

Press release**Christa von Bernuth**
Tief in der Erde

– Crime novel based on a true incident –

Goldmann



***Tief in der Erde* [Deep in the Earth] is inspired by one of the most infamous cases in German criminal history: forty years ago, ten-year-old Ursula Herrmann was kidnapped on her way home and died in a box that had been buried in the forest floor. To this day, there is no evidence to support a guilty verdict beyond a reasonable doubt. In her new crime novel, journalist and author Christa von Bernuth fictionalizes the events of 1981.**

A village in Upper Bavaria: On her way home from her uncle's, ten-year-old Annika sets off on her bike through the forest – but she never comes home. After searching in vain, Annika's family receives unknown phone calls playing a traffic jingle from the radio and two letters demanding a ransom of 2 million German marks. Shortly after, the police find a box buried in the forest floor, with the girl's body inside. The investigation focuses on a man with a criminal record. Traces leading to a nearby boarding school are neglected. Thirty years later, the suspect is convicted in a trial based on circumstantial evidence, but he denies his guilt. Annika's brother Martin is convinced that the real culprits have not yet been caught. He once again contacts the journalist Julia Neubacher, who accompanied the trial as a court reporter, in order to finally uncover with her help what happened to his sister back then.

Christa von Bernuth was a student at the boarding school where the investigation was only superficial. In her novel, she traces the failures of the police and the bias of the judiciary – and searches for the truth behind the officially solved case. For her research, she worked with the victim's brother, studied all the files available to her, spoke with former classmates of the boarding school, and informed herself in detail about the trial of the suspect.

Christa von Bernuth: *Tief in der Erde*

Crime novel based on a true incident
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The author



Christa von Bernuth is a writer and journalist. Her debut, *Die Frau, die ihr Gewissen verlor* [*The Woman Who Lost Her Conscience*], was published in 1999. Her subsequent novels – *Die Stimmen* [*The Voices*], *Untreu* [*Unfaithful*], *Damals warst du still* [*Back Then You Were Silent*] and *Innere Sicherheit* [*Inner Security*] – were made into films and translated into several languages, including Swedish, Dutch, Russian and Polish. *Tief in der Erde* is her first crime novel inspired by a true story. Further true-crime novels by the author are planned by Goldmann.

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Selected press comments on previous works

»equipped with a fine sense for the secret cracks and distortions in the psyches of her characters, Christa [von] Bernuth unrolls a story about friendship, lies and betrayal, and about the smaller or larger malice and perfidy of which people are sometimes capable.«

Peter Henning, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, on *Wer schuld war*

»a strong piece of contemporary literature.«

Madame on *Wer schuld war*

»An extraordinary crime novel, linguistically on a high level, exciting until the last page, with political explosive power.«

Radio Bayern 5 aktuell on *Innere Sicherheit*

»German history should not be left to historians. German history provides great thriller themes.«

Elmar Krekeler, Die Welt, on *Innere Sicherheit*

»sophisticated characters, false leads, surprising twists and eerie insights into the mind of a killer.«

Glamour on *Damals warst du still*

Four questions to the author

Why did you decide to fictionalize this very case, and why now – forty years later?

Ursula Herrmann's brother, Michael Herrmann, contacted me about a year and a half ago. Because of my crime novel *Die Stimmen*, which is set in a boarding school, he learned that I had been a student at that boarding school, where so surprisingly little was investigated after Ursula Herrmann's death. At first I wanted to write a report on this topic, but another journalist was already working on it. So I dropped this idea again. Michael Herrmann, however, kept in touch with me and from time to time forwarded me ideas from hobby investigators. Most of the theories were completely absurd. I continued to refuse to deal with them. Until I learned, through a dedicated hobby investigator, that the interception circuit that was too late to be available to the police was possibly at the home of a lawyer whose daughters had also attended the boarding school. That's when I became interested. I talked about it with the editor and my good friend Barbara Heinzius – just as an idea to fictionalize this actual case. I then

asked Michael Herrmann if he would help me. He was not very enthusiastic. Actually, he didn't want to deal with it anymore. The public prosecutor's office had already turned down further investigations – he wanted to finally put an end to it. Then he agreed – for my luck.

How much of the novel is fictional and how much corresponds to true events?

Of course, I must not answer this question comprehensively without making myself vulnerable. What I can say: Almost all of the characters are fictional. For example, I had to combine the investigators into two main characters – Thomas Bergmüller and Karin Hieronymus – because in reality there were simply too many of them, and it would have been confusing for the readers. I bent some facts in favor of the dramaturgy, and I also invented some things. Of course, my conclusions are fictitious, too. But the rest is correct and corresponds to the content of the files that were available to me. By which I mean: It definitely could have happened the way I wrote it.

You are in contact with Ursula Herrmann's brother. What did your collaboration on the novel look like?

We are in constant contact, he has also read the novel and was – to my positive surprise – very taken with it. He gave me all the necessary information, everything that he had previously found out on his own. And he put me in touch with the linguist Barbara Zipser, whose name in my novel is Barbara Brandt. Barbara Zipser's input was incredibly important, she found out quite a lot. Without these two, the novel could not have been written in this form.

Do you use real cases as inspiration for all of your crime novels?

No, this is my first novel based on a real case. I also work for a magazine called ‚Echte Verbrechen‘ [True Crime], which also deals with real criminal cases. I really like this journalistic approach. By that I mean: I think I'm quite good at inventing exciting stories. But now I find reality a hundred times more exciting.