

MARTINA CLAVADETSCHER

## THE HORRORS OF OTHERS

How do you show something that everyone has seen for a long time?

Martina Clavadetscher, winner of the Swiss Book Prize and one of the most renowned German-language authors, writes mischievously and deliberately about the elephant in the room and asks about the responsibility of literature.

A skilfully told story filled with striking images, a novel, whose frightening topicality is already evident in its title: This could be anyone's story. In any country, at any time. As long as no one learns from the horrors of others.

While ice-skating, a boy comes across a dead body in the ice, which marks the beginning of a series of events. Kern, a wealthy heir, can no longer ignore the fact that his eyesight is deteriorating. But does he even want to see clearly? Then there's Kern's centenarian mother, who spends most of the day in bed on the top floor of the villa yet still manages to pull the strings with brutal consistency. Schibig, a lonely archivist who gets swept away by Rosa, an old woman from a caravan who takes a spectacular interest in unspectacular events — because everything is connected: the dead man in the ice, mysterious meetings of the top-hats at the Adler inn, Kern's wife who refuses to eat chalk to get pregnant, and a planned NS-memorial, a lot of money on Argentinian number accounts, menacing mountain dragons, and other persistent legends.

MARTINA CLAVADETSCHER is a writer and playwright. After studying German literature, linguistics and philosophy, she worked for various German-language theatres. She was awarded the 2021 Swiss Book Prize for her previous novel.

- Family secrets at the foot of the Frakmont - how a mysterious dead body in the ice leads to the dark side of Swiss history
- Clavadetscher cleverly mixes various literary forms, plays with sound and rhythm and convinces with a precise and at the same time very poetic language.' SRF, Luzia Stettler
- „A tribute to the primal human power of storytelling.“ From the laudation for the Swiss Book Prize

2025 | 336 pages | hardcover | € 25 ,–

1.

The boy first hears about methane gas at break.

Someone from the year above shows him a video of a flame shooting up from the ice and explains how easy it is:

‘You just smash a hole into a thinner section of ice with a pickaxe, hold a lighter to it – and boom, up it goes.’

That offhand explanation, and the thrill it sparks, are enough to send the thirteen-year-old skating out towards the middle of the lake the very next day. Later, in his statement, he’ll say he wishes he hadn’t.

But the disaster happens and it happens in a place that cannot really be considered amenable. There are the jagged rocks of the Frakmont, the craggy fringe of the Alps, the uneven valleys, the frozen moor. Peat clings to the landscape, and the marsh breathes out a mix of noxious gases and age-old legends that lie buried like clumps of clay in ancient soil. Just off to one side, in a hollow, lies a former battlefield with a fitting name: *Ödwilerfeld*. Beyond it, more fields, farmland interrupted by motorways and railway embankments. Industrial buildings crop up again and again with storage depots for timber, steel or gravel. Livestock sometimes graze in the fields here and there. Winter is reluctant to leave. A frosty February wind cuts through the moorland. The local garden centres are frozen in time, filled with dry stone fountains and sculptures, frost-bitten Zen gardens and marble Greek gods. Properties are fenced in with noise barriers and hedges, with little PRIVATE signs hanging everywhere.

It is Saturday. The murmur of a radio drifts into the day. The signal tunes in on a pop song, before a cheerful voice fades the music out:

*The local police, together with experts from the Research Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape, have tested the ice on Lake Ödwil in several places and have now opened up the majority to the public. From today, we’re allowed to walk or skate on the marked zones. It’s the first time in 35 years that the ice on Lake Ödwil is thick enough. So get on out there and have a fab weekend despite the cold.*

The radio presenter plays *We didn’t start the fire*. Billy Joel has just started listing names – *Harry Truman, Doris Day, Red China, Johnnie Ray* – when the thirteen-year-old boy, sitting at the edge of the lake, tightens the laces on his black skates. He is a forward in the Under-19 hockey team and, according to the stopwatch, the fastest sprinter of them all. Just after 1pm, he ducks under the red-and-white tape. He carries a pickaxe and a lighter under his ski jacket. He wants to find the methane bubbles. He wants to make the fire breathe. He wants to film the explosion. He wants to upload the video. He wants to be famous.

