



## Lakeside stories

Four great new reads from Berlin authors – and one Berlin-related book from a lit superstar – you should pick up or pre-order as soon as possible.

### Nell Zink: *Mislaid* (Fourth Estate)

The recently discovered American-born, Bad Belzig-based author (see interview, page 6) divided critics across the world with this lusty tale of lesbian-on-gay heterosexuality, racial appropriation and middle-class family angst in the humid swamps of Virginia. Anti-heroine Peggy Vallaincourt is a newly enrolled college student who finds her budding lesbianism hampered by a sudden pregnancy thanks to a short-lived love affair with young gay poetry professor Lee Fleming. A shotgun marriage and two kids later, Peggy decides she's had enough, crashes Lee's car into a lake and escapes the Fleming mansion with her young daughter. Zink toys with a typical family melodrama before curving off into a fantastically droll satire about racial identity, white male privilege and innocence lost. Fans of flowery prose may find her delivery a little dry, but her blasé steamroller trip through the story of the Flemings, punctuated by random bursts of extraordinary beauty, makes for one of the most entertaining and thought-provoking novels of the summer. It's available in a bright-yellow box set with Zink's first novel, *The Wallcreeper*. BH

### Tod Wodicka: *The Household Spirit* (Random House)

American writer Tod Wodicka has lived in Berlin for the past 10 years. Perhaps this is why he is persistently interested in the history of his home country and the reason why his second novel reads like

an allegory of his ambivalence towards it. All this emerges from a tender story between two people who are trying to assimilate the hardships of the waking world. The novel takes place on Route 29, a cul-de-sac in an upstate New York backwater. Howie Jeffries, a 50-year-old divorcée and proprietor of one of the two houses on the lonely road, is a painfully shy, emotionally deficient man trying to invigorate his relationship with his estranged daughter. He connects with next-door neighbour Emily Phane, a smart, intense 24-year-old suffering from a crippling sleep disorder. Wodicka has elegantly structured the novel so that the two characters are perceived in equal measure. Although some of the conflicts depicted are a tad mired in platitudes, there are moments of true emotional complexity that explore the fine line between the familiar and the estranged. Moreover, Wodicka has a way with language, a love for the comedic nuance of words, that can enliven even the most mundane social situations. EE

### Wyndham Wallace: *Lee, Myself and I* (Jawbone Press)

In 1999, Wyndham Wallace, an English music journalist now living in Berlin, met Lee Hazlewood, the man most famous for penning Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots are Made For Walkin'", revered by those in the know as the producer, singer and "cosmic country" progenitor who influenced everyone from Phil Spector to Nick Cave. Wallace's chronicle of the eight years he spent as Hazlewood's publicist, manager and friend is both a tribute to the man and his music – going over Hazlewood's career in loving detail, from his collaborations with Sinatra to his lesser-known self-imposed 'exile' in Sweden – and, in its latter half, a poignant reflection on mortality. Through Wallace's eyes, we see Hazlewood turn from hot-tempered, untouchable idol to fragile, doddering old uncle as he succumbs to cancer. It's only Wallace's deft, frequently self-deprecating writing and a slew of great anecdotes (mostly from the lips of Hazlewood himself) that keep things light enough for summer. RG

### Jonathan Franzen: *Purity* (Harper Collins, out September 1)

Some may cringe at the fact that Jonathan Franzen's fifth and highly anticipated novel is titled

*Purity*. Yet Franzen has a way with words that allows him to extract the most morally complex qualities even from seemingly ordinary expressions. Purity is the name of a female character, a cynical 22-year-old American woman with a crippling college loan, persuaded to join an internship programme with a rogue operation that leaks government secrets in South America, run by Andreas Wolf, a Julian Assange-like figure who grew up in East Berlin during the final years of the Cold War. By contrast to *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, *Purity* is more plot driven – the tempo of the narrative is somewhat quicker, and more attention is paid to action. The result is a novel that deals with the role of the internet in the distribution and quality of information, the gullibility of a frustrated and cynical younger generation and the cult of personality, while also looking back to the past to create a palpable sense of what it was like to live in 1980s East Berlin. All of this, of course, expounded upon in elegant and cunning prose. EE

### Stuart Braun: *City of Exiles* (Noctua Press)

These days it's easy to associate the word 'exile' with the malcontents who have deliberately left their homelands for the freer pastures of Berlin, who sit brooding in cafes jotting away in their journal or planning their next art project. According to Australian journalist Stuart Braun, Berlin has been home to such people for two centuries – not just the aforementioned wannabes, but genuine misfits, free thinkers, revolutionaries and oddball artists from around the world. With nary a whiff of pretentiousness, *City of Exiles* tells the city's story through a motley cast of outsiders – and not just the predictable Isherwood-Bowie-Iggy variety. Everybody's in here, from the Expressionists of the 1920s to the *Geniale Dilletanten* of the 1980s, Rosa-Luxemburg's pre-WWI Spartacists and the RAF to the American transvestites of the 1970s and the gang of digital exiles allied with Edward Snowden. In his exultation of the city's foreign renegades as well as its oh-so-tolerant, authentic locals, Braun cruises a little too swiftly through the darker chapters of Berlin history and drops the occasional minor factual mistake. Yet, all in all, his book is an easy-to-read account of the city's more colourful characters and their feats. Essential reading for any newbie exile. SG