

# Popular German Crime Fiction

## — Nele Neuhaus and her Bestselling Novels —

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### 1. German Crime Fiction

Crime fiction is one of the most popular literary genres worldwide, and Germany is no exception. Fiction (“Belletristik” in German) makes up the largest group in the German book market, with a share of about one third of total sales. Within this group, narrative literature (“Erzählliteratur”) accounts for about half the market, followed by crime fiction with a quarter (see the January 2016 issue of ‘Branchen-Monitor Buch’ at <http://www.boersenverein.de/1079003>, retrieved 28th January 2017). This means that the share of crime fiction within the entire German book market is about 8 to 10% in terms of sales, but as crime fiction books are often sold as reasonably priced paperbacks, its share of total number of books sold will likely be around 12 to 15%. Crime fiction is known in German as “Krimi”, which is short for “Kriminalroman” or crime novel, and “Krimi” is also used for crime movies.

While crime fiction is popular with Germans, around the world “German literature” is seldom associated with mysteries and thrillers, but rather with Weimar Classicism (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Friedrich Schiller) and Romanticism (E.T.A. Hoffmann, Novalis), or with 20th century Nobel Prize winners such as Thomas Mann and Günter Grass. When giving thought to crime fiction, even among Germans, the first authors that come to mind may be the British and American classics of the genre, by writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, or popular Swedish authors as Henning

Mankell and Håkan Nesser.

While Germany does have its own crime fiction tradition going back to the early 19th century, it is the socially critical crime fiction (Sozio-Krimi) of the 1960s and 70s that has had a profound effect on the development of the genre not only in Germany, but also in other European countries. Recent developments include a boom in regional crime fiction (Regio-Krimi), and contemporary German-language authors who use a variety of plots, characters and settings. However, in general it seems that the traditional police procedurals and whodunit-plots are dominant (see Campbell/Guenther-Pal/Petersen 2014, Kutch/Herzog 2014 and Hall 2016 for an overview of German crime fiction).

## **2. Nele Neuhaus and her Works**

Nele Neuhaus was born in 1967 and started writing while still in school. As writing had always been a hobby for her, it took her a long time to finish her first book, 'Unter Haien'. This thriller, involving investment bankers in New York, was completed in 2000, at a length of 1000 pages (see appendix for translations and details of publishers). She was unable to find a publisher, so decided to shorten the book by half (with help from her sister), and finally published it herself using print on demand, in 2005. She then promoted this book among friends and in local bookshops, and was able to sell the first print run of 500 copies. Encouraged by the positive feedback from her readers, she decided to write more books, and started the 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series, a crime story featuring two police detectives, located in the Taunus region in central Germany. The first book 'Eine unbeliebte Frau' (2006) sold 1,000 copies within three weeks, and the second book 'Mordsfreunde' (2007) started with a print run of 5,000 in its first edition. Soon, she had sold a total of 45,000 copies, mainly through word-of-mouth recommendations among local booksellers. In 2008, one of these booksellers recommended her books to an editor of a large German

publishing house, and so her third book 'Tiefe Wunden' (2009) was published by List Verlag, part of the Ullstein Group. The fourth book 'Schneewittchen muss sterben' was released a year later and quickly became a bestseller in Germany (Lückemeier 2011).

Since then, she has been one of the best-selling German authors, with a total print run of 7 million copies sold (Elsermann 2016). Her best-known works are from the 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series, but she has also published two fiction books apart from this series, and eleven books for teenagers featuring girls and horses. The 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series has also been made into films, starting with the fourth book 'Schneewittchen muss sterben' which was released in 2013, followed by six other books in chronological order. Her success in Germany has also been replicated abroad, and 'Schneewittchen muss sterben' was translated into Dutch, Italian and Korean in 2011, only one year after being released in Germany. Since then, her books reportedly have been translated into 32 languages (Elsermann 2016); however, I have only been able to confirm translations into 25 languages (see appendix for a complete list of translations). Nevertheless, this is a very impressive list of translations, all published within five years. The 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series has now been completely translated into three other languages, Dutch, Polish and Korean (with the exception of the latest book, which was only released in October 2016).