The blades of his skates glide towards the adventure. Soft powder snow lies on the untouched ice. The regular scraping of metal accompanies his breathing; he is making good headway and he even thinks he can see the first bubbles, when he stumbles and falls to his knees.

He swears. He can guess what's happened. His right skate has snagged on something. The boy crawls up to it. A mix of anger and curiosity drives him forward. He wants to see what ruined his perfect run. The obstruction is blue and looks like a bit of denim. He yanks at the fabric. He can't get hold of it. It's too taut. Something hard is underneath, like a piece of frozen wood. He brushes the snow aside with his glove until he gets a good view.

He stops breathing. A piercing scream shatters the silence.

He snaps back as if he were attached to a rubber band, lands on his backside and scrambles away, sliding and flailing, crawling backwards on all fours like an insect, until he's finally back on his skates. His sprint back to shore breaks his personal record.

At 1.38pm, a call is logged with police HQ. The message is relayed correctly.

This is clearly not a matter of life or death.

His phone lights up for the second time. It lies mute between two stacks of paper, then goes dark again, unseen. Schibig sits behind the piles, his hair uncombed. His gaze and furrowed brow are focused on the silver scissors he is using to cut out some newspaper clippings. In fact his entire living room is full of papers, archive boxes, books that are already giving off a sweetish scent – only the kitchen, where he heated up his frankfurters in his kettle, smells oddly salty. His days pass in an orderly fashion. The paths and places are familiar: the quiet desk in the archive; his small flat, which is starting to look more and more like the archive itself; the drives between the two places in his old square VW Polo; the jogging route around the lake; even the shopping centres. None of these rattles him any more. The breathing exercises help. Then there's the old checklist from the therapist that he goes through when he first notices the signs: *breathe, clench your fists, controlled yawning, say 'stop' and remember – it will pass*. He manages fine in his day-to-day life. The kettle thing is an outlier. And ever since his ex-girlfriend stopped popping in to check on him, he has not had to pretend to be actively participating in normal life. Schibig knows now that his paper world cannot simply be synchronised with the world out there. Everything moves too fast for him. The present bolts ahead and he limps after it, at most managing to collect scraps it leaves behind so that maybe one day they'll add up to something.

Schibig puts the scissors aside and carefully places the clippings into a folder. Content, he breathes in the silence and gives a brief drumroll with his fingers on the edge of the desk, when the phone rings once more.

It says *Phil* on the display. His ex-girlfriend's brother. A police officer who has never stopped seeing him as some sort of friend, sending him nonsense videos of grown men on water slides and rogue lawnmowers, and occasionally coming by the archive basement. Schibig reluctantly raises the phone to his ear, and a voice immediately says:

'Schibig, I know you barely leave the house, but I need your help right now.'

'I'm not keen,' Schibig says honestly, though he knows he'll go anyway, even as panic rises in his throat.

'Please,' the voice says and adds:

'Someone seems to have pulled a prank that I need to check out quickly, but I am in town and you live close by.'

Phil pauses. Schibig waits.

'Ten minutes, tops. Promise.'

Schibig closes his eyes and agrees.

## 2.

Three months earlier, a well-dressed man sat in his office doing nothing at all. The biro sat untouched in their leather holder. The desk pad was spotless. The paperclips gleamed.

