

Katharina Mahrenholtz
and Dawn Parisi



Literature!

Of Books and Writers





LITERATURE!

Of Books and Writers

by Katharina Mahrenholtz & Dawn Parisi

Non-fiction · illustrated literary compendium · adults · 190 pages ·

Original title: LITERATUR! Eine Reise durch die Welt der Bücher ·

First published by Hoffmann & Campe, 2012

Dawn Parisi, Hamburg, Germany, +49 (0)177 29 24 776

mail@dawnparisi.com, www.dawnparisi.com

@the_dawnparisi

@katharina_mahrenholtz

translated excerpt

*‘Classic’: A book which people praise
and don’t read.*

– Mark Twain

DANTE ALIGHIERI

Divine Comedy

La Divina Commedia



Plot

The narrator Dante travels through the here-after – more precisely, through the three Realms of the Dead. From **hell** he goes to **purgatory**, and from there, on to **heaven**, though we don't really know why. The story begins with Dante's search for the meaning of life, during which he meets in a forest the spirit of the Roman poet Virgil. He leads Dante through hell and purgatory. From there, Dante's childhood sweetheart, BÉATRICE, takes over because Virgil is not allowed to go to heaven (because: heathen). It ends when Dante sees the **Triune God**.

Facts

- 1: The story consists of 14 233 verses.
- 2: It is much more complicated than stated above: Dante meets a whole troupe of characters (and not just for a casual chat): Cleopatra, Attila, Thomas Aquinas, they're all there. And there's not a line without symbolism or metaphors.
- 3: The *DIVINE COMEDY* is no cushy read for a rainy Sunday afternoon. You might even say that it's practically impossible to read.
- 4: It is the most important work in Italian literature – no less because Alighieri was the first to write in Italian instead of Latin.
- 5: Alighieri is pronounced Ali-gyeah-ry.

Trivia

Dante named his work simply *LA COMMEDIA*. 'DIVINA' was added later added by Giovanni Boccaccio as a sign of adoration.

Getting started with Dante

Try the comic of the *DIVINE COMEDY*: US-American Seymour Chwast has made a graphic novel out of the story: weird, humorous, surprising and aweless (Dante looks like Peter Sellers as INSPECTOR CLOUSEAU). It lacks Dante's beautiful language but you understand what it's about. And for enigma fans, there is *INFERNO* by Dan Brown with a ton of allusions to Dante.

About Alighieri

At the age of nine, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) sees Béatrice, who is around the same age, for the first time. It's love at first sight. He doesn't meet her again until nine years later. She waves to him, after which Dante is even more in love and, above all, full of inspiration, and writes the work *VITA NOVA* about his great love, Béatrice. She becomes his muse, though he has only seen her twice. And the number 9 remains important for all of his work.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Plot

HAMLET is a Danish prince. One day, his father dies – supposedly of a **snakebite**. At the wake the dad’s ghost appears, revealing that it had been **murder!** HAMLET’s uncle CLAUDIUS (= father’s brother) had poured **poison** in the ear of the sleeping king.

The Ghost demands that HAMLET avenge him. HAMLET agrees and henceforth pretends to be **mad**. This works quite well but unfortunately it causes a rift between him and Ophelia, whom he had been wooing. Despite the distress caused by doubts and his contemplated suicide, HAMLET decides to stab to death Uncle CLAUDIUS, who is standing behind a curtain. Regrettably, the stabbed person turns out to be POLONIUS, OPHELIA’s father.

The plot thickens: OPHELIA goes (genuinely) mad and **kills herself**. Her brother, LAERTES, wants to avenge his sister and father; he challenges HAMLET to a duel in which an array of tricks and poison are involved. In the end the stage is littered with dead people.

Trivia

Of all Shakespeare’s heroes, HAMLET has the most dialogue and monologues. A challenge for any actor. Shakespeare had faith in one talented man: Richard Burbage, the head of the *Lord Chamberlain’s Men* theatre group of which Shakespeare was also a part. Shakespeare (aka the Bard, meaning “poet”) only had minor roles and wrote plays for the company – Burbage was the star.

Quotes

Shakespeare’s dramas are crammed with quotes that have entered our everyday language.*

HAMLET is no exception. These two are the most important ones:

To be or not to be, that is the question

– HAMLET asks himself at the beginning of a soliloquy about suicide: dare I, daren’t I?

The rest is silence

– the last words HAMLET utters before he collapses and dies.