Is 'Schneewittchen muss sterben', or any other of Nele Neuhaus' books, an 'excellent novel' to the extent that it has won an award? The answer is 'no'. The most widely known award for crime fiction is the 'Deutscher Krimi Preis' (German crime fiction award), which is awarded to three German-language and three translated books every year. Another well-known award is the 'Friedrich-Glauser-Preis' (Friedrich Glauser award), which currently has five categories. There are numerous other literary awards, but Nele Neuhaus has never won any, with the exception of the

‘Japan Booksellers’ Award’ in 2013 (本屋大賞, <http://www.hontai.or.jp/history/honyaku2013.html>, retrieved 28th January 2017). Besides these awards, the ‘Krimi-Bestenliste’ (list of best crime fiction) is compiled monthly by literary critics and published in the weekly ‘Die Zeit’, listing German novels as well as translated ones, but Nele Neuhaus has never been mentioned. So, if none of her novels have been ranked highly by these awards, what are the secrets of her success?

### **3. How to Become a Bestselling Author**

For unknown authors, one way to gain fame is to get an award. A recent example that comes to mind is ‘Tannöd’ (English title: The Murder Farm), the first novel by Anna Maria Schenkel, published in 2006 and awarded several crime fiction prizes the following year, subsequently selling over a million copies. Another way would be to create a scandal and attract the attention of the media, but if the plot’s quality is below standard (see Mayer 2013), it will not sell. However, for Nele Neuhaus, I think that the following are the main reasons for her success:

#### **a) An Unusual Story Line**

Most crime fiction plots follow the pattern “a murder is committed – the detective looks for clues – the perpetrator is arrested”. However, the story line in ‘Schneewittchen muss sterben’ is quite different. In a small village in the Taunus region, two girls vanish, and Tobias, their childhood friend, is convicted for murder. After serving eleven years in prison, he returns to the village, just at the time when the remains of one girl are found. The police start a new investigation into this case and are finally able to identify the real perpetrator, and Tobias is proven to be innocent. This unusual story line has certainly helped the novel to stand out among the hundreds of other books published every year, which led to Nele Neuhaus’ breakthrough in 2010.

### **b) A Traditional Whodunit with a Closed Circle of Suspects**

Although some of Nele Neuhaus' books follow an unusual plot, as described above, the underlying pattern is always a traditional 'whodunit': The detectives (Pia Kirchhoff and Oliver von Bodenstein) investigate a crime, ask suspects, slowly uncover clues, try to figure out who is who and who is related to whom, and who may have had a motive to kill the victim. Finally, they identify the perpetrator, normally just before the books end. The reader has the same information as the detectives and can therefore engage in the same investigation, keeping up the suspense.

One part of many whodunits is the closed circle of suspects. The British country house has long served as the model for this pattern, where all suspects belong to a certain group, and the detective is an outsider, who must try to find the perpetrator. This is true for several of Nele Neuhaus' novels, for example in 'Eine unbeliebte Frau' all the suspects are members of an equestrian farm, and in 'Schneewittchen muss sterben', nearly all the residents of the village of Altenhain act suspiciously and have something to hide. However, the number of characters in the 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series is very large compared to many other crime stories, and to illustrate this, let's take a look at the main characters in the novel 'Schneewittchen muss sterben'.

The first group of characters are the police at the regional criminal unit in Hofheim: The heroine is Pia Kirchhoff, detective inspector, working closely together with Oliver von Bodenstein, detective superintendent and head of the division of violent crime at the Hofheim police. Their colleagues are detective inspectors Kai Ostermann, Frank Behnke, Andreas Hasse and Kathrin Fachinger, and their boss is commissioner Dr. Nicola Engel. Family members of Pia and Oliver also appear in the book. The von Bodenstein family consists of Oliver, Leonora (his mother), Quentin (his brother), Cosima (his wife) and their three children (Lorenz, 25; Rosalie, 21; Sophia, 2). Pia Kirchhoff is divorced, and her former husband Hennig

Kirchhoff also works for the police as the chief of Frankfurt forensic investigation.

The second group of characters are the village people in Altenhain: The Sartorius family, with Tobias (protagonist, sentenced to 10 years in prison for murdering Laura and Stefanie), Hartmut (his father), and Rita (his mother). The two victims are Stefanie Schneeberger (her parents left the village shortly after the murder, so they do not appear in the novel) and Laura Wagner, with her family, Manfred (her father), Andrea (her mother), and two younger sisters. Other residents of Altenhain are the Terlinden family with Claudius (a local entrepreneur), Christine (his wife), and their twin sons, Lars (a banker) and Thies (who is autistic); the Lauterbach family with Gregor (former teacher of Tobias, Laura and Stefanie, and now minister of education in the state of Hesse), and Daniela (his wife, a doctor); the Fröhlich family, living next to the Lauterbach house, with Amelie (a young girl who grew up in Berlin), Arne (her father), and Barbara (her stepmother); and finally Tobias' old friends, Nathalie Unger (alias Nadja von Bredow, a successful actress), Felix Pietsch, Jörg Richter, and Michael Dombrowski. Except for Amelie (who was not living in the village when the murder happened and is therefore an outsider) and Tobias' parents, there are no less than 14 suspects.

