to interview you for this edition of Andromeda SF Magazine. To start with, I'd like to know what were your ways into SFF—when did you start engaging in the genre, and what were/are the major influences that keep you going?**

I tend to call myself a lifelong SFF fan, because I have enjoyed SFF for as long as I can remember. My first contact with the genre were children's books like *Mecki auf dem Mond* by Eduard Rhein, with illustrations by Wilhelm Petersen.

A bit later, I discovered SFF on TV and eagerly devoured reruns of *Star Trek*, *Raumpatrouille Orion*, and *Time Tunnel* as well as *Captain Future*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Space 1999*, and Czech fantasy shows and movies like *Pan Tau*, *Arabela*, or *Three Hazelnuts for Cinderella*. There was also this thing called *Star Wars*, which looked extremely fascinating. But unfortunately, I couldn't persuade my parents to take me to see the films in the theatre.

I found *Perry Rhodan* and *Geisterjäger John Sinclair* at the newsstand and bought the oc-

casional issue. Nonetheless, most of the SFF I consumed was via film and TV until I realised that there were books just like those movies and TV shows I loved. The first actual science fiction novel I read was *Keeper of the Isis Light* by Monica Hughes in German translation.

Then I found an English language copy of Alan Dean Foster's novelisation of the first *Star Wars* film in a local bookshop and plopped down a whole month's worth of pocket money (US import paperbacks were expensive in the 1980s) to buy it. I still hadn't managed to actually watch *Star Wars* by this point—because my parents didn't have a VCR, and the *Star Wars* movies didn't come to German TV until the early 1990s—but I figured the novelisation was the next best thing.

Even as a teenager, I read primarily in English. For starters, the selection of English language SFF was simply much bigger. Also, I realised that anything—SFF books, comics, horror, all of which were somewhat disreputable at the time—is automatically considered educational when read in a foreign language.

In the late 1980s, the foreign language section of *Buchhandlung Storm* in Bremen consisted mainly of dictionaries and reference books, but they also had two spinner racks of imported mass market paperbacks. One was mainly mystery and romance, the other was SFF. That's where I discovered Anne McCaffrey, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Arthur C. Clarke, Raymond E. Feist, and Poul Anderson among others.

Then in 1989, my parents and I were stuck at Athens airport for several hours, because our connecting flight back to Germany was delayed. We still had a bit of Greek money left and spent it at the airport bookstore. My Mom bought a gossip magazine, my Dad the latest issue of *Stern*, and I bought a promising-looking science fiction novel called *Prelude to Foundation* by Isaac Asimov. The sheer scope of that sto-



Cora Buhlert.

ry—mathematically predicting the future and planning it out for a thousand years—literally blew my mind. Over the next year or so, I read my way through the entire *Foundation* series as well as all of the robot stories and novels and anything else by Isaac Asimov I could find.

That was also the point where I started considering myself a science fiction fan rather than just a *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* fan.

**As well as a fan, you're a writer and a fan writer, the latter being what won you a Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer at the 2022 Worldcon in Chicago. How did you get started with fan writing, and what's the continuing appeal?**

I stumbled into fan writing by accident. I wanted to discuss the books I read and the movies and TV shows I watched in detail, but no one around me was interested. So, I jotted my impressions, comments, and fan theories down in my journal instead.

Then the internet came along, I started a blog and more or less did the same thing I'd been doing in my private journal, writing about books I read, movies and TV shows I watched,



and whatever else came to mind. Around the same time, I also started writing non-fiction articles about German pulp characters and the like for fanzines.

The first incarnation of my blog lasted from approx. 2003 to 2008. Then I got too busy with work and life and stopped blogging for a while. I started again in 2010, when I realised that I missed blogging. That incarnation of my blog is still going strong.

At first, it was just me shouting into the void, then other people started leaving comments and linking to my posts, which encouraged me to continue. Around 2015, I found my name on a Hugo recommendation list for Best Fan Writer and realised, “Oh, so I guess I’m a fan writer then.”

As for the continuing appeal, there are always new books, films, and TV shows coming out and older works waiting to be discovered, and of course there are always new debates and controversies springing up. And as long as I have something to say and am having fun, I don’t think I’ll ever stop.

**Traditionally, the Hugo Awards are given out not only for professional work, but also in a variety of Fan categories—honouring fans and fandom in the same way professional creatives are honoured. As a winner in one of the Fan categories—what does it mean to you to receive this award, and what do you think this tradition does for SFF fandom as a whole?**

The Hugos were the first science fiction award I was aware of, because a lot of those English language paperbacks I bought had “Winner of the Hugo Award” emblazoned on the cover. I enjoyed most of those books, so winning a Hugo was clearly a mark of quality. But at the time—we’re talking about the late 1980s/early 1990s here—I had no idea how the Hugos were awarded, what categories besides Best Novel there were, and who decided on the winners.

It wasn’t until much later, when I got on the internet, that I learned how the Hugos worked and that everybody can nominate and vote, provided you have a WSFS membership.

One of the things that sets the Hugos apart from most other SFF awards as well as awards in other genres is that they also honour fans and their work and have since the very beginning. The very first Hugo Awards given out in 1953 had a category for the Number One Fan Personality, which was won by Forest J. Ackerman, while Best Fanzine has been awarded since 1955. The reason for this is that SFF has always had a very strong and active fan community, and that the lines between fan and pro have always been blurred. And while most other genre-specific awards are given out by writers’ organisations or juries, the Hugo winners are chosen by fans, so it makes sense for the Hugos to have fan categories.

In my Hugo acceptance speech, I said that science fiction fandom was born shortly after the genre itself, in the letter pages of *Amazing Stories* and other pulp magazines. Because the editors posted the full addresses of the letter writers (which would be unthinkable today for privacy reasons), fans could find each other and band together to form clubs, publish fanzines and organise the first cons. Fandom as we know it is about a hundred years old now and even though the technology has changed a lot, many of the topics you find debated in early fanzines are still with us today.

In my acceptance speech, I compared fandom to a great and colourful tapestry or quilt to which thousands of people have contributed in their own way over the past hundred years. And to learn that my own contributions to this great quilt or tapestry have been considered worthy of a shiny, rocket-shaped trophy was an amazing feeling.

**You are a long-term contributor to *Galactic Journey*—an online project that brings the past of 55 years ago into today, especially in the fields of Science Fiction and Fantasy. How did you get to be a part of this, and what is the appeal of older genre works for you?**

As mentioned above, when I started reading SFF, a lot of the works I read were from the golden and silver age and already decades old by that point. And as someone who studied literature at university, I like seeing where ideas came from and how older works influenced later authors. So, I always read older SFF alongside newer works.

As for *Galactic Journey*, I first became aware of the project via a link at *File 770*. I liked what they were doing, so I started following the blog. Eventually, I left a comment on a post about the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and then another on a post that mentioned the devastating 1962 North Sea flood. I wrote those comments as if I was living in the early 1960s and experiencing these events as they happened, because what sets *Galactic Journey* apart from other sites that review vintage SFF is that we're writing about books, films, TV

shows and world events as if we were living in the 1960s. So, when we review the debut story of a sixteen-year-old Terry Pratchett or a short film made by a young California film student named George Lucas, we don't mention what will become of these people.

Eventually, Gideon Marcus, the founder and editor of *Galactic Journey*, asked me if I wanted to write a guest post about German science fiction. That guest post eventually turned into three posts—one about West German science fiction, one about East German and East European science fiction, and one about *Perry Rhodan*—and then I became a regular contributor.

The fascinating thing about *Galactic Journey* is that you literally see history—both genre and world history—unfolding in real time. For genre history, we have seen the New Wave rise and crest, though it was never as dominant as it seemed in hindsight. For example, we had an Edgar Rice Burroughs revival in the 1960s, which even earned Burroughs two posthumous Hugo nominations and yet seems to be mostly forgotten now. We also had the second sword and sorcery boom, which was not just happening in parallel with the rise of the New Wave,

but the same authors—Michael Moorcock, Roger Zelazny, Fritz Leiber—were writing both.

For world history, it's 1969 at *Galactic Journey* right now and the protests of the late 1960s are at their height. Now most of my teachers were veterans of the 1968 protests and talked about that time a lot, so I thought I was very familiar with the era, but it turns out



Figure 1: Photo of action figures telling a story.

that there were a lot of things I didn't know or where I simply accepted received wisdom, which turned out to be incorrect.

Because that's another thing you quickly realise when you actually read older SFF, and not just the big and famous names either, that received wisdom is often biased or just plain wrong. For example, it's received wisdom that *Astounding Science Fiction* was the best magazine of the so-called golden age and that John W. Campbell was the best editor. However, when I read lots of stories from the 1940s for my Retro Hugo project in 2020, I found that while Campbell published a lot of classics, he also published a lot of dross. Meanwhile, supposedly lesser magazines like *Planet Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Weird Tales* or *Thrilling Wonder Stories* actually published a lot of very good stories, many of which have never been reprinted, because early anthologists like Isaac Asimov or Martin Greenberg were biased towards *Astounding*. Or take the often repeated claim that women were not writing SFF before the 1960s. Which is wrong, because there were several women SFF writers going back to the 1920s, and the number of stories by women actually went down in the 1960s. Indeed, *Journey Press*, *Galactic Journey's* publishing arm, has published three volumes of *Rediscovery: Science Fiction by Women*, which reprint forgotten SFF stories by female writers from the 1950s and 1960s.

**I personally enjoy a lot of recent stories that put found family front and centre - but often enough those found families are forced to rely on each other because they couldn't rely on their horrible parents/guardians. On your blog, you regularly give out the "Darth Vader Parenthood Award for Outstandingly Horrible Fictional Parents", as well as more recently the "Jonathan and Martha Kent Fictional Parent of the Year Award" for fictional parents**

**that get things mostly right. Can you tell us a bit more about how those awards came to be and what's your intention with them?**

The Darth Vader Parenthood Award for Outstandingly Horrible Fictional Parents started as a joke, for whenever there were some really terrible parent figures in a book or a movie or TV joke, I would always say, "And here is another hot candidate for the prestigious Darth Vader Parenthood Award." Eventually, I compiled a list of winners going back to 1980 (Darth Vader himself was of course the first winner) and kept updating it.

The award was a purely personal thing, until I mentioned it in a review of an episode of *Star Trek Discovery* in response to a comment by Emmet Asher-Perrin at Tor.com that Sarek of Vulcan is science fiction's worst dad. Now Sarek isn't a particularly good father by any means, but he's not even remotely the worst father in science fiction. In fact, Sarek wasn't even the worst SFF father of 2017—that dubious honour goes to Ego, the Living Planet, and Thanos, both from *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*. So, I posted my list of Darth Vader Parenthood Award winners (though not all winners are SFF characters—for example, there are quite a few soap opera characters among the early winners). From then on, I've been announcing the winners of the Darth Vader Parenthood Award for Outstandingly Horrible Fictional Parents on my blog. At first, it was just an announcement and then it became a whole awards ceremony with eulogies, acceptance speeches, red carpet fashions, audience reactions and even a trophy, an ugly vase. I also added a Retro Award similar to the Retro Hugos for terrible parents who either predated the award or whom I missed the first time around.

The Jonathan and Martha Kent Fictional Parent of the Year Award emerged in 2020, when I noted in my announcement of the Darth Vader Parenthood Award winner—Galactic Overseer

Simon Novalight from the novels *Nightchaser* and *Starbreaker* by Amanda Bouchet—that there had also been a lot of positive portrayals of parenthood in media that year and that it might be time for a companion award. In the comments, people said, “Do it!”, and so the Jonathan and Martha Kent Fictional Parent of the Year Award was born. The first winner was Din Djarin of *The Mandalorian*, and the prize is a slice of Martha Kent’s famous apple pie. There’s also a running gag that the winners never actually get to enjoy their pie, because their various kids and sometimes the kids of previous winners (Grogu is very adept at using the Force to steal apple pie) gobble it all up. But luckily Martha Kent knows just how hungry kids can be and always bakes a spare pie.

As for why I’m doing the Darth Vader Parenthood and Jonathan and Martha Kent Fictional Parent of the Year Awards, for starters they’re a lot of fun. I love writing the acceptance speeches, particularly those for the villains, and I also love having characters from different pop culture universes interact with each other in ways that they normally never would. I think my favourite moment was Hordak from *She-Ra: Princess of Power* declaring that the Evil Horde is committed to diversity and an equal opportunity employer—which is true, because half the Evil Horde warriors are women and they’re all members of different species—and that he doesn’t mind that She-Ra is lesbian, but would she please, please just come back.

But the two awards are also a commentary on how parents are portrayed in pop culture, particularly in pop culture aimed at young audiences. Because both good and terrible parent figures serve an important purpose. The horrible parents show kids that their own parents may not be ideal, but at least they’re not remotely as awful as Darth Vader or Thanos or Hordak. Furthermore, they also show kids that they

don’t have to become like their parents, but that they can break free and take their destiny into their own hands. Luke Skywalker does not turn to the Dark Side like his father, but deliberately rejects it. Adora starts out as a villainess who does terrible things in the name of the Evil Horde, but turns against Hordak and becomes the heroine She-Ra. These are powerful stories for kids from less ideal family backgrounds.

The good parents, meanwhile, serve as role models. Once again, there are lots of kids out there who need these stories, because they don’t have good parent figures in their lives. The popularity of found family stories ties into this as well. Because found family stories show us that we are not bound by our birth family, but that we can make our own families with people who truly care about us. It’s no accident that all winners of the Jonathan and Martha Kent Fictional Parent of the Year Award to date have been found families of some kind. In several cases, the members of these found families are not even the same species.

That’s why we keep seeing stories about good and horrible parents over and over again in pop culture, because many people out there need these stories.

**You also regularly post toy photo stories on your blog, which show a different kind of creativity. What is the background behind these stories and what’s the appeal for you?**

I collected toys—dolls, action figures, and PVC figurines like Smurfs—from childhood on well into my twenties, when I took a break for space and cost reasons. What reignited my toy collecting was my pal Matt John of the *Rogues in the House* podcast posting photos of himself playing with *Masters of the Universe* action figures with his young son. I complimented him on the great condition of the toys—the originals are forty years old by now and often look their



age—, whereupon Matt replied, “No, these are brand-new.” And I said, “Wait a minute, they’re making *He-Man* toys again?”

*The Masters of the Universe: Revelation* cartoon had just come out and made me fall in love with these characters all over again. So, I bought He-Man and Battle Cat to keep my vintage Teela figure company. But then they wanted their friends and family, so I bought Orko, She-Ra, and Man-at-Arms. They also needed someone to fight, so I got Skeletor and his minions.

Whenever I get something cool, I want to share it with the world, so I took pictures of my action figures. Then I realised that I had all the characters I needed to recreate a scene from the cartoon, so I set up the figures, took photos and posted them on social media, complete with dialogue. People enjoyed these little scenes and they were a lot of fun to do, so I made more. At first, I just put the figures on a table or a shelf, but eventually I started creating settings and brought in props found around the house. My parents’ collection of pewter miniatures turned out to be very useful, and the repeated appearance of Delftware in the background—which started because my Mom’s Delftware carafe turned out to be perfectly suited to looping a chain around the handle to

chain up a prisoner—became something of a running gag.

Gradually, the stories became more complex with different settings and several characters interacting. I also started posting them on my blog, so I could include more dialogue than the 240-character limit *Twitter* allowed. Once again, people enjoyed them, so I did more.

I have a very visual imagination—in fact, my earliest dream jobs as a kid were *Disney* animator and film director—, but unfortunately, I have no talent for drawing or painting. Taking photos of action figures allows me to tell stories visually with no drawing skill required (fig. 1).

Furthermore, I started doing the toy photo stories around the time my mom became sick and needed near constant supervision. I couldn’t concentrate on writing or work while watching over mom, but creating toy photo stories allowed me to do something while keeping an eye on her.

Mom is gone now, but I will continue doing the toy photo stories, because they give me a lot of joy.

**Thanks a lot for finding the time to answer my questions, I appreciate it!**



*Constanze Hofmann is a voracious reader of SFF who fell for the shiny “Hugo Winner” stickers on books as a teenager. That interest brought her into Worldcon fandom during the Puppy years, and finally to her first Worldcon in Helsinki in 2017, where she realized that there’s a lot of excitement to be found in helping to organize conventions. When she’s not zipping by in a hi-vis vest, you can usually find her in the crafting area, often dreaming up a new community project. Constanze is part of the team bidding to bring Eurocon to Berlin in 2026.*



"Kosmische Schwingung" (Cosmic Vibration) by Olaf Kemmler



Thomas Recktenwald

# A Short History of Science Fiction Club Deutschland (SFCD)

Next year, on August 4th, we will look back at seventy years of Germany's oldest and—concerning fans of Science Fiction in its literary form—biggest SF society. Among its founding fathers were German author Walter Ernsting, from the US Forrest J. Ackerman and Raymond Z. Gallun, and the British fan Julian Parr. The organisation wasn't originally an e. V., which means “eingetragener Verein” (as a registered association), but would receive that status only four years later, when the board was forced to protect the name against rivalling groups.

And there were—for different reasons—a lot of rivals in German fandom in the late 1950's/early 1960's. One reason lies in the person of Walter Ernsting himself: He was affiliated with the Pabel publishing house, where the first German translations of Anglo-American

SF pulp novels appeared, and also his own early works. Ernsting used the LoC (letters of comment) pages in Pabel's pulp series Utopia-Magazin and other opportunities to reach SF readers and to promote the idea of an SF club, but a lot of fans who were already members or showed interest in joining an SF club found the connections between Ernsting's ideals and his commercial aims too close.

Moreover, there were two other prominent names in the early days of German fandom, bookseller Heinz Bingenheimer and author Wolf Detlef Rohr. Both separately wanted to transform the SFCD into a book club, Bingenheimer using it as address list for his mail-order business, Transgalaxis, and Rohr mainly to sell his own novels. But a huge majority of the SFCD members protested against Bingenheimer's plans, so much in fact that by the end of 1957, he was forced to leave the club. Transgalaxis, however, still exists and was run by his son Rolf until his death in 2020.

Rohr however was, at least in the beginning, more successful and even managed to get the club's magazine, *Andromeda*, replaced by his own magazine, *Blick in die Zukunft* (Look into the Future), which consisted more of advertising pages than articles or stories. Ernsting, founder and editor of *Andromeda*, not only tolerated this but, in 1958, renamed the association Science Fiction Club Europe (SFCE). Fans

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*Illustrator **Olaf Kemmler** was born in 1966. Apart from his main job as a graphic designer in a signmaking company, he has a career as a writer. He views science fiction as his true homeland, but crime fiction and thrillers are part of his repertoire, too. For his work as co-editor of the SF magazine EXODUS, he and his two colleagues were awarded the Kurd Laßwitz Prize in 2015.*

[www.fantastica-kemmler.de](http://www.fantastica-kemmler.de)

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who were not happy with this development found a new home under the umbrella of the Stellaris SF-Interessen-Gemeinschaft (SSFI) [Stellaris Society of SF interest], founded by Karl-Herbert Scheer, who later, together with Ernsting, developed the concept of the Perry Rhodan series.

Now it gets really complicated: Towards the end of 1958, Ernsting finally realised that his club got on the wrong track, so he re-established his *Andromeda* magazine in parallel to *Blick in die Zukunft*, and in February 1959, he founded the Science Fiction Union Europa (SFUE) as successor of the SFCD, leaving Rohr alone with the SFCE, who also wanted to inherit the SFCD. In August 1959, Rohr founded the Europäische Science Fiction Union (ESFU) in Zürich/Switzerland. After that Ernsting re-established the SFCD, and had the name finally registered on December 19, 1959.

After a lot of fan feuds in the early 1960's—on the one hand about the development of SF writing and publishing in Germany in general, on the other hand sometimes on a personal level between Ernsting and other authors or fans—fandom was in need of a neutral person who would be able to bring fans back who had left the SFCD in anger and had joined other groups like the SSFI. That person was Waldemar Kumping, who in June 1962 became president of the SSFI and two months later chairman of the SFCD.

But not only former members returned. Dieter Steinseifer established a section called “Kontakt” to promote the club and attracted a lot of new members, and in the middle of 1963, the SSFI merged with the SFCD. SFCD city groups flourished, the biggest ones in Munich around Waldemar Kumping with their fanzine *Munich Round Up*, Vienna with fanzine *Pioneer*, and Berlin (West) with fanzine *Anabis*. Because of the political status of Berlin, however, Heinz-Jürgen Ehrig and his fellow fans, although members of the SFCD in private, couldn't form an official subsidiary of the club. And West-Berlin fans served as straw men for fans who lived in Berlin (East) and the German Democratic Republic, supplying them with fanzines.

Finding reliable information about membership figures of the SFCD over its first decade isn't easy. Membership lists and index cards got lost, official statements in the late 1950's about 1,000 or 1,500 names were probably pure propaganda, and the separating, renaming, and merging of clubs didn't help either. Rolf Heuter, who in 1983 published *Der Science*



*Fiction Club Deutschland e. V. - Die Geschichte des SFCD 1955-1982*, estimates that 600-800 members is a realistic number for the club's first years, dropping down to 125 in 1960 when the quarrels reached their climax. It then increased again to about 400 until 1967.

In the late 1960's the student revolts also reached German fandom, especially a club as big as the SFCD, with members of different age, educational background, and political orientation. Fans inside and outside the club formed groups and published fanzines that showed their understanding of politics and their ideas, in which direction the SFCD should develop. In 1968, Waldemar Kumping's successor as SFCD chairman, Gert Zech, was considered reactionary and, of course, opposed by left-wing fans, his successor two years later, Heinz-Jürgen Ehrig, was still considered too liberal. The 1970 Worldcon in Heidelberg with its—mostly Anglo-American—fannish traditions like the masquerade and the St. Fantony ceremony was a special target for the lefties in fandom.

Not only did membership numbers drop again, but the club zine *Andromeda* also appeared at more and more irregular intervals. Thus, in 1970 Heinz-Jürgen Ehrig established the bi-monthly newsletter *Andromeda Nachrichten* (AN) to supply the members with essential information about SF, fandom, and SFCD-internal matters. The association's finances permitting, *Andromeda* was to appear besides AN, with three issues per year, edited by different teams who could apply at the association's annual general meeting presenting their idea for an issue's topic. That same year, the magazine *Story Center*, a platform for amateur authors, was adopted as regular club publication, starting with issue 2.

Despite of all these efforts, the SFCD got into serious trouble when Ehrig resigned as chairman at the end of 1971. Only the experience and

stamina of vice-chairman Dieter Steinseifer, who also sacrificed a huge amount of his spare time, saved the club from liquidation more than once. Inactive board members and chairmen who could or would not bring the club forward dominated the 1970s. Fortunately, there were always editors-in-chief for the main club publications, as were members or groups who organised the yearly SFCD conventions around the AGM (annual general meeting).

When I encountered the SFCD at my very first convention in October 1982, the association had become attractive again for SF fans who, in the era before the Internet, were looking for a larger organisation that could provide domestic and international information about their hobby. There were also strong regional or city chapters, e.g. in Hanover, Berlin, Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, and Vienna, organising monthly meetings and sometimes conventions and publishing their own fanzines.

After the reunification of the two Germanies in 1990, East German fans could easily establish clubs and magazines, and some of them joined the SFCD. Since then, SFCD conventions have regularly been organised in Leipzig and Dresden, and a couple of issues of *Andromeda* were used to write about the history and sometimes difficult situation of fandom and SF in the GDR (the former East German state).

The SFCD's membership figures are now stable around 370, losses are more or less compensated by newcomers. Since the club is still focusing on SF literature, new members are commonly between 35 and 55 years old; readers, critics, collectors, and sometimes beginning or even established authors.

Since 1985, the SFCD has been issuing a yearly literature award, now called *Deutscher Science Fiction Preis* (German Science Fiction Award), DSFP in short, [www.dsfp.de](http://www.dsfp.de), which has the two categories, "Best German-language Novel" and



“Best German-language Short Fiction”. Thanks to generous donations, this award is now the only genre award left in the German-speaking world which includes a prize money (of 1,000 Euro per category). The DSFP is judged by a jury committee—comparable to the Arthur C. Clarke Award—which is open to any interested person including non-members, and the award is normally presented at the SFCD conventions.

As the oldest German SF association, the SFCD does not only have a long history but also preserves it in the club archives, which contain—if possible—two copies of all SFCD-related publications, historical documents and correspondences, and an audio tape collection, the “Phonothek”, which is probably unique in fandom. Waldemar Kumming started it in 1959 with recordings of the first SFCD convention and continued it until 2008, when he had to stop attending conventions because of health problems. He died in 2017, and his tape and fanzine collections are now part of the SFCD archives. About twenty years ago, I started to digitise the tapes, and I continue to record events in Germany and abroad, now by means of small digital devices instead of a 20-kg tape recorder.

With four issues per year, *Andromeda Nachrichten*, professionally edited by Michael Haitel from 2006 and taken over by Sylvana Freyberg in 2021, is a real showpiece and has now taken over the role of *Andromeda* as the association's leading publication, whereas *Andromeda* is mainly published for special occasions, like the bilingual editions for the Worldcons 2014



in London, 2017 in Helsinki and 2019 in Dublin. With its homepage [sfcd.eu](http://sfcd.eu), an Internet discussion forum, and *AndroSF*, a book series created by Michael's publi-

shing house (see <https://www.pmachinery.de>) for the SFCD—the latter not included in the membership fee, but available through any bookstore—the association tries to cover different areas mandated by its statutes, namely the critical approach to SF in literature and other media, offering a home to fans of the genre and promoting literature, science, and other areas connected to SF.

When you discover the SFCD table at conventions, SF-related fairs, or events in museums, you will see a roll-up advertising “Aktion Bücherrettung” (Book Rescue Campaign), an enterprise initiated and run by Roger Murmann and fellow fans in the Frankfurt-on-Main area, aiming to collect books and magazines before they get thrown away, and to sell them for a small fee to people who want to fill gaps in their collections—or sometimes make their first steps into SFF literature, wanting to get some samples without paying too much. The books come mostly from collectors who have to move to smaller homes, or their heirs who have no interest in SF and find the SFCD offering this service via Google.

