



The Sinner

By Petra Hammesfahr

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Cora Bender killed a man on a sunny summer afternoon by the lake and in full view of her family and friends. Why? What could have caused this quiet, lovable young mother to stab a stranger in the throat, again and again, until she was pulled off his body? For the local police it was an open-and-shut case. Cora confessed; there was no shortage of witnesses. But Police Commissioner Rudolf Grovian refused to close the file and started his own maverick investigation. So begins the slow unravelling of Cora's past, a harrowing descent into a woman's private hell. Hailed as Germany's Patricia Highsmith for her bittersweet thrillers where the innocence of childhood collides with horrors enacted by adults, Petra Hammesfahr has written a dark, spellbinding novel which stayed at the top of the nation's bestseller list for fifteen months.

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The Sinner By Petra Hammesfahr Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

“*The Sinner* is unnerving and weird and guaranteed to stick with you weeks later.” —Sarah Weinman

“Hauntingly insightful and sensitive.” —*The Guardian*

“Delightfully unsettling.” —*The Telegraph*

“The best psychological suspense novel I have read all year . . . a brilliant study of a woman driven to the edge of madness.” —*Sunday Telegraph*

“[A] complex, disturbing, and fast-paced psychological thriller.” —*Booklist*

“This novel by one of Germany's most successful crime writers is wonderfully written, gripping, full of psychological insight.” —*Literary Review*

“Petra Hammesfahr's *The Sinner* demonstrates why she is one of Germany's bestselling writers of crime and psychological thrillers. It's grim, delves deep into the human psyche, and keeps you gripped.” —*The Times* (London)

About the Author

Petra Hammesfahr, born in 1951, has not had an easy life; she left school at thirteen and became pregnant by an alcoholic husband at seventeen. It is a life that has provided inspiration for her bittersweet family crime novels where the sweetness of childhood and the horror of adults meet. Hammesfahr has written over twenty crime and suspense novels and writes scripts for television and film. She has won numerous literary prizes, including the Crime Prize of Wiesbaden and the Rhineland Literary Prize. John Brownjohn is one of Britain's foremost translators from German and French. His work has won numerous awards on both sides of the Atlantic, including the US Pen Prize. He is also a screenwriter whose credits include 'Tess' and 'Bitter Moon'.

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It was a hot day at the beginning of July when Cora Bender decided to die. Gereon had made love to her the night before. He made love to her regularly every Friday and Saturday night. She couldn't bring herself to refuse him, being only too well aware how much he needed it. And she loved Gereon. It was more than love. It was gratitude and utter submission-something absolute and unconditional.

Gereon had enabled her to be a normal young woman like any other. That was why she wanted him to be happy and contented. She used to enjoy his lovemaking, but that had stopped six months ago.

It was Christmas Eve, of all times, when Gereon had taken it into his head to install a radio in their bedroom. He had wanted it to be a special night. They'd been husband and wife for exactly two and a half years and the parents of a son for eighteen months.

Gereon Bender was twenty-seven, Cora twenty-four. A slim five feet ten, Gereon looked fit and athletic, although he played no games, he never had time. His hair, ash blond at birth, had darkened little since then. His face was neither handsome nor ugly. It was an average sort of face, just as Gereon himself was an

average sort of man.

Cora Bender was just as unexceptional in outward appearance, discounting the scar on her forehead and her scarred forearms. The dent in her skull had been caused by an accident, the gnarled skin on the inside of her elbows was the result of a nasty infection transmitted by hypodermic needles while she was being treated in the hospital—or so she'd told Gereon. She had also said she didn't remember any details. That much was true. The doctor had told her that lapses of memory were common in the case of severe head injuries.

There was a hole in her life. She knew it concealed some dark, squalid episode, but her memory of it was missing. Until a few years ago she'd fallen into that hole innumerable times, night after night. The last occasion had been four years ago, before she met Gereon, and she'd somehow managed to close it. She had never expected to fall into it again since her marriage to him. And then, on Christmas Eve of all nights, it had happened.

