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- A family novel set against the backdrop of contemporary German history
- *Poetically courageous and psychologically confident, Lina Schwenk tells of the fatal happiness drug of symbiotic closeness. A beguiling debut!* – Angelika Overath
- *Not a superfluous word, not a dispensable twist in Lina Schwenk's work.* – taz
- **Longlisted for the German Book Award (Deutscher Buchpreis)**

Lina Schwenk

Blind Ghosts

A Novel

In *Blind Ghosts*, Lina Schwenk tells a touching family story from the 1950s to the present day. In her haunting debut novel, she explores a period when urgent questions collide with profound silence.

Olivia, Rita and Karl's daughter, has always been aware of the adults' fear of another war after 1945, even though there has been peace in Germany for years. Karl persistently checks the pantry for supplies, and time and again the family seek refuge together in the cellar when their father fears the invasion of the Russians. For Olivia and her sister Martha, it's a game that they quietly submit to, partly because they have long known that their parents don't have the words to explain and that the more they ask, the louder the silence becomes. 'Soon I'll be dead,' thinks Olivia too, as her parents' anxiety gradually becomes her own. In her first flat of her own, Olivia misses the cellar - the small shelter of her childhood, which at least meant one thing: family time. She only realises the long cracks that extend from her parents to her generation, when she later tries to protect her own daughter from this feeling of threat. But then February 2022 arrives, and what previously seemed like a phantom suddenly becomes frighteningly real. *Blind Ghosts* is a multi-layered and moving novel that exposes deeply rooted fears against the backdrop of contemporary German history and explores the strange and enraptured in people with a keen instinct.

Lina Schwenk, born in Bochum in 1988, initially worked as a nurse and in medical refugee aid. She then studied medicine in Witten, St Etienne and Cardiff and has been working as a doctor ever since. Her texts have appeared in numerous anthologies. This text was nominated for the Alfred Döblin prize.

Every family has secrets, but some families' secrets have intergenerational consequences. In Lina Schwenk's debut novel, "Blinde Geister," the narrator, Olivia, is surrounded by people who bear the psychological scars of World War II. Her father, Karl, constantly checks the pantry for supplies, and he and Olivia's mother, Rita, retreat to the cellar with Olivia and her sister, Martha, when they cannot overcome their fear of another war, even though Germany has been at peace for many years. Olivia and Martha play along with their parents' "game" at first, but it's something they don't dare ask about. The more questions they ask, the louder the silence surrounding their family's secrets becomes. At some level, they realize that their parents simply have no words to explain why they behave the way they do.

Martha's solution is to flee her parents' house; Olivia cannot bear to do this, so Rita presses her to move into her own apartment. However, Olivia misses the cellar since she has come to associate it with family time, and her mental health seems to suffer. Over time, it dawns on her that she has inherited her parents' fear of unseen threats, and she is influenced by other characters who were marked by the war: the sadistic gym teacher, who has Olivia and the girls in her class reenact battles as sport. A nurse in the psychiatric hospital who handles patients the way they were handled under the Nazis. The "King," an elderly patient Olivia cares for as a nurse in the hospital. All these people shape the course of Olivia's life and her own relationships. Finally, she meets someone who understands: her husband, Paul, whose family has its own secrets. Silence characterizes Olivia's relationship with Paul, and they often communicate without words, in the way only truly kindred spirits can.

It's not until Olivia has her own daughter, Ava, that cracks really begin to show, and it becomes clear just how much trauma has been passed down to her. Olivia tries her best to shield Ava from the fear that has characterized her own life, only to discover that this is ultimately impossible. When the Russians declare war on Ukraine in February 2022, the "ghosts" that have haunted Olivia and her family become shockingly real.

With an excerpt from "Blinde Geister," Lina Schwenk was a 2022 finalist in the open mike Berlin and for the Alfred-Döblin Prize in 2025. She received the GWK-Förderpreis für Literatur in 2024 for her unpublished manuscript. The novel is on the shortlist for the debut prize of the Harbour Front Literaturfestival 2025 and was longlisted for the 2025 German Book Prize.