Over the past few years, the SFCD intensified its connections to the two main genre-related libraries in German-speaking countries: Phantastische Bibliothek Wetzlar (PBW; <https://phantastik.eu>) near Frankfurt-on-Main, and Villa Fantastica (<https://www.villafantastica.com>) in Vienna. Both institutions not only benefit from “Aktion Bücherrettung” to extend their collection, but also get support from SFCD members if they need help. In 2020, the SFCD intended to celebrate its 65th birthday in the PBW, an event which unfortunately fell victim to Corona, requiring the only virtual AGM so far. The 70th anniversary in 2025 however is already planned to take place in Wetzlar between the library's more than 300,000 books. ■

**Thomas Recktenwald** joined fandom in 1982 and soon became a member of Science Fiction Club Deutschland (SFCd). For many years he was a member of the board in various functions, including secretary, treasurer and chairman. He was also twice editor-in-chief of the SFCd magazine "Andromeda Nachrichten".

He is responsible for maintaining the SFCd's analog and digital archive, especially the audio tapes. And as a regular visitor to German SF-Cons, British Eastercons, Eurocons, other European conventions and Worldcons, he continues Waldemar Kummig's audio recordings of program items.

He studied physics and now works as an SAP programmer for a medium-sized company in the Black Forest.



Photo by Jörg Ritter

**Science Fiction Club  
Deutschland e.V.**  
Wir. Machen. Zukunft. Seit 1955.  
sfc.d.eu

ANDROMEDANACHRICHTEN 279  
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**SCIENCE FICTION CLUB  
DEUTSCHLAND**

Unser Vereinsmagazin informiert über  
Vereinsnews, Conventions,  
SFF-Wissenswertes und Rezensionen,  
Geschichten und vieles mehr.



"Der Stein des Unglaubens" (The Stone of Unbelief) by Jan Hoffmann



# What Else is Happening in Good Old Germany

## Aktion Bücherrettung—A Unique Book Rescue Campaign

By Jörg Ritter

Once upon a time, long, long ago ... thus begins a text that you can find in *Andromeda Nachrichten* 278, a German SF fanzine published by Science Fiction Club Deutschland, with an excerpt available here <https://buecherrettung.de/file/a/839d0cae02422462.pdf>. Albeit in German. Which shouldn't be a hindrance, since (e.g.) <https://www.onlinedoctranslator.com/de/translationform> comes to the rescue, easily

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*Illustrator Jan Hoffmann was born in Aachen in 1967. After studying illustration in Hamburg (at the vocational school for illustration and the technical college for design), he came to Munich. He has lived and worked there ever since as a graphic designer and freelance illustrator. His customers include Karstadt, Jung von Matt, Scholz & Friends, Kailash-Verlag, Random-House, "phantastisch!", "COZMIC", etc.*

*In his free time he works on his own projects ("CAN IT BE"—fantastic comic short stories, "Tales from the Other World"—illustrated Irish fairy tales), "OBSCURO"—metahero comic, "Big Words of Great Minds"—illustrated biographies of well-known personalities, etc.)*

[www.jan-hoffmann-illustrationen.de](http://www.jan-hoffmann-illustrationen.de)

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delivering a more or less correct translation to the language of your choice.

For those of you who don't want to travel down that road, here's an—abridged—retelling.

The tale starts in 1991, when some Big Name Fans (BNF) sat together at BärCon in Berlin and talked about what should become of their collections after their demise. And it continues with the death in 2006 of Dieter Sachse, a BNF who was known to have housed a huge collection in his dwelling near Mainz. But when Science Fiction Club Deutschland (SFCF) got a message some time later that they could go pick up some stuff, nothing was left but a few video cassettes. They never learned what had happened.

For a time, a small-dimension solution was effected by Roger Murmann at Science Fiction Treff Darmstadt, and the proceeds from the occasional book donation were used to finance flyers for the regulars table a.k.a. "Stammtisch".

A breakthrough came with a request to SFCF from the neighborhood: Hans-Jörn F., a collector hailing from Offenbach, had died, and his brother was looking for someone to take over his SF&F legacy. For the regulars' table alone, that was a bit too much. While clearing out the huge wall shelf was manageable (done by a trio of Stammtisch visitors that were incidentally also SFCF members), redistributing the hoard to fellow fans was not. And so, the idea of a cooperation was born: Science Fiction Treff Stammtisch as a local organization and SFCF as a nationwide association joined forces and started a common project, *Aktion Bücherrettung*.

Books were initially stored in a small guest-room in the house of Roger's parents. Dime novels were nicely stowed in boxes, but the books were piled up in several rows along the walls. Gradually, metal shelves from the hardware store (financed by the proceeds of the book rescue) eased that situation. But books continued to pile in. Thus, the next step was to expand to a neighboring, much larger basement room, one of those party basements with a large house bar, popular in the 1970s and 80s. Those rooms are now filled with a good 10k books and about the same number of SF&F dime novels.

A few notable events:

Luxembourg fandom veteran and SF author Claude Peiffer (2022 appointed Grandmaster by the European Science Fiction Society) wanted to give his father's collection to SFCD. But this would take a while: On the eve of the planned trip, new regulations came out regarding Corona, and almost nobody could legally cross the border. But, a year later and after three pandemic-related postponements, two cars plus trailers made the journey, and thousands of SF dime novels and books were collected. They even needed additional temporary storage in nearby Saarland.

Bonnie Bruck and Max Enzbrunner near beautiful Ammersee had contacted us in order to give the specimen copies of SF artist Johnny Bruck into good hands. Announced were over 20 boxes, sized 87\*39\*38 cm. In the depths of winter, the book rescuers set off in a rented 3.5-ton truck in the direction of southern Germany. The first thing that awaited the two-man team in Herrsching was a hot goulash soup, combined with warm hospitality and a beer. That made putting things away afterwards a breeze. That afternoon, they learned many interesting details from the life of the well-known creator of countless PERRY RHODAN and other title covers.

And for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time now, a 3.5-ton truck has crossed the border to Austria, where Aktion Bücherrettung currently rescues the collection of a fan that wants to give with warm hands.

In the Andromeda Nachrichten piece, there's a Q&A, answering the most pertinent questions. In short (and thus incomplete): Aktion Bücherrettung wants to be a mediator between current collectors and future generations of readers. They're selling for rather symbolic prices since profit is not a goal. All the work is done by volunteers. There are no listings, but you can visit after an appointment or send your own lists of missing titles. Welcome packages for new SFCD members are also compiled from their stock. Rarities are first offered to Phantastische Bibliothek Wetzlar (home to > 300k titles of fantastic literature).

Do you want to know more? [www.buecherrettung.de](http://www.buecherrettung.de) is your friend. Or contact SFCD folks at this con, or at numerous German or Luxembourgish conventions where they regularly set up shop.

Last but not least: Aktion Bücherrettung needs to sell stuff. Hoovering up collections is but one part of the rescue. If you want to help out, you now know where to find them.

We would love to hear about similar efforts in other countries. Write us about it at [chefredaktion@sfgd.eu](mailto:chefredaktion@sfgd.eu). If there's enough feedback, we might cobble a piece together, to be published



in Andromeda Nachrichten. Or we could spread the news, e.g. in the “Ads–News–Information” section of said fanzine. ■

## The Congress of Utopias

By Klaus Farin

At the beginning of the third millennium, our world is experiencing a tremendous pressure of problems that could end in a human catastrophe. We need utopias that give us perspectives, motivation and opportunities for action! Especially in times of crisis, nothing is worse and more counterproductive than paralyzing resignation. We are countering this with our project Congress of Utopias.

*“Science fiction is a powerful tool of human thought.*

*The more positive stories we tell about the years ahead, the better we can imagine them and plan for them.”*

*Kim Stanley Robinson*

The quote from Kim Stanley Robinson is a commitment to the effectiveness of literary thought and work. What role does utopian thinking play in social development, what role can and should fiction play—in the question of the climate crisis as well as in the area of war and peace or the future of work in the digital age?

Ways of life made vivid in literature have served as projection surface for possible developments from early on and have shown the power that utopias often have for the future of society. This also applies to a future that needs to be avoided. Utopian thinking becomes particularly relevant in situations of crisis and upheaval. It is no coincidence that the Industrial Revolution, the German Empire, the Weimar Republic and then the '68s were creative highlights of

literary and other utopias that triggered social learning processes.

The “Congress of Utopias”, consisting of over 50 individual events, aims to reveal, make accessible and map the social learning potential of utopias. Two questions are guiding here:

(1) What connections between utopias and real social developments can be traced on the basis of literary utopias, especially those of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and what is still relevant of them today?

(2) What utopias exist today, what is their scientific basis, and what potential do they have to influence social development?

Further information:

Contact: klaus.farin@hirnkost.de ■

## Climate Futures 2050

By Klaus Farin

The CLIMATE FUTURES 2050 literary prize is intended to encourage professional and non-professional authors of all ages to engage with the climate and possible futures through literature. All forms of short literary exploration of the topic are possible, be it prose or poetry, as a science fiction story, dystopia or utopia, as a fable or fairy tale. Graphic novels and slam



poetry texts are also welcome. It is important that the writers find their own narrative form that makes their thoughts and feelings accessible: What will life in Germany, Europe and the world look like in 2050?

The jury assesses the conciseness of the narrative, the variety and originality of the ideas, the scientific and technical innovations, the style of language, the surprising moments in the story, the unusual message—in other words, everything that is out of the ordinary today and encourages readers to think about their own future, which can still be shaped today. The prize is awarded in the two categories children and young people as well as adults.

At least ten entries in each category will be published in a prize anthology as a hardcover book and e-book by Hirnkost Verlag and will each receive a prize of 300 euros. If selected entries have the format of a stand-alone novel, they will be published in a separate volume and the authors will receive an author contract from Hirnkost, which includes a guaranteed fee of 2,000 euros.

Further information:

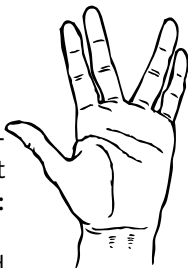
<https://klimazukuenfte2050.de/>

## To boldly go where no man has gone before ...

By Sylvana Freyberg

Most of you know this opening line of one of the most famous and beloved Series: Star Trek.

Star Trek is characterised above all by the technology of the future it depicts. It is interesting that the writers who wrote the stories we enjoy so much were honoured



by the National Space Club in Washington in the 1960s for the scientific accuracy of the Original Series. And to this day, the writers don't just come up with new terms, but also with more or less plausible explanations.

It doesn't matter which of the series and spin-offs you watch, there are many terms coined by Star Trek, e.g. warp drive, the more recent spore drive, or our favourite, the instantaneous hopping from one place to another, beaming.

But do you know the science behind it all? Would it really be possible one day to beam to the next convention instead of driving or flying? The writers introduced a communicator, and today we have our mobile phones. Right? We can hope ...

In Germany we have two physics professors who also enjoy watching the series and are Star Trek experts: Professor Hubert Zitt and professor Metin Tolan. They both explain the technology and other background information in lectures in an entertaining yet sophisticated way. It is particularly interesting to see which technical visions of science fiction authors have already become or could soon become reality.

You don't need to have an understanding of physics to be amazed and entertained by them.

*Prof. Metin Tolan* is a physicist and university lecturer (fig. 1). He has been president of Goettingen University since 2021. In addition to his scientific work, he devotes himself to the humorous-physical examination of soccer, film, and television. For example, he gives lectures on topics such as "The physics of soccer", "The physics of James Bond", "The physics of Star Trek" and "Titanic—More than just a sinking." As an avowed Trekkie, he examines the physical feasibility of inventions, stunts, and film effects, and also compares the



Figure 1: Metin Tolan 2021. Photo: Jan Vetter.

films with historical reality (e.g. Titanic), or (as an VfB Stuttgart fan) presents a formula that predicts the position of the German team in the next soccer World Cup.

In 2023, the MetropolCon team (see page 15) invited him to give a lecture on Star Trek physics.

Further Information:

Shaken, Not Stirred!—James Bond in the Spotlight of Physics, Springer, 2020, 978-3-030-40108-5

*Prof. Hubert Zitt* is a computer science lecturer at Kaiserslautern University of Applied Sciences on the Zweibrücken campus. He gave his first lecture on the physics and technology of Star Trek in 1996 as a Christmas lecture at his University. Since 2005, he has also been giving Star Trek lectures in other cities (fig. 2), both at universities and at specialist conferences organised by companies, as well as events such as FedCon, Europe's largest science fiction convention.

Further information:

<https://www.startrekvorlesung.de>



Figure 2: Star Trek lecture in 2014. Hubert Zitt with over 800 Star Trek fans in the main auditorium of the University of Magdeburg. Photo: Eroll Popova.



## Future Life – We read the Future

von Klaudia Seibel

*Did you know that—right in the middle of Germany—there is a treasure trove where ideas are hoarded and the future is read? The small town of Wetzlar is the site of the Library of the Fantastic, Europe's largest library of speculative fiction written in German, with 300,000 volumes available to the public. Fully one third of it contains science fiction: research material of the "Future Life" think tank, where the future is extrapolated from science fiction.*

We live in interesting times, and predicting the future—which is an impossible task anyway—has become more so because of that weird VUCA<sup>1\*</sup> world we live in. And yet, you cannot do without plans: You have to choose a direction, you have to make assumptions to go by. Particularly if you must make strategic decisions as an entrepreneur, you both need to know what's coming and find ways to bend the future to suit your interests and place the right product in that future.

This is where science fiction comes into play. In recent years, science fiction has become a veritable tool of corporate foresight. Methods like "design thinking" or "science fiction prototyping" are applied to creative processes. Science fiction has a lot to offer: it contains probable and improbable future scenarios, a plethora of technological, social and political ideas, and case studies in human behaviour—to name but a few. Thus, science fiction represents an almost inexhaustible source of ideas, which in turn can be triggers for innovative approaches, part of a bigger solution, or broadening horizons for further thought.

The Future Life team is specialized in mining the enormous pool of existing ideas the library has to offer, which can be an interesting starting point for future narratives that help product developers, researchers, and organizations to approach their questions about innovation and development from a completely different perspective. The team clusters and curates ideas and re-arranges them into topical scenarios, which serve as impulses for foresight and innovation processes. These can be presented in the form of keynotes or full-length topical surveys—such as the 2014 study on nanotechnology, "Nanotech Ideas in Science Fiction Literature,"<sup>2</sup> which has been translated into English. More studies in German can be found on [www.future-life.de](http://www.future-life.de). The latest, on production and production processes in the near future, was funded by the EU.

Additionally, these ideas can be used as impulses for storytelling workshops, where the participants learn to "think like a science fiction author" and develop rudimentary stories about possible futures concerning their business area. All of the above come together in Future Life's "innovation incubator", where SF-inspired scenarios are created to answer real-life questions. These scenarios are given to science fiction writers, who use them as the setting for their stories. These stories are then fed back into the process of writing a topical survey.

Thus, Future Life gives science fiction ideas an impact on real life. It promotes "science fiction thinking", an emerging concept that comprises the different approaches that make use of science fiction ideas and story structures (for more on this, see here<sup>3</sup>—alas, in German).

If you want to learn more about Future Life, come and visit us in Wetzlar or listen to this<sup>4</sup> radio feature. ■

1 volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VUCA>

2 [https://www.technologieland-hessen.de/mm/mm001/Nano\\_SF\\_Web\\_EN.pdf](https://www.technologieland-hessen.de/mm/mm001/Nano_SF_Web_EN.pdf)

3 <https://sciencefictionthinking.com>

4 <https://www.marketplace.org/2018/04/12/business/can-science-fiction-predict-future/>



# LUXEMBOURG'S SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY FAN CONVENTION



**WHEN?** Around Easter each year!

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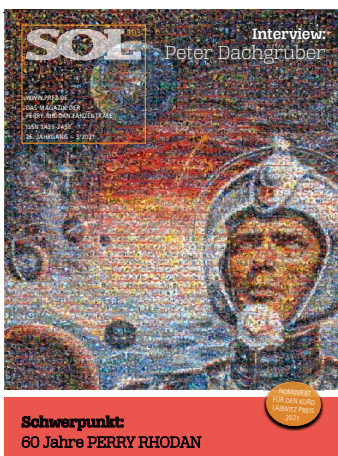
Mark Kammerbauer

# Who is Perry Rhodan?

Asking who is Perry Rhodan is directly related to the question on what Perry Rhodan is, actually. Considering that we are talking about the longest running consecutive fictional story in human history, answering these questions is actually not as easy as it may seem. But let's approximate the answers for an international audience that may not yet be familiar with this Science Fiction phenomenon.

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*The photomosaic was created in 2021 on the occasion of "60 years of PERRY RHODAN" as the cover of SOL 103 magazine. It is composed of the cover images of the 3100 issue novels of the series published up to that point and recreates the cover image of PR 19 "The Immortal". The picture was originally drawn by Johnny Bruck in 1961.*



## A German Science Fiction series: What is it about, who writes it?

Perry Rhodan is a series of 60 page Science Fiction novels that follow a consecutive storyline from one issue to the next. Perry Rhodan is also the name of the main protagonist (some would say "hero") of the series. The stories are written by a team of German-speaking authors. The very first story hit newsstands—not book-stores—in 1961. The individual editions are published in a format resembling newsprint pulp magazines (Heftroman). The driving aspect of the format is its weekly publication schedule, guided by an editor-in-chief and a leading authorship (Exposéautoren), who coordinate the author team and the supporting staff of editors, proofreaders and artists. In December 2023, the series has reached issue no. 3250, with no end in sight.<sup>1</sup>

The founding authors, Karl-Herbert Scheer and Walter Ernsting/Clark Darlton, proposed the main characters and the premise of the series to the original publisher, Moewig Verlag. As members of their generation, both authors had experienced World War II. Both were active as authors of Science Fiction in the postwar era in Germany. Ernsting initially obscured the fact that Darlton was his alias by stating the first was the translator of the second, because translations of Science Fiction from English to German were becoming increasingly popular in the country. Scheer and Darlton had different interests in telling their stories, ranging from conflicts in space to peaceful exploration. Their concept was given a life of 30 or at best 50 weekly issues. They developed an immortal formula.

The formula is as follows: Perry Rhodan is the “risk pilot”<sup>2</sup> (Risikopilot) of the spaceship STARDUST, scheduled for the first trip to the Earth’s Moon in 1971. Remember, the first issue was published in 1961! He finds a spacecraft of the alien Arkon Empire that crash-landed into the Moon’s surface. Rhodan, being a “rapid decision maker” (Sofortumschalter), finds a likely ally in the elderly Crest<sup>3</sup> and a very unlikely ally in Thora, the female commander of the ship. They join forces—Rhodan to pacify Earth, on the verge of a nuclear war, and Crest, knowing his civilization is crumbling into decadence, searching for heirs to the empire. They also join forces to find the legendary “Planet of Eternal Life.” Rhodan and his team members receive a life-prolonging treatment from a “fictive being” known as the Wanderer (ES). And then millennia of adventures begin.

**A participatory series: Fans and the fandom**

In the postwar years, an early Science Fiction scene emerged in Germany. The Science Fiction Club Deutschland, or SFCD e. V., was founded in

1955, among others by later Rhodan co-creator Ernsting/Darltton. Forrest J. Ackerman was one of the early international SFCD members and also played an important role in publishing a translated version of the first 100+ issues of Perry Rhodan in the United States. In Germany, the series quickly became a fan favorite. The producers and the consumers also established a formal line of contact. A reader’s page (Leserkontaktseite, LKS) was soon installed. Author and editor William Voltz, who began his career in German Science Fiction as a fan author and quickly became one of the most popular authors of the series, was the first “reader’s uncle” (LKS-Onkel). Fans could communicate, send letters, express their praise and criticism, draw illustrations, write fan stories—and would receive a response and experience being published on the LKS page. This is how renowned German authors such as Andreas Eschbach and others had their first stories printed. And fans would read them, leading to a continuous loop of fan interaction and participation that the series fosters to this day.

Soon enough, fans not only communicated through the reader’s page in the weekly issues. The Perry Rhodan fandom founded clubs, held cons, published fanzines, created artwork, fan

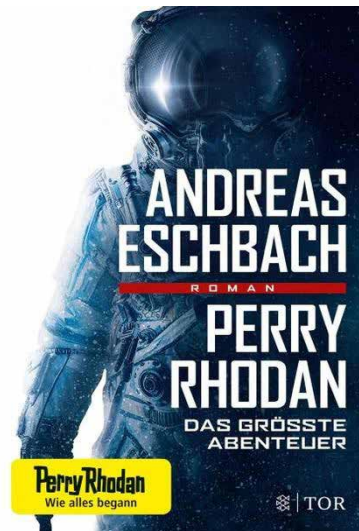


fiction, websites and more. Some initiatives are of significant importance to the communication between the makers and the fans. One is the Perrypedia, a wikipedia-type website that is dedicated to the series and comprises a rich and useful repository of information on its fictional history, characters and terminology—not only for the readers, but for the authors as well, especially regarding the 60+ year series continuity.<sup>4</sup> The Perry Rhodan fan center (Perry Rhodan Fan Zentrale, PRFZ) is the official point of contact for fans who aren't members of existing fan clubs.<sup>5</sup> It also serves to establish a formal connection between the readers and the authors. The PRFZ holds events and publishes a magazine, SOL, as well as fan projects and fan fiction, such as the DORGON series. Independent fan clubs organize large events such as GarchingCon near Munich or ColoniaCon in Cologne.

### Relaunches: An overview

Looking at a series with such an extensive continuity and attendant complexity, the question arises how the makers attempt to attract new readers. After all, Perry Rhodan has been running continuously for more than 60 years. One way is to attempt a relaunch—other brands have done so successfully, such as the Marvel franchises, Star Trek or Battlestar Galactica. Regarding Rhodan, it is sensible to qualify the term relaunch and speak of “soft” and “hard” relaunches. These take place when the series branches out from its core media, the pulp-format newsprint novel, into other media. Early on, this was applied to paperback editions with stand-alone “Planet Novels” (Planetenromane), comic book versions (the first one being *Perry Rhodan im Bild*) and a feature film (Perry Rhodan—SOS aus dem Weltall). Later, the hardcover “Silver Volume” series was launched (*Silberbände*, literally covered in silver foil with colorful 3D covers), audio drama editions were

created, to be followed by video games, audio books and more. The Planet Novels feature independent stories that take place in the series universe (Perryversum). They are oriented towards the core series, yet it is disputable whether and to which degree they are canonical. The same can be said about the comic book versions. The mid-60s feature film is widely regarded as a failure by fans and takes liberties in its depiction of the early story arc of the core series, including the moon landing, finding the shipwreck from Arkon, and returning to Earth. Perhaps its rendering of the series was a bit too audacious, or not enough. The first three audio drama editions were produced by the renowned Europa label and were loosely based on three Planet Novels. After that, a twelve-part audio drama series was created in the 1980s with scripts by Perry Rhodan-author H.G. Francis, who condensed the action of the first 19 pulp volumes, taking only moderate liberties and following the original storyline. This in particular can be considered a “soft” relaunch.



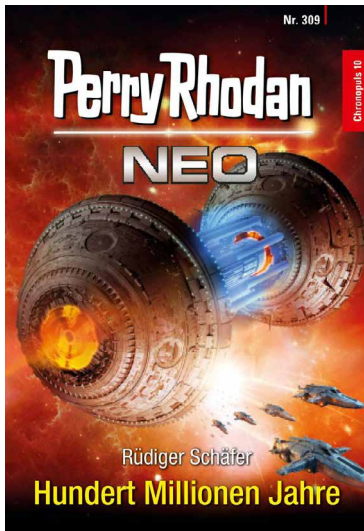


A special form of soft relaunch is the prequel written by renowned German Science Fiction author Andreas Eschbach. “Perry Rhodan—The greatest adventure” (Perry Rhodan—Das grösste Abenteuer) is a fictitious biography of the main character’s early years prior to his moon landing and extending into a back story of the first original pulp novels.<sup>6</sup> The thick volume, called “The Eschbach” by fans, was published by TOR. The author, a reader of the series since his youth, became a guest contributor to the core series upon invitation by current editor-in-chief Klaus N. Frick. From the relaunch perspective, the prequel offers new readers a thrilling starting point before the actual beginning of the core series. A “hard” relaunch was offered to a new readership in the form of Perry Rhodan NEO, published in a hybrid pulp-paperback format, featuring a softcover with color print and newsprint pages with paperback binding. Here, the moon landing takes place in 2036 and numerous aspects of the core series were adapted, yet altered. The approach oscillates between remix and mashup, as themes

of the core series are reinterpreted and newly juxtaposed. A further special kind of relaunch is “Little Perry” (Der kleine Perry), a comic book written and illustrated by Olaf Brill and Michael Vogt and published by Carlsen Verlag.<sup>7</sup> Here, the story of Rhodan’s Moon landing and his encounter with Thora is told in a new, fresh manner aiming at a young readership. Sequels to the first issue are in preparation. Based on Little Perry’s success, there is a likelihood that translated versions will be published. See page 56 for a sneak preview.

### International distribution and publication

The Perry Rhodan series first appealed to a German-speaking audience, if simply for the reason that it is published in the German language. From this perspective, countries such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland constitute the primary markets. However, it also appeals to a much broader audience in various countries. The core series was and still is translated into Dutch for readers in the Netherlands, into Japanese, into French, into Portuguese for the Brazilian readership, into Greek, into English ... and many more. The very first translation was from German to Hebrew, which (according to the Perry Rhodan entry at Wikipedia)<sup>8</sup> was something of a bootleg affair. An English version was published in the US by ACE Books, for which two original pulp novels were combined into one paperback edition. Forrest J. Ackerman and his wife Wendy Wahrman acted as editors and translators. The series was cancelled with issue no. 117/118 and following that, the editor couple offered translations to readers on a subscription basis for another 19 issues. Whether the success or failure of English language editions of Perry Rhodan is related to different cultural preferences, or the fact that certain popular Golden Age concepts of Science Fiction were already known to an anglo audience (while



it was Perry that introduced them to German first-time readers), is a matter of dispute.