Same but different

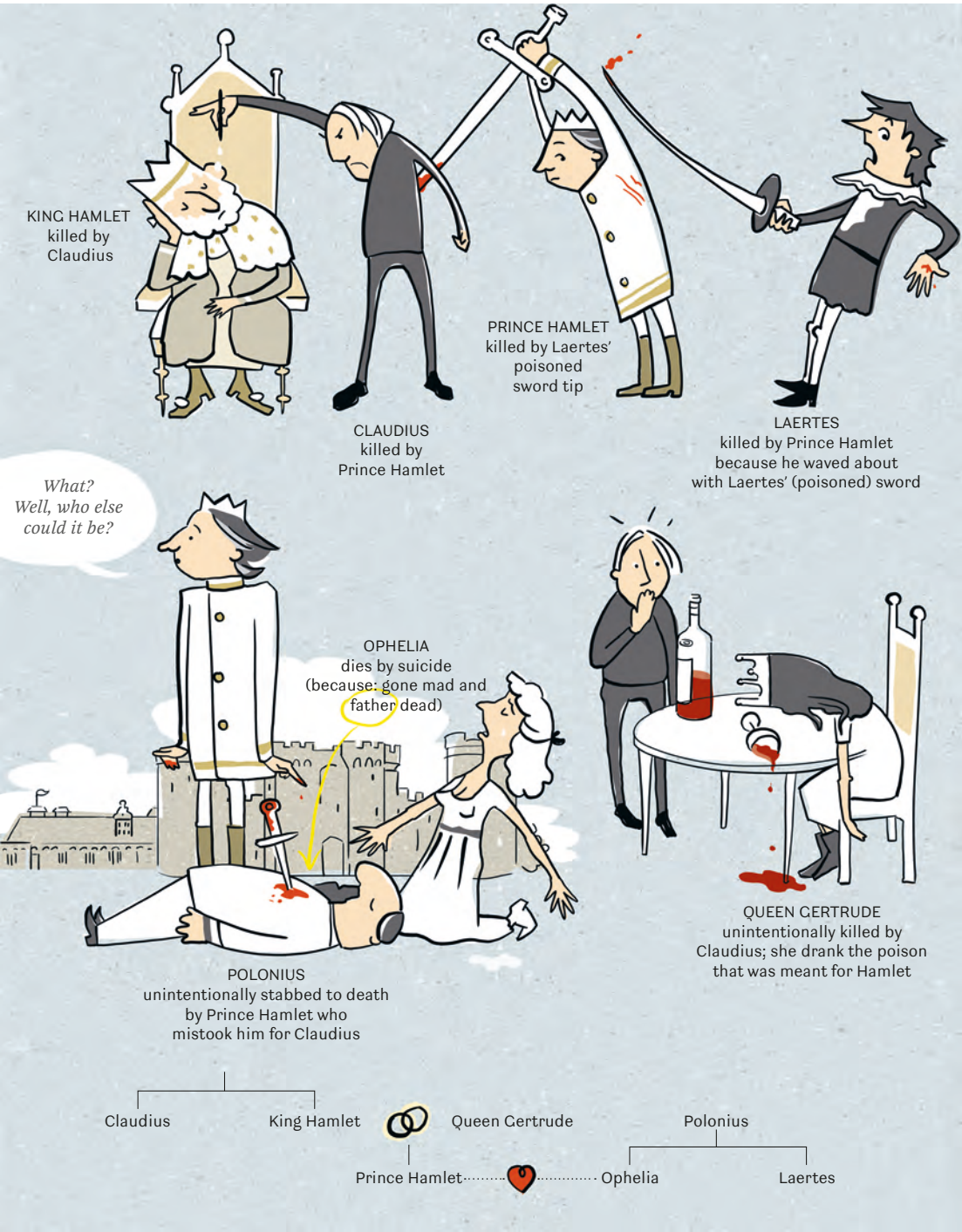
If you like grand tragedies with absurd plots, why not try: *MACBETH* (Scots, witches, ghosts, interwoven storylines), *ROMEO AND JULIET* (nightcap, feigned death, poison, real death, despair, more death) or *OTHELLO* (a handkerchief leads to murder and suicide)?

Getting started with Shakespeare

HAMLET is no walk in the park. You may want to start off with one of Shakespeare’s lighter dramas like *KING LEAR* (tragic but less demanding) or simply with a comedy like *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM*.

To this day, possibly the best way to enjoy Shakespeare is still in a theatre and not films featuring some heart-throb; or, quite simply, the audiobooks from the *BBC Radio Collection*.

* *A horse! a horse! My kingdom for a horse!* (*RICHARD III*); *All that glisters is not gold.* (*THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*); *All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.* (*AS YOU LIKE IT*); *Now is the winter of our discontent.* (*RICHARD III*); *How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child!* (*KING LEAR*); *If music be the food of love, play on,* (*TWELFTH NIGHT*).



National legends*

A European selection

While some national writers are well-known throughout the world, others have slipped international notice. In brief:

1 THE NETHERLANDS

The poet and dramatist Joost van den Vondel was part of the "Golden Age" movement during that golden 17th century when things were hunky-dory: business was good and art was great.

2 BELGIUM

Two writer legends: Georges Simenon (*MAIGRET*) for the Walloons and Hugo Claus (*THE SORROW OF BELGIUM*) for the Flemings.

3 CROATIA

Unknown to many non-Croatians, Miroslav Krleža is considered the founder of modern Croatian literature; the collection of short stories, *THE CROATIAN GOD MARS*, is a significant contribution to anti-war writings.

4 FINLAND

Aleksis Kivi was the first person to write in Finnish as opposed to Swedish. His now world-renowned novel *SEVEN BROTHERS* received crushing reviews in 1870. Kivi only became the national poet after his early death.