The War

...was a long time ago, so people say. More than twenty years already. We're living in peace now. I stomp through the snow. It's piled up in peaks next to the street and hides the sidewalk, gray at the edges and at the tips. Martha is walking a few yards in front of me. Her jacket has slid up under her school satchel, her hips sway back and forth, her pleated skirt swinging along like an accordion. I try to make my skirt swing like that, humming a melody, but Martha doesn't hear me. My feet are ice-cold and wet in leather shoes, as always happens after just a few steps in the winter. The apple trees along the side of the road have white buds on their branches; I take one as I pass and bite into the ice crystal. As I do this, I move more slowly; the distance between Martha and me increases. She had all As on her last report card. She is smart and doesn't have to wear glasses like I do. She found out that Rita and Karl bought an apartment in the city. I don't want her to move out, so I'm doing everything I can to make sure she will stay. I hang up her wet towel if it falls off the hook after she showers, and I've stopped borrowing her clothes. As we arrive at school, she turns to me briefly and tilts her head. At any rate. When I step into the gymnasium, my glasses fog up; I can't see who's already there. I have skipped first-period gym class so often that Rita and Karl got letters at home. Rita furrowed her brow, and Karl had the letter read out loud to him, listening with closed eyes as if it were a story. He leaned back in his big armchair and put his long legs, which he normally propped up, down on the floor. Then he looked at me.

"What don't you like about gym class?" His gaze was reluctant, as if gym class were something one didn't talk about.

Suddenly, I was embarrassed. Since then, I haven't skipped. Not because of his question, but because of his gaze. I don't want to be the weak one.

Now I can see again. The locker room is already full of girls; there's hardly a free bench. Henni's bag is over there where I usually change, so I find a section of wall. With the wall at my back, I pull my sweat suit over my sweater. The more cloth there is covering my skin, the less painful this will be. From the corner of my eye, I can see that Henni and Gitte are doing the same thing. The two of them sit right behind me in German class. When they aren't whispering, they pelt me with paper balls that hit my neck hard. I pretend I don't notice. When I undress in the evening, the balls fall to the floor. I unfold them all, but there has never been a message on any of them. We are twelve girls in total; in other classes, it would be loud and shrill, but now even Gitte is silent. We're preparing ourselves. Henni winds bandages around her knee, hides the bruises. For me, it takes a long time until a bruise becomes visible; bumping into a table is not enough, I really have to hit myself hard. But my elbows are blue.

Only when everyone is changed and ready do we go into the gymnasium. The usual school rules don't apply here. No one has to walk alone; we all line up, if not next to Henni and Gitte. Martha has a different gym teacher than I do; she doesn't skip class. She says physical education is essential if you want to achieve something in life. She even trains with a gymnastics club in the evenings. Karl takes her there; she's seldom at home, already planning her studies. She wants to be a teacher.

We come into the gymnasium. The air is stale and thick. Our teacher is already stacking up the benches. A milky light shines through the narrow windows below the ceiling, making his cheeks seem even more sunken. His face always overshadows his eyes.

"Good morning, ladies!" he bellows.

Girls and boys have separate gym classes. We stand straight and answer as one.

Then we trot off, one after the other; I'm always last, and that's OK with me. Every gym class begins the same way. We run ten laps around the school courtyard or, on days when it snows, like today, around the gymnasium.

"So that no one sees our blood in the snow," I hear Henni whispering.

At the beginning of the year, we ran around in confusion, some faster than others; Gitte was always the fastest. Now we're a creature with twenty-four feet, in lockstep left and right, and left and right; that's good, even if it feels like we're marching into a storm.

Huffing and puffing, we line up against one wall of the gymnasium, with the benches on the other side. Henni jostles me as she goes by. She has really broad shoulders from doing push-ups.