Kern had no more appointments in the diary. That morning's negotiations had been more than enough. On his desk sat a framed photo of Hanna at a summer party five years ago, beside a weighty Star Wars figurine. The detailed, expensive model of Han Solo frozen in carbonite had been a birthday gift from Hanna. Kern stared at the suffering face of the imprisoned space adventurer, the sealed eyes, the half-raised hands, the legs protruding slightly from the silver block of carbonite. Han Solo's cheeks gleamed, and his half-open mouth looked as though he still had something left to say. Kern stared at the figure as though he were waiting for a flicker of life, but the outlines of the statue began to blur. He rubbed his eyes. For days, his vision had been playing tricks on him. The world kept going fuzzy, the trees outside blended into a solid mass of green, and the lettering on the adverts blurred into fraying zigzags. Kern could no longer deny it, everything was unravelling at the edges. Worse still, sometimes web-like clumps clung to the outlines – silken nests at every corner. On the way to the meeting, he'd even seen glinting threads in the air, thin filaments stretching from the church door to Pizza Express, from lamp post to bus stop, as if a thousand money spiders had launched their silk sails and drifted across mountains and oceans, only to land here of all places, weaving a nightmare backdrop just for him.

But the worst distortions were in people. Sometimes their faces seemed to melt into a fleshy mess, glaring at him like a burns victim, regardless of who they were. From one second to the next, they would turn grey, ageing in record time before his eyes. Something dead clung to them. The sight of these sluggish ghosts irritated him. Kern couldn't say whether it was electromagnetic interference, a fault in his cornea, or just his mind playing tricks.

Either way, the office waited. But the phone remained silent. Just occasionally a small light would blink when a call came through to reception. Kern's hands rested on the desk. He refused to touch the mouse. So the screen stayed blank, blissfully blank. He didn't want to see his emails. He didn't want to be here at all. If he had his way, he'd sneak off one night,

drive for miles and miles, fly light years away like the smuggler Han Solo diving into unknown galaxies in the Millennium Falcon through clouds of dust and gas. A childish wish, he knew, but still. Everything had already been found, everything already done – only boredom remained.

He looked at his hands. They seemed to be developing dry cracks. Not that the earlier battle had cost him any effort. His assistant had done all the talking, largely dominating the discussions. In true upstart style, the young man had laid out the arguments, made a firm offer, and bulldozed through the objections. Kern had simply sat beside him, like a general in his tent waiting for the victory report. In the end, he only needed to nod and sign with a fountain pen. The plot next to the ancient battlefield was now his, including a barn and two old peat-cutters' huts. The only thing spoiling it was that a memorial was going up three hundred metres away. The transfer would go through in the next few days. More land, then, more dirt. Kern pictured the desert planet Tatooine – unlike Han Solo's grim, industrial home world Corellia, it offered more space, but just as much danger. Still, Kern knew one thing for sure: money laughs in the face of danger. Money is the deadliest weapon there is. His weary hands stirred more fantasies. He saw his trembling fingers, unable to keep still after battle. There were specks of blood on his knuckles; he saw himself kneeling at a trough, cleaning his sword. Or he saw his bearded face in the cracked mirror of a petrol station toilet, a pistol resting on the sink, steam-pink water circling the drain, the night thick outside, a neon sign pulsing somewhere. His hands were bloody, but his heart remained relentlessly white.

Pull yourself together, he told himself. Enough of this maudlin rubbish. All weakness will be buried, he told himself, and the thought came hard and angry. The reprimand lodged in his head; wherever his thoughts turned, the voice was always there – scolding straight into the folds of his brain. Icy words pushed through his mind like the tongue of a glacier, leaving behind the debris – filthy, heavy. Every mother leaves something behind. He honestly couldn't say what was keeping him here. Kern's gaze returned to the frozen Han Solo. He now saw that the carbonite prison was a temporary coffin, and sleep is a temporary death. Then it happened. The figure's brows twitched, the plump lips quivered, as though ready, at last, to speak. As though they still had something to say before the end.

'That's enough, Kern thought. He rubbed his eyes once more and reached for the phone.

'Anna?'

A young voice answered at once, waiting for instructions.

'Anna, I need an appointment with the optician.'

The young voice reassured him that wouldn't be a problem, and took the opportunity to gently remind him about a long-delayed file that needed his attention.

'My mother's?'

The young voice confirmed, adding that it was just a couple of signatures, then the matter would be done. Kern hesitated.

'I'll do it in the morning,' he said. Then he hung up, and the office sank back into silence.

3.