### **Not only text: illustrations for covers and spaceships**

The appeal of the series is based on the characters, the stories, the complex storylines, the continuous serial format and the ability of the editors and authors to entertain readers, once every week, for more than 60 years. And cosmic grandeur, of course. The graphic components of the series, however, should not be underestimated. From day one, it was the covers created by artist Johnny Bruck who caught the attention of readers. The pulp editions were offered primarily at newsstands, where the cover facing front was presented to provisional consumers. Fascinating worlds unfolded before the eyes of readers-to-be, paint-ed or collaged by Bruck from issue no. 1 until issue no. 1799, when he unexpectedly passed away. Bruck wasn't only responsible for the cover illustrations, but also for ink drawings inserted alongside the text, in addition to

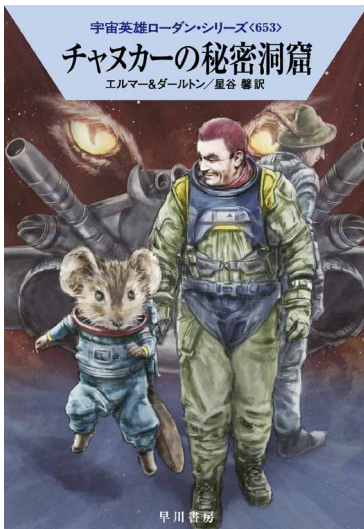
covers for other Perry Rhodan products. He was succeeded by artists such as Al Kelsner, Arndt Drechsler, and others.<sup>9</sup> While Bruck pioneered the cutaway drawing format for the series with an illustration in issue no. 78, Rudolf Zengerle drew the first actual spaceship cutaway drawing (Risszeichnung), a Guppy (Kaulquappe) in the spherical shape typical to the series spaceships, especially those built and operated by Arkon as well as Terran humankind (see fig. 1).

The first generation of illustrators responsible for spaceship, robot and tech cutaway drawings were professional technical draftsmen. The second and following generations, however, were fans who acquired the skills to draw these illustrations in a DIY manner. Eventually, tutorials were published in the series on how to draw the cutaway illustrations. Their intention is to offer readers a quasi-realistic depiction of the technology described in the series as a further dimension of storytelling. The creation of the illustrations is managed by an editor who coordinates the technical requirements with the illustrators. Currently, author Verena Themsen is responsible for this task. In 2023, the first large scale official exhibition of the "Risszeichnungen" was curated by illustrator Gregor Sedlag in the Industriesalon Schöneweide in Berlin, featuring many original pencil and ink drawings by artists who contributed to the series (fig 2 and 3).<sup>10</sup> However, not only colorful covers and detailed drawings enrich the stories of the Perry Rhodan series. There is also fan art in all forms, shapes and media formats, for instance the digital animations by Raimund Peter.<sup>11</sup>

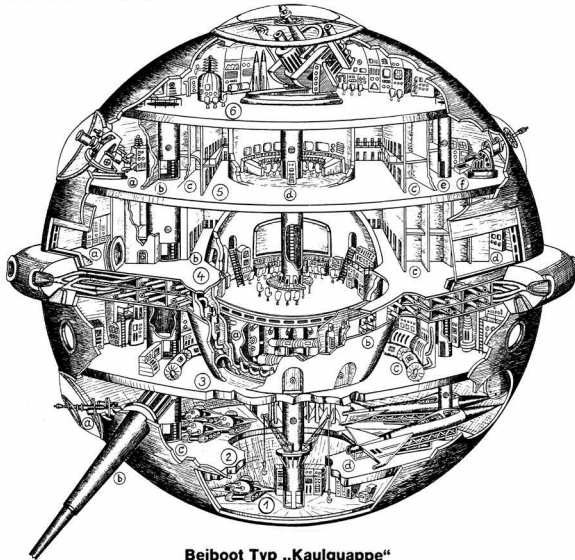
### **Discourse:**

#### **Why is the series popular in Germany?**

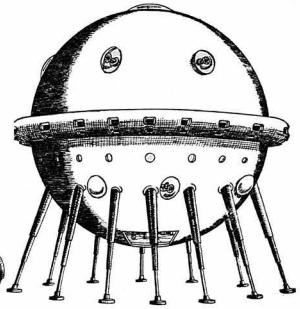
The fact that the Perry Rhodan series has been running for 60+ years, with an edition of the core series published every week, is proof of its ongoing success. For one, this success is certainly



## Terranische Raumschiffe



**Beiboot Typ „Kaulquappe“**  
(Durchmesser 60 Meter)



**Allgemeine Daten:**

- Deck (6) Schweres Polgeschütz mit Positronik und Kraftanlage.
  - Deck (5) Feuerleitzentrale, a) Observatorium, b) Antigravschacht für Lasten, Pol zu Pol, e) Antigravschacht, f) Geschütz.
  - Deck (4) Hauptzentrale mit Panoramablickschirm, Steueranlage und Positronik, a) Nebenschleuse, b) Funkraum, c) Mannschaftsraum, wissenschaftliche Abteilung und Krankenstation, d) Hauptschleuse.
  - Deck (3) Maschinenraum und Kraftanlage, a) Lineartriebwerk, genannt „Kalup“, b) Impulstriebwerk und Äquator-Ringwulst mit 18 Feldprojektoren, c) Antigravprojektoren.
  - Deck (2) Laderaum und Hangar, a) Geschütz, b) Teleskoplandstützen (insgesamt 12 Stück), c) Shits (Flugpanzer), d) 3-Mann-Zerstörer.
  - Deck (1) Verladerraum mit Bodenschleuse.
- Maßstab 1 : 250**

© PERRY RHODAN by Heinrich Bauer Verlag KG, Hamburg

Figure 1: Guppy (Kaulquappe), artist Rudolf Zengerle

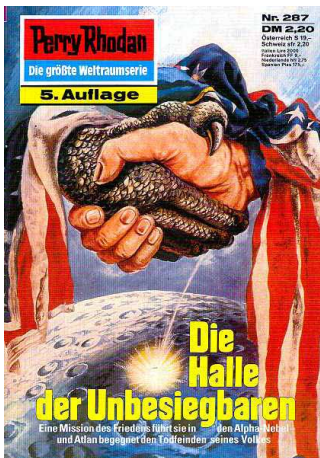


© PERRY RHODAN by Heinrich Bauer Verlag KG, Hamburg

Figure 2: Crescent Moon Hunter (Mondsicheljäger der Oraccameo), artists: Jürgen Rudig & Gregor Sedlag

related to reader habits and the importance of the pulp novel format in making stories available at a low cost to a broad readership. In the 1980s, the series experienced its 5th reprint in pulp format. This meant that readers could pick up five different Perry Rhodan issues per week, in addition to the Planet Novels and the companion series, Atlan, also published in a first and second edition. The publication schedule afforded a young readership in particular jump-on points, from the early—and some would say simpler—days of the series in reprint form through its different iterations all the way to the present-day first edition. However, the pulp novel market experienced a general decline, in the course of which all the reprint editions were eventually cancelled. Currently, aside from the core series (and the Silver Editions and NEO), so-called miniseries with Perry Rhodan stories are printed annually. It should also be noted that the readership has aged with its series. Current discussions point out that digital entertainment formats such as RPGs often find more acceptance among young consumers interested in Science Fiction and Fantasy content than print media.

A further dimension is the socio-political one. In the series, Perry Rhodan emerges as the heir if not to the universe itself—thus was the official subtitle to the series, *Erbe des Universums*—but at the very least to the Arkon empire. This, to a certain degree, also betrays inspirations to the series certainly known to the founding authors, with the Foundation novels by Isaac Asimov and its crumbling galactic empire as one example. In the series, Rhodan advanced, in the manner of the hero's journey, from risk pilot to political representative of a unified government of humankind to the "Grand Administrator" of the "Solar Empire" (Großadministrator des Solaren Imperiums). At the same time, action through conflict was a major driving theme of the stories. In the first issue of the Galaxy Masters (Meister der Insel) story arc, a fan favorite, Rhodan and his friends arrive near the Andromeda galaxy and danger arises in the form of the mysterious Masters. At the end of the story arc, one hundred issues later, Atlan, Rhodan's best friend, kills the female leader of the Masters, Mirona Thetin. This also indicates a blueprint of sorts on how the series functioned in its early years: A mystery unfolds and leads to a conflict that is resolved at the end of the arc.





### Perry Rhodan: A political series?

Thus, the series also encountered significant criticism from German high culture, claiming that fascist ideas were being reproduced in the series in a manner harmful to young readers of what was then still West Germany, decades prior to German reunification. Rhodan, the immortal leader of a cosmic empire? Democratically elected, albeit never having lost an election? It may be true that the series, as relatively straightforward entertainment media, yet characterized by complex story arcs, struggled with the minutiae of political sciences and realities. It may also be true that a certain type of story appealed to a certain readership: Futuristic engineering helped the protagonists solve cosmic conflicts. Subtlety wasn't entirely absent, though, nor was a humanist streak, present in the series from the beginning. Rhodan's team is a multi-species team, after all. It

is not clear if we should understand this team as a family-type community, or an institutional society, or both, but nevertheless, they are not ethnically homogeneous. On the contrary, many team members—Gucky, Ichu Tolot, or Atlan—aren't even from Earth.

One aspect of why the series has been, and still is so popular in Germany is presented here as a hypothesis. From a Weberian sociological point of view, bureaucratic institutions exist first to deal with a certain policy issue, then they tend to focus on perpetuating their own existence. Consider the fact that Germany is globally known for its bureaucracy. Assume that this isn't always met with the roaring applause of the general population (think taxes). Now Rhodan comes along and dismantles one institution after the next, beginning on Earth. He is responsible for the end of the nation

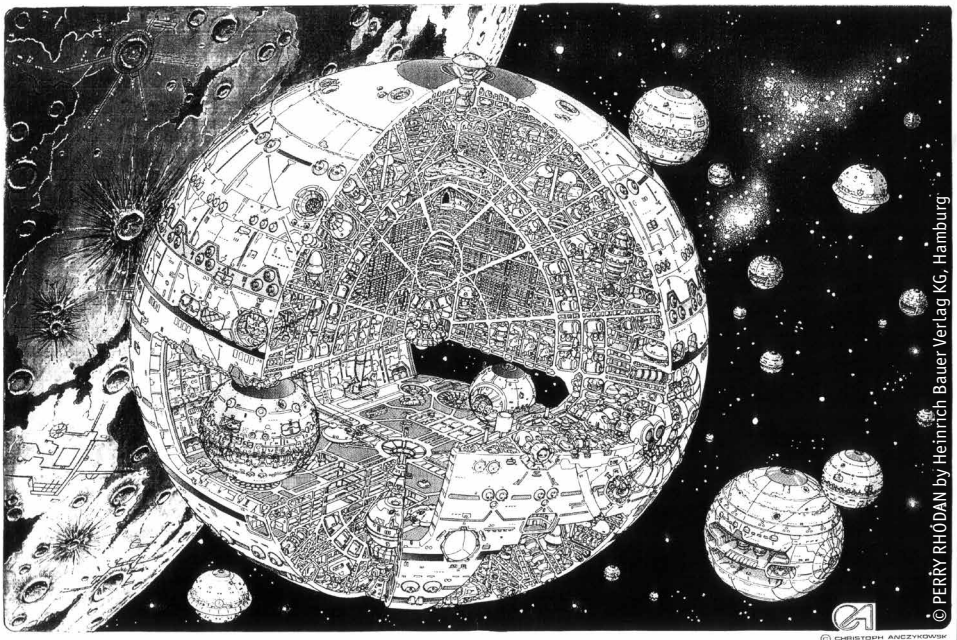


Figure 3: Multi-Purpose Battle Cruiser ODIN, artist: Christoph Anczykowski

state as we know it, initiated and symbolized in a particularly powerful scene in issue no. 1 when he removes the US flag from his uniform. Considering his track record, one might get the impression that he is an institution-smasher on cosmic levels. How did this happen?

### Perry Rhodan: Who does he become?

This is the point where we need to speak of why Perry Rhodan is (or was) an American in the first place—and who he eventually becomes. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union picked up speed. Sputnik had been launched in 1957 and America's Explorer 1 followed in 1958. On 12 April 1961, Juri Alexejewitsch Gagarin became the first Kosmonaut to orbit Earth. Astronaut John Glenn orbited Earth less than a year later, on 20 February 1962.

Between these two dates, the Perry Rhodan series was launched. The Federal Republic of Germany, commonly known as West Germany at the time, was part of the Western Bloc. Unsurprisingly, Anglo-American Science Fiction was popular and accessible in the form of abridged pulp editions translated into German. It therefore comes as no surprise that a German series would attempt to benefit from this circumstance. Hence, Perry Rhodan is an American, albeit with German and French emigrant heritage. The name Rhodan, on the other hand, is a catchy variant of "Rodan", the name of the flying Kaiju monster resembling a Pteranodon from the 1956 Japanese film.

And so, Perry Rhodan, the American "risk pilot," is the first modern human to encounter representatives from an alien species. His world is on the brink of global thermonuclear

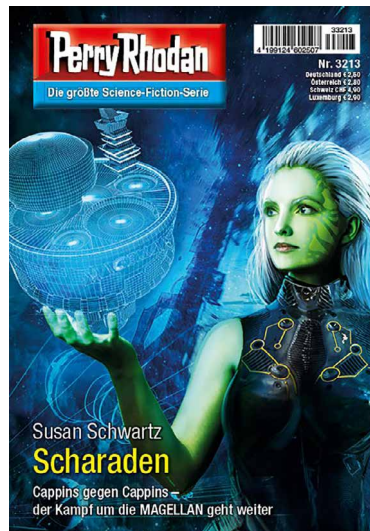


war between the West and the East. He realizes that the aliens from Arkon command incredibly advanced technology. He also realizes it would be his duty, as an officer of the fictional US-Space-Forces (not to be mistaken with the real-life United States Space Force, which began operations in 2020), to return home with the knowledge gained—and possibly, with technical artifacts. He further realizes this would give the USA such an advantage in terms of military capabilities that adversaries would immediately feel threatened to the degree of extinction and act accordingly: with a preemptive thermonuclear strike. That is when he gets creative. The only way to prevent this scenario is for himself to become the antagonist, with the help of his new friends from Arkon. Thus, he returns to Earth with his crew and Crest. He also has some Arkon technology on board. He doesn't land the STARDUST in the US, but instead, in the heartland of the enemy, the Gobi Desert. Hence, Rhodan steps out of the spacecraft and removes the US flag from his uniform. Ask yourself: Would readers in the US approve

of this act? And ask yourself further: Is this a possible reason for the modest success of the Perry Rhodan series in the Anglo-American context?

One might now conclude that Rhodan is a thief (of the STARDUST), a kidnapper (of some of his crew, at least) and a traitor (for refusing to follow orders to return), albeit with an altruistic, humanist motivation. He becomes "The Terran." Rhodan's logic is that the technology from Arkon at his disposal must not benefit one single nation, which would lead to more wars, but all of humankind, with Rhodan's new "Third Power" being the arbiter of this process. Next, he dismantles the regime of the Robot-Regent who rules Arkon with a positronic fist. Then he dismantles the Galaxy Masters. And so forth and so on ...

... until William Voltz assumed the sole responsibility of lead author of the series in the 1970s, when he was already one of its most popular writers. He also wrote the legendary issue no. 1000, aptly titled "The Terran." But Voltz' contribution was much more significant than that. Akin to Rhodan, he dismantled the



great institution of the series: the Solar Empire itself. An even absurdly greater institution, the Council of the Seven Galaxies, destroyed humankind's cosmic nation. The planet Earth and its Moon in their entirety were transported from the Solar system, lost in space, to reappear from hyperspace millions of lightyears from home. After that, cosmic odysseys with plenty of sense of wonder and, as some critics would say, oftentimes esoteric concepts, succeeded the reign of the Solar Empire. This also reflected larger political and social trends in the 1970s, generational change among the readership and a greater attention to, well, pretty much everything other than men with ray guns emerging victorious from space conflicts. Star Wars being a popular exception, perhaps precisely because it didn't take itself all too seriously. Perry Rhodan, for the most part, is a serious affair. But there is some humor in there, too.

### **Changing Perry: An adaptive series**

The Perry Rhodan series demonstrated the capacity to address reader interests at different times in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, and continues to do so to this day. This also resulted in changes to story patterns of "good vs. evil," or the depiction of characters of certain social groups, in particular aliens—and women. We should note that the stories presented in the pulp format are known in Germany as "trivial literature." And that comes with a value judgment. However, to be fair, not just since the Voltz era of lead authorship have such patterns been challenged. Gucky, the four-foot-tall alien "Ilt" resembling a mix between a mouse and a beaver from the planet Tramp, created by Walter Ernsting, can be considered the series' greatest humanist.<sup>12</sup> Everyone, and literally so, is a "Mensch" to Gucky—and this doesn't even explicitly refer to

the Yiddish word. Coincidentally, it is also the German word for human being. So, if everyone in the universe, according to Gucky, is a Mensch, we are already well on our way towards a humanist view of the cosmos.

The role women play in the series is also indicative of its continuous development. Thora, the female commander of the spaceship from Arkon that crash-landed on the moon, was introduced as a powerful, adversarial figure until she reluctantly fell in love with Rhodan. Mirona Thetin emerged on the scene without anyone knowing she was Factor 1, leader of the Galaxy Masters. She fell in love with Atlan, who killed her after she revealed herself. To be fair, Atlan still loves her back. In this manner, the series reflected social trends in West German society: Women tended to be viewed as companions. But in the series, they eventually also appeared as cosmic entities, such as the Superintelligence ESTARTU or the Kosmokrat Mu Sargai, who may even find enjoyment in pulling Atlan's strings (who, in return, may very well be the central romantic figure of the series, instead of Perry). Rhodan is currently married to Sichu Dorksteiger, a female scientist from another galaxy. Or she is married to him. It is hard to tell. In any case, marriage obviously is still important in Perry's far future, while other constellations are hinted at. Diversity isn't only exercised within the series. For instance, several women are active in the author team. One of the most sensitive renderings of cosmic interactions between men and women is portrayed in issue no. 3161 by Susan Schwartz, "Strangers in Time and Space." And Ben Calvin Hary offered readers a thoughtful description of Rhodan's adopted son Tyler's feelings for his best friend Dante in the final issue no. 12 of the miniseries Atlantis 2. As a queer author, Ben enriches the diversity of the creator team in a personal way. As a media-savvy producer of Perry Rhodan content



and leading author of both Atlantis miniseries, he will also be responsible for the direction of the flagship series from issue 3300 onward.

## Conclusion

International Science Fiction fans now have an idea who—and what—Perry Rhodan is. The leading protagonist of the series, published weekly since 1961, is a man from Earth, the first to encounter aliens on the Moon. Following this encounter, he paves the way for a cosmic future history of humankind. Entities of greater evolutionary development and intergalactic institutions of dazzling complexity play important roles within stories that range from exploration to conflict. The series with its strong, yet varied visual identity quickly developed into a platform for communication between the creators and an active fandom. Translations and relaunch formats are intended to appeal to a broad and international readership. The recent generation of authors addresses questions of diversity in a manner matching the currents of our times. These topics are, however, often a matter of contention among fans on social media, reflecting differences between traditional and contemporary understandings of society.

As a fantastic prism refracting its very own image of German-language culture, the series also reflects the changing ways of telling stories amidst a changing world, while competing with other digital brands and formats. One prevailing theme—perhaps more so in the present than in the past of the series—is a humanist view of the future where everybody is a Mensch and everyone can become a Terran. ■

1. <https://perry-rhodan.net>
2. In the US edition, the term “test pilot” is used.
3. In the US edition, the name “Khrrest” is used—likely to avoid confusion with a leading toothpaste brand.
4. <https://www.perrypedia.de>
5. <https://www.prfiz.info/home.html>
6. <https://www.tor-online.de/buch/andreas-eschbach-perry-rhodan-das-groesste-abenteuer-9783596701469>
7. <https://www.carlsen.de/comics/der-kleine-perry>
8. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perry\\_Rhodan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perry_Rhodan)
9. <https://www.perrypedia.de/wiki/Titelbildgalerien>
10. <http://www.rz-journal.de/>—with thanks to Georg Joergens and Gregor Sedlag for providing high-resolution images of original cutaway drawings.
11. <https://www.youtube.com/wyborg/videos>
12. In the US edition, his name is “Pucky”.

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**Mark Kammerbauer** is an architectural researcher and author. Part of his publications deal with the inspiration Science Fiction can offer to urban planning, urban design and architecture. Since his childhood, he is a fan of all things Science Fiction. Raised in the USA and in Germany, he quickly became an avid reader of the PERRY RHODAN series. Having contributed fan art as a teenager, he returned to active fan duty in recent years. Mark is also a member of the Science Fiction Club Deutschland e.V.



Photo by Saskia Wehler

DIRK VAN DEN BOOM

# THE EMPEROR'S MEN

Shortly before the First World War, the German light cruiser *Saarbrücken* leaves the port of Wilhelmshaven to make its last big journey before being decommissioned.

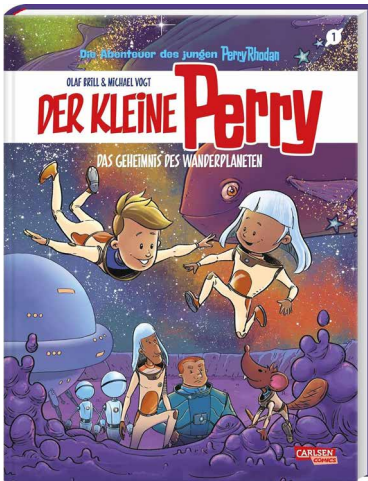
But near Portugal the old ship encounters a mysterious phenomenon, and the crew unexpectedly finds itself in the Mediterranean, 1500 years in the past, at a historical moment: It's the year 378, the beginning of the end of the Western Roman Empire, the start of Völkerwanderung ... the crew of the *Saarbrücken* decides that to survive they must make friends of the Romans.

They had been the Kaiser's men in the 20th century, and now, in the past, another emperor might need their services ...



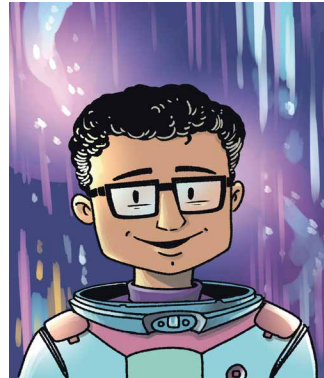
Available as ebook and paperback.

[www.emperors-men.com](http://www.emperors-men.com)

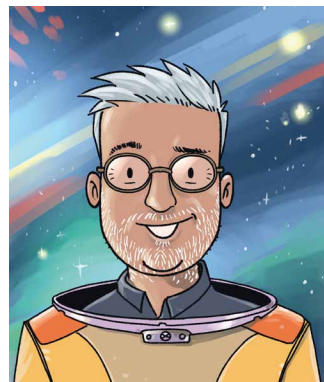


The story of the space hero Perry Rhodan, retold as a children's comic

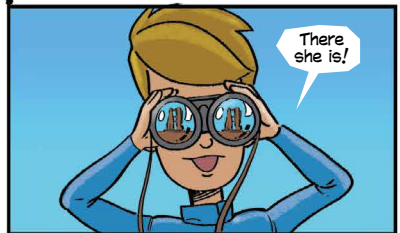
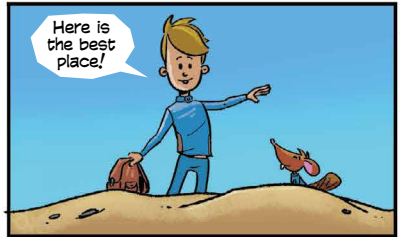
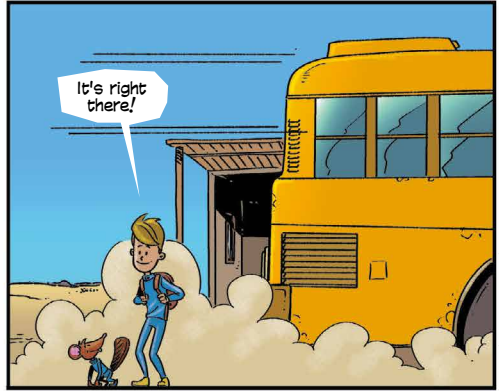
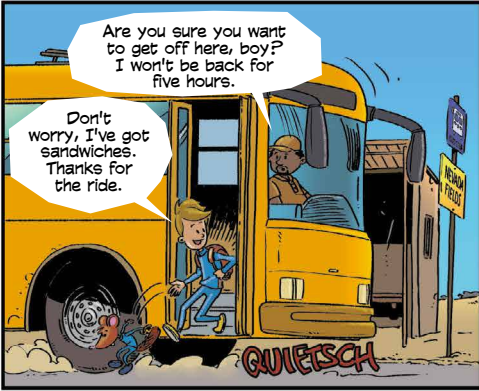
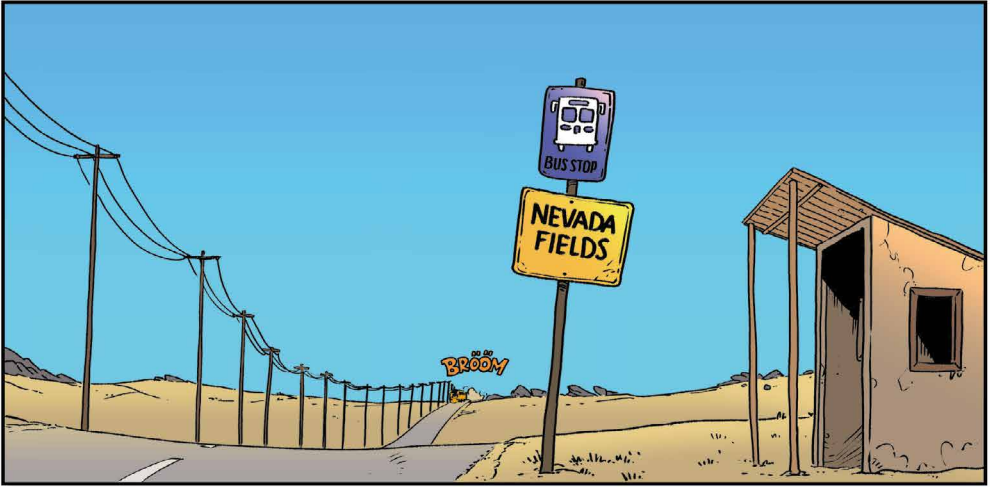
**Olaf Brill** (\*1967) is a writer of comic books ("Little Perry"), pulp novels ("Perry Rhodan") and film books ("Der Caligari-Komplex"). At "Perry Rhodan" he is also the editor responsible for the "Stellaris" short stories and the "Perry Rhodan Report". For more than ten years, he has formed a team with comic artist Michael Vogt. They are the creators of the bizarre and fantastic comic series "Ein seltsamer Tag" ("A Strange Day") published by Panini and the children's comic "Der kleine Perry" ("Little Perry") published by Carlsen.