### **c) Regional Crime Fiction**

Regional crime fiction has been an important part of the German literary scene since the late 1980s. These are novels whose plots place a strong emphasis on the region in which the story occurs (see Frackman 2014). However, some authors seem to place so much emphasis on the correct description of local roads and customs that they forget to write a good plot, and therefore many of these "Regio-Krimis" have been unfavourably reviewed. Despite this criticism, many of them sell very well in the area they are located in as readers can easily identify themselves

with the region. As a result, some authors are happy about their books being labeled as “Regio-Krimi” because it enhances sales, while others strictly reject this label as it classifies their books as inferior, thus damaging prospects for long-term and nationwide success. Nevertheless, there is some regional crime fiction which has been very successful nationwide, among them the novels by Michael Kobr and Volker Klüpfel about detective inspector Kluftinger in the Allgäu region (“Allgäu-Krimis”, 6 million copies sold), and the East Frisia crime fiction by Klaus-Peter Wolf (“Ostfriesen-Krimis”, 4 million copies sold) – however it must be noted that these national bestsellers have hardly been translated into other languages, probably because their strong regional emphasis is unappealing for readers who are unfamiliar with details of local German cultural peculiarities.

Nele Neuhaus is among those rejecting the label “Regio-Krimi” for her crime fiction, the ‘Bodenstein and Kirchhoff’ series, although she has without doubt benefited from the regional setting of her novels in the Taunus. Before she was signed by the List publishing house, the most important way to sell her books was through local booksellers, and the appeal at that time was that she offered regional crime fiction. She says that the reason why she chose the Taunus as the location of her novels was simply convenience. Compared to her first book ‘Unter Haien’ which is set in New York, she did not need to spend much time researching the details of the location, as she knew much of it because she had been living there for several decades (njo 2014).

In some of Nele Neuhaus’ books, we can find some distinctive features which are typical of the Taunus, a mountainous rural area north of Frankfurt in central Germany with forests, but also with some agriculture remaining. It is an affluent and popular neighbourhood due to its proximity to Frankfurt with many people commuting, helped by good rail and road connections. The Taunus is known as an area with one of the

highest average per-capita incomes in Germany, and this is reflected in some of Nele Neuhaus' crime fiction. For example, the first novel in the 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series, 'Eine unbeliebte Frau', is set around an equestrian farm, something that would hardly be found in a poor district. In the fifth novel, 'Wer Wind sät', the plot revolves around wind energy, which has become a very important feature in the German mountains, so this plot could not have been placed in an urban setting. While Bonter (2015) counts the 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series among regional crime fiction, I think that the local setting helped her to start the series, but in later books the regional focus is less distinct.

#### **d) Character Development**

Most crime fiction is published as a series, where the readers can follow the lives and work of the protagonists (normally these are the detectives) over several volumes. If a protagonist is popular with readers, they want to know how his or her life continues, and are thus likely to buy other books from the same series. This will lead to increased sales, which in turn will most probably encourage the author to keep the protagonists alive and write more books, therefore further increasing sales. Bonter (2015:94) regards the strong emphasis on the private lives of the detectives as typical of German regional crime fiction, although it must be noted that this concept is common among crime fiction authors worldwide, one prominent example that comes to mind is Kurt Wallander, the inspector in the novels by Swedish author Henning Mankell.

Nele Neuhaus' 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series is no exception. In the first book, Oliver von Bodenstein was happily married, while Pia Kirchhoff had just started working at the regional criminal unit in Hofheim, headed by Oliver, after divorcing her husband. During the series, Oliver's marriage breaks apart, while Pia finds a new partner and marries. Over time, the reader also gets to know their families, e.g. Oliver's father who



plays a main role in 'Wer Wind sät'. Pia's extended family is introduced in the seventh book, 'Die Lebenden und die Toten', and an important episode from Oliver's childhood forms the plot in the newest book, 'Im Wald'. While one may argue that too much emphasis on the private lives dilutes the storyline and bloats the size of the novels (most of Nele Neuhaus' books have between 500 and 600 pages), it is also true that tension may rise if the protagonists are personally affected by the crimes.