5 CZECH REPUBLIC

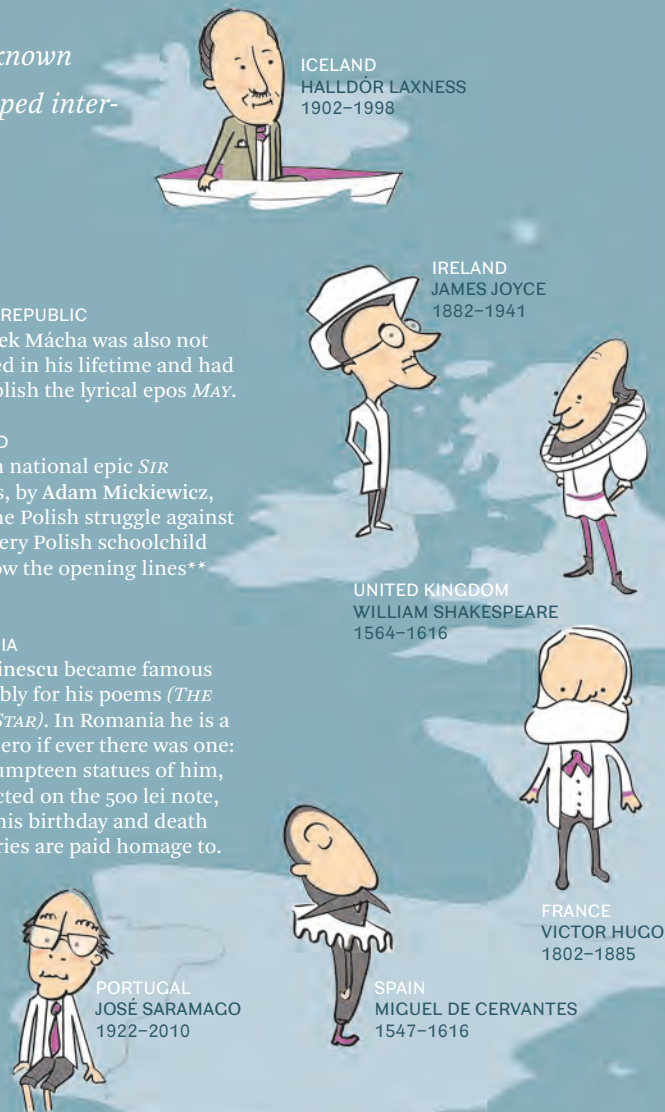
Karel Hynek Mácha was also not appreciated in his lifetime and had to self-publish the lyrical epos *MAY*.

6 POLAND

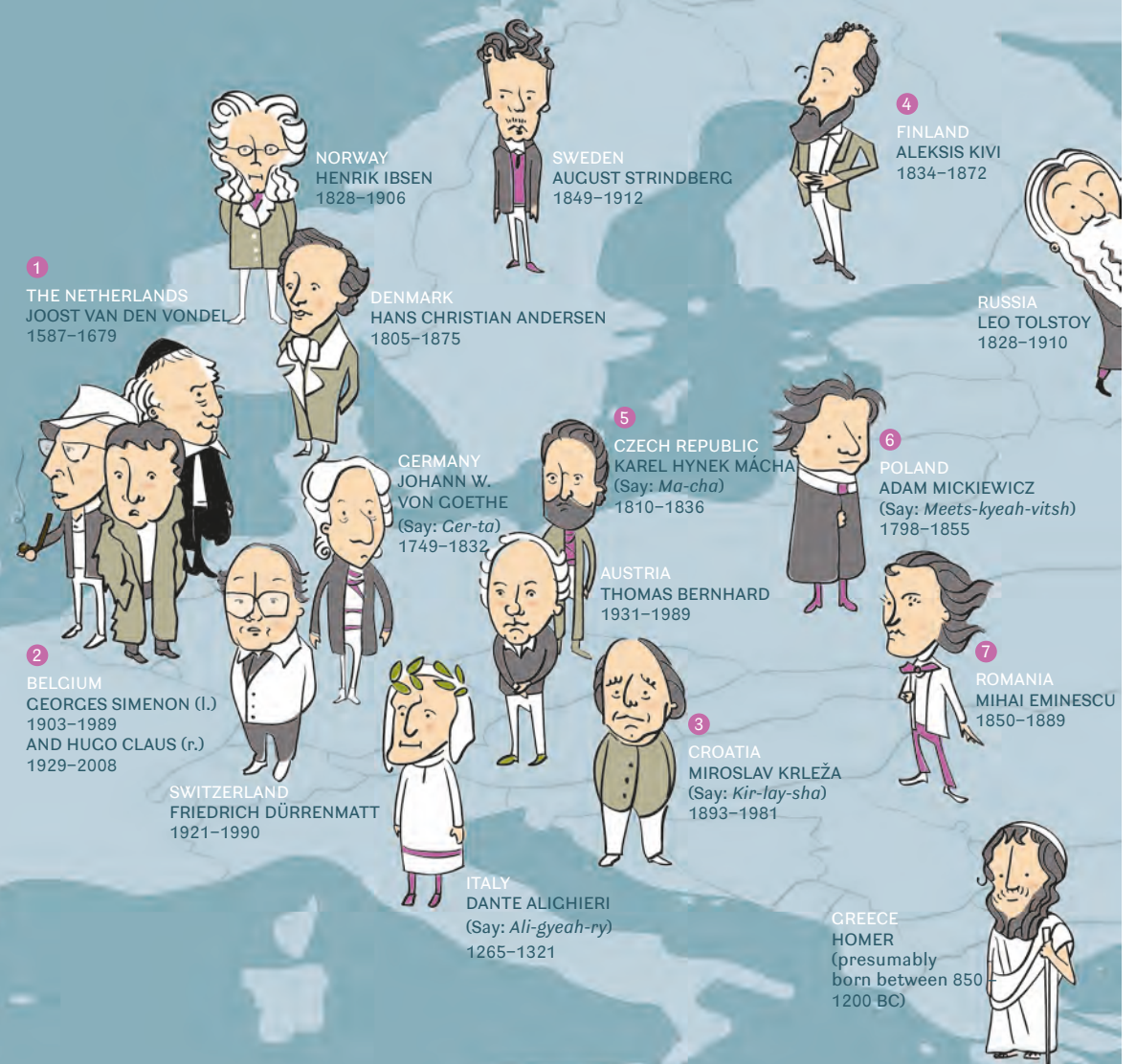
The Polish national epic *SHADDEUS*, by Adam Mickiewicz, is about the Polish struggle against Russia. Every Polish schoolchild has to know the opening lines** by heart.

7 ROMANIA

Mihai Eminescu became famous most notably for his poems (*THE EVENING STAR*). In Romania he is a national hero if ever there was one: there are umpteen statues of him, he is depicted on the 500 lei note, and both his birthday and death anniversaries are paid homage to.