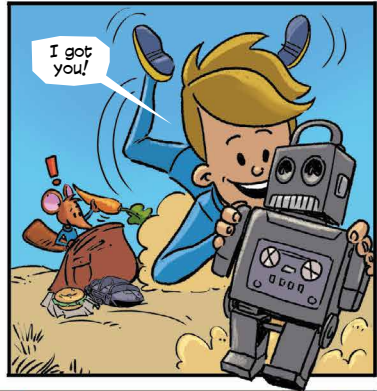
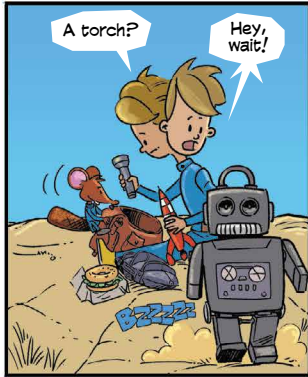
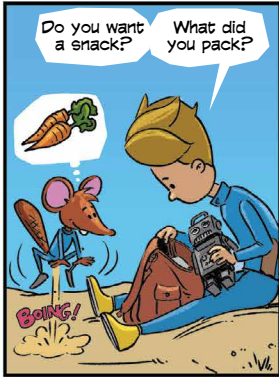
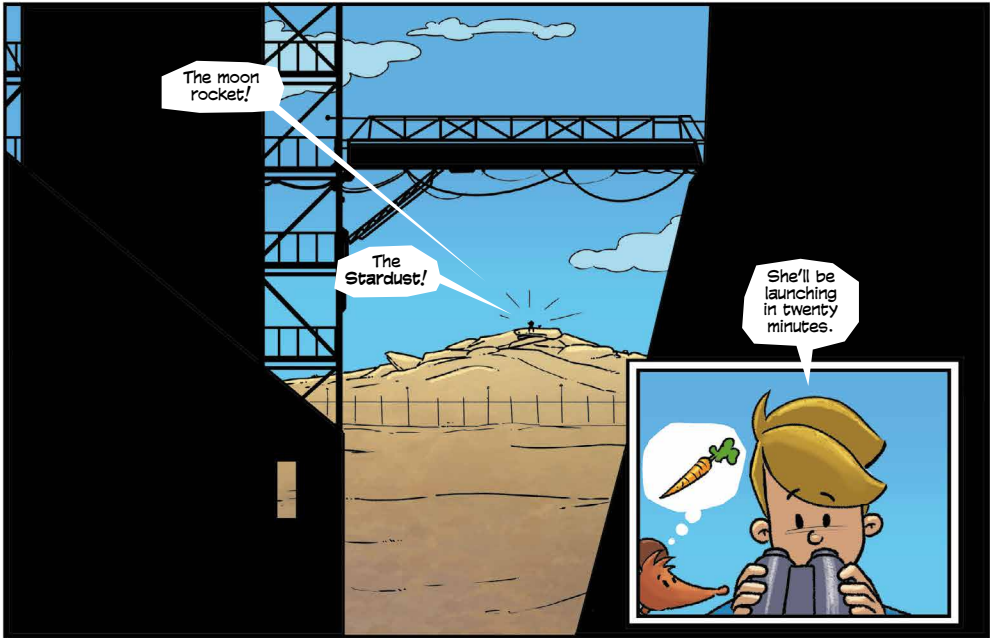


**Michael Vogt** (\*1966) lives and works as an illustrator and comic artist in Berlin. In addition to numerous children's books (Fischer KJB, Randomhouse, etc.) and magazine illustrations, his work consists of comics such as the SF-album series "Mark Brandis" and "A Strange Day" (both published by Panini-Germany). Perry Rhodan readers may know him from his "Perrys Tooniversum" cartoons. His latest work is the children's comic series "Little Perry" (published by Carlsen) in collaboration with Olaf Brill.

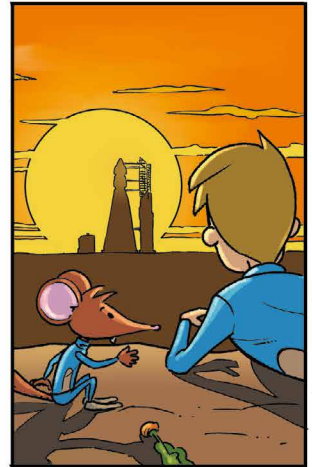
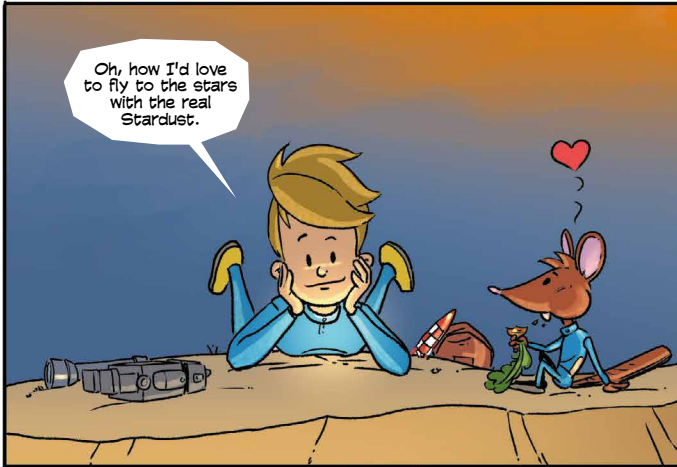
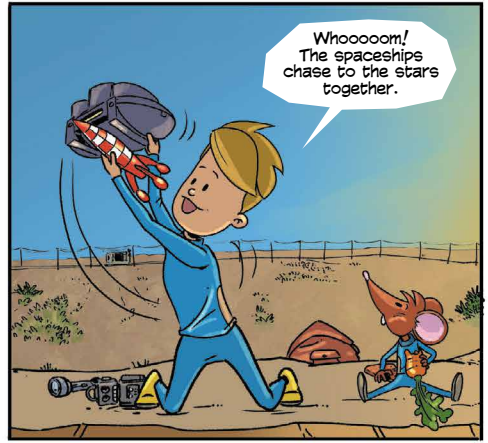
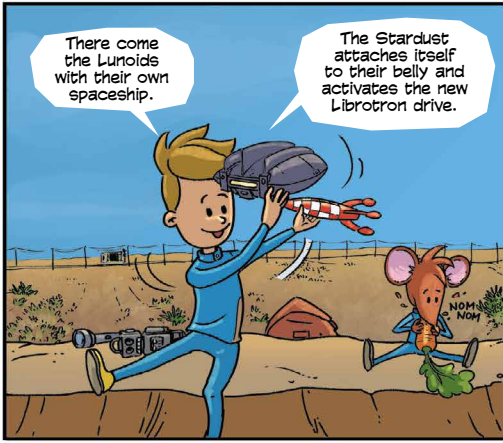














"Anchor of SQUZZA" by Lothar Bauer



Dirk van den Boom

# An Alternative for Alternative History

## A few words about the “Emperor’s Men” series of novels

Alternative history is a very nice genre with the purpose to answer the eternal question: what would have happened, if... We Germans are prominent subjects in this genre, because we have proven in our past that we are capable of providing convincing bad guys if needed. And alternative history needs bad guys for its alternative description of how things could have been. Harry Turtledove, whose works have (for known reasons) not been translated into German, provides some good examples for that, but he is certainly not alone. Alternatively—pun intended—, the Japanese can fulfil this role as well, roughly for the same reasons. I’m sure, with more global calamities evolving and more baddies readily available, the scope will be widened with every new generation of authors. I actually look forward to it.

For a German author, this is nevertheless a difficult subject. Reading the genre and encountering German baddies frequently has its benefits: it gives me an idea of how others see

us, irrespective of the question whether their perspective is realistic, romantic, or maybe a little bit stereotypical. I am myself prone to the tendency to look for a German villain when writing in a historical context. It’s easy for the prospective reader to understand and fulfil certain expectations, and it makes writing easier if one can work with available expectations. Using Germans in alternative history is not necessarily a sign of laziness on behalf of the author, but it certainly helps to smoothen things out, especially when the deadline is tight and the bank account empty. I understand.

As a German writer, I am mostly writing for a German audience, and here we encounter a degree of “enough is enough.” Yes, we are aware of the reasons why it might be interesting to write the next episode of “if Hitler had won, what would have happened?” Easily, if you want to avoid the Third Reich, you can just jump back a few years and make the German Emperor and the likes the baddies. We have plenty of history to choose from. Hence, the first instinct of a German author is: Avoid it at all costs. The Americans are doing it plenty. Not always with a lot of knowledge, but this is fiction, and despite my own background as an academic, I like to bend the facts if the plot requires it. And the plot requires it quite often. No sweat.

Still, the first instinct is not always the best one. Maybe it is a better idea to actually go there: Use the German tropes and do them differently. This of course includes another risk, namely to glorify and change the bad events into positive ones. Some people like to “rectify” their own

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*Illustrator **Lothar Bauer**: I'm 63 years old, retired, from the Saarland region. I have been working on being an artist for 25 years, lots of graphics over the years for fan publications and small publishers, nominated for the Kurd Laßwitz Prize several times, and won it in 2018.*

<http://slo-faster-graphics.org/>

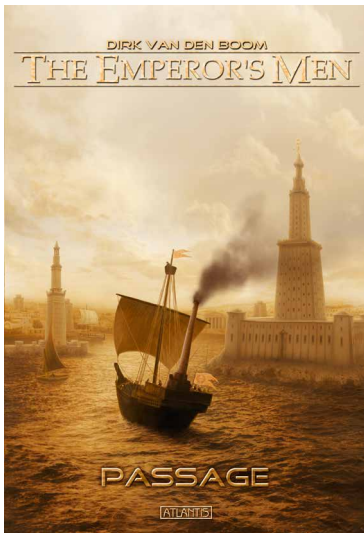
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history by writing because they don't like it very much. I don't like many aspects of German history, but I'm aware of these events and want to use them in a constructive fashion. Enough to know that we should do whatever we can in order to avoid that something this bad ever happens again. Knowing about the past helps to shape the future, and trying to re-interpret and change the past is quite detrimental to that. Therefore, this was not my choice. Still, choosing a military context is helpful, because describing the actions of military men helps to bring the plot forward. And action. Whoever the villain is, we need action. So what was my choice in the matter?

When designing the "Emperor's men" series, I took a German "small cruiser" (that's the equivalent to a modern destroyer), starting on its last voyage before retiring to the scrapyard, shortly before the outbreak of the First World War. Touched by a strange phenomenon, the cruiser, named "Saarbruecken" after my hometown (all small cruisers of that era were named after cities), vanishes on its way, travels

through time, and reappears on the Mediterranean Sea during the time of the Roman Empire. That is, actually an Empire in decline, shortly before the events that also in English are described by the German word "Voelkerwanderung", or the migration of peoples, a process among others initiated by the attacks of the Huns in the East, pushing many peoples towards the stressed borders of the Romans. An Empire ravaged additionally by internal strife, mostly motivated by religious differences within Christianity, and already lacking the resources to keep everything together. Enter Captain Rheinberg and his crew, children of their time, with no hopes to ever return to their present and bound to establish an existence in late antiquity. Hilarity ensues.

How do we describe these sailors in order to not make them insufferable bigots? They are certainly children of their time, have to be, because that's what makes the story interesting, the confrontation worth writing and reading. A clash of cultures and of technology, and a difficult process of adjustment on both sides, all with a background of conflict and strife, internally and externally. I had to be careful and be aware of the fact that, despite what some writers like to assume, even in imperial times the Germans were a diverse people with a lot of conflicting attitudes. Firstly, and for the sake of the story—and the desire to make my main protagonist NOT an asshole—I chose the Captain and some of his crewmates to be of the liberal mindset, which definitely existed in the German officer corps of that time, although in a very small minority and heavily disliked by the conservative majority. But the needs of the expansion of the Imperial Navy required the acceptance of non-noble applicants as officers in order to have the manpower needed for all the new ships. Therefore, among those commoners especially, some slipped through who were not as strict and single-minded as others. This be-





came, historically, evident in the revolution which toppled the Kaiser in the end, an event our time-travellers would never experience.

Secondly, and maybe even more importantly, the NCO-corps as well as the crew of enlisted men were heavily touched by the rising ideas of socialism at that time. It's not that all of them were outright revolutionaries. But the poor men who entered the service of the navy in order to have a living wage and some stability in their life knew where they came from and what kind of discussions were going around among the workers, the disenfranchised and the neglected. During the revolution, they took over some of the remaining warships, kicked out their officers and declared our First Republic. Consequently, a certain percentage of my cruiser's crew had to be, at least fundamentally, of the revolutionary or critical mindset. Most would still obey orders, especially in such a difficult and overwhelming situation, but depending on the nature of those orders or the circumstances encountered, they would start to ask questions.

On the other side of the equation, in the Roman Empire of late antiquity, the situation is way more complex, as our time-travellers encounter a vast society consisting of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds,

held together by the increasingly feeble grip of the Pax Romana, the Roman peace. Interestingly, we have the same mix of more modern and more conservative individuals as in our crew, although based on other premises. What we surely have is powerful men (mostly men—things being what they were) who knew power, influence, compromise, and necessity, as much as those leaders of the time my time-travellers came from. This was, if any, the common ground which I could use to develop the story.

Consequently, the Germans in this alternative history are neither per se bad or good, and the same goes for the Romans and other people they encounter. Individuals are nasty or corrupt or simply egoistic, but the crew as a whole does not have a particular character which makes them “so.” And they learn and develop and question themselves, depending on their intelligence or mental flexibility, just like any of us would do. Once the translations in English were published, it became obvious that the—modest—success of the novels gave proof that this can work for english-speaking readers, at least for some.

Maybe also for you. The first novels of the series are available in English via amazon.com, including the whole story arc of the first six books. ■

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**Dirk van den Boom**, born 1966, has published professionally for more than 25 years, mostly in the genres of science fiction and alternative history. Apart from that, he is director of a small NGO working in the area of migration, and extraordinary professor for political science at the University of Muenster.





"Zwei fliegen vorbei" (Two fly by) by Sylvana Freyberg

Uwe Post

# Time for new Visions

*Future Fiction Magazine* (German edition) has been publishing new glimpses into our future since the beginning of 2022. The magazine's concept: handy, attractive, reasonably priced, down to earth. That's why we not only publish short stories that imagine a possible world a few decades ahead, but also articles and interviews on topics that affect us now and in the near future. In the meantime, we have not only sold around 1500 copies, but have also received the Hall of Fame Award from the European Science Fiction Society (ESFS, fig. 1). A great success for our still-young concept, which obviously hits a nerve, especially as SF short stories in anthologies are otherwise considered almost unsaleable. Why is that? What is special about our magazine?

When we launched the first issue of the *Future Fiction Magazine* at the beginning of 2022, success was anything but certain. For several years now, authors have been campaigning for a more diverse literary view of the future under the umbrella of [FutureFiction.org](https://FutureFiction.org). Be it the *FutureCon SF* team or the network around Francesco Verso, who has not only published countless novels and anthologies in Italy, but also has excellent contacts all over the world. The idea behind this is to counter the one-dimensional dominance of mainly Anglophone SF with voices from all over the world that take a fresh look at the future, off the beaten track, and offer the public previously unknown perspectives. The focus of future fiction is on credible stories of tomorrow, i.e., from the near future, which, instead of cynical dystopias or colourful space battles, show possibilities for our coexistence and development, be it in terms of climate, technology, transport, or society. Of course, we are not talking about boring we-love-it-all utopias, but exciting stories about socially relevant topics. We have brought this mission to Germany and established an additional SF magazine, because the existing ones have a significantly different focus. "We" are Sylvana Freyberg, Yvonne Tunnat, and Uwe Post, known in the German SF scene and beyond for our commitment to young and diverse future literature that has the courage to leave aside classic and popular stereotypes for once. The result is a non-profit magazine that, for just 7 euros (e-book 3.99), always presents

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*Illustration by **Sylvana Freyberg**. This is one of a series of paintings she created before taking on the role of Editor-in-Chief of the ANDROMEDA NACHRICHTEN, the magazine of the Science Fiction Club Germany e.V. See more about her activities on page 11.*

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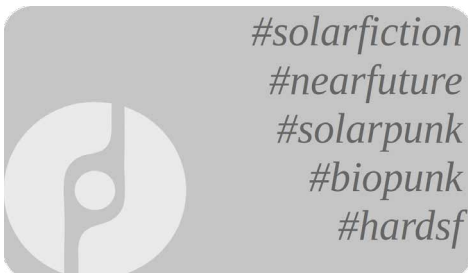






Figure 1: The FFM’s European Science Fiction Award

fresh perspectives on around 100 pages in a handy, attractive format instead of telling the hundredth robot spaceship tale. Not that there is anything wrong with such stories—but there are already other platforms for them.

There is no doubt that our project is a niche product that can only avoid ending up as a total economic loss through its idealism and one or two compromises. For example, we translate foreign-language texts with AI support ([DeepL.com](https://www.deep.com)) and then edit them carefully to save costs. We also pay authors only a symbolic fee of 60 euros and print purely digitally via Amazon, as anything else would be too expensive. Many interior illustrations are also created with AI-based image generators or come from pixabay.com. As “utility graphics”, we consider cost savings to be justifiable here, whereas the attractive covers all come from capable artists, for a

fee of course (with the exception of the cover of issue 4, as this had an AI focus).

Most of our efforts go into acquiring the texts. Although we are also open to suitable submissions (details can be found on [futurefiction.de](https://futurefiction.de)), it became apparent from the beginning that it was necessary to have top-class texts written specially for our magazine, or to take them from other international magazines or future fiction anthologies. Sometimes things turned adventurous, like when we tried (ultimately successfully) to contact a Cuban author or (unsuccessfully, as the contact form on the website was broken) to ask an Australian author for a story.

Stories from “exotic” countries such as Peru, Mexico, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Czech Republic, Nigeria or Uganda are virtually unavailable in German. Likewise, young German authors have only limited opportunities to publish stories about near-future topics. *Future Fiction Magazine*, however, offers perspectives far from the mainstream, which is characterized by American SF series and the associated aesthetics, dramaturgy, and choice of topics. The success of our project shows that it is obviously worth opposing this hegemony with an alternative.

We are still on the lookout for visions and articles that take an exciting and positive look at the near future of our world—in an entertaining but realistic way. ■

**Uwe Post**, born in 1968, is a software and games developer, IT consultant and author of specialised books and SF short stories and novels. “*Walpar Tonnraffir und der Zeigefinger Gottes*” was awarded the German Science Fiction Award and the Kurd-Laßwitz Award in 2011. Post also co-publishes the German edition of *Future Fiction Magazine*. He regards humour as an occasionally underestimated force of nature in the universe.

<https://uwepost.de>

Instagram: @upostbot



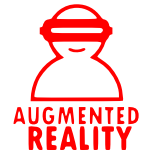


# Future Fiction

Future Fiction is fiction of ideas,  
a multicultural project  
preserving the cultural biodiversity of the future

Future Fiction is what makes reality obsolete  
from a technological  
political or ethical point of view.

Future Fiction is a crossmedia platform.



because the future arrives everywhere



“Vorsehung” (Providence) by Timo Kümmel

Aiki Mira

## “The Universe without the Polar Bear”

As if our Tegos have secretly synchronised our movements, we sit down simultaneously. She at the window, me at the aisle. Our long-haul flight is about to begin. A time, unreal and long, is about to begin. A time during which we can unplug Tego without getting a warning signal from him. Ten hours without long-term memory. We look forward to it. The neurochip sits in our inner ear and usually bothers us as soon as our heads roll to the side during sleep.

We look at each other and smile. With her it is anticipation. I smile because she smiles, and I know what she is thinking: finally sleeping and not just resting. Resting is what people do nowadays instead of sleeping. Especially young people. No wonder: they have Tego ingrained. As a result, their bodies are on constant alert.

She tugs at her ear, I bend over, our summer dresses mix. I help her remove Tego, the storage box already in my hand. Like many couples, we share one box. There are boxes with more than two compartments. We don't need that. Our little girl got her Tego implanted—since forever, it seems.

“Do you think she's –?”

Hastily, I store her Tego in the box, then I look up. I want to see the light that illuminates her face as soon as she speaks of our little one. It's like someone is shining a spotlight on her from above. She opens her hand, to make sure they are still there: our initials. Three letters inked under the skin. During her retro phase, our girl thought the family tattoo was cool. Back then, she loved everything old-fashioned and liked to use words like cool or retro. Now she's grown up, but still looking for a lost world. A world just for herself.

The same year our little one came into the world, Tego's ID function replaced the requirement of an ID card. Swallowable nano-bombs had only recently been invented and governments fought the new security risk with more surveillance, which in turn caused unrest among the population. People took to the streets on the day our little girl was born.

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*Illustrator **Timo Kümmel** succumbed to his longing for other worlds and his love of fantastic literature from an early age. He graduated from the technical college of design, trained as a wood sculptor and studied painting and graphics for two years before becoming self-employed as a freelance artist and illustrator. Numerous book covers and illustrations come from his forge and wander through the entire spectrum of the fantastic.*

*In 2011 and 2015 he was awarded the Kurd Laßwitz Award for the best science fiction graphics, and in 2018 he was awarded the Vincent Award for the best horror graphics and the Temporamores Award for his illustrated book *PROVISION*.*

*More about the artist and up-to-date information about his projects and publications can be found at: [www.timokuemmel.wordpress.com](http://www.timokuemmel.wordpress.com) as well as on Facebook, Instagram, Mastodon and Bluesky.*

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Worldwide protests peaked and no one noticed the extinction of the polar bear.

Years later, on our little one's seventh birthday, Tego played a sound file he had made to celebrate the special day. We heard the death cry of the last polar bear, a sow who died unnoticed in front of the cameras of a zoo, while our little one made her first cry in a video-monitored hospital bed and people all over the world paraded with No-Tego chants. The new fundamental right for information granted Tego access to the surveillance tapes, which he then edited into this peculiar mix of sounds. Our little girl grew up with such birthday songs. I can't listen to Tego's compositions without getting wistful.

"I'm sure she's reached her rig by now," I assert as confidently as I can, afraid that unnecessary concern might expel the light from her face.

"Our brave little girl. I'm so proud of her."

Her eyes light up as she speaks. Her gaze wanders to the window. Silently we watch the passing clouds. Without warning she turns her head and whispers:

"A climate fighter, who would have guessed?"



But wasn't that predictable, I want to reply, our little girl, a fighter like you? We smile at each other and for a moment I want to believe that we will recognise each other in any place and time, even without our long-term memory. I take her hand. She regularly lotions her skin, my hand almost slips, her skin is so smooth.

"Sleep now."

She exhales in relief accepting the permission to leave me. At last, she closes her eyes. I lean back, the box still in my hand, the second compartment still empty. I hesitate. Why?

Maybe because I'm afraid. Afraid I won't be able to stand it. Time without Tego seems to me like flying without a seat belt. I close my eyes and let Tego read to me from the book I started on the outward flight. But my eyes don't stay closed for long. The urge to watch another person's sleep is just too irresistible. And every time I open my eyes to look over at her, Tego's voice gets quieter, as if he is looking at her, too.

When was the last time I saw her sleeping like this? It must have been on the outward flight. Our little one despises us for travelling by plane. Even though she knows we are so old, we hardly have time to travel slowly. Don't young people always despise something? Lately, even sleep. If only they knew what they are missing.

When she sleeps, she looks completely relaxed, like she is somewhere else. She is probably dreaming.

My Tego could record her sleeping sounds. The latest, implanted version could even photograph or film her. But that wouldn't capture anything of what I'm feeling right now. Portrait painting—if Tego could master this ancient cul-



tural technique, he could capture some of my feelings for eternity. Is there anyone left who still masters portrait painting? Before Tego can answer me, I lean forward. He recognises the gesture and remains silent. I almost touch her sleeping face, breathe in her sleeping breath.

The first breaking news explodes directly in my ear. The words are like bullets: as soon as they hit their target, they develop explosive power. They have been designed that way, as sound detonations that are meant to tear inside.

As the words hit me, I look at her. It is no use. Tego no longer responds. Without mercy he continues his bombardment. After all, every breaking news story is based on the idea of an exceptional situation. This is the moment when all the rules change. The moment when everything changes.

I shiver, I feel nauseous. My body comprehends before my brain can process the meaning. I look at her, but she remains out of reach. Like in a nightmare, we suddenly inhabit separate universes. She rests in the pristine time of the long-haul flight, while I am catapulted into real time contaminated by breaking news. I wish I could go back in time, back to her. But whatever I do, I must not infect her universe with my reality. Desperately, I focus on her face, on her narrow mouth. This helps. Her mouth looks like it is smiling. Suddenly I know what I have to do.

To have no record of the crime later, I release Tego from my inner ear. Then I take the box, open it, look around. No one seems to be watching me. I drop her Tego on the floor, step on it. Again, and again. What I do is punishable, no question. For this reason, I must do it as inconspicuously as possible. Afterwards I will have to lie.

I take a deep breath, insert my Tego and call the flight crew. Only then do I realise that on an

international flight such an incident will cause a lot of fuss.

"Even if—as you say—it was an accident, an official investigation will be necessary. We'll have to contact the destination airport and inform border control. You understand that don't you?"