"First, we'll crawl!" screams the teacher. As if we ever did anything else. We always start with crawling. Creeping through invisible mud, over invisible stones.

"Let's go!" bellows the teacher. He could have whispered; we would have obeyed. Henni throws herself on the ground, dragging herself forward with her elbows. I have developed a technique that is less painful. I keep my upper body close to the ground and tighten my stomach muscles. I never put my weight on just one knee or hand; I try to put less strain on my elbows. They hurt especially badly at night, when I want to read in bed. I have to hold the book up in the air without propping myself up. That's so difficult that I turn the light off after ten minutes. I miss reading a lot.

"Stoooooop!" screams the teacher. "Push-ups!"

I try to keep my bottom down; otherwise, he'll kick it. I'm already sweating down my neck; my sweater scratches my body. We crawl along: left arm, right knee, right arm, left knee, until we reach the trench. It's made of stacks of benches; behind those are knapsacks for the next

exercise. I can smell the other girls' sweat. Henni blows me an air kiss and grins. Then she comes over and, while she's protected by the trench, she grabs three bricks from her knapsack and puts them in mine. She does that every time, and although I know the teacher sees her, he doesn't react. Weakness is always punished.

That summer, Rita discovered the welts on my shoulders. She called the school. The teacher was supposed to call back. She rubbed salve into the spots and put her arms around my chest. I leaned against her and wanted to say, "Soon I'll be dead."

But she let go again so fast that I didn't say anything. I wanted to stay there; she smelled so good. Later on, I told Karl what had happened. I can't remember what he said, but he showed me another technique for tying the straps. Since then, it hurts less, and there are hardly any traces on my skin.

"Lesson number one!" screams the teacher. "Heads up!"

He throws tennis balls at us; I jump to the side, onto Henni's foot. The next ball hits my cheek. Automatically, I do push-ups as punishment; my arms start to tremble only after twenty. For a while, I was doing extra push-ups at night.

The teacher called back the same day. Karl answered the phone, Rita was down by the river. I heard what he said; all of his sentences were interrupted. I heard how his voice got softer.

"Preparation for life," "Nonsense!" "Now listen to me," "Those are little girls," but at some point, he didn't say anything more, and I wished that Rita had answered instead. When she came home later, I slipped into the hall and listened.

"What did the teacher say?" she wanted to know, and Karl mumbled something about restructuring in gym class, something about transition and change. Rita got loud and angry; the cabinet door slammed, and when she screamed, "No predatory youth," I ran into the kitchen.

"Lesson number two," echoes through the gymnasium. "Creeeeeep!"

This one's the most difficult – moving forward soundlessly. I'm always the slowest one, but I believe I'm also the quietest. I hear all the others panting. We move close together, eyes forward, the next trench is still miles away.

I got my period the day before yesterday and showed Rita right away. I was so proud, I thought that would be enough to get into the club, even without breasts. Most girls in my class have had their periods for a while now; they write each other notes when it's time; they giggle and go to the bathroom together.

Rita gave me thick pads, which I stuffed in a bunch into my pants, even if thin red lines were only visible on the topmost one. It looked like my admission ticket. How do you say that you're part of the crowd and you want to go to the bathroom with the others? I still wear pads today, and I find it difficult to close my legs when I'm creeping.

"Lesson number three!" screams the teacher. "Taaaaaaake cover!"

We jump up, run to the trench, and throw ourselves into it. He's not allowed to yell *attack* anymore. There was a long parents' meeting about that. *Take cover* is also taboo.

"There aren't many more like him. They're all dying out. My mother said you have to feel really sorry for him," said Henni yesterday in German class.