Three months later, the old woman stands at the window with a freshly rolled cigarette, humming softly. Through the mottled glass she watches the spectacle unfolding on the lake. People push their way across the ice like aimless little worms. Some fall, get back up, keep moving, fall again, help each other up, and glide forward together.

She rolls the thin cigarette between her fingers, pushing a wild strand of hair behind her ear. Everything smells like absence. She's only been back in the caravan, back in this cold zone, for a few days. Even with the heater turned up full blast, she's wearing her thickest cardigan, a heavy red-and-black monster, over a garishly coloured T-shirt that reads: *Craft must have clothes; but truth loves to go naked*. Outside, the world is grey. The sun presses down on a blanket of fog. The snowy banks of *Lake Ödwil* glare back, unfriendly, while the mountains cast even gloomier shadows across the moor. Cheerful people in a dreary setting, she thinks – or is it the other way round? Just like the stale old world she remembers, she thinks, scratching a dried coffee splatter from the windowpane. She's about to look for her lighter when something catches her attention.

One of the 'worms' steps out of line. A man in a neon ski jacket shuffles across the ice with unsteady legs. With each scraping step, he moves as if in slow motion, cutting straight through the groups of skaters. He looks out of place, forcing his way forward, breaking free of the crowd. Then, about a hundred metres in, he ducks under the barrier tape. He becomes the only bright dot in a sea of white. The old woman keeps her eyes fixed on him.

Schibig tries to steady his breathing. No ringing in his ears yet, no nausea, no thudding heart. Everything's still fine. The icy air helps. His body feels clear, like glass. Slowly, he slides his soles across the frozen surface, clinging to the hope that this really is just a ten-minute job – that the boy had just had a poor sense of humour or spotted a lump of driftwood and dead leaves. Or maybe just plastic, caught in a gas bubble, he tells himself, trying to steer clear of darker thoughts.

'Highly unlikely,' he murmurs to himself, trying to stay calm. Then he recalls Phil's words on the phone: 'Highly unlikely, and in these temperatures, practically impossible'. Still, he regrets picking up at all. The archive was closed on Saturdays. He could have spent the weekend reading in peace. But no, he'd promised desperate Phil he'd make an exception, check the situation quickly and discreetly, then give him the all-clear. In a strange way, he was flattered that Phil had asked him of all people to handle something off the record.

'If someone asks me and gives me a task, I manage,' Schibig whispers.

'Tasks eliminate excuses. Tasks are good,' he continues, scanning the ice for cracks or darker patches. Frost has gathered on his shoes, but he doesn't feel cold. His ancient ski jacket is still up to the job, even if it reeks of mothballs.

'It's true, in these temperatures, nothing surfaces. Physically impossible. It's probably nothing, nothing at all,' he chants like a mantra. The further he shuffles, following a lone set of skate tracks, the more surprised he is at himself. His heart is beating strongly. His breathing is calm. He must be nearly there.

Back in the caravan, the kettle is whistling. The sweet smell might have made the caravan feel cosy, if she weren't pacing in front of the window. She takes another look: the man in the ski jacket is barely making any headway. She rearranges the things on the table again. Moves a folder of bank statements, shifts her notes next to the radio, stacks the white charger cable on the newspaper and places the tobacco pouch on top. The little tower gives her some sense of order. But her restlessness is growing. I should be able to do something, she thinks. There is always something to do. I didn't come back just to sit and rot.

She glances back out. As soon as she spots the neon figure, she looks down at her phone to distract herself. No new messages. Her plans have been on pause ever since she arrived. She sets the phone aside, only to pick it up again, check the time, refresh her emails. Then she sets it down for good. She stands quite still for a moment, feeling the stillness as something close to pain. I must look so idle from above. From space I'd be invisible, just a twitchy little flea in a tin box, she thinks, suddenly angry. Even the man in the ski jacket is getting more done than I am. A final glance out the window makes up her mind. She shoves the cigarette into her pocket, grabs her woolly hat, and pulls the coffee pot off the hob. Minutes later, as she steps outside, the cold hits her full in the face like a slap.