I nod, smiling as hard as I can. Although they are much younger than me, they treat me like a child. Before they leave, they give me a disapproving look. I know what they are trying to say: none of this would have happened if you two had implanted your Tego like we did. We are too old for the operation, I want to shout after them, but I don't.

"What's wrong?"

I look into her eyes, still cloudy from sleep, and lie:

"Nothing."

She exhales in relief, leans back, and opens her hand.

"Any word from her yet?"

Her hand closes. I stare at her for a moment, then I realise: the tattoo! The initials carved under her skin function like a memory aid.

"No message. But I have a confession to make..."

She laughs as I continue to lie to her. She laughs more freely than she has in a long time. Then she leans forward, our summer dresses intermingle, float into each other. With a twinkle in her eye, she murmurs:

"Our little girl won't think that this is cool at all."

"People here don't think it's cool either. Because of my clumsiness, our border entry will take a little longer, I'm afraid. So sorry about that."

I squeeze her smooth hand, tears springing to my eyes, and I add:

"Everything that happened today—if I could, I would undo it."

She thinks I'm talking about the broken Tego and pats my hand:

"Dearest, don't take it to heart."

Then she laughs encouragingly, and I fall in love again, this time with the sound of her voice. Meanwhile, an endless loop of live news repeats in my inner ear:

"Multiple explosions.", "No survivors."

\*

"I'd like to call her."

"There's no reception where she is now."

We sit across from each other. The room is windowless.

"I know, she probably doesn't have time for it either. What did she write?"

"The same as always: All's well, old ladies, and don't you worry about a thing."

"She's a darling!"

Tears shoot into my eyes, I blink against them and pretend a speck of dust has flown into my eye, which is completely absurd: we are in a highly sterile holding room. They're making us sit here while they check whether we're crazy or criminals or planning to become either. I don't mind having to wait. It feels like they have given us extra time.

As they lead us out of the cell and back into the arrival's hall, their faces remain conspicuously silent. Their pity remains subtle, but I recognise it because I know why they pity us. They say nothing and I say nothing.

A little later, we leave the airport building. Hand in hand. She now wears a wristband with a temporary ID. She can't log on to public transport with it. For a moment we both just stand there, not knowing what to do. My Tego suggests renting a car privately and registering her as an anonymous guest. During the drive home, I secretly put the car on autopilot and order things from an online department store. A few hours after our arrival, I receive

three packages of varied sizes. I hide two of them. The third I take into the living room.

There I find her sitting on the floor, her back straight, her legs crossed, her arms stretched into the air. While I open the parcel and unpack the new Tego, she watches me. Her face turns gloomy:

"Oh dear, do I have to set this thing up from scratch? Make up a new security key and everything?"

"I can do it for you."

She laughs in relief, knotting her arms with her legs:

"You know that would be illegal."

We look at each other and giggle like two retro gangsters in a retro movie. Tears spring to my eyes again. Hastily, I turn my back to her. I must do it soon; I can't stall her much longer. So, I put her new Tego in my ear and register in her name.

I install her favourite services: weather, world news, political travelogues, and advanced yoga exercises. She continues to tie herself into knots, looking happy. Really happy.

I get up, go to the kitchen, to fetch a glass of juice for her. I close the door. Quietly I say: data destruction service. Her new Tego finds 250 providers and compiles a ranking list. Together we go through the conditions of each one. We decide on EX-IT.

Tego reads me the terms and conditions:

"Deleting people from one's life is a serious step that should be well thought out. It is only legal under exceptional circumstances."

He lists all the permissible circumstances. Then he pauses and waits for me to make a choice. As if it were really a choice:

"Violent death."

Tego puts the tick, and we send the form.

After that, I take her new Tego out of my ear and put in my own. First, I go through the records of my last long-distance calls. Nothing, no indication that our little girl knew anything

about the nano-bombs. But if I'm unsure, what do those think who didn't know her at all? The police? The military?

And what would happen to all her uploaded data without a destruction service? To her photos, videos, messages, and conversations? Tego finds out that her data would be turned into a monument. A data monument which would only be accessible 30 years after her death. But her relatives will be long dead by then, I want to protest. Then I realise the monument is not for us, but a gift to market research. „A service that comes with the factory settings“, Tego enlightens me. So, if I don't change anything in my default settings, I will also end up as a museum? The thought creeps me out.

I search EX-IT, fill out the form for my own Tego, but don't give the command to send it. Instead, I take Tego out again, put him down and fetch a small package no bigger than an envelope from the bottom kitchen drawer.

A light anaesthetic. I take a quick look at the dosage instructions, crumble some of the sticky powder into a half-full glass of juice, mix everything and then put my Tego back in.

I bring her the juice together with the new Tego. She looks at me gratefully, drinks the glass in two gulps. Her face wet and shiny.

“Can I talk to her right now?”

I shake my head, lying again:

“First, you have to wear the new Tego for 48 hours, after that everything should work like before, including the phone.”

She nods and opens her hand.

I hesitate, then say:

“Don't you want to sleep properly? Now would be a good time.”

She looks at me. Is she taken aback by my suggestion? Or relieved?

She doesn't say a word, just nods and then lies flat on the floor. I push a pillow under her head. Her eyes close, she breathes calmly.

I wait ten minutes, then take out my Tego, grab the empty glass, smash it against the wall. Despite the noise, she doesn't move. I pick a particularly large piece of shattered glass. Two cuts are enough to remove one of the three letters along with the skin. Then I put my Tego back in place, get some bandages and close the small hole on the inside of her hand. The two remaining initials are bloodied but intact. My body feels heavy.

I force myself to get up and fetch the third package.

Silently I spread its contents on the floor next to her. A sheet of solid paper and a pencil with a soft lead. Her body is numb. But I expect her to wake up soon.

Paper and pencil look just like I remember them from my childhood. Only they feel quite different. The grain in the paper surprises me. My fingers cramp. It's been a long time since I held a pencil.

I start with the outlines, then put in eyes, nose, mouth. Not long and I am staring into a young face. It's young because I haven't drawn any wrinkles into it. Younger than she was 20 years ago. But this resemblance—why am I only noticing it now? Now that it's too late, because no one will ever see what our daughter's face would have aged into.

I continue to draw the portrait as if it were an alternative universe. A densely packed reality that contains everything that already was, that could have been or that is yet to be. This carefully layered reality collides with me. Tears run down to my chin, drip from there into the painted face, soften its contours, leave stains in the paper. A warning signal sounds. Tego reminds me of the filled-out document that is still in my outbox.

I wipe the tears from my face. Tego recognises the gesture and the emotion behind it. He plays what he knows will cheer me up. A melo-

dy, just five seconds long. The echo of the last polar bear. Our little girl sent it to me on the evening of her seventh birthday. She made it out of Tego's birthday song, isolating, then amplifying and doubling the sow's death call. She saved the file under the name: The last polar bear lives forever.

If I send the form, those five seconds will disappear together with the rest. I will not only be deleting data; I will be deleting something much bigger. So, I delay a little longer, stay a little longer in the universe that has exploded, and at the same time get ready to jump into another, less painful one. One that is still whole, but empty: the universe without the polar bear. ■

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German Title "Das Universum ohne Eisbärin", published in c't Magazin  
Translation Aiki Mira

### **Excerpt "Utopie27" by Aiki Mira**

Winner of the German SF Award, 2022

Now that my brother Kajin is dead, he spends more time with me than before. I always thought the dead disappeared, but that's not true. They just grow deeper inside us. Kajin and I like to play a game. We think about a place in Frankfurt, like Bethmann Park, which doesn't exist anymore. From there, we find our way home in our imaginations and see how far we can go, how much Kajin still remembers. His mental image of the city he grew up in gets smaller every time. He reaches the point where he has to turn back earlier and earlier.

Kajin means "Where is life?" Very few people know my name. Kajin calls me Civanok, because he thinks I look like a crumpled fledgling. Everyone else calls me Lu, or just Kajin's little sister. Because our parents died young, my

brother and I are close. While he was still alive, sometimes we had the same thoughts, often dreamed the same dream and spent the whole day remembering it. We never dreamed of real places or things. Mostly we were other people in the dream, but we didn't know who. I can still hear Kajin's voice in my head—his living voice—not the one he has now.

The alarm shrieks. I wanted to tell my brother something. Too late. Visiting hours are over. Avatars disappear, and a world that was populated just moments ago empties. I sense the weight of the VR glasses, take them off, and blink. Air crackles in my ears. Above me a neon light flickers. Recently it's seemed like I live not in a skyscraper, but in an old computer.

The mattress I sleep on makes a damp pit under me and is mushy like old fruit. Smells like it, too. A shirt that I've already worn far too long and urgently need to wash sticks to my sweaty skin. A subtle stench of death tickles the hairs in my nose. Not far from the mattress sits my two-week-old birthday cake. Twenty-seven LEDs blink on top of it. I look at it every day. First the layers of cake collapsed on themselves, then the cream filling turned colours and started to run. A furry carpet has been growing on it for the last two days. Today, grotesque creatures reach upwards from it. If I breathe out too hard, they fly in all directions as if they're made out of dust.

Like the cake, my hair transforms over time. First it became straighter, glossier. Then clumps formed. Even the scent changed. Yesterday I hacked it all off with the kitchen knife. Now the dark strands lie on the floor and coalesce with the rest of the apartment. I'm sure I'll find them again one day, but I won't recognize that they're my hair.

I lift my bare legs one after the other. Thin, brown, peculiar, as though they belong to another person. To my surprise, they work. I tot-



ter past the blossoming cake to my work table. Its digital pad pulses in stand-by. First I look through the obituaries. I compiled them yesterday, but I have to check them before I send them in. Because yesterday evening seems damned far away.

A twenty-eight-year-old woman who jumps barefoot out of a twentieth-floor window. An eleven-year-old girl who is flung five yards from an e-scooter. An eight-year-old boy who shuts himself in a refrigerator and suffocates 2,047 seconds later. A twenty-three-year-old man who suffers a heart attack after playing twenty-four VR games in a row. Why didn't I ever notice it before? In our world, young people don't become old anymore. Like the seedlings we plant every year on the roof of our apartment building, they break in the first storm or wither in the first drought. ■

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German Title "Utopie27", published in the short story collection "Am Anfang war das Bild", ISBN-13 978-3-949452-15-4

Translation CD Covington

Submitted to English Magazines

### Laudatory Speech for "Utopie27"

written by Yvonne Tunnat & Franz Hardt for the award committee, August 2022

Translation Claudia Rapp

"Now that my brother Kajin is dead, he spends more time with me than before. I always thought the dead disappeared, but that's not true. They just grow deeper inside us."

Lu's brother was a successful gamer who died recently. The relationship between the young siblings, who lost their parents at an early age, was very close. Since the death of her brother Kajin, Lu has been merely vegetating and ne-

ver leaves the house. She lives in a terribly run-down flat where leftover food is left to rot. Every day she meets Kajin's digital self in the digital afterlife, in Utopia26.

Lu designs and organises virtual memorial pages and funeral ceremonies. We learn about her problems with this work and how the people in her world deal with death: "In the end, all that remains are photos and videos. They are burned into people's minds as if they were real memories." In her world, young people no longer grow old: "Like the seedlings [...] they break in the first storm or wither in the first drought".

Lu, who was called the "crumpled little bird" by her brother, loses herself more and more in a virtual reality: "I feel comfortable in flight, at the heart of the crowd, in the ups and downs of movement, between the fleeting and the infinite". Then Kajin's digital copy explains to her that he and all the other digital inhabitants of Utopie26 have joined forces and will be moving on. Utopia26 and therefore her brother, whose name means "Where is life?", are no longer accessible to her.

Lu's world is broken, but the relationships between people are not quite. Neighbours help her: they give her food, repair her bathroom. There is solidarity among the people. Unfortunately, none of this helps, and the story does not end well for Lu. In an ambiguous ending, she says: "Then I close my eyes and fly—"

The story is multi-layered, emotionally moving, complex, and stylistically excellent, with sentences such as: "I listen for a moment to the unfathomable sound of the tuba, which wafts through the walls like a fragrance."

It is excellently placed between the poles of the "familiar-looking" near-future and clearly set-apart future technology. Powerful dystopian elements penetrate the lines, are presented and thus made tangible for the reader. Elegant formulations and creative coinages take turns.

Aiki Mira works with images and remarkable details about secondary characters that you can't get out of your head.

The gradual drifting away of the main character Lu, her withdrawal into herself, and the loss of her connection to reality are convincingly portrayed. Added to this is her fascination with death, which is not just a professional one. "The darkness came at me from all sides at once." This quote describes the core of the story and points to the ending. In Lu and Kajin's world, young people in particular have the feeling of being left all alone, while everyone else is already dead. Just like us while reading, Lu can no longer judge what is real and what is just imagination. Is Lu a simulated consciousness in Utopia27, the new version in which "the digitalised consciousness does not [know] that it exists in a simulated environment"? Is she al-

ready dead and just doesn't know it yet? Does Lu think she is in Utopia27 and doesn't end up committing suicide, but merely escapes the simulated world of Utopia27? Or is she still in the real world and on her way to unintentionally ending her life, as may have happened to Kajin?

An intense story that offers an insight into the tormented souls of many young people. It shows the pain and emotional strain that can result from the loss of a loved one. The story deals with grief and death, but also with the search for oneself, one's own destiny, and a home.

A story that lingers long after reading.

For these reasons, the committee is delighted to honour "Utopie27" by Aiki Mira with the German Science Fiction Award 2022. ■

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**Aiki Mira** (they/them) studied media communication in Stirling, London, Bremen and researched youth culture and gaming. Today Aiki lives in Hamburg and writes novels, short stories and essays.

Their short fiction has received multiple awards: the German Science Fiction Award 2022 and 2023, and the Kurd Laßwitz Award 2022.

In 2023 Aiki received the Chrysalis Award from the European Science Fiction Society.

Their novels *NEONGRAU* 2022 and *NEURO-BIEST* 2023 both won the Kurd Laßwitz Award in the category best novel of the year.

Aiki co-hosts the Science Fiction podcast *DAS WAR MORGEN* for public broadcaster SWR.

In 2024 Aiki's fourth novel *PROXI* will be published by Fischer Tor.

<https://aikimira.webnode.page/>



Photo by Miguel Ferraz

Andrew May

# How Space Physics Really Works

Lessons from  
Well-Constructed  
Science Fiction



Herbert W. Franke

# The Orchid Cage

A Science Fiction Novel



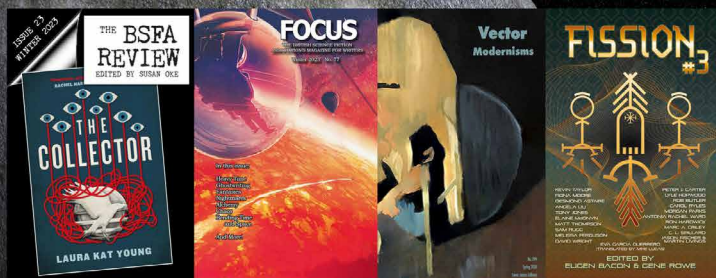
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Carsten Schmitt

## “Wagner's Voice”

Each new hole in his head cedes a little more of himself to the Voice. The doctors tell him not to worry, since he and the Voice—they're practically the same thing, right? Jens Wagner isn't sure what to make of that, yet the notion is comforting somehow and, besides, he did it voluntarily, what with the Voice and all that.

*Herr Hildemann seems hungry. You should feed him.*

Herr Hildemann, the tomcat, is sitting in front of his bowl, pointedly licking up the crumbs of dried cat food that have accumulated on the floor around the red plastic dish.

“I know, I know you never, ever get any food, do you, poor chap?” Wagner opens the bottom drawer next to the sink and looks indecisively at the cans stacked within.

“Do you fancy chicken or venison?”

Herr Hildemann coos leaving his post by the bowl to inspect the contents of the drawer together with Wagner.

*There's some cat food in the fridge.*

With a beam of light from the tiny projector

on the ceiling, the Voice shows him where he should focus his attention. The red dot pulsates on the stainless-steel paneling of the refrigerator. Wagner opens the fridge and takes out a tin.

“Gee, Herr Hildemann, we've almost forgotten about the open can. It's going downhill with Daddy, ey?”

Herr Hildemann mews in agreement, but he's quickly appeased once Wagner puts a bowl of food down in front of him. Wagner strokes the big grey-white tom from head to tail, then straightens up. What was he doing here?

He lets his gaze wander through the kitchen. The countertop is tidy, empty but for a mug. He finds some leftover coffee in it. Unsure, he turns the mug in his hand. Had he wanted to make a fresh brew? There's no way to tell.

The phone rings.

*Marlene is calling. Do you want to take the call?*

“No!” You'd think the Voice would have figured that out by now, because that's what it does. Observe, learn, and understand what he wants and what he doesn't.

*All right.*

The ringing fades.

\* \* \*

For the past hour, Jens Wagner has been staring at the projection screen at the other end of the bare room, looking at images from his past.

“Do you want me to say something?”

“Only if you feel like it,” the Neuro-Cybernetic Technical Assistant tells him. “The first thing to come to your mind. It helps classify your emotional reactions. But it's not strictly necessary. After all, we've got you all hooked up,” she

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*Thank you to the FISSION team that we can publish “Wagner's Voice”, winner of the German SF Award 2021.*

*The English translation was first published in FISSION #4 by Eugen Bacon & Gene Rowe (eds.), British Science Fiction Association (BSFA), 2024. Reprinted with kind permission by the publisher.*

---

says, checking the fit of the sensors that measure his heartbeat and respiratory rate.

"You don't have to sit absolutely still, but please try to move your head as little as possible." The technician turns the tablet screen for Wagner to see. "We don't want to lose the image of your pupil." The screen shows a close-up of his left eye with the trademark golden fleck on the otherwise brown iris.

"All right," Wagner says and lets his head sink into the headrest.

The NCTA is typing on her tablet and takes a seat behind Wagner so he can only see her out of the corner of his eye.

He has agreed to have his cloud scanned for images, feeds, and documents. The artefacts of a lifetime. That's the simple part. The tough part is to understand the meaning of each piece in this puzzle of raw data from which algorithms will construct a model of his personality with all his habits and dispositions.

A how-to guide for being Jens Wagner. This cannot be automated. The computer might deduce from the data off his smart watch that he usually goes for a walk after lunch. But it doesn't know how that makes Wagner feel or why he chooses a particular route. It might conclude he enjoys the exercise in the fresh air when it's really about the journey through almost forty years of his life.

There's the old coffee shop—long-closed now—where he and Sabrina used to meet. It's right at the turning point of his walk, and the AI might assume this is where he needs to take a quick breather. Only, what he really stops for is to reminisce about the afternoon when, after countless cups of milky coffee, they confessed to be in love with each other.

Thus, Wagner spends hour after hour in this room with the assistant looking at pictures. He tells her whatever comes to his mind—who the people in the photos are, where they were taken, and what the occasion had been.

The NCTA remains silent most of the time. At first, she smiles and nods, and mutters approvingly now and then, but as the stream of random images goes on, she becomes quieter, and, out of the corner of his eye, Wagner can see her yawning and tapping on her tablet.

"The AI has already identified most of the people from the metadata and processed the other content," she says when he complains about the speed of the images flitting across the screen in ever-faster succession. "Now, we're only measuring your emotional responses to the images."

Wagner mumbles an apology and continues to look at the pictures in silence, even when he would like to say something about them. Sometimes, they flicker by so quickly, the azure holiday skies and green picnic meadows, the flash-lit living room scenes and faded-silver grandparents' memories fuse into a single image oscillating in constant motion.

He is unsure how he is supposed to recognise anything, let alone react to it; but the machines beep and blink, the flow doesn't ebb, and the technician doesn't react when she looks up to check the displays.

Wagner feels like he's racing through his life at such speed the airflow is choking him. The computer seems to notice because the torrent of images slows to a tolerable trickle. The fast-forward journey through his life has reached their first vacation. It's a selfie of Sabrina and him on the boat to Sicily. The salty sea breeze has moulded his short-cropped hair into a spikey hedgehog shape and whirled Sabrina's long red strands so they cover her face, leaving only her laughing mouth visible. The ferry's red-and-yellow smokestack looms in the background, flaunting the shipping company's logo, a variation of the island's coat of arms.

The next picture. There's their old station wagon parked on a campsite. Sabrina has disappeared up to her hip in the trunk, looking for

something Wagner put in the wrong bag. The horizon is dark, almost black, from the thunderclouds that would unload above them later that night. The storm had torn away the tent, so they had to spend the night in the car and the rest of the holiday in cheap B&Bs.

Wagner laughs because the wind took pity on them, granting them enough time to make love. They were sure that they had conceived Marlene that night. Their *storm child* as they would call her later, jokingly first and then more and more often in exasperation. Wagner almost tells the young technician about it, but then he thinks she won't be interested in the intimate affairs of an old man, and, besides, there is no need to talk, is there?

The moment goes by, parsed by machines that record, dissect, and analyse his heartbeat, respiratory rate, and pupil dilation, as well as twenty-eight distinct facial muscle twitches, fourteen different ways of holding his head, eleven discreet eye movements, and twenty-eight other involuntary motions of head and face to interpret Wagner's. All this in an instant shorter than any camera could capture to presumably file it away under *Happy Memories*. The stream of images continues to flow, skips three years after the storm and only pauses again on the playground in the park near their first apartment.

Marlene is standing there, her hand on the handlebars of her fallen bike, the skin on her knee scraped, blood running from the wound. Her mouth is distorted into a scream, eyes and nose ready to squirt streams of tears and snot. Did he drop the camera when she ran to him, for comfort and encouragement, to him, always to him? Wagner doesn't remember.

She had been loud and impetuous, erratic, and apparently the exact opposite of Sabrina: "*Where does she get it from?*"

*Not me*, Wagner thinks, and, *deep down*, *you two were too much alike*.

The time stream picks up speed, skips years, then decades. There's the large patio of their house in the suburbs. A garden table with a cheesecake, Wagner's favourite. He remembers the occasion and flinches. The neighbours were there and Susanne, Marlene's then-girlfriend. Wagner hadn't liked Susanne, but Sabrina hated her. That day ended in a fight, like so many.

The image stays on.

"No," he says, and the bored technician looks up.

"Excuse me?"

"Please skip this one. I don't want to see this!"

"Mr Wagner, these are all files you've given us access to."

"I don't want to see it. Now, please, continue."

It's an order. Wagner rarely talks like that. The technician hesitates, but then she presses a button, and the picture disappears.

That day, they finish the session earlier than usual.

\* \* \*

Jens Wagner is sitting on the sofa. The coverlet is almost twice as thick as it used to be because of a layer of matted cat hair. Wagner rubs it and forms little braids of fur between his thumb and index finger.

"Gee, Herr Hildemann, we'll have to brush you again. Shall we have a go, or are you going to scratch me again?"

Herr Hildemann sits at the far end of the sofa and blinks. Possibly, he seems to say, he might be willing to endure some grooming today. Wagner is looking for the fur-thing. It should be around here somewhere. Someone must have cleared it away. Sabrina always tidied things away, then Wagner never found them. Like the fur-thing.

"*You have a different system from mine,*" he'd say.

"You have no system at all," she would reply.

Now, no one else can tidy the fur-thing away but that only makes it worse.

*It's game night. You should get going, or you'll be late.*

Wagner jumps up. Wednesday again. "Looks like you'll be spared today," he says, but Herr Hildemann has already curled up on the sofa cushion in expectation of his inevitable triumph.

\* \* \*

*You need to get off at the next stop. Probably best to press the button now,* the Voice says in his ear, and Wagner hums affirmatively. What he would like to say is that he hasn't gone gaga quite yet, but the bus is chock-full, and he doesn't like the look on peoples' faces when he forgets not to talk back to the Voice out loud in public.

Instead, he gets up and shuffles through the moving bus towards the exit, where he presses the stop buzzer.

"You need to push the red button," a young woman with a pram says. "The blue one's just for lowering the bus."

Wagner almost expects a *told-you-so* comment, but the Voice remains mute. Perhaps it senses his irritation and leaves him alone.

He finds the rest of the way on his own and, five minutes later, he enters the *Tabletop*. The pub's interior is warm and poorly ventilated. Some guests only come for food and drinks, but there are games at most of the tables.

Wagner steps to the one under the middle window. The whole gang is already here. Marius and Paul have ordered colas; Dirk is sipping his usual peppermint tea. In the center of the table is the box with the mahjong tokens. So, it's an old favourite today. Looks like they finally want to overthrow Wagner from his undisputed throne of mahjong mastery. Marius is itching to set up the square of tiles, so their welcome is brief.

Wagner lines up his tokens in front of him and

re-arranges them. He is afraid of the day they will no longer make sense to him. Would he notice? Maybe he doesn't recognise them even now? How can he tell? He'd like to ask the Voice for advice, but it's embarrassing, and he doesn't want the others to think he's playing unfairly.

The game is slow-going at first, but he finds his pace and his fear that his friends might have noticed something unusual about him abates. None of them comment on his play any different from usual.

During the second round, Wagner's self-confidence returns. The game is going well for him, and victory is almost within grasp. When Paul discards a token Wagner can use, he snatches it with a triumphant: "Bang!"

The others look up. Blood rushes to Wagner's face. Something's wrong; he's said something wrong, has made a mistake.

*The move is called pung,* the Voice says. *When you pick up a token to get three of a kind, you must say pung.*

"Pung, I mean, of course," Wagner mumbles, and rolls his eyes. "Alzheimer's, ey? Haha."

Marius nods and turns his attention back to his game tokens. Paul blinks but says nothing. Only Dirk frowns and clears his throat. He hesitates a moment, then says, "I met Marlene in town the other day."

"Uh-huh," Wagner says, who feels all sorts of alarms going off inside him.

"She said she keeps trying to get hold of you, but you never answer the phone. She asked me to tell you to call her back sometime."

Wagner doesn't reply because an invisible chain has wrapped itself around his chest, and his head has become all hot.

"Jens, just talk to her. It would do you both good." Dirk looks worried, but Wagner only wants to break his traitor's face right here and now.

"You wanna play or talk shit, asshole? How dare you talk about me behind my back? But



you always liked to meddle in other people's affairs, didn't you?"