* To agree on one national hero is a difficult task for any country. France, for example, could decide between Victor Hugo, Émile Zola and Marcel Proust; Russia could just as well single out Fyodor Dostoevsky – and in Switzerland one could argue for both Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt.



** "Lithuania, my country! You are as good health: How much one should prize you, he only can tell who has lost you." The Lithuania referred to here is the region of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and not the modern country. But that's another (geopolitical) story ...

Faust Part 1



Plot
DOCTOR FAUST feels burnt out. Despite his extensive studies, he has failed to attain infinite wisdom. There's simply too much to learn in this world. He tries to find the meaning of life through magic, but when a kobold (= goblin) doesn't cooperate, FAUST concludes that suicide is his only option. Just then, he hears the Easter morning bells. They remind him of happy childhood days, and he changes his mind. On his Easter walk he is followed home by a stray black poodle who turns out to be MEPHISTOPHELES (= devil). A pact with the devil ensues.

FAUST sells his soul to MEPHISTOPHELES in return for being put out of his misery (= all wishes fulfilled). He gets a magic potion that rejuvenates him and gives him beer goggles. Enter GRETCHEN: plain, modest, ordinary. But, thanks to the cure-all, she seems a proper femme fatale to FAUST. He goes half mad with desire for her. MEPHISTOPHELES sees to it that his lust is fulfilled (we are told between the lines).

Then: some back and forth between the lovers, an abundance of metaphors, two murders and desperation at the end; GRETCHEN gets pregnant, kills her newborn child and is locked away in a dungeon; FAUST and MEPHISTOPHELES run off.

FAUST PART 2 came out twenty years later: yet more symbolism, mysticism and oddities, but with a happy ending.

Trivia
The story about Dr Faustus and his pact with the devil was old hat even in Goethes' day: the well-known legend had existed since the 16th century. It was based on the real Faust, a miracle healer and magician, who traveled the country around 1500. A man who blew himself up in the attempt to make gold.

Getting started
Although FAUST is quite straightforward and beautifully written, it isn't a quick read-through. As another option, try other novels of Goethe (ELECTIVE AFFINITIES or THE SORROWS OF YOUNG WERTHER, see p.21). Or opt for Goethe light: the ballads – short, exciting and all the bigwig of the German language.



★ 1749 in Germany
† 1832 in Germany

Goethe ranks as the most significant of all German writers. In Germany his abundant legacy of quotes remains unmatched*

Name-drop enthusiasts, beware: "Goethe" is tricky to say. You'll get close by saying "Ger-ta" (silent "r").

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe debuts in 1773 on a grand scale with his drama GÖTZ VON BERLICHINGEN. He bedazzles the public and revolutionizes theatre as it is known. Until then, it had been imperative that dramas combine place, time and plot. Goethe overrules this principle in "GÖTZ": there are 50 different settings and a multitude of parallel (!) plots. And it is written in a heartfelt language, much to the delight of the whole country.

A year later, WERTHER is published (see p.21), a European bestseller. Only in his mid-twenties, Goethe soars to new heights and heads for the pinnacle of literary success. He reaches it – if only decades after his death. During Goethe's lifetime, WERTHER remains his biggest success. Goethe becomes a true celebrity, attaining fame beyond the borders of Germany. After all, he not only writes the whole shebang (dramas, novels, poems, letters), but he also has a notion for politics, the arts and natural science. Goethe is made minister, studies the science of colours and the metamorphosis of plants.

As for women: as a young man he falls in love with Charlotte Buff who is engaged to another man (WERTHER is a reference to this experience). Shortly after, Goethe is briefly engaged to Lili. He then falls in love with Charlotte von Stein: seven years his elder and married with seven children. But this doesn't work out either (though it is not known if secretly maybe it does). Finally, Christiane Vulpius becomes Goethe's lover. They marry in 1806, when Goethe is 57 years of age.

Undoubtedly, the most important relationship Goethe has is with his writer-friend Friedrich Schiller. Initially, the Privy Councillor dislikes his younger colleague, but they soon become brothers in spirit. Schiller's increasing success puts Goethe under pressure – and it is only after Schiller's death that Goethe can finally finish FAUST PART ONE, having worked on it for 60 years.

* A selection: Blood is a juice of rarest quality. // So this then was the kernel of the brute // I'm human here, here I can be! // Two souls, alas! dwell in my breast. (all from FAUST PART 1); A word momentous calmly hast thou spoken. (IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS); Noble be man. Friendly and good. (ON THE DIVINE); Half drew she him, and half sank he. (THE FISHERMAN); Do you know the land where the lemon trees blossom? (WILHELM MEISTER'S APPRENTICESHIP).

Napoleon Bonaparte crowns himself Emperor
First steam locomotive
1804
WILLIAM TELL
Friedrich Schiller

Battle of Trafalgar
1805
THE YOUTH'S MAGIC HORN
Clemens Brentano / Achim von Arnim