The teacher throws balls against the side of the trench; we duck. I'm not sorry for him. When he has recess duty, he usually stays in one corner. With his head, his bald neck stretched out a bit and stiffly, he looks as if he were wearing a big hat. His hair is shaved around his ears. He doesn't interfere when a fight breaks out; he just smokes one cigarette after another, his fingers in short black leather gloves, his other arm dangling from his body. Very seldom does he

bellow something across the courtyard. I wait behind the pillars of the awning until he disappears into the building when the first bell rings. Only when it's snowing does he stop and stare into the sky.

Recently, I asked Martha whether she wants to become a teacher like him. She rolled her eyes; she was on the go again. I had gone into her room without knocking and closed the door behind me. She was packing her bag.

"Don't be stupid," she hissed.

"He makes us crawl until our hands bleed," I said, and held my calloused palms out to her. She turned to me and sat on the bed. I didn't expect that; I avoided her gaze.

"Think of it like this," she said after a while, lowering her voice, "if the Russians come again, you'll be prepared."

I glanced quickly at the door and was relieved that I had closed it

"They're not coming," I whispered.

"Oh, or someone else." She rolled her eyes. I believe at that moment we were both thinking of Karl, who checked whether the pantry was full, of the silence that set in after that—the first warning signals. Usually, before he spoke his next word, Martha took to her heels, fleeing the house. I stayed home. In the morning, I could sense what kind of day it would be by the way Karl came into the kitchen.

Martha stood up again and took her bag. But before she left the room, she touched my shoulder briefly with one of her long fingers and said, "I'm sure the loony will be replaced soon; the ones like him should be locked up."

Suddenly, Gitte is crouching behind me, slaps me on the behind, and squawks, "Ohhhhhh, Olivia got her period."

Henni joins in. I try to hide behind a knapsack.

"Lesson number four!" screams the teacher. But I don't hear it because Henni and Gitte are forcing me out of the trench. They are crawling toward me.

"Taaaaake cover!" bellows the teacher, and a tennis ball hits me in the head.

I drop to the floor to get behind the bench.

"We leave the fallen behind," says the teacher right into my ear. He says it very softly, for this is also forbidden. I listen to the other girls' steps, how the lockstep passes me by, the rhythm fills my head, swells, it sounds like a whole army. The floor shakes, and I push myself back into the trench. A girl waves me over to her; she's crouching with another girl from my class. They press their backs to the benches, their eyes wide open. One of them is holding her arm as if she's wounded. The place they're sitting isn't safe; they can be hit from the side. I motion to them to follow me, but they don't move. They're trembling, and I crouch next to them against the side of the trench and feel the trembling in me too. I hold a sweaty, cold hand, and together we listen to the screams outside. They are getting shriller. Only the volume of the teacher's voice doesn't change. Finally, he whistles.

"Get up!" he screams.

I help the girl next to me up, stick out an arm to push myself up, and reach into a puddle. She walks in front of me, her head lowered, and lines up with the others.

Our faces are all wet and smeared. I run to the end of the line.

"Let's go!" he's standing right in front of me.

"Volga," I say.

"Louder!" he says.

"Volga." My voice isn't as loud as I would like it to be.

"Where?" he yells at me.

"Flows southeast," I reply.

He takes another step.

"As if. To the northwest!" screams the next girl, loudly and clearly.

His steps on the gymnasium floor set the pace.

"Yenisei. From south to north."

"Amur, border river to the southeast."

"Ural, first south, then west over the border to Kazakhstan."

"Irtysh, flows to the north."

"Kolyma, south to north."

"Don, flows southeast."

A cool breeze blows through the gymnasium, as if someone had opened a door. It's the end of this hated class. I have to go right back out into the snow, into the courtyard. And yet I want to stay in this line longer, standing and shouting. When it's my turn again, my cheeks are red and hot, and the hair on my arms is standing up. I keep my eyes forward and scream river names and points of the compass.

[Translator's note: this next section comes from a bit later in the book.]