### **e) Marketing and Social Media**

After an author has written a book, he or she wants to sell it. If it is a great book and wins an award, the book will be featured in the media and sales are likely to increase. If a book is sold by a publishing house, the publisher will promote it via its sales channels. However, in the case of Nele Neuhaus, neither of these approaches was possible, as she never gained an award and she published the first books herself using print on demand. Print on demand ("Book-on-Demand" in German) first appeared in 1998, but still makes up only a very small part of the German book market. It has opened up the market to unknown authors by giving them a chance to produce a book with an ISBN (Schrape 2013:130-131). As mentioned above, Nele Neuhaus promoted her books herself, being very successful on a regional level, before being 'discovered' by a large publisher. This self-made story of a nameless writer, who becomes a bestselling author, has been received extremely favourably by the media, not only in Germany (Lückemeier 2011, njo 2014 and Rost 2014 are examples of dozens of similar newspaper articles), but also abroad, e.g. in Korea (Jong 2013).

Nowadays, many authors keep in contact with readers via social media. Nele Neuhaus is no exception, as she has her own homepage (<http://www.neleneuhaus.de>), and is also using Facebook and Twitter. But when she published her first book in 2005, social media was not as

prevalent as today, so she relied on personal contact with readers. However, the spread of social media coincided with her rising book sales, and she used it extensively, being mentioned as a prime example of an author in the age of digital media, although she stopped using Facebook for some time, as it was too time-consuming (Rost 2014).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Nele Neuhaus is one of the most successful German crime fiction authors, whose books are also widely translated and published abroad. This makes her stand out among most other German authors, with only Sebastian Fitzek and Ferdinand von Schirach coming to mind as contemporary bestselling German crime fiction authors whose works have been translated into several other languages. As shown above, Nele Neuhaus' success is based on a combination of several factors. Regarding the plot, the regional setting has helped her to build up a local fan base, encouraging her to continue writing in the early stages of her career. By choosing a traditional whodunit-plot in combination with a police procedural, she is playing it safe and appeals to the taste of the masses and not just a niche market. Within these restrictions, the unusual storyline of 'Schneewittchen muss sterben' was the main reason for her breakthrough. The serialisation of her 'Bodenstein and Kirchhoff' series, including detailed descriptions of the detectives' private lives, helps to keep up interest among readers. Regarding marketing, her self-made story has helped her to gain the attention of the mass media, and her intensive use of social media helps her to keep in close contact with her readers. In conclusion, Nele Neuhaus has achieved success by combining traditional whodunit fiction with German regional crime fiction, adding an unusual storyline, and doing well at marketing.

## Sources

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### **Appendix: Nele Neuhaus’ Bibliography Including Translations**

Source: Author’s compilation, based on the database at the German National Library (Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, <http://www.dnb.de>) and additional online search, as of 28<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

Bodenstein-and-Kirchhoff Series:

- (1) *Eine unbeliebte Frau*. Monsenstein und Vannerdat, Münster 2006; List, Berlin 2009.
  - o Croatian: Nevoljena žena (2012)

- Italian: La donna malvista (2012)
- Korean: Sarang patchi motan yōja 사랑받지못한여자 (2012)
- Chinese: Bu shou huan ying de nü ren 不受欢迎的女人 (2013)
- Russian: Nenavistnaja frau – Ненавистная фрау (2013)
- Turkish: Sevimleyen kadin (2013)
- Bulgarian: Ubijstvoto na misterioznata zena – Убийството на мистериозната жена (2014)
- Greek: Mia antipathētikē gynaika – Μια αντιπαθητική γυναίκα (2014)
- Japanese: Akujo wa jisatsu shinai 悪女は自殺しない (2015)
- Dutch: Een onbeminderde vrouw (2016)
- Polish: Nielubiana (2016)

(2) *Mordsfreunde*. Monsenstein und Vannerdat, Münster 2007; List, Berlin 2009.

- Korean: Nōmu-ch'inhan-ch'in'gudŭl 너무친한친구들 (2011)
- Croatian: Prijatelji do groba (2012)
- Chinese: Mou sha zhi you 谋杀之友 (2013)
- Polish: Przyjaciele po grób (2013)
- Russian: Druz'ja do smerti – Друзья до смерти (2013)
- Spanish: Amigos hasta la muerte (2013)
- Bulgarian: Priyateli do smŭrt – Приятели до смърт (2016)
- Dutch: Moordvrienden (2016)
- Japanese: Shitai wa emi o maneku 死体は笑みを招く (2016)

(3) *Tiefe Wunden*. List, Berlin 2009.