End of Holy Roman Empire
1806

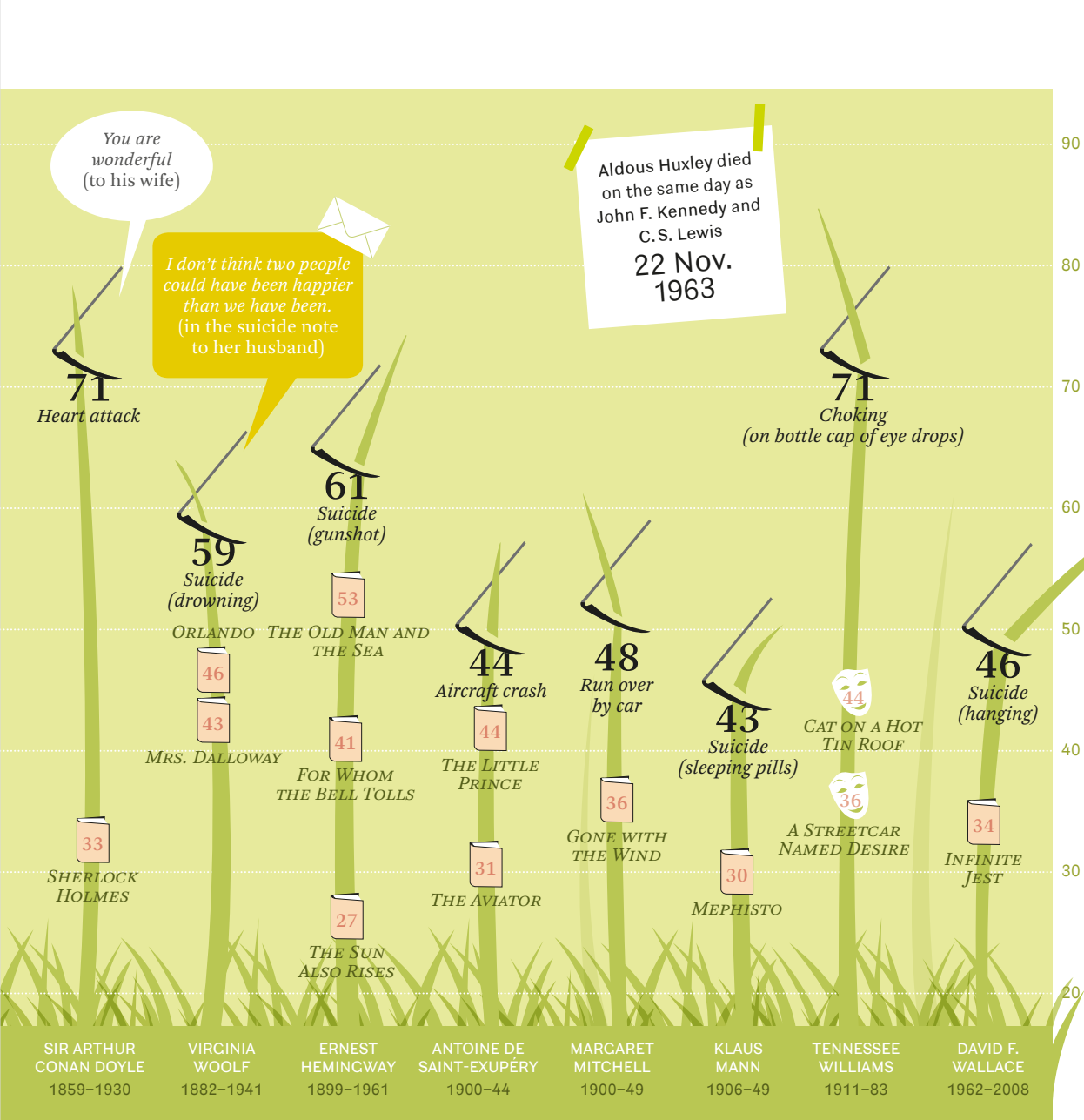
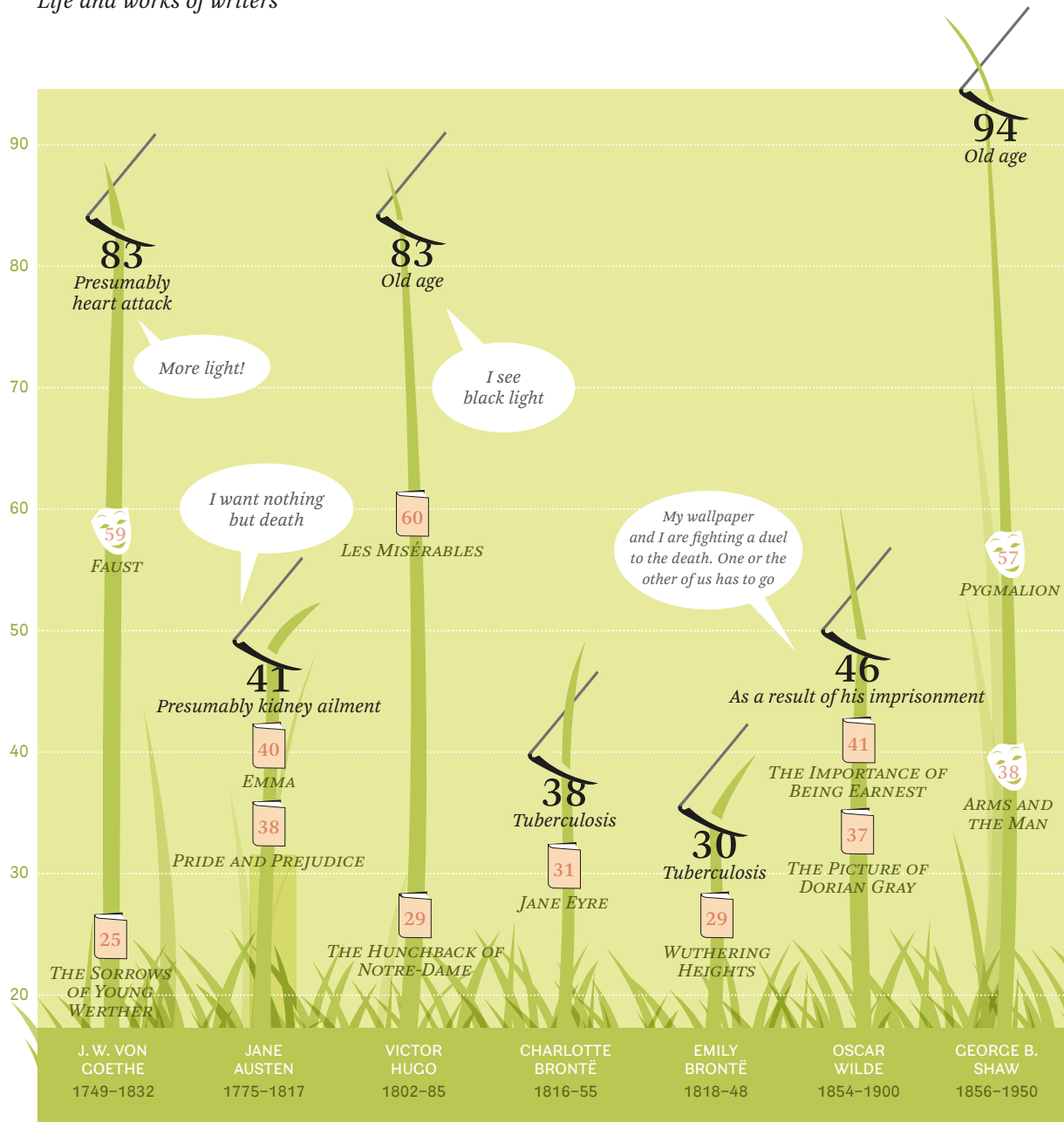
Beethoven completes Symphony No. 5
1808
FAUST PART 1
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