Silence

...reigns here. I miss the dogs. There are only a few people who scream a lot. Laughter usually fades quickly in the rooms, although it is not forbidden. The droning of the radio in the hall is new, but it doesn't say anything. It's for the nurses' rhythm; they need something to sing along with. Sometimes it's Bach, and everyone smiles for a little while. My room is not at the end of the hall, but it's also not at the beginning. Somewhere in between. My roommate has just overcome her delusions and only murmurs when she believes she's alone. I'm happy that she's there; otherwise, the night would be too big in the shadow of the empty beds. Our steps echo when we walk around the room. I'm not sure if it was this way last time around. The contents of my suitcase fit in the wardrobe behind the door; I put all my things in there. In the bathroom, I find a razor blade glued under the sink. For the next few weeks, I won't shave my legs. I will only wash sometimes, especially not my face or hair. They must be sticky, knotty, like my soul. By contrast, my hair is beautiful when I brush it. Soft and shiny brown. My skin is clear, and the little wrinkles that form when I smile emphasize the shape of my face. I'm happy about the transformation in the end, when I'm healed, when I once again start to shower and scrub. When my hair tickles the nurses' noses as they take my blood pressure in the morning, they smile because it smells good. I learn things. First, there's breakfast. Before that, I take a lap around the park, through the chestnut trees; they hide the high iron fences behind them almost completely. Forgotten barbed wire curls on them like sheep's wool. Perhaps I can stay here until the leaves are all gone. The sun shines through the branches, introducing a golden hour that has just begun. If there were no wind, it would be warm. Quickly, I dig both hands into the earth, rub it into my skin.

The tables are full; there's hardly any staff. All the people look like patients. Dull gazes, no contact, everyone is focused on their tray. I know that people notice me as I stand there; everyone sees me. A new patient. I search for familiar faces; I need just one that says to me it's OK that I am here. I don't want to, but I feel insanely guilty, as if I had no right to remain. Even if Rita always says there's a time in everyone's life when they're best accommodated here, simply so they can be as they are. She has never been a patient in a psychiatric hospital.

There's an empty seat in front of a tray; I jump when a nurse takes me by the arm from behind. Firm grip. She leads me, smiles at me, and says: "enjoy your meal, Olivia."

I recognize her. Irma. It's written in big letters on her name tag. She's from the time of the dormitory rooms when all the patients were washed with the same washcloth in the mornings, when the dirt was left between their legs. I heard Rita say this to Karl, in one of her loud sentences behind a locked door. That she saved him from those washcloths, from those beds, that therefore, he must help her now. He did not ask with what.

I push Irma's hand away. There's milk soup, small hard slices of bread, a dab of honey and butter, coffee. Beautiful, hot coffee. I eat everything. Tilt my head side to side while doing so. Mumble into my lap as I have seen others do. The earth sleeps dark under all my fingernails, leaving black streaks on the white cup.

My suitcase has a double bottom; Karl gave it to me at some point. He advised me to leave my passport in there – and a few bills. Today, there are books and chocolate hidden there. My appointment with the doctor isn't until midday, with Dr. Dor. I smile spontaneously when the nurse tells me this. Dr. Dor treated me last time. It was difficult to adhere to a curve with him, to form a wave that caused the voices to rise and then fade. A delusion was easier. It was more constant; it stayed. First, it focused on water, then light, then electricity. Where does it come

from and how can I trust that it will stay? Who's sitting on the other side of the switch? I heard Karl's voice in my head while I was speaking. Dr. Dor's eyes lit up when I asked that question. In the evenings, I turned the light off. With my eyes wide open, I waited through the nights and missed the morning until it was there.

A delusion is a matter of training; you have to stick with it. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but become more beautiful and silky with each session, smelling slightly sweet. Dr. Dor didn't say anything about this, but I'm sure he wrote it down in his cold files.