Everything was fine at first, what with the soft Christmas music and Gereon's caresses, which gradually became more urgent and passionate. Her mood didn't sour until he slid slowly down the bed, and when he buried his face between her thighs and she felt his tongue, the music swelled. She heard a rapid roll on the drums, the throb of a bass guitar and the shrill, high-pitched notes of an organ. Only for a fraction of a second, then it was over, but that brief moment was enough.

Something inside her disintegrated—or rather, burst open like a safe being attacked with an acetylene torch. It was an unreal sensation. As if she were no longer lying in her own bed, she felt a hard surface beneath her back and something in her mouth like an outsize thumb that depressed her tongue and caused her to gag unbearably.

Cora's response was purely instinctive: she wrapped her legs around Gereon's neck and squeezed it between her thighs. She was within an ace of breaking his neck or throttling him, but she didn't even notice, she was so far away at that moment. It wasn't until he pinched her in the side, gasping and panting and driving his fingernails deep into the soft flesh of her waist, that the pain summoned her back.

Gereon fought for breath. "Are you crazy? What's got into you?" He massaged his throat and coughed, staring at her and shaking his head.

He couldn't fathom her reaction. She herself was equally at a loss to know what it was she'd suddenly found so repulsive and distasteful—so terrible that she'd momentarily felt his tongue was the touch of death.

"I don't like it, that's all," she said, wondering what it was that she'd heard. The music was still playing softly: a children's choir singing "Silent Night"—what else, on such a night?

Her unexpected onslaught had quenched Gereon's desire. He switched off the radio, turned out the light and pulled the covers over his shoulders. He didn't say goodnight, just growled: "That's that, then . . ."

He fell asleep quickly. Cora wasn't sure later whether she had also dozed off, but at some point she sat bolt upright in bed and lashed out with her fists, yelling: "Don't! Let go! Let go of me! Stop it, you filthy swine!" And her ears rang with the wild beat of the drums, the throb of the bass guitar and the shrill strains of the organ.

Gereon woke up, grabbed her wrists and shook her. "Cora! Stop that!" he shouted. "What is all this shit?" She couldn't stop, couldn't wake up. She sat there in the darkness, desperately fighting off something that

was slowly bearing down on her-something of which she knew nothing, only that it was driving her insane.

She didn't recover her composure until Gereon had gently slapped her face several times. He asked her again what the matter was. Had he done something wrong? Still too bemused to answer right away, she merely stared at him. After a moment or two he lay back. She followed his example, turned on her side and strove to convince herself that it had just been an ordinary nightmare.

But it happened again the following night, when Gereon tried to make up for lost time, even though there was no radio in the bedroom and he made no attempt to do what he regarded as the supreme expression of love. First came the music, somewhat louder and longer lasting-long enough for her to realize that she had never heard the tune before. Then she fell into the dark hole and emerged from it yelling and lashing out. She didn't wake up. That she did only when Gereon shook her, slapped her face and shouted her name.

The same thing happened twice the first week in January and once the week thereafter. Gereon was too tired that Friday night-so he claimed, at least-but on the Saturday he said: "I'm getting sick of this." That may also have been his reason the night before.

In March he insisted on her going to a doctor. "It isn't normal, you must admit. Something's got to be done. Or do you plan to go on like this indefinitely? If so, I'll sleep on the couch."

She didn't go to a doctor. A doctor would have been bound to ask if she had some explanation for this curious nightmare, or at least for why it happened only when Gereon had made love to her. A doctor would probably have begun to rake around in the dark hole-to persuade her to become aware of things. A doctor wouldn't have understood that there are things too terrible to become aware of. Instead she tried a chemist, who recommended a mild sedative. This cured the yelling and lashing out, so Gereon assumed that all was well again. It wasn't.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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