1809
ELECTIVE AFFINITIES
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

First tin can
1810

Napoleon invades Russia
1812
CHILDREN'S AND HOUSEHOLD TALES
Grimm brothers

How old?!
Life and works of writers



KEY
29 Age at publication | (selected) Novel | (selected) Drama | Famous last words | 94 Age at death

More deaths: Alcohol Jack London | Car crash Albert Camus, Anton Chekhov | Choking (whilst laughing) Anthony Trollop | Cocaine Georg Trakl, Gottfried Benne | Duel Alexander Pushkin | Murdered (by fascists) Federico García Lorca | Suicide (drowned) Paul Celan, (gas stove) Sylvia Plath, (shot) Heinrich von Kleist, Hunter S. Thompson

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

The Sun Also Rises



Plot
Men, adventures, alcohol and women – these themes make up most of Hemingway’s novels. In this one, the adventure takes place in Pamplona at a *corrida* – a Spanish bullfight.

Three of the men involved are American writers: ROBERT, BILL and MIKE (a breezy character). JAKE is the narrator. The women are BRETT (a nurse, ROBERT’S ex-lover, loved by JAKE, engaged to MIKE) and FRANCES (apparently engaged to ROBERT who now rejects her).

This spirited bunch comes together in Pamplona to drink and watch bullfights. Inevitably, conflicts arise: ROBERT tries it on with BRETT (which upsets MIKE, hurts JAKE and FRANCES, and bores BRETT), BRETT gets involved with a young torero (which annoys MIKE and ROBERT and hurts JAKE). In the end, practically everyone is unhappy.

Trivia
After the First World War it was fashionable for American writers to move to Paris, France: F.Scott Fitzgerald, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway all went to the city of lights. They met in cafés and bars, debated, drank, wrote, lived and loved. The American writer Gertrude Stein, host of a

literary salon in Paris, called Hemingway and his friends the *Lost Generation** – they were disenchanted from the war, inclined to alcohol and love affairs. And all were ingenious writers.

Getting started with Hemingway
Although Hemingway is famous for his clear, plain language (see page opposite) *THE SUN ALSO RISES* is a demanding read. If you want to get to know this great US writer, why not start by reading his marvelous memories of the 1920s: *A MOVEABLE FEAST* and, of course, the novel *HE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* (see p. 134).

* In *A MOVEABLE FEAST* Hemingway also tells the story of how Gertrude Stein came to this term: she got it from the boss of a car workshop. When the mechanics couldn’t repair Steins Ford T, the boss called them a *génération perdue*. Gertrude Stein promptly took up this name for Hemingway and his clique adding: “You have no respect for anything. You drink yourself to death.”



★ 1899 in Illinois, USA
† 1961 in Idaho, USA

Hemingway was a war reporter, a game hunter in Africa, and womanizer

Hemingway suffers from depression. At age 61 he shoots himself and dies by suicide just like his father, brother, sister and grandchild. A tragic, famous family.

Ernest Hemingway is among the most acclaimed writers of the United States. He wrote brilliant novels and short stories, and lived an exciting life.

Already at school Ernest is a keen and talented writer. Later, he works as a war reporter. In 1918, during the First World War, he volunteers to serve for the Red Cross as a driver at the Italian Front. He is injured, and in hospital, falls in love with a nurse (more or less the model for the story of *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*).

Back in the United States, Hemingway carries on his work as a reporter, marries Hadley and moves to Paris. There, they live the life of the Roaring Twenties; they meet other artists, drink, have little money but a zest for life. In 1927 he has a breakthrough with *THE SUN ALSO RISES*, divorces Hadley and heads straight into the next marriage with Pauline. Back to the States again, numerous travels, game-hunts in Africa with Karen Blixen’s husband, and war correspondence in the Spanish Civil War. His novels and short stories are inspired by his experience (to mention just a couple: *THE SNOWS OF KILIMANJARO* is set in Africa, *FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS* plays in the Spanish Civil War).

Hemingway is far-famed and a legend. His life, much like a novel, is packed: love affairs, binge drinking, war correspondence, boxing and hunting, two airplane crashes in Africa, four marriages, three children, Pulitzer for *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*, and eventually a Nobel Prize. Written curtly, straight forward and simply – the most important information is found between the lines. He called this method of omission “The Iceberg Theory”:

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.