The delusion quickly took on a life of its own. It captured my roommate, who looked at me with evil eyes at night and betrayed me to the enemy. That got me valium. It captured Nurse Irma, who brought me poison in cups of coffee. I was forced to drink it until I spat it in her face. That brought Nurse Tom, who sniffed my pants and rubbed my hair between his fingers. He nibbled on my nipples when I was sleeping. He always had a pill for me, until I couldn't speak; I could no longer call the delusion by its name. That brought me Dr. Dor as my only visitor. The delusion made an exception for him. He reduced the number of pills, and when the morning sun succeeded in waking me, I was supposed to go home. He had said several times that it was time. Rita picked me up silently and brought me back. Then the bar in the basement had just opened, and Valentin was sitting on the steps smoking.

Irma comes in without knocking and tears me away from my thoughts. She's not smiling anymore; first, she inspects the whole room before looking into my eyes disparagingly. The smile in the dining room was for the others.

"Already settled in?" she asks stiffly, opening the window, wrinkling her nose. She wasn't fooled the last time. She gives me the tablets and a glass of water. I swallow them without delay, even if their effect is unpredictable. Then she reminds me how to get to the doctor's office.

"Thank you, nurse," I say. Emphasize the *nurse* and flinch as I finish. She disappears quickly. She looks friendly from behind.

My feet are still cold. I reluctantly leave my dirty sweater on, rub a little soap into my hair, making thick strands that close in around my face. That's art. The earth does the rest. Soon it will be midday; I can already smell the overcooked vegetables in the hall.

A troop of nurses comes toward me, in lockstep, a white jacket with long sleeves and full of ties shines on one arm like plucked angel's wings. I can only continue once the sound of their steps has faded. It takes a long time; I lean against the wall and wait.

"Usually, you can hear if you're safe," Karl said to me on one of our rare walks through the forest. "Just listen carefully, be patient, breathe quietly, and if you don't recognize the noises, wait."

When it's quiet, I see the red lamps over the room doors, as if the patients had shot off flare guns.

Dr. Dor opens the door himself after I have knocked, but I don't go in right away. I have to wait; he calls for me twice. I'm not at home here yet. He doesn't smile, looks gray and cool, examines me only when I look away.

"Please," he says, motioning to the soft chair in front of his desk. I stare out the window, searching for the beech limb that gives me something to look at. It must have been cut off. Just

open sky, interrupted by the usual iron bars. All the windows that can be opened here have bars on them.

"Suffocation or jail," said Dr. Dor to me once. Then sooner jail.

The hard gaze persists until I soften it up with tears. Dr. Dor passes me a tissue, and finally, the corners of his mouth move.

"What happened, Olivia?" he asks, a soft rasping from his throat. Not talking to him isn't an option. And while I'm speaking, I take a sip of water, rub a single drop from my lower lip with the back of my hand.

"What are the voices saying?" asks Dr. Dor, nodding encouragement. His big chin gleams in the light like fresh bacon.

"They say that the void is my home, they say the void is pure. Never go there again. It will be the last time. But how should I not go there?"

He nods and leans back. Forgets to give me another tissue. The first one is just a little white speck on the floor. He looks up at me.

"Why did you stop taking your medications, Olivia?"

Each *Olivia* is like a kiss on my outer ear.

"I ran out."

"You can get more here," replies Dr. Dor. "It's good that you've come back."

I have to grin, broadly and without thinking, and I startle. But he's smiling too.

Rita and Karl do not come to visit. They should not come; that's one of the rules. We talk on the telephone sometimes, and Rita is friendlier than usual, asks a lot of questions, probably makes some notes. I don't like that. I don't get any answers; she says, "Now it's all about you."

When Rita answers, I ask for Karl. Usually, she says he can't come right now. Each time, I reply: "How nice that at least the psychiatric hospital has a room for me." She never falls for this. Only one time did her voice break. It's more and more difficult for me to hang up; I want to know what the two of them are doing while their daughter is sleeping in the psychiatric hospital. Whether they still eat? Dance? Or are they both just crouching in the basement again?