

BETTINA WOHLFARTH
WAGFALL'S LEGACY

CLIENT: AGENTUR HERBACH & HAASE
MATERIAL: FULL GERMAN MS. (440 PP)
PUB DATE (D): MARCH 2019
PUBLISHER: OSBURG VERLAG
RIGHTS SOLD: FRENCH
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**Shortlisted for the Klaus Michael Kühne Prize
for best German-language debut novel.**

1996: Viktor Wagfall knows he hasn't much longer to live. Every day he sits down at his desk to rescue in extremis a never-told secret from final oblivion: who was Isidor Schweig?

At the end of the 1930s and during the Second World War, Wagfall lived under this very name as an art forger in Paris, painting virtuoso copies of painters such as Courbet, Renoir, Bonnard and Matisse. His story takes us behind the scenes of the systematic confiscation of Jewish art collections in Nazi-occupied France. As a painter and forger, Schweig collaborated with Nazi-loyal art dealers, but also maintained a friendship with Rose Valland, who was the only Frenchwoman to remain at the Jeu de Paume museum, secretly cataloguing the looted artworks stocked there so that it might be traced after the war.

Above all, Wagfall wants to document a painting that he has secretly kept since the war. Whoever finds it one day should know its history and thus Wagfall's, alias Isidor Schweig's, love for Adèle Bertin, movingly inscribed within the painting itself.

The present: Many years after his death, Viktor's daughter Karolin Wagfall, who lives as a photographer in Paris, accidentally comes across the manuscript and the painting while cleaning out the family home. Is it a masterful copy of Henri Matisse's *Odalisque assise*? Or could it even be the original, looted by the Nazis together with the rest of Paul Rosenberg's incredible art collection? Karolin takes her find back to Paris and, with her camera, sets out to retrace* her father's nearly vanished footsteps. She can no longer avoid his legacy, even the intangible one. A series of photographs emerges, which she pins on the walls of her study, image by image, as she types Wagfall's manuscript into the computer. There, the *Odalisque assise* has already found a temporary place and awaits a final, shocking, revelation.

FICTION / NOVEL

BETTINA WOHLFARTH was born in 1963 and studied German language and literature, philosophy and theater studies. She has lived in Paris since 1990, where she has spent the last few years working as a freelance translator and journalist, specializing in art and art history, which she has always loved. She regularly reports on the Paris art market for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. *Wagfall's Legacy* is her debut novel.

PRAISE

Almost everything in this book is real, except for the main character: Bettina Wohlfarth's historical novel "Wagfalls Erbe" takes us to Paris in the 1930s.

At the beginning, it's a bit like Woody Allen's movie "Midnight in Paris." In her debut novel, Bettina Wohlfarth, a translator and journalist, transports the reader to the pulsating city of light in the thirties. Together with Isidor Schweig, a young painter from Stuttgart, one wanders the streets of the French capital in the summer heat of 1936, full of life and still carefree. You can almost feel the shimmering blue air that caresses Isidor when he arrives. "In this air was my future." You accompany him to his new apartment on the fifth floor of a cheap apartment in Montmartre, from the bedroom you look with him over "the silver-grey Parisian zinc roofs with their innumerable miniature clay chimneys," from the studio and living room to the back of the Moulin Rouge wings...

Bettina Wohlfarth has interwoven Viktor Wagfall's report with a wealth of background knowledge about the Nazi art theft that could probably also have been a meticulously researched non-fiction book. But what a boon that it isn't! For then the reader would have missed out on this moving, linguistically powerful and atmospherically dense novel of art, history and Paris, which remains exciting until the very end, when the secret about (Isidor's lover) Adèle and a mysterious Matisse painting is finally revealed. **FAZ**

An exciting novel that integrates historical facts into a German family story. In *Wagfalls Erbe*, Bettina Wohlfarth skillfully combines two narrative threads: the fictional "Notes of a Melancholic Art Forger" by Viktor Emanuel Wagfall, which his daughter Karolin finds in the family home after the death of her parents, and the subsequent search for clues by the freelance photographer. The city of Paris - 80 years ago and today - is observed and described in loving detail. **Handelsblatt**