1926

First television

1926

THE SUN ALSO RISES Ernest Hemingway
DREAM STORY Arthur Schnitzler
THE DEATH SHIP B. Traven

W. Disney creates Mickey Mouse
Invention of toast
Penicillin discovered (A. Fleming)

1928

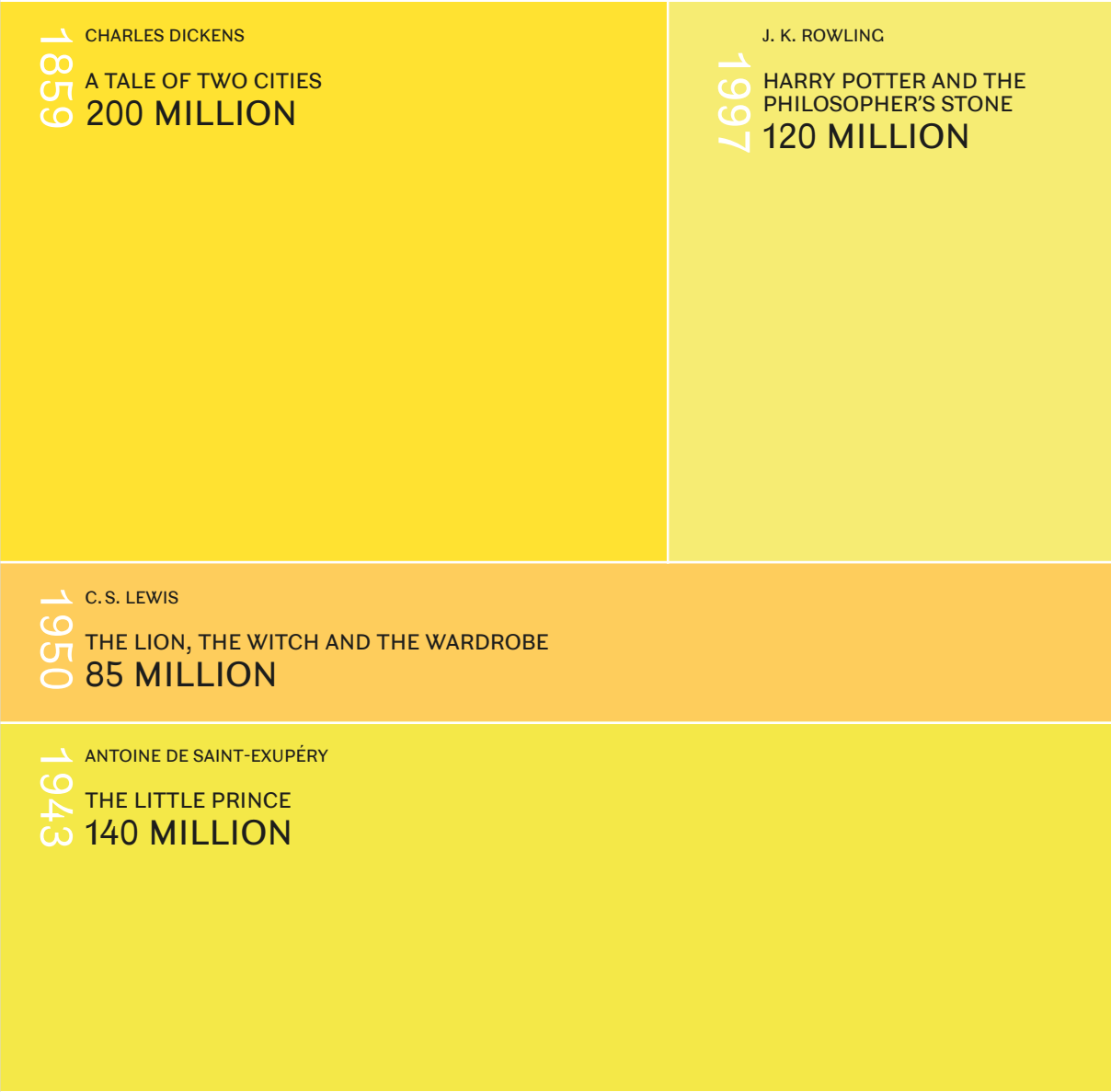
LADY CHATTERLEY’S LOVER D. H. Lawrence

Writers and pen names



Bestseller

The top-selling books of all time*



* Religious and political oeuvres are out of competition. A comparison between the *BIBLE* and the *HOBBIT* would not only be unfair but also bogus because one could only guess the print run of the *BIBLE* (approx. two to three billion copies). The same goes for *THE LITTLE RED BOOK* (more than one billion copies), *THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO* (approx. 500 million copies) and the *KORAN* (approx. 200 million).

Short and sweet

A literary run-through

DORIS LESSING
THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

The author ANNA WULF suffers from **writer's block**. She keeps **four notebooks**: a black one for memories of **Africa** (the place of her birth), a red one about her **political activities**, a yellow one with **ideas for novels** and a blue one for **everything else**. Sure enough, she overcomes her depression with the help of the notebooks and winds each one up with a final **black line**. She is now at peace with herself and can start a **new notebook**, the *golden notebook*.

This is embedded in **another plot**. A novel in itself, entitled *FREE WOMEN*. It is about ANNA and MOLLY (a mediocre actress), both single parents, politically active and bright intellectuals. Themes of love, sex and men are explored (as is the **female orgasm** – a shock for many back in the nineteen-sixties) but Doris Lessing has always defended this book from being labelled a feminist novel.