Dirk's eyes widen. He retreats from the barrage of abuse. The other two friends are silent, paralysed. "Jens, I haven't been talking behind your back..."

"You're so full of shit, motherfucker."

*Jens, you're losing control. You'd better go to the bathroom and calm down.*

The Voice speaks to him over a bone conductor. Nothing should be able to drown it out, but the raging storm inside him engulfs even his own thoughts. He leaps up, toppling his chair and, with a backhand sweep, scatters the tokens so they land on the neighbouring tables. There's an embarrassed silence. It never gets loud in the *Tabletop*, not like this.

"What do you know? She didn't even come to the funeral, not even the damned funeral!"

Wagner picks up his coat from the floor and storms out of the pub. He gets lost three times before he realises the Voice in his head is just trying to give him directions.

\* \* \*

"Dad, did you know you can get a government grant to modernise the heating?" Marlene's tone is emphatically neutral, like always when she's trying to talk him into something.

"It's not worth it for us anymore."

"What if you ever want to sell the house? With the old heating system, you'd have to sell it for a lot less than it's worth."

"You know Mum would never agree."

Marlene pauses for a breath or two. "But maybe later." What she means, though, is *after*.

"Why don't you move in with us? The house is big enough, and we'd love to have you around."

"You know it wouldn't work out with Mum and me. It would be a disaster."

"Who knows how long your mother will be around? Don't be so stubborn."

She didn't even come to Sabrina's funeral.

Wagner hasn't spoken to his daughter ever since.

\* \* \*

*How are you?*

Wagner is sitting at the kitchen table. There's a steaming cup of coffee in front of him, and Herr Hildemann wants to sit on his lap. He pays no attention to either of them. He mumbles something unintelligible and rubs his eyes.

*Last night, you lost your temper and upset your friends. You should call Dirk and explain what happened.*

"Explain what?" Wagner asks.

*Such extreme emotional outbursts are part of your condition.*

"Isn't it your job to prevent that?"

*That's right, Jens. I'm sorry, but I'm not infallible. I learn from my mistakes and improve.*

"Hm."

Jens, the Voice asks. *Yesterday, you reacted extremely to the mention of Marlene.*

"Don't you dare; not you, too!" Wagner hisses. "She brought it on herself."

*All right, Jens.*

"You got to take better care of me. What happened last night shouldn't happen again. That's not me."

\* \* \*

*I will sustain your personality for as long as possible.*

Wagner laughs when he hears the Voice in his head. It sounds like him and doesn't drown out any other sound but is just there. He feels for the plaster behind his right ear. It's where they have implanted the bone conduction unit that transmits the Voice straight to his cochlea.

"I really can't tell the difference."

The lank doctor smiles. He seems to smile a lot. His face speaks of plenty of time spent outdoors and laughter lines extend from his mouth and eyes to his grey temples.

"We use an algorithm to tune the Voice exactly to how you would hear your own speech. The

technology has been used in hearing aids for quite some time."

"It works," Wagner says. "Almost a little scary."

"Initially, yes," the doctor confesses. "But the Voice is just one channel the system uses to communicate with you. It will also provide visual clues we call "nudges". Think of them as gentle reminders, like, so you don't forget to take your umbrella when you go for a walk.

"However, input is most important. We've fed the system with all the data you have provided. Your search history on the web, social media, personal records, and photos to create a realistic model of your personality. The system will learn the rest over the coming weeks and months."

Wagner nods. The thing with the photos had even been fun, except for the once.

"Rest assured, if you're a vegetarian, you won't start eating meat tomorrow, and if some impostor tries to swindle you into believing he's your grandson, you will tell him to go to hell. You will stay Jens Wagner till the end."

Till the end. It's supposed to be comforting, but Wagner knows what it means. Nevertheless, he smiles and shakes the proffered hand. "Goodbye, Doctor..."

"Weinmann," the doctor prompts.

"I know," Jens Wagner says. "Just kidding."

\* \* \*

Dinner is potatoes with quark, and he's got the portion just right, so nothing goes to waste. It's important to cook. It never was his forte, but he had to learn. Initially, Sabrina would show him, even when she became almost too weak. Now, it's the Voice that helps him.

"Anything else?"

*You always add paprika.*

"Right." He stirs the spice into the curd, takes a non-alcoholic beer from the fridge, and heads to the living room. There's a nagging sensation like something tugging softly at his guts.

"Was there something else today? Something I forgot?" The question feels like an admission of failure.

*No, but you remembered correctly, the Voice praises him. It's Wednesday. That's game night, but Paul sent a message saying they're taking a break until further notice because of the flu season.*

Flu season, right; nothing you can do about it. He turns on the TV. Herr Hildemann lies down next to him and purrs.

\* \* \*

Dinner is well-portioned. That's important, so you don't have to throw anything away. Tonight, it's brownstuff with whitegrain.

"Goodbye, Mr Wagner," echoes from the hallway. "Enjoy your meal!"

"Goodbye," Wagner replies, then asks, "Who was that?"

*The young man of Meals on Wheels.*

"What did he want?"

*He brought your food. You should eat before it gets cold.*

\* \* \*

Wagner is where the food is made. In front of him, on the countertop, there's one of the plastic bowls they use for cooking in here. It's dirty because nobody has cleaned it.

"I have to cook something."

*You already had dinner.*

"That can't be, because I've cooked nothing yet."

*The young man brought your food.*

"So, do I have to cook something, or don't I?"

*You don't.*

Wagner just stands there.

*Would you like to look at some photos? We can look at them together and remember who's in them.*

"All right," Wagner says. "Where are the photos?"

*Come to the living room, the Voice says and indicates the way with a strip of lights.*

Wagner settles down in the armchair. The cat jumps onto his lap.

"A cat," he exclaims.

*That's Herr Hildemann.*

"What kind of name is that for a cat?"

*He's a tomcat. You and Sabrina picked the name.*

Wagner strokes Herr Hildemann, who purrs, and everything is all right.

*Look*, the Voice says. On the opposite wall, the image of a photograph appears. It shimmers silvery grey and has a wavy white border. The picture shows a man wearing a straw hat and a light jacket. He is sitting somewhere outdoors. Behind him, one can see beer garden tables and trees. The man is drinking from a bottle. He's grinning so broadly it looks like he's going to choke on his beer at any moment.

"Cheers!" Wagner says.

*That's your grandfather when he was young.*

"We were all young once, right?"

The Voice doesn't answer, as if unsure whether it, too, was once young.

*And this is your mother when she was little.*

A young girl with tousled curly hair sits on the floor playing with a toy dachshund carved from wood.

Wagner smiles. "She liked animals."

*Yes, there are many pictures showing her with animals.*

The succession of photos on the wall is silver-grey at first, then with a faint tinge of orange-brown colour, before becoming perfectly exposed and artificially smooth, but it makes no difference to Wagner. Every photo makes him smile or wonder, and he enjoys having time to look at them at leisure.

"Who's that?" In the thousandth part of a second, the camera shutter has enshrined the image of a tanned young man in swimming trunks sitting on a deckchair. A little girl is flying into his arms, her momentum pushing him against the backrest. Her wet hair stands like a

spiky halo around her head. Both are laughing, and Wagner is smiling now, too.

*This is you with Marlene, your daughter.*

"Blimey, I'm quite a looker, ey? I have a daughter, as well?"

And then, "We were all young once, weren't we? Show me another one!"

\* \* \*

"Right, Mr Wagner, now let's sit down again, shall we?" The woman leads him to a chair, and Wagner sits down.

*This is Nurse Tina.*

"Nurse Tina," he says out loud. He forms the words haltingly, as if probing their meaning and suitability.

Nurse Tina smiles, asking, "What's on today, Mr Wagner?"

Wagner hesitates. He doesn't understand what she means, and he's a little anxious about not knowing the answers to such questions.

*Around lunchtime, you will be picked up by the Senior Citizens' Care Service.*

"Around lunchtime, I'll be picked up by the Senior Citizens' Care Service," he repeats, relieved.

"Oh, that's nice! Do you enjoy going there?"

*Don't know*, Wagner thinks.

Yes, the Voice says.

Wagner shrugs and snorts in response.

"Now that doesn't sound overly enthusiastic." The nurse rubs her hands with a pungent blue liquid. She visibly startles when she hears the Voice coming from the loudspeakers.

"Mr Wagner enjoys the activities and having company."

"Jesus Christ! That's creepy. Sorry, Mr Wagner."

Nurse Tina looks at him, but he just shrugs his shoulders. Her gaze wanders through the room until she addresses the speaker in the centre of the ceiling.

"Does anyone ever come to visit him?"

"You can ask Mr Wagner directly."

Tina repeats the question, this time directed at Wagner, who only shrugs his shoulders again. "Yes," he says pointing his chin to the white wall.

"Mr Wagner has had no visitors in the last six months."

"What a pity. Don't you have any family who could come visit? Maybe that thing," she waves her hand at the speaker, "could call them for you sometime?"

Again, he hesitates, but this time the Voice speaks to him first.

*You have a daughter, but you are not in touch.*

"I have a daughter, but we're not in touch."

"Oh, it's a shame with families today. They just don't stick together anymore." Nurse Tina packs up her things and enters some data on her tablet. "Well, I'd better get going. Bye, Mr Wagner!"

"Goodbye," he replies simultaneously from mouth and speakers.

\* \* \*

Wagner is looking at pictures. He likes that. Mostly he doesn't know the people in the photos, but the Voice helps him, then he remembers sometimes. Often, feelings wash over him when he sees the images, though he doesn't know why. Then he might laugh or feel sad for something he has lost and cannot remember.

"Who is this?"

*This is Sabrina, your wife.*

"Where is she?"

*Sabrina passed away a few years ago. She had been sick for a long time.*

"Did we have children?"

*A daughter.*

"Where is she? Is she dead too?"

*No.*

"Then where is she?"

*You're not in touch.*

"Why?"

The Voice doesn't answer immediately.

*She didn't even come to Sabrina's funeral.*

"Why not?"

Again, the Voice hesitates. *I don't know.*

"Can't we ask her?"

\* \* \*

Herr Hildemann's bowl is still there, but the tomcat isn't. The Voice has concluded that, even with its help, Jens Wagner could no longer take care of him. His new family has sent a photo of Hildemann, showing a girl sitting in the sun on a balcony, holding him on her lap. Herr Hildemann looks content, pampered, and loved.

Wagner would have wanted it that way.

He's sitting at the kitchen table. There's a cup of coffee, untouched since the nurse made it in the morning and left it there. Wagner is looking out the window. The neighbour's trees are too close to the border of his property, but he doesn't seem to mind. He watches the birds. Sometimes a squirrel comes by, but he doesn't expect it, because to expect anything, he'd have to remember it first.

Wagner remembers almost nothing. Everything that happens is new and must be sorted into pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad. Yet every day, he is waiting for something, for the hole inside him has grown so big the Voice has difficulty filling it. You cannot see it, but his serotonin level has dropped. What little he eats and drinks he only does when the Voice reminds him to. The Voice notes it and initiates countermeasures and, when these fail, it downloads new ones from the expert system in the cloud.

*You're not drinking your coffee. Would you rather have something else?*

"No."

*You should drink. Please, have some water.*

On the sideboard, a full carafe lights up in the beam of the Voice's pointing device.

"No."



The Voice detects no indication of aggressiveness or irritation in Wagner's inflection or facial expression. It registers his behaviour, categorises, and evaluates it according to its protocols. It runs simulations for various scenarios, but it takes longer and longer to come to solutions. Milliseconds first, then hundredths, practically an eternity. The system is smothered by the weight of its own rules.

Wagner looks out the window. Coffee and water remain untouched. There is nothing to distract his attention from the birds in the trees. His personality has imploded like a burnt-out star, a Black Hole absorbing everything that comes close giving nothing back. Except the ring tone. It orbits his event horizon, grazing it without being sucked in. It's the phone. Wagner turns towards the sound.

"What's that?"

*Someone's calling you.*

"Who?"

*Marlene. Your daughter.*

"Oh, that's nice. I don't think I've heard from

my daughter in a long time."

Wagner stays put. He doesn't act without the Voice prompting him. It observes and analyses twenty-eight distinct facial muscle twitches, fourteen different ways Wagner is holding his head, eleven discreet eye movements and twenty-eight more facial expressions.

The results contradict the patterns it has learned and collide with the rules of what it means to be Jens Wagner. The Voice needs to make a decision, has to do it the way he—it—would.

The wall screen next to the fridge comes to life. A gentle chime draws Wagner's attention to the image of a woman with short, dark-blonde hair. She's in her mid-40s, and is a perfect stranger to Wagner. He is happy to see her.

"Hi, Dad."

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Translated by Carsten Schmitt

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**Carsten Schmitt** was born on an April afternoon (neither dark nor stormy) in 1977. He writes in the mornings before work, during the day he does things with computers and is devising cunning plans to bring together his lifelong obsession with Science Fiction with his day job. At night, alas, he's way too tired to go out and fight crime.

Carsten's stories have been translated and published in Canada, China, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Romania, Spain, and the UK. He was a finalist for George R. R. Martin's inaugural Terran Award and is an alumnus of the Taos Toolbox writing workshop run by Walter Jon Williams and Nancy Kress.

Carsten lives in the Saarland region of Germany together with his partner where they are owned by three cats.



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“Future Shock” by Mark Freier



Yvonne Tunnat

## “Rotting Skin”

The machine pours steaming liquid out of two openings; on the left it smells of coffee beans,

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*Illustrator **Mark Freier**: Until 2002, when his first book cover for *Beyond the House of Usher* (Jenseits des Hauses Usher) was created for Blitz-Verlag, graphic design had been a hobby for Mark Freier. In 2004, Freier completed his training as a media designer (print) at the Mediadesign Academy in Munich. Since then, he has been working as a freelance graphic designer. He illustrated book covers, dime novel covers, and radio play covers—e.g., *Dorian Hunter*, *Sherlock Holmes Chronicles*, *Oscar Wilde & Mycroft Holmes*, as well as large-format vinyl album covers—e.g., for the *Howard Phillips Lovecraft - Chronicles of Horror* series.*

*The majority of his work is in the crime, fantasy, horror, and science fiction genres.*

*Freier was a multiple winner of the Vincent Prize in the “Best Horror Graphics” category. In 2009, he was also honoured as “Best Graphic Designer.” He has also been nominated for other awards. He was nominated twice for the Kurd Laßwitz Prize in the category “Best Science Fiction Graphic” and was nominated several times for the German Fantasy Prize as “Best Graphic Designer.” Freier lives in Munich.*

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on the right slightly metallic and a little like chlorine. Sadly, the smell of chlorine spoils the smell of freshly brewed coffee.

I grab a cup, think about adding milk, but decide against it. The milk bottle has no label.

Even the milk from modified cows is flawless and delicious, the adverts tell me. Maybe so, but I still find these animals with five legs or horns in uncomfortable places hideous.

I look around the carriage—apparently everyone is travelling north today. Which isn't surprising, summer has started early, even earlier than last year.

The only table where there is still room is occupied by a lady with a small boy on both seats facing the direction of travel.

I take a seat opposite and nod to them. I hope she doesn't start a conversation! The boy might be about two years old, an age at which most people can only stammer inadequately. The lady might be just the right age to be colossally forthcoming with strangers. It won't be long before I'm that age, too.

“More mustard?” she enquires, and I look up because such a question at nine o'clock in the morning has me confused. It's the boy she's talking to. He is shovelling a very large spoonful of mustard into his wide-open mouth and closes his eyes as the yellow paste disappears behind his lips. Yum, delicious, his face seems to say, it is almost spelled out in brightly coloured vapours above his head. The skin of his forehead looks furrowed and strangely marbled.

The voluminous glass jar in front of him is half empty. The sight alone is enough to give me heartburn.

"You'll probably always hold that against him, all his life. 'Back when you were little, you always ate a jar of mustard for breakfast'," I say to her. Now I've done it, I've started a conversation again! It's as if the words are falling out of my mouth without my brain having given them permission beforehand.

She responds with a brief nod before turning her attention back to the boy.

"To this day, we still tell our daughter that she always slurped the condensed milk as a child. Impractical when visitors spontaneously come for coffee," I add. Yum, condensed milk. Definitely from unaltered cows back then.

I watch the boy, who's still completely absorbed in savouring his mustard. The woman dabs the corners of his mouth with an embroidered handkerchief. The cloth remains clean, the little boy has eaten so carefully. She turns away from him and leans back against her seat cushion. Behind us, a little girl screams.

"No, no, no, not that, ouch, that's green!" I wonder what green food is on her breakfast plate? We are silent, the muffled voices of the parents can be heard, then the girl breaks out into a screeching yell that shrills through the whole carriage, a sound like grating metal. I suppress the impulse to put my hands over my ears. My counterpart also flinches, only the boy doesn't react, just dips his spoon into his mustard again.

"My name is Auguste," says the woman as the shouting from the table behind us slowly dies down, and she nods at me. I nod back. "Rebecca."

"Are you travelling alone?" she asks me.

Always! My husband hasn't ventured to leave the comforts of our home for years. Understandable; he can only get around in a steam-powered wheelchair. I just nod. No need to tell her

the details. Auguste puts her hand on the boy's shoulder. "His name is Elias."

I almost ask her if this is her grandson. Thank God she is quicker. "My dearly beloved little son."

Really? I take a closer look at her. Her face is grey, her eyes tired, her skin wrinkled, her shoulders slumped. Overall, she looks shrunken, as if she used to be much taller and more upright and then someone started to slowly let the air out of her. Is she really young enough for the boy to be her son? I can hardly ask her directly about her age!

She might be too worried about her own age to recognise it as truth. I look at Elias. The sight of him imbues me with despondency, and it's not just because of his mustard breakfast. I lean forward a little towards him. "Well, little sir?"

He stares blankly in my direction. Does he need glasses? A rattle escapes him. A sound like that shouldn't escape a child's chest! He averts his eyes, and I end up hoping that I don't provoke one of those fits that often seize children of this age.

A scene with Ben comes to mind. His head covered in angry red, the loud stomping on the floor. No, no, no! Not that! That one! No! That one! Most of the time, nobody knew what might be meant. The defiant phase was long, a thousand years. And then it all came to an end, but in a different way than we had hoped. At the smallest hour, he woke with a boiling forehead, drenched in sweat, constantly whimpering. We all got up immediately and took care of him, organised leg compresses in a frenzied rush, my eldest ran to get the doctor—too late. Our little Ben virtually evaporated before the new day had even begun.

Thirty years have passed. That night is still with me. The memory of his smell. Like rotting lettuce. A part of me keeps switching back to that scene, reliving it over and over again.

I think of my husband, how he sits there sadly as



soon as he feels unobserved, his brow furrowed. Is he there too, in that dark place? I have never asked him this question for fear of his answer.

"Where is his father?" I ask carelessly, nodding my head at Elias.

Oh, how I wish I could shove that question back into my mouth when I notice Auguste turn away and look out the window. I follow her gaze. The first thing I see are cows with five legs, and the coffee in my stomach grumbles. Even though I passed on the milk!

"Gone. Years ago."

Someone behind us laughs frantically. I realise how tense I must be because it makes me wince. But none of this has anything to do with us. The smells in this carriage, chlorine, coffee, rose perfume, all of that fades into the background. It's as if nothing else around us matters.

I look at Elias, barely two years old. Years ago? In my head, the pieces come together to form a picture.

The personal physician disclosed this possibility to us back then, too. Ben hadn't quite cooled down to ambient temperature yet. We were aware that technology was advancing, and we had to make a decision quickly. The doctor had promised us a few more lively years, even if Ben would remain a two-year-old. A goodbye, yes, but not just yet.

I look at Elias. That rattling in his chest. Cornea cloudy and yellowish. His fingertips reddish to brown, his lips dried out, but now sprinkled with fine mustard. At the table in front of us, a toddler yelps and bangs a spoon into his breakfast porridge. The young father grabs him and blows raspberries against his cheek with his lips and beard, the child squirming with delight. The toddler notices my gaze and returns it, life pulsating from his green-blue eyes under long eyelashes. I look at Elias again. Short, dull eyelashes. No pulsation.

Auguste observes my expression and sinks deeper into the seat; her shoulders slump until she looks like an upside-down V.

Can the boy even hear me? Smell me? Taste me? I look at the spicy mustard. That's obviously still coming through.

Organic matter rots. The mechanical device manages to supply blood to the skin for a few years, often a decade. I saw what happens afterwards a few years ago in Berlin. An adult man. He was begging on a street corner. Clothes that used to be expensive but were now worn out, he even still wore a tie, now dusty and full of dandruff. Out of habit, I dug some coins out of my pocket and handed them to him. I noticed his fingers. The flesh had obviously no longer been able to hold the nails. I dropped the coins, and when he bent down to pick them up, I saw his hairline, the back of his head already ragged, only a few tufts still clinging to the decaying flesh, in which a few dull, yellow maggots were wriggling. My stomach doesn't usually get upset so easily, but I could barely keep my last meal inside me. Their odour attracts The Friends of Life, who protested against this kind of life support from the very beginning. They call these creatures Steamies. Walking corpses. A name that is not so far off the mark. They have not achieved much. After all, as soon as the impairment becomes too visible and smelable, Steamies are usually locked away or even terminated. This beggar on the street corner remained a unique experience for me.

I watch the boy as he opens his mouth wide, revealing short yellow teeth, then devoutly pushes a spoonful of mustard into it, closes his mouth again and swallows. I saw his uvula in the process. It is already completely grey, frayed and covered in small white spots.

We could have done that to Ben, too. I clutch my coffee cup and realise that it's been empty for a long while. Auguste strokes the little boy's

head, but gently, almost as if to avoid pulling out tufts of his hair. I feel this taste in my mouth, right at the back, as if bile is solidifying and creeping up my throat, throbbing against my lips from the inside. I know he can't hurt me, but the sight of him does something to me.

I force myself to look at the woman instead, more thoroughly than before. Her hands are greyish-pale, but the skin is not criss-crossed with soft blue veins, as is the case with older women like me. I'm wearing a scarf, partly to hide the way the skin on my neck is already rippling, but that's not the case with her. She must be younger than me after all.

They had promised us a few years, not an eternity. If we had made a different decision back then, there would still be no Ben sitting next to me today, not anymore. I picture him here, still alive or at least similar enough. For a brief moment, I imagine it too intensely, almost feeling Ben's restless body, the tickle of his hair on my forearm.

I still read every article about it. Despite all the research, they still don't manage more than five acceptable years. It has something to do with the brain. It works more and more sluggishly with the mechanical heart instead of the real heart. That's probably why Elias hasn't said anything yet.

I force myself not to lower my head. It's as if someone is painfully pulling my hair behind me. Stay seated! With your back straight!

Respectfully continue the conversation. That's all I can do for her. From mum to mum. How can she keep him from smelling? Of course, I know. It's the mustard.

Auguste didn't want to part with her Elias yet. Now he's going to take her with him. ■

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German Title "Morsche Haut", published in the short story collection "Der Tod kommt auf Zahnrädern"

Translated by Claudia Rapp

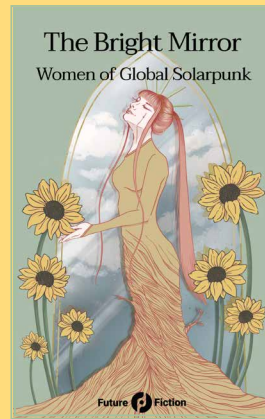
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**Yvonne Tunnat** (born in 1978 in Sögel/Emsland) has been increasingly involved in science fiction since 2020. She runs a review blog at [www.rezensionsnerdista.de](http://www.rezensionsnerdista.de) and a podcast on German-language fantasy at [literatunnat.de](http://literatunnat.de). Together with Janika Rehak, she published the steampunk anthology "Der Tod kommt auf Zahnrädern" (i.e. Death comes on cogwheels, Amrûn, 2022).



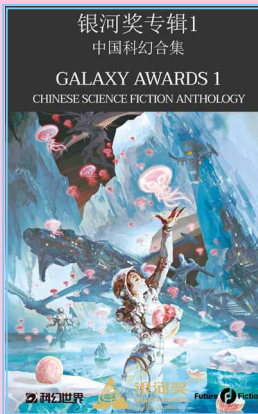
**“... solarpunk overturns the classic view of the male hero and anti-hero by telling stories in which the solution comes from women, from their participation in important decisions, their resilience under stress and threat, their all too often underestimated ingenuity, and from their ability to collaborate and act for a greater purpose, for a higher good.”**

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**“... from the research of immortality to the digital conservation of ancient temples, passing from medical breakthroughs, sensorial augmentations, innovative interfaces and dramatic ways to achieve richness, Chinese Science Fiction authors already live in a “pre-view” of tomorrow's world.”**

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Associazione Future Fiction, 2024





"Flieger" (Aviator) by Micheal Vogt



Juliane Honisch

## “A Series of Misfortunes”

They had everything they needed. Or at least they should have had everything they might ever need. Of that they had been sure.

“This is... rather unfortunate,” Miccela said with her usual understatement, just as if she had run out of white pepper while cooking and would have to use black pepper instead. Andras liked this understatement and appreciated Miccela all the more for displaying it. Elegant, somehow.

However, all their 3D printers had broken down simultaneously and they were functionally doomed.

Perhaps it had been a bad idea to send out living human beings on this exploration expedition into the vastness of space. Live humans were quite unsuited for such an endeavour. The decision to do it anyway was on the one hand due to the determination, desire and explo-

ratory urge of these very humans, and on the other, on the astonishingly conservative attitude of the various collaborating space agencies, who believed that when exploring the galaxy one could not do without the elements of “instinct” and “gut feeling”. In the competition between AI and humans, it was precisely those two abilities that were seen as the ones denoting the superiority of humans.

A rather poor argument.

“Unfortunate!” Erica echoed, sounding far less coolly professional than her colleague. Also rather less composed and a great deal less quiet. “Inconvenient? Without a 3-D printer nothing... NOTHING works around here!”

“I know.”

“No spare parts, no new equipment, no further development, not even the status quo is maintained...”

“I know.”