- French: Flétrissure (2011)
- Czech: Hluboké rány (2012)
- Italian: Ferite profonde (2012)
- Japanese: Fukai kizu 深い疵 (2012)

- Korean: Kipūn sangch'ō 깊은상처 (2012)
- Slovakian: Hlboké rany (2012)
- Chinese: Shen shen de shang kou 深深的伤口 (2013)
- Croatian: Duboke rane (2013)
- Dutch: Diepe wonden (2013)
- Polish: Głębokie rany (2013)
- Russian: Glubokie rany – Глубокие раны (2014)
- Spanish: Algunas heridas nunca se curan (2014)
- English: The ice queen (2015)

(4) *Schneewittchen muss sterben*. List, Berlin 2010.

- Dutch: Sneeuwwitje moet sterven (2011)
- Italian: Biancaneve deve morire (2011)
- Korean: Paeksöl-kongju-ege-chugŭm-ül 백설공주에게죽음을 (2011)
- Chinese: Bai xue gong zhu fei si bu ke 白雪公主非死不可 (2012)
- Czech: Sněhurka musí zemřít (2012)
- English: Snow White must die (2012)
- French: Blanche-Neige doit mourir (2012)
- Portugese: Branca de Neve tem que morrer (2012)
- Russian: Belosnežka dolžna umeret – Белоснежка должна умереть (2012)
- Serbian: Snežana mora umreti (2012)
- Spanish: Blancanieves debe morir (2012)
- Croatian: Snjeguljica mora umrijeti (2013)
- Greek: Ē chionatē prepei na pethanei – Η Χιονάτη πρέπει να πεθάνει. (2013)
- Polish: Śnieżka musi umrzeć (2013)
- Japanese: Shirayukihime niwa shinde morau 白雪姫には死んでもらう (2013)

- Latvian: Sniegbaltītei jāmirst (2014)
- Lithuanian: Snieguolė turi mirti (2014)
- Macedonian: Snežana mora da umre (2014)
- Swedish: Snövit ska dö (2015)
- Thai: Snōw wīth t̄xng t̄āy สโนว์ไวท์ต้องตาย (2015)
- Danish: Snehvide skal dø (2016)
- Estonian: Lumivalgeke peab surema (2016)
- Finnish: Lumikin on kuoltava (2016)
- Turkish: Pamuk Prenses Ölmeli (2016)

(5) *Wer Wind sät*. Ullstein, Berlin 2011.

- Korean: Param-ül-ppurinŭn-cha 바람을뿌리는자 (2012)
- French: Vent de sang (2013)
- Dutch: Wie wind zaait (2013)
- Italian: Chi semina vento (2013)
- Czech: Kdo seje vítr (2014)
- Polish: Kto sieje wiatr (2014)
- Russian: Kto posejal veter – Kto посеял ветер (2014)
- Croatian: Tko sije vjetar (2015)
- Spanish: Quien siembra vientos recoge tempestades (2015)
- Estonian: Kes külvab tuult (2016)
- Danish: Den der sår vind (2017)

(6) *Böser Wolf*. Ullstein, Berlin 2012.

- Korean: Saakhan nŭktae 사악한늑대 (2013)
- Dutch: Boze wolf (2014)
- English: Bad wolf (US)/Big bad wolf (UK) (2014)
- French: Méchant loup (2014)
- Italian: Lupo cattivo (2014)

- Polish: Zły wilk (2014)
- Russian: Zloj volk – Злой волк (2014)
- Lithuanian: Piktas vilkas (2015)
- Portuguese: Lobo mau (2015)
- Latvian: Dusmigais vilks (2016)

(7) *Die Lebenden und die Toten*. Ullstein, Berlin 2014.

- Dutch: De levenden en de doden (2015)
- Korean: Sanjawajug eunja 산자와죽은자 (2015)
- Polish: Żywi i umarli (2015)
- English: I am your judge (US)/To catch a killer (UK) (2016)
- French: Les Vivants et les Morts (2016)
- Greek: Egó tha se dikásō – Εγώ θα σε δικάσω (2016)

(8) *Im Wald*. Ullstein, Berlin 2016.

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*Unter Haien*. Monsenstein und Vannerdat, Münster 2005; revised edition: Prospero, Münster 2009.

- English: Swimming with sharks (2013)
- Korean: Sang-eoui dosi 상어의 도시 (2014)

*Sommer der Wahrheit*. Ullstein, Berlin 2014. [published as Nele Löwenberg]

- Dutch: Zomer van de waarheid (2015)
- Korean: Yeo leum eul sam kin so nyeo 여름을 삼킨 소녀 (2015)
- Polish: Ostatnie lato w Nebrasce (2015)

*Straße nach Nirgendwo*. Ullstein, Berlin 2015. [published as Nele Löwenberg]

- Korean: Kkeut na ji anh neun yeo leum 끝나지 않는 여름 (2016)