PS: this might be the most famous book of the Nobel Prize winner but it is not necessarily the easiest one to read. To get started try *THE GRASS IS SINGING* or *THE FIFTH CHILD*.

JOHN LE CARRÉ
THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD

To figure out that this is an espionage novel is a no-brainer. But the novel takes this genre to another level (fewer car chases, shoot-outs and women, more social criticism, politics, psychological stuff and a very unhappy ending).

Berlin in the nineteen-fifties. ALEC LEAMAS is head of the MI6 office and things are **not going well**: his agents in East Germany are being eliminated one by one. LEAMAS goes **back to London**, lands a desk job (and a lover), lets himself go and even ends up in prison.

It turns out that this is just a trick to make the other side believe he's easy to recruit. A complex back and forth follows: **(double) agents** and **(contra) spies** outsmart one another and the goodies are the baddies and vice versa.

In the end everyone winds up in **East Berlin**. In an attempt to escape over the Berlin Wall, LEAMAS' ex-lover gets **shot**. He rushes to her and gets killed likewise.

JAMES BOND is passé: John le Carré's secret intelligence services are unpleasant and their agents are tragic heroes at best.

THOMAS PYNCHON
V.

BENNY PROFANE, a scatter-brain, meets the nit-picky HERBERT STENCIL, who tries to decipher his father's **diary**. In it, the letter **V**. keeps coming up.

STENCIL reckons it must stand for his **mother** and, during the quest for **her identity**, works himself up into a series of absurd ideas.

So much, roughly, to the plot. The rest of the novel is postmodern (i.e., several layers of meaning, spaces/places in time and parallel plots that the reader has to assemble himself). Sounds like hard work and it *is* hard work – the novel was a success nevertheless.

Directly after publication, Thomas Pynchon retreated from public view. He has written (successful) novels time and again, but for 40 years nobody has caught as much as a glimpse of him. He jokes about it himself and occasionally appears on *THE SIMPSONS* – with a bag over his head.

HEINRICH BÖLL
THE CLOWN
Ansichten eines Clowns

HANS SCHNIER is a **clown**. In his end twenties, relatively successful and happy with his girlfriend, MARIE. But when they decide to **marry**, trouble starts. MARIE is a Catholic but HANS wants on no account to live by the order of the Church. MARIE leaves him. He starts drinking, his **career goes down the drain**, nobody helps him. At the end of the novel he sits on the steps of the Bonn train station and **waits** for MARIE'S return.

This novel caused controversy: criticism of the Catholic Church was not taken to kindly. And yet, Böll maintains that his principal focus was on the love story – crushed by diverging human values and the power of an institution.

ROALD DAHL
CHARLIE AND THE
CHOCOLATE FACTORY

CHARLIE comes from a poor family. His big dream is to one day visit WILLY WONKA'S (mysterious) chocolate factory. The **bizarre owner** keeps his gates locked to the eyes of the public – until the day he surprises the world with a **publicity stunt**: he has hidden golden tickets in five of his chocolate bars. Whoever gets the lucky ticket wins the chance to see the factory from the inside.

Sure enough, CHARLIE gets one of the highly **sought-after tickets** and is taken on a tour around WILLY WONKA'S factory – along with **four other children**.

The other kids are all annoying in their own way and are **met with accidents** – one after the other – during the tour. **Only** CHARLIE **remains**. Because CHARLIE is a pleasant child, WILLY WONKA passes the factory down to him and invites CHARLIE'S family to move into the chocolate factory.

Roald Dahl wrote not only children's books but also brilliant, macabre stories for adults.



★ 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE
Americanah

Plot
Here's a question: why does Michelle Obama straighten her hair? This novel revolves around this question (the answer = because it's what society demands of her!): In the 1990s, young IFEMELU leaves her homeland of **Nigeria** and her childhood **sweetheart**, **OBINZE**, to study at **Princeton**. With no work permit, she is on the verge of prostitution – something she is so ashamed of that she breaks all ties to OBINZE. Eventually IFEMELU meets a rich white man who gives her a **green card**. And her blog about everyday racism in the United States grows in popularity. Nonetheless, she eventually **returns to Nigeria** and makes up with OBINZE.

This novel is about discrimination in all its forms, (quite a bit) about hair – and about the understanding that the colour of someone's skin is still more relevant than it should be.

Body of work
Adichie first publishes poems, short stories and a play. In 2003 she gains fame with her first novel, *PURPLE HIBISKUS*, which is set in Africa, just like her second novel, *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN* (2006). Adichie wins prizes and is regularly invited to speak about discrimination, women's rights and the importance of home. With her

third novel, *AMERICANAH* (2013), Adichie lands an international bestseller.

About Adichie
This author is a godsend for any marketing department: intelligent, successful, charismatic, funny and – rather unusual in the literature business – an entertainer. Regardless of the occasion (university lecture, TV interview or talk show), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's enthusiasm is contagious.* She starts with funny anecdotes about hair and – still chuckling – pivots to the actual, serious topic: the subtle but everyday racism in the USA. How these two themes are related can be read, among her other books, in her hit novel *AMERICANAH*.

At the age of 19, Adichie left Nigeria to study in the USA. Today, she stays connected to her roots, living alternately in Nigeria and the USA. She regularly expresses her political thoughts and is an important voice for Africa in the western world.

* Her terrific TED talk *We Should All Be Feminists* has been viewed millions of times on YouTube. Beyoncé incorporates some of it into her song *Flawless*.

Americanah, 2013





THANK YOU

Dawn Parisi, Hamburg, Germany, +49 (0)177 29 24 776
mail@dawnparisi.com, www.dawnparisi.com
@the_dawnparisi
@katharina_mahrenholtz