“...and by status quo I mean breathable air in sufficient quantity and temperatures where we don't burn up or freeze into ice lollies!”

“I know. Unfortunate.”

Andras cleared his throat. He never talked much. Even on Earth he had been fairly taciturn. After years in space with Miccela and Erica plus the on-board computer as travel companions, the latter entity inferior to them only by the lack of gut feeling and instinct, Andras's delight in personal communication had decreased to the barest minimum.

“You want to say something, Andras? Or do something?” asked Erica. “In case you haven't already done enough to create the situation.”

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*Illustrator **Michael Vogt** (\*1966) lives and works as an illustrator and comic artist in Berlin. In addition to numerous children's books (Fischer KJB, Randomhouse, etc.) and magazine illustrations, his work consists of comics such as the SF-album series “Mark Brandis” and “A Strange Day” (both published by Panini-Germany). Perry Rhodan readers may know him from his “Perry's Tooniversum” cartoons. His latest work is the children's comic series “Little Perry” (published by Carlsen) in collaboration with Olaf Brill.*

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Her voice wavered somewhere between overly sweet and suspiciously sour.

Andras's features remained expressionless. He did not even acknowledge, much less respond to the inherent accusation that he was somehow to blame for their current predicament. Every reply to such an idiotic statement would be one word too many. Precious energy wasted.

Mostly, only one of them was awake at a time while the other two were in cryostasis. For extended stretches of time when nothing was expected to be discovered, all of them 'slept' and left it to the main computer to cover the long distances through the black void and only report in when it became necessary.

It had become necessary.

"The planet is in the habitable zone," Andras announced, already deciding that even those seven words were wasted, because they all knew that. Nor was it an answer to the 3D printer problem. At least not unless, like Andras, you always thought at least seven moves ahead and therefore often answered things by uttering something that others saw as a non sequitur.

"So?"

"Operation successfully accomplished."

"Operation accomplished—patient dead." Erica sounded cynical.

An uneasy silence followed which even Andras did not find comforting this time. He refrained from making a reference to the fact that they were not dead yet. Erica's statement was neither scientifically sound nor in any way helpful.

Andras was not good at interpreting feelings—particularly not Erica's—but from the largely unused depths of his vocabulary, some definitions suggested themselves: a) ill-tempered, b) aggressive and c) spiteful. He didn't consider himself responsible for fixing a); b) wouldn't get any better if he pointed it out,

and concerning c) he was not at all sure whether it was a communication variant or simply a character flaw. He did not wish to discuss that either, although he did have an opinion about it, albeit unproven.

The crew of the 'Antares' consisted of two women and one man. Over the years, Andras had collated enough reasons to come to the conclusion that this represented an unbalanced ratio, even though the gender of the two female astronauts did not interest him in the least.

Maybe that was part of the problem?

Not their current problem, though: The 3D printers had all broken down. If at least one had worked, it could—as intended—have produced the required spare parts for all the others. Raw materials were available in sufficient quantities. But against all odds, the printers had all burned out at exactly the same moment.

"I think," Miccela said dryly, "that we can rule out sabotage." Her dark brown eyes stared first at Erica and then at Andras.

Erica bit her lips but said nothing. She managed to do so in a very speaking way.

"Sabotage is only useful if you wish to harm someone else, not yourself," Miccela continued patiently.

"Sixty-four 3D printers all breaking down at the exact same time? How likely is that?" asked Erica bitterly.

"They all evolved from the first one. Maybe that one passed on a bug right from the beginning and each new duplication carried it along."

Andras nodded. He thought so too.

"Irrelevant," he said nevertheless. "The why is only interesting if it leads us to a solution."

"Irrelevant?" Erica snapped. "Irrelevant? We're stuck in this bloody orbit, we can't go forwards, we can't go back, we can't go down, and that's irrelevant?"

Sometimes Andras wondered what had made the Space Exploration Authority choose Erica out of the thousands of applicants. Presumably, her gut feeling and instinct had been proven to be gratifyingly above standard. Perhaps they had thought to compensate for his own obvious deficit in these areas.

Andras was not an AI. He regretted that. This regret was an emotion that an AI would not have felt. All the more reason for regret.

The star was called Alpha Felis Maioris. It had a number of planets that approximated the layout of the crew's native solar system: smaller planets inside, one in the habitable zone—with an atmosphere and oceans—and then progressively larger celestial bodies up to a Jupiter-like giant. There was also an asteroid belt brim-full of metals and rare earths: hence the abundance of raw materials.

They hadn't named the planet Terra 2. Too cheesy. So far it only had a number, but Erica kept suggesting names that somehow always meant Earth in languages none of them knew. Talking about cheesy.

Numbers were so much preferable.

"We just need to get one—just one—3D printer back up and running," Miccela said. "I'm

sure we can analyse the error and find... produce the spare parts."

3D printers did not need breathing air. They were therefore mostly located beyond the crew habitat airlock. This airlock was defective, too. The on-board computer had identified the fault: it was located on the other side of the closed airlock. It was up to the printers to produce all the parts necessary to repair it. It was up to the RS—the robo-scurriers—to use them to carry out the repairs. Without the printers to assemble the spare parts though, the robo-scurriers could not go to work. The main computer told them where to fix the problem, but how this ought to be achieved under the circumstances remained unsolved.

Something beeped. They all jerked. No one had expected a beep. A beep might well mean more trouble.

They all turned to the console. A little light blinked like a lone Christmas decoration.

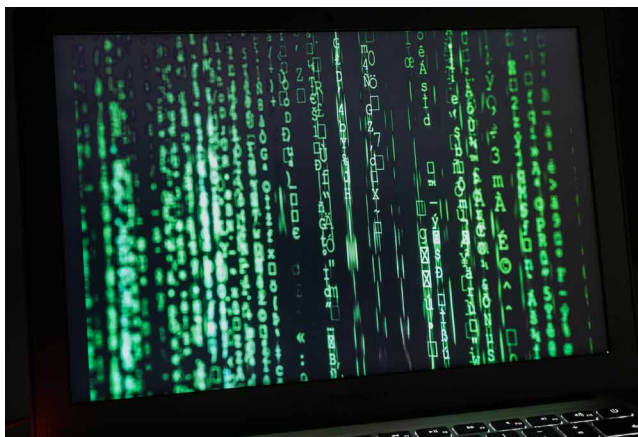
"What the he..."

"Was that you?" Erica asked venomously, looking from Miccela to Andras. They both shook their heads. Andras wondered if, in more archaic times, Erica would have been the one to attribute every misfortune to the transgressions of a minority and would have gladly thrown the first torch to burn a witch.

He cringed. Such fanciful thoughts were not like him. Was he going to get ill?

"Details on screen!" ordered Miccela. The semi-transparent plasma field rose. Rows of unreadable symbols crept upwards on it. Then suddenly they whizzed.

"Not so fast!" ordered Andras to the on-board computer. The field divided: on the right the



rows of characters continued to rush, on the left they rolled by in a much more sedate pace, the speed reduced to human reading capacity.

"Do you understand that?" asked Erica after a while. It was almost flattering that she thought he only had to look at a few rows of nonsensical symbols shooting past to understand everything immediately. He was good, but not that good.

"Computer!" he spoke into the room, not keeping to any particular direction. The on-board computer was all around them. "Analysis?"

"Analysis is ongoing," the sonorous bass voice replied. The computer could generate different voice pitches. The bass range was supposed to sound soothing and reliable. The effect was counterproductive because now they expected something terrible to happen every time the voice was low.

"Oh," Miccela said.

Erica opened her mouth, but then said nothing. Andras refrained from thanking her for that.

"Mixed languages," the computer now announced. "The transmission cannot be fully attributed to any single known language."

"And where is this coming from?"

"The transmission originates from the planet's surface."

A three-voice scream—well, almost. The three astronauts' mouths hung open so wide that one might have expected a scream. However, no one screamed.

"Initiate surface high-res scan!" ordered Miccela.

"I don't believe it!" complained Erica. "Has the computer broken down too, now?"

"That, or it's misinterpreting the incoming data. Or..." Miccela didn't speak further.

"Or there's someone down there," Andras concluded, automatically mimicking the computer's low voice range.

They fell silent. A planet—that's what they

had been sent to find. An empty planet. One that was suitable for settlement.

First contact?

Their training had included a very theoretical course on how to behave if something like this should occur. But since no one seriously expected such a thing to happen and no one had any empirical data about the subject in any case, the course had been quite short. In fact, it had primarily consisted of the following contents:

1. Be polite. (How?)
2. Don't make yourself unpopular. (Doing what?)
3. Be prepared to leave quickly. (Where to?)
4. Do not betray the location of the Earth. (To whom?)

"Shall we be polite now?" asked Erica then, sounding rather rude.

"We could send a reply," Miccela suggested.

"To whom? And to what?" asked Andras. "We don't even know what the message means.—A friendly invitation? A hostile threat? A test to see if we're smart enough to understand this? A request that we visit them? Or the opposite?"

"In any case," Miccela decreed, "I'll send a brief report home."

Their on-board computer did so regularly. Thanks to apex technology, digital data could be sent far faster than light, as the transmission only bounced from wave crest to wave crest, defining the space in between as non-existent.

"Report has been sent," informed the on-board computer.

"Great," Erica said. "So now we wait a few eons for an answer? Orders? Helpful instructions?"

After all, they didn't even know if anyone was still alive on Earth, or if the consequences of climate change and the expected resulting procurement wars had left any survivors. Andras had run some simulations on this. The results were not encouraging.



He refrained from pointing this out. Knowing the probabilities did not solve any of the problems at hand. Their whole expedition was based on the hope that even the improbable was in principle possible. If not, they might as well have stayed at home: they and the other exploration ships, all of which had been sent off in different directions.

"Computer! Analysis!" repeated Andras.

"Data is subdivided. One strand binary. Others show character clusters interpretable as words."

"And what do they say?" asked Erica.

"Analysis still incomplete. No reference frame available so far."

"Where exactly is the transmission coming from?" asked Miccela. "The planet is Earth-sized. We have not detected any easily visible settlements so far. So where did..."

They all stared at the image of the planet as it lay there below them in all its pristine beauty.

"Sanskrit," said the on-board computer. "Some word stems can be assigned to Sanskrit."

None of them spoke Sanskrit, probably not even the on-board computer. Andras started to ask just that, but the computer wasn't finished yet.

"Akkadian and Assyrian."

"Is that cuneiform?" asked Miccela as the characters on the plasma column suddenly changed.

"Translate incoming message!" ordered Andras.

"Insufficient data on extinct languages," the bass voice sounded.

"But you recognised it!" Erica scolded.

That was neither a command nor as a question, so the computer said nothing.

"I can recognise Beethoven's Fifth Symphony," Miccela explained dryly. "But I couldn't compose it."

The series of characters continued to run across the plasma screen.

"Fucking hell!" Erica cursed.

A slight jolt went through the spaceship.

"Change of orbit initiated," the computer announced in a soft alto voice. It sounded almost satisfied.

"We didn't give an order to do that!" exclaimed Miccela, who usually rarely raised her voice. "Why..."

"ETA in two hours, twenty-four minutes and three seconds," informed the on-board computer. "Ground contact in quadrant z34."

"Ground contact?" Andras noticed that his voice was rising as well. "The ship is not designed to land! Computer! We need an atmospheric glider to get to the surface!"

"Atmospheric gliders will be created on demand by the 3D printers!" the computer said. "The weather in the landing zone is suitable for humans. Spacesuits are still recommended to prevent any allergies or adverse reactions to local parasites."

"Computer! Course correction back to stationary orbit!"

"Computer! Run self-check!"

"Computer! Damn it!"

The three humans in their locked crew habitat stared at each other. By now the plasma column had split into three, fast characters, slow characters and a countdown that was running backwards. One wall displayed the image of the planet's surface. It seemed to be getting closer.

"Well," Miccela finally remarked dryly. "We've always known that this journey would end at some point. Also that we might not return. So that's that."

"Maybe we can still meet the aliens and shake hands?" remarked Erica. "Or tentacles?"

"This is their planet. We are the aliens here!" corrected Andras and was ignored.

Again the characters on the plasma column changed.

"Hey! I can read that!" exclaimed Erica. "Personal visits of the cast to the administration complex is not scheduled," she quoted. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Realignment is being worked on," Miccela read. "We ask for your kind patience. Editing is underway. Redacted dialogue lists are in progress."

Then, all at once, all the rows of characters disappeared. Instead, the plasma column showed bright flames.

Fire?

Fire in the habitat!

No. That, too, was just an image displayed by the plasma column. Someone sent them a picture of a fire. It looked very realistic.

"Fire-fighting measures are being initiated," said the circumferential bass voice.

"No!" all three astronauts shouted at the same time, and Andras tried to imagine how the sprinklers would open and fill the room with liquid. Or how the habitat would be deprived of any oxygen that fed the fire.

Would they burn?

Would they drown?

Would they suffocate?

"That's not a real fire!" shouted Miccela. "Computer! Recheck data!"

A single second could be infinite.

"No heat detected. Fire-fighting measures discontinued," said the computer.

"It's just a hologram!" whispered Erica. "Just a hologram. And what's that burning there, anyway?"

"Looks like a bush on fire."

"Wasn't there something about religion?" asked Erica. "I'm not a believer, but didn't you have burning bushes in the times of yore?"

"As a manifestation of the divine that needed a way to communicate," Miccela explained. "I

wonder if that was just a hologram then, too."

"That would mean that at that time..."

"Oh, spare me the archaic alien shittycack!"

The burning bush disappeared. The plasma column was empty. This way of communication had obviously failed to get the expected reaction. No one had fallen to their knees and offered any offspring for a handy sacrifice. Andras felt as if he suddenly had forgotten his lines on stage and did not even know which play he was in.

Silence. For a long time no one said anything.

"Landing procedure initiated," the computer announced.

"What are we going to say now? Take me to your leader?" Erica asked cynically.

"Oh for fu... crying out loud!" muttered Andras.

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"I absolutely insist!" said Andras. "I want two 3D printers on board from two totally different manufacturers."

"This unit is perfectly fine!" assured the space agency's chief technician. "Nothing can go wrong with it at all. The one unit can reduplicate itself. One is enough. Sufficient and cost-effective."

Andras didn't know why he didn't believe this, but he didn't. Somewhere in the back of his mind, something made him feel he needed to intervene here before he boarded the Antares with Miccela and Erica to leave Earth and explore distant worlds where no one had ever... or something.

"And I want a different destination!" demanded Erica venomously.

Andras didn't like the young woman. He didn't even know why he didn't like her. After all, he hardly knew her. Instinct and gut feeling? He had been assured that he was delightfully lacking in those skills.

"The course is already laid in!"

"Does the on-board computer know ancient languages? Akkadian? Sanskrit? Cuneiform script?" asked Miccela. The man from the space agency stared at her as if she had two heads.

"That's hardly necessary..." he stammered, looking as if he thought Andras, Miccela and Erica were out of their minds. Yet it was a thoroughly logical request. Of course! Ancient languages!

Andras found his fellow astronauts' wishes perfectly plausible.

Only, why?

They boarded the spaceship. This time everything would go well.

This time? It was the first time he left Earth.

Andras was more nervous than he wanted to admit. He had been so much looking forward to the launch, but now he couldn't shake a dread feeling of *déjà vu*. It gnawed at him, but he could not grasp it.

Repetition. So boring. He hated reruns.

Who ever watched reruns?

Who watched anything at all?

All at once he realised he had watchers. Spotters. Viewers. They all had viewers. The whole world had an audience.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances," he quoted the Bard. "And one man in his time plays many parts."

"As You Like It!" said the technician, grinning. "Shakespeare."

That grin...

Nonsense. Surely he wouldn't get paranoid now? How embarrassing would that be?

And anyway—since when had he been able to quote Shakespeare? ■

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This story was first published in this magazine.



**Juliane (Ju) Honisch** began writing at the age of twelve, much to the chagrin of her parents, who thought she should devote her time to more meaningful things. Decades later, useful pursuits still don't seem to be quite her forte. She has lived in Germany and Ireland and currently resides in Hesse with too many books and too many musical instruments, but only one husband. She has an MA in literature and history, which explains her love of stories with a historical background.

For her first novel "Obsidian Secrets" (*Das Obsidianherz*) she received the German Fantastic Award (*Deutscher Phantastik Preis*) in 2009. The last book in the series won the SERAPH, the award for speculative literature, awarded by the Phantastische Akademie at the Leipzig Book Fair 2014.

She writes in both English and German.

<https://www.juhonisch.de/?lang=en>





"Destination Stars" by Dirk Berger



Dirk van den Boom

# Artificial Intelligence Gives us the Jitters—and Science Fiction is not Always Helping

Recently I was invited to a public panel discussion. This was one of the occasions where I wasn't quite sure which of the hats I'm always balancing on my head was the relevant one. I am both a writer of science fiction and a professor of political science, and there are those invitations where I have to check back which one of me they were actually inviting. For this panel discussion I was told that both hats are fine, and I was introduced accordingly. The question of that event was simple: Should we be afraid of the rise of Artificial Intelligence?

First of all, I avoided any discussion about the definition of AI, because if you dive into that

topic, everything else vanishes. As a science fiction writer, I have my own very vague and unconscious definition, guided by HAL 9000, Butler's Jihad and Iain Banks' Culture Universe. When I look at ChatGPT and the likes, I see a very sophisticated language model, and I don't know if HAL would be very happy about the comparison. As a political scientist, the question of definition was more or less irrelevant anyway. If I look at social processes, the implications of perception are, most of the time, more important than reality. I see that every day in the area of migration policy, where I work professionally: it is less the reality of migration and its consequences which is discussed among the public, but the perception of it. And it is perception on which both political as well as individual decisions are made.

When I was asked, of course with a smirk, what Science Fiction is teaching us about AI, I had a lot of examples prepared—but the moderator of the panel, well prepared as he was, came up with his own. He wanted to be cool, I guess. Of course, he went on to list the obvious: Terminator, Skynet, subsequently doom and destruction. I'll be back. Of course, I'd expected that. I had expected it because most of my perception of Science Fiction went into the same direction: AI is, most of the time, our doom.

Now, we need to qualify this a bit. Talking to the computer of the Enterprise—a very, very

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*Illustrator Dirk Berger (\*1969) was already enthusiastic about science fiction books and the exciting illustrations on the covers as a child. Today, drawing and painting such scenes serves as the most important way for him to balance his work as a science teacher. Even though the drafting and concept art are still done with pencil and paper, the majority of the images are created digitally using his graphics tablet. The results can be seen in books by Joe R. Lansdale, Steven Erikson, Ian McDonald, James P. Blaylock, Gene Wolfe, and many others. He has been living and working in Leipzig for more than ten years.*

[www.lightandstorm.com](http://www.lightandstorm.com)

<https://www.facebook.com/dirk.berger.3720>

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sophisticated language model—is very much akin to what we do with ChatGPT currently, but there is more behind it and, aside from some episodes, the AI in *Star Trek* is generally regarded as benevolent—unless of course it is focused on androids of the Noonian Soong-variant. But we are talking about a genre which must produce suspense and drive a plot forward. A nice antagonist is helpful; the more frightening, the better. A rogue AI is a perfect example of a nice villain. No serious author will neglect such an opportunity, even if he or she actually thinks AI is a non-issue we shouldn't be bothered about.

A quite recent article in the *American Scientist* (from October 2023) lists some of the fears we encounter when we talk about AI. The first example goes to our heart: the influence of AI-models on our creativity. The very first group affected by this consists of our artists, the people who draw those nice spaceships with which we adorn our book covers. Their work is heavily questioned by the use of AI “generated” art, and many—self-publishers, small presses—have already used these kinds of covers in order to save money, not to talk about Marvel using AI to produce intro sequences for their popular streaming productions. In the area of writing, our own George R. R. Martin is party in a lawsuit against AI-generated novels, which steal from works available online. This is not only affecting our dear colleagues, whether they produce pictures or texts. It changes our perception of art. If we change our perception of art—as something that is always available “for free” and can be produced without any creativity and effort—that has direct consequences for the way we perceive and “use” culture. Funny enough, *Science Fiction* rarely touches on this specific issue. Our utopia is that machines do the hard work, and we are all very creative and produce a lot of art, because we no longer

need to care about anything else. Our reality however might be that we do the hard work, and machines are very creative and produce a lot of art, depending on how we define creativity and art.

Aside from our specific doom as writers and artists, a more general uneasiness seems to develop, again, mostly based on perception, but of course not without reason. Some of these worries are actually quite specific, like the fears about a lack of protection for data privacy; the prospect of job loss, because the call centre agent, the sales assistant and the financial advisor are no longer needed; leading to the fear that sums it up in the end: overall human obsolescence. The whole public discussion, based on reality or not, has triggered a sense of “general public unease.” As with all general unease, this is expressed individually. Some just have a concern, others need therapy. But the perception of fear and a certain insecurity is pervading.

Now this is not the first time our society experiences stress because of technological change. When the automated weaving machines were introduced, the steam engine propelled us to travelling speeds never before experienced, and when our bodies were lifted into the air like birds, anxiety was evident in the public record. Most of us are, basically, conservative in our outlook on life, and changes are only accepted when they come very gradually, so we can adjust. The major issue is that the current pace of development is no longer gradual. This means many are overwhelmed.

If *Science Fiction* is to help us master anxiety and uncertainty, we need to be very specific which part of the genre we choose. Hint: *Skynet* doesn't help. Since Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, the question whether the machine can develop self-consciousness is prevalent in the genre. If we don't want to condemn the

development of AI in general, we must look elsewhere. Thus, I turned to the already mentioned Culture universe by Iain Banks. Not because the AIs in his works are all benevolent and helpful and a blessing for humanity. But Banks was able to describe a possible future—I am hesitant to call it an utopia, although it's not altogether dystopic either—in which AI and humanity came to a gentlemen's agreement, living together, one possibly more dependent on the other, but without the constant fear of annihilation. This was only possible, I'd like to emphasize, because Banks' Culture has an economy beyond lack of important resources. But even in Neal Asher's Agent Cormac series, we can find some solace in the idea that AI will probably be so intelligent that it will decide to self-restrain itself, if the alternative is mutual destruction and mayhem.

Fear is good for a plot full of suspense. "2001" would have been a totally different movie if HAL 9000 had been a benevolent and supportive AI cooperating with the crew's mission in a more constructive way. But fear is not a good basis for a public discussion, because fear shapes perception in a very negative way. To voice arguments against a wall of fear is problematic, frustrating and sometimes futile. If Science Fic-

tion can be part and parcel of a realistic public discourse, we should be able to accept that the fear we are mongering in our genre is for entertainment purposes only (or mostly), and that it is nowhere written that reality will or must develop in the same direction. Once we differentiate, the genre can play a constructive part in this discussion. I think it is useful that we explore our possibilities and see where we can contribute. We are in a unique position to do so.

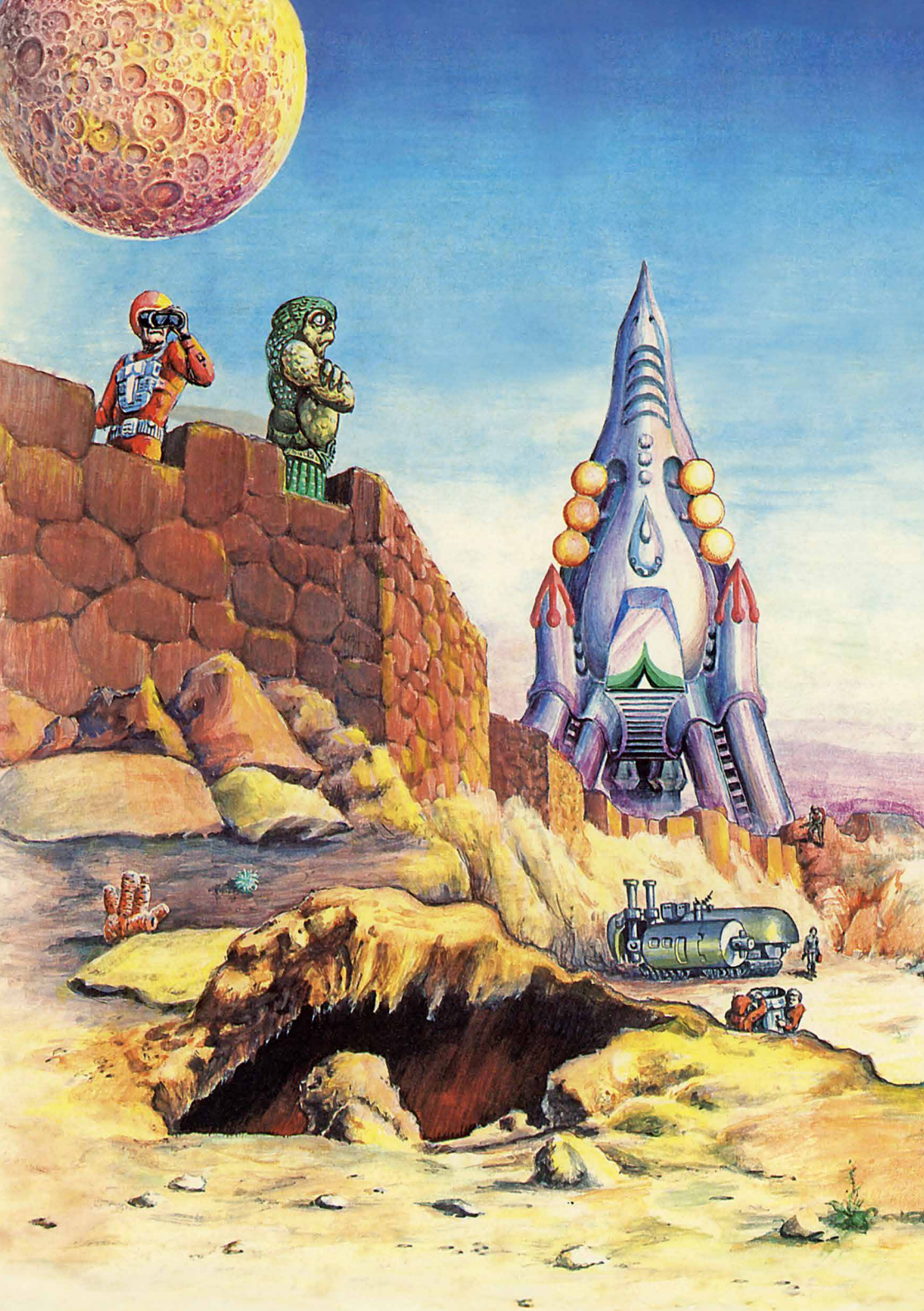
But how did my panel-discussion go? It went badly. The other panelists were a computer scientist (who didn't care about perception and buried us in techno babble) and a teacher (who was very afraid for his job and therefore discussed everything based on fear). The moderator was at a loss once he had mentioned Skynet. In the end, the audience was none the wiser, but maybe a bit more afraid than necessary. After the event, someone from the audience approached me and asked: "Are you personally afraid of AI and what will happen now?" The moderator hadn't asked me that, and I was quite content that he didn't. On further reflection, my answer was irresponsible: "I'm an old man, whatever happens, it is unlikely that it will affect me personally." That was cowardice.

Don't run away like me. ■

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**Dirk van den Boom**, born 1966, has published professionally for more than 25 years, mostly in the genres of Science Fiction and Alternative History. Apart from that, he is director of a small NGO working in the area of migration, and extraordinary professor for political science at the University of Muenster.









"Andre Norton - Forerunner 1992" by Igor Shaganov

Lian Stollenwerk-Gans

## Don't Offend!

# A Quick Primer on Sensitivity Reading

*"In writing as in science, exploration ends where creativity is shackled by fear!"*

—Lian A. G.

Now that I have your attention with this bold quote of mine—which I'll get back to later, I promise!—let's venture straight into the big questions: What is sensitivity reading? Who does it and who is it for? And most importantly: why? (Take a sneak peek at the next spread:

We'll spend some time on the sci-fi-specific reasons there—but first, the basics.)

A sensitivity reading examines how sensitive topics and representation of marginalised groups are being handled in a given text. It checks that delicate subjects such as mental illness, war, or abuse are depicted in a way that's not disrespectful or needlessly hurtful to sufferers, victims, or survivors. Too dark? Exactly! Now imagine you're picking up a book to garner

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*The illustrator **Igor Shaganov** hails from Ukraine. He moved to Germany in 2002 for family reasons. In 1988 he prepared a package of information and presentation materials for the First Jefremowsky Readings. In 1989 (as a member of the SF club "Argo") he organised the first international congress of science fiction enthusiasts, SocCon-89, in the Ukrainian SSR, for which he received a special congress prize. In the same year he designed the first book cover and interior illustrations for V. Vasiliev's fantastic story "Without Fear and Reproach." Also during this time he drew covers for the fanzine "Watchbird."*

*From 1990 to 1994 he worked as an artist in the editorial office of the SF magazine "Odyssey" (Odessa, Ukraine), and designed more than 40 works for the publication of the "Masters of Science Fiction" library. These include books by Poul Anderson, James Blish, Philipp Dick, Gordon Dickson, Phillipp Farmer, Keith Laumer, Andre Norton, S&J Robinson, Cordwainer Smith, Brian Stableford, Roger Zelazny.*

*In 1996 he received a special award from the ESFS (European Science Fiction Society) at Lituanicon 1996 (Vilnius, Lithuania) for the development of the ESFS symbols and a series of illustrations for them.*

*Since 2018 Igor has been working as a media designer at the printing service provider Copy-Dreieich, and in his spare time he has designed many book covers for the publishers Saphir im Stahl, Arcanum and Scratch Verlag. He lives and paints in Darmstadt.*

*Homepage: <https://igor-shaganov.jimdofree.com/>*

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some well-earned, much-needed escapism and half-way through some author—who quite obviously had no clue what they were writing about—uses your worst experience as a mere plot device to move their hero's story forward! Aggravating, isn't it? But I will go lighter on you in a couple of paragraphs. Just stick with me through the isms and we'll see the stars again, I promise.

"The isms?", you ask groaning with foreboding. Yes, the isms and phobias, to be more precise. Because the other thing a sensitivity reading checks is that the representation of any marginalised groups is neither discriminatory, stigmatising, nor perpetuating harmful stereotypes. In other words, the goal is to avoid racism, colourism, sexism, ableism, ageism, fascism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, biphobia, interphobia, and other forms of discrimination lurking in the intersections. And now:

Just take a deep breath and exhale, if you have experienced any such discrimination. (You are allowed to be a little angry at me for reminding you of the real world in the midst of your Andromeda escapism.)

And—please!—breathe, if the mere mention of those isms makes you feel all icky and defensive inside. If you stuck with me this far, chances are, you are part of the solution, not the problem. Also remember: There is help!

A sensitivity reader or sensitivity consultant has experience with the sensitive issue or is a member of the marginalised group portrayed in the text they are meant to examine. They can be hired to consult on healthy, diverse representation and inclusion at an early stage in the writing process or to proofread specific pages, chapters or entire manuscripts. Sensitivity consultation can be an inspiring, useful, but most of all advisable part of the writing process for any author who wants to include a character in their story

of a marginalised group they are not themselves part of, or a sensitive issue that they have not experienced. Think of sensitivity consultants as experts (because they are), but in humans and human experiences rather than, let's say, bioengineering or space velocity. A writer should still do research beforehand—lots ideally—but then, you let the expert check it. Especially because people, their experiences, and their feelings are often far less googleable than the speed of light for example—plus, you can't hurt the speed of light by misrepresenting it.

A sensitivity reader will want the best for your story, so don't worry about them being hard on you for having accidentally done an ism—they won't, cause you're dealing with it head-on. A good sensitivity consultation will not just find fault, but rather offer solutions. Thus, you can also scratch any concerns about your story "turning soft" by taking away potential conflict. Unless, of course, isms and traumas are the main sources of conflict in your story, in which case: Please go back to the drawing board!

Sensitivity consultation will most likely improve your writing, plus: You simply are a nicer humanoid being<sup>1</sup>, if you aim to harm as few people as possible!

*"Okay, okay, I get it. Sensitivity reading makes sense for all those mundane now-timey stories, constrained by the linearity of time, shackled to Earth. I, however, am writing about aliens and a human race that lives so far in the future that they've overcome petty human squabbles—what would I need sensitivity reading for?"*

Well, imaginary reader, I'm glad you asked. Thanks for giving me such a good segue into my *three stellar reasons* to include a sensitivity reading in your next sci-fi project:

<sup>1</sup>At this point in time, the likelihood of non-humanoid beings reading this and deriving any meaning from it is statistically speaking 0.0000000001/ 1000th of a percent point. If you are a non-humanoid being reading this: Please accept my apologies, I did not mean to exclude you.

**No one writes in a vacuum—not even people who write about space!**

Creating a new world—like the atheist space deities that we are—will always draw inspiration from real places and real people. Whether you consciously or subconsciously base the society of a planet on an existing or historical culture, chances are, some of your readers will recognise the parallels—probably those whose culture you've been inspired by. And wouldn't it be better if they came away wanting to write rave reviews rather than vowing to never read your books again, all because you had no idea that the cool technique your aliens use to toughen up their soldiers was actually a religious purification ritual?

**Your aliens might live in an imaginary world; your readers live in this one—at least for now!**

Stories thrive on conflicts. Most conflicts are power struggles. And the way you position one alien society against another with respect to their respective positions of power

will be received as a message, whether you intend to send one or not. Readers are going to interpret what they read through their own lived experiences. The characters and societies they experience in your stories will more often than not be read as shorthand or allegories for groups that exist in the real world. Therefore, an accidental or clumsy allegory can do real harm. So, you need to decide: Are you writing for your readers or are you writing for yourself? If it's for the readers, then you need to do them justice by doing the work, be it extensive research or involving a sensitivity reader (I recommend doing both). If you're writing for yourself, well, then, keep it in your drawer—no harm, no foul.

And last, but by lightyears not least: **It will make your plots and worldbuilding stronger!**

Often, we strive to depict a world that's more colourful than our own. But a narrow focus on just our own lived experiences, or



Figure 1: Don't be speciestist! © Felix Gans



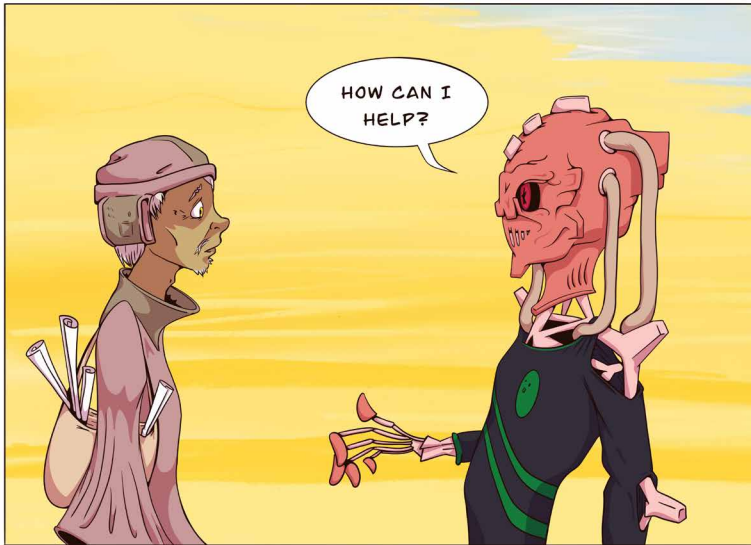


Figure 2: Break expectations. © Felix Gans

worse, the fear of backlash can hold us back significantly. So instead of adding to what is all around us—colourful societies with a myriad of different people and possibilities—we first strip our stories of diversity and colour to then try and add more. See the paradox? Just imagine how rich your writing could be, if you stopped being afraid about only 'writing what you know'! Knowing that you don't have to

restrain yourself, but can paint with all the colours of humanity will be a new and bountiful well of inspiration. You can play and break clichés (fig. 1), defy expectation (fig. 2), and surprise readers—and publishers!—with fearless new plots. Being prepared to do the research and having a sensitivity reader in your corner will free you to well and truly *boldly go where no writer has gone before!* ■



Based in Berlin, **Lian Stollenwerk-Gans** is an author, editor, and sensitivity reader—and lucky enough to be able to collaborate with their partner, illustrator Felix Gans.

Lian believes strongly in the power of stories to change minds, help people to feel and be seen, and foster healthier societies: Because representation, inclusion, and acceptance shouldn't be science fiction!

You can find them on Instagram @lian.a.g or on their webpage [fantastisch-lektoriert.de](http://fantastisch-lektoriert.de). (Feel free to finally give them a reason to translate their webpage).



"Our New Religion" by Uti Bendick

Yvonne Tunnat

# Who are you, and how old are you, anyway?

## German SF Short Stories in Numbers

In 2023, 377 short stories in the genre of science fiction were published. This count contains all German science fiction short prose in magazines, story collections, or anthologies with an ISBN or ISSN, see figure 1 on the next page.

I try to collate as complete a collection as possible. However, SF short stories are sometimes published in off-topic anthologies. As I may not have found all of those, some stories might have been left out.

I already did the analysis of the numbers for 2021 and 2022.

### Why has the number decreased?

In 2023, the Verlag für Moderne Phantastik, which usually is responsible for about 80 short stories a year, did not publish an anthology,

which is related to the death of publisher Rico Gehrke in November 2022.

At an earlier point in time, I had calculated how many short stories had been published each year since 2000. The data situation was not complete, so I had taken into account those stories that had either been counted by Martin Stricker as part of his work for the German DFSP award or were counted by KLP trustee Udo Klotz in the KLP voting process. The evaluation showed that, based on an average of 300 stories per year twenty years ago, the total number was gradually approaching 500 and even exceeded this in 2014, 2018, and 2020. Thus, fluctuations are normal.

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*The illustrator **Uli Bendick**, born in 1954, lives in a small village in the Vogelsberg region. He is a self-taught artist who specialises in creating digital collages. For this, he uses individual picture elements and combines them to create a completely new picture that no longer bears any relation to the original material.*

*He has co-edited the following anthologies: together with Michael Tinnefeld "Diagnose-F—Science Fiction trifft Psyche", (Verlag p.machinery), and together with Aiki Mira and Mario Franke "Am Anfang war das Bild", (Verlag Hirnkost). Both anthologies received a special award in the Kurd Laßwitz Preis in 2022. Most recently, Torsten Low Verlag published the calendar "Science Fiction - Art and Calendar Stories 2024", which was created in collaboration with Mario Franke and Marianne Labisch. The 2025 calendar is in preparation.*

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**Who writes in the German-speaking scene?**

In 2021, I also determined how many of the short stories were written by men, women, and non-binary people.

Here are the results from 2021, 2022, and 2023, as far as I could ascertain the writers' gender, see figure 2.

The figures refer to the number of stories. If a person published several stories in the same year (which is true for many), they were counted each time.

The distribution is quite similar over the years, with small fluctuations and a slight tendency for more short stories to be published by women. However, three years is still too short a time span to be able to speak of a trend.

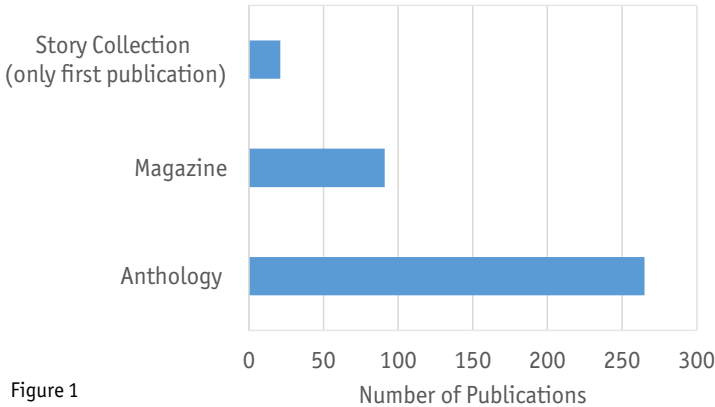
**Are there differences depending on the place of publication?**

If you include the publication platforms, you get the following result for 2023, see figure 3.

**Just tell me how old you are ...**

A total of 304 authors published SF short prose texts in 2023. For 217 of them, the year of birth can be determined (CV or personal contact). This means that 262 of the 377 texts are covered by this statistic, see figure 4.

Magazine issues, story collections, and anthologies that were included in this study can be found here, on the Website with the German article (<https://www.rezensionsnerdista.de/2023/12/15/wer-wo-und-wie-alt-das-kurzgeschichtenjahr-2023-in-zahlen/>). ■



**Yvonne Tunnat** (born in 1978 in Sögel/Emsland) has been increasingly involved in science fiction since 2020. She runs a review blog at [www.rezensionsnerdista.de](http://www.rezensionsnerdista.de) and a podcast on German-language fantasy at [literatunnat.de](http://literatunnat.de). Together with Janika Rehak, she published the steampunk anthology "Der Tod kommt auf Zahnrädern" (i.e. Death comes on cogwheels, Amrün, 2022).





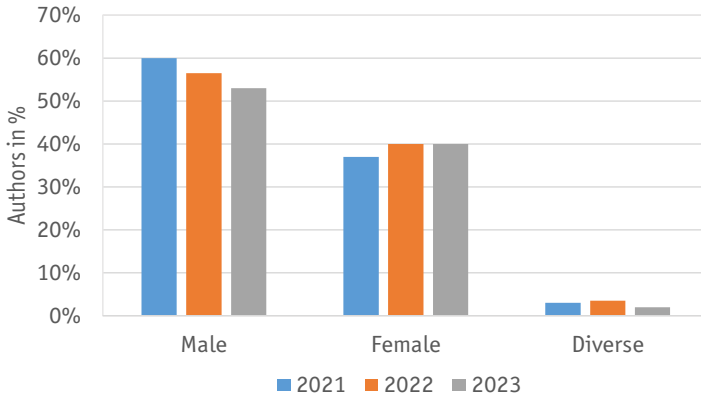


Figure 2: I do not know the gender of the remaining 5% for 2023

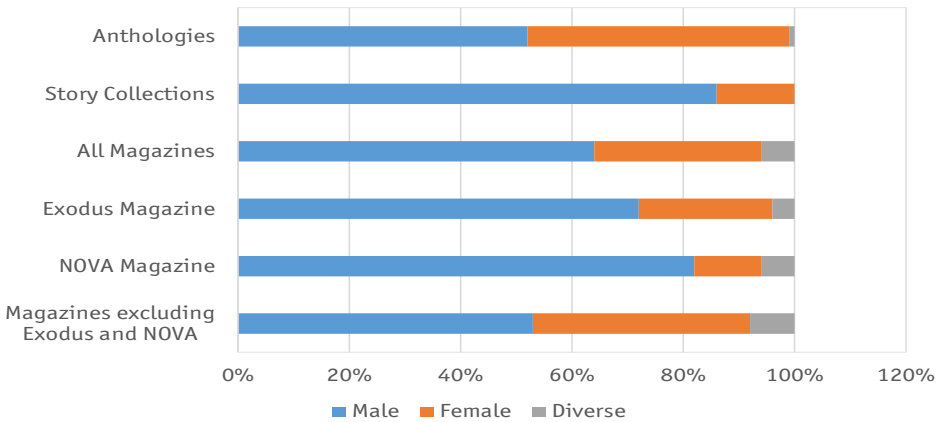


Figure 3: Anthologies n=264, Story Collections n=21, All Magazines n=91, Exodus Magazine n=25, NOVA Magazine n=17, Magazines excluding Exodus and NOVA n=49.

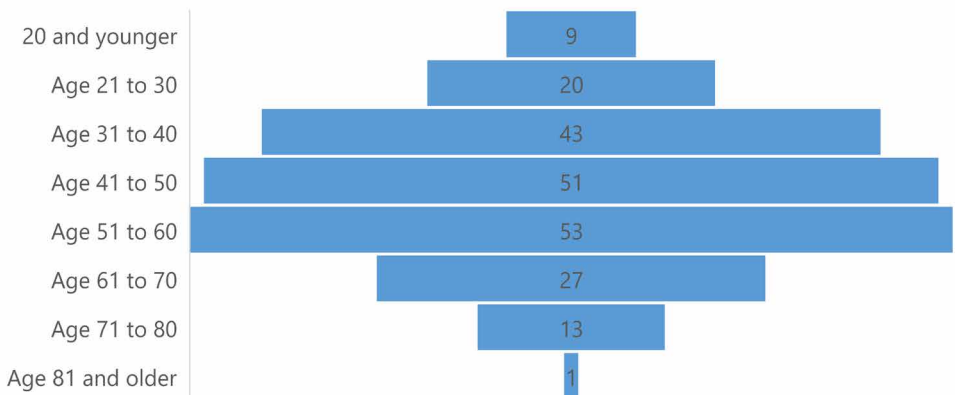
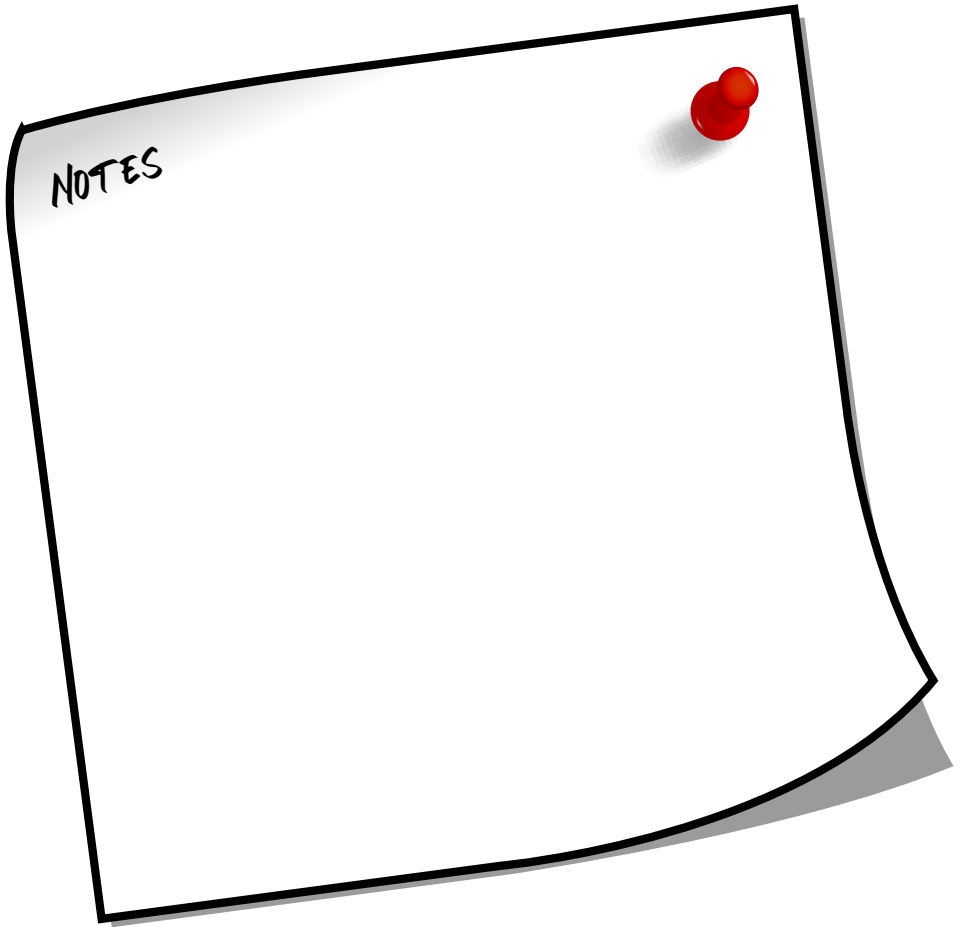


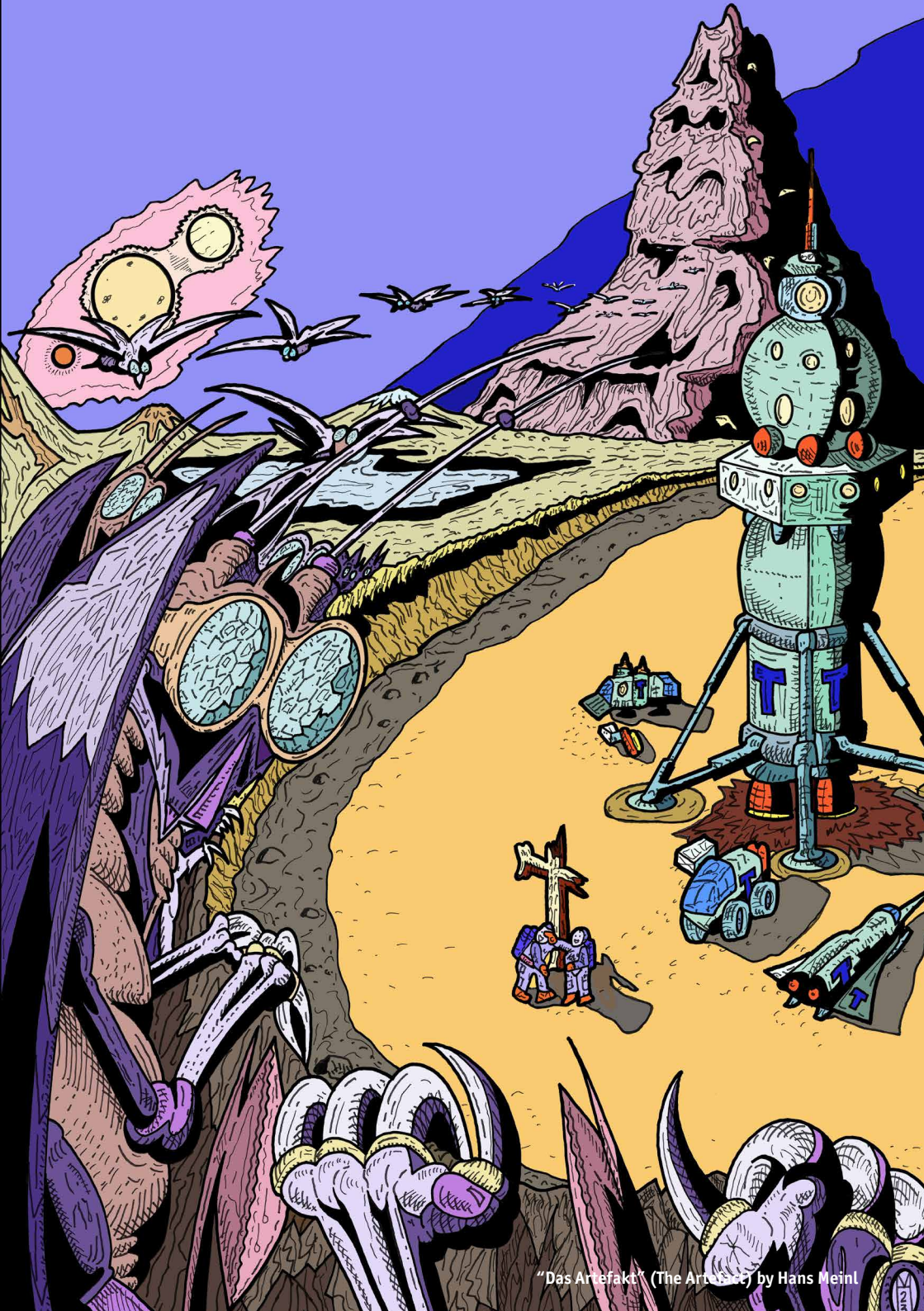
Figure 4



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**Hans Meinel** was born in 1952 in Rostock and moved to Jena in 1973, where he has lived ever since. After a degree in physics from the FSU Jena, he got a doctorate in Civil Engineering from the HAB Weimar. Meinel says: I have been drawing since I was a child. After the end of my professional career, primarily as the Science Director of the Zeiss-Planetarium, I found more time for my passion. Beside drawings with pastels, I developed my technique in drawing comics, where my preference for SF is helpful in terms of content. For my first bigger project I created 118 drawings for all short stories by Philip K. Dick, whose mind also inspired the image I contributed to this publication. I am currently working on illustrations for a historic sightseeing Jena guide, geared at primary school students.

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"Das Artefakt" (The Artefact) by Hans Meinl

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