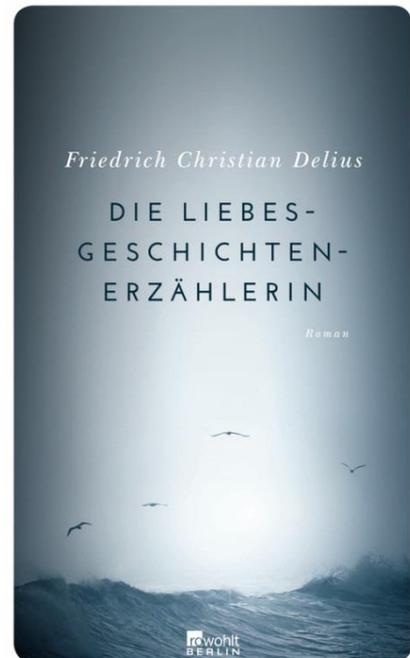


Friedrich Christian Delius
A Teller of Love Stories
Rowohlt•Berlin
fiction
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A journey of five days spanning an entire century. The new novel by the winner of the Büchner Prize.

Escaping from her duties, husband and children for a few days, a woman journeys from Den Haag to Frankfurt via Amsterdam. The year is 1969, and she reflects on three romances set in times of war and defeat: her own, her parents' and that of an ancestor during the Napoleonic wars. The latter is the story she wants to tell, but the narratives and lives seem increasingly to interweave. A king builds the modern state of the Netherlands; his illegitimate daughter is forced into a noble family from Mecklenburg; her great-grandson, a U-boat captain in the Imperial German navy, manages to trick the Socialist revolutionary sailors in Kiel, and tries to escape the darkness of his own soul, eventually becoming a preacher; his daughter, the traveller/narrator, who wanted to be a good German girl yet also oppose the Nazis, finds freedom in writing and whose ex-POW husband from a landowning family is slowly becoming estranged from her.

Friedrich Christian Delius's new novel builds on his own family's moving story. It tells of a woman's journey between Scheveningen, Heiligendamm and the German Rhine, a journey of five days that spans a whole century.



Friedrich Christian Delius was born in Rome in 1943 and grew up in Hesse, Germany. He has lived in Berlin since 1963. His collected works have been published by Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag in an edition spanning eighteen volumes. Among others, Friedrich Christian Delius has received the Fontane Prize, the Joseph Breitbach Prize and in 2011 the Georg Büchner Prize.

“There’s no doubt about it: Friedrich Christian Delius is a keen, sensitive author, and an intelligent and subtle observer. His best books come about when he exploits the full range of his gifts for historical reflection and empathy.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

A Teller of Love Stories

by Friedrich Christian Delius

Sample translation by Mandy Wight

Write it, write it for us, Marie, the voices called, voices drifting in from far out at sea, softer than the water masses rumbling in the distance, less regular than the waves' beat, more flattering than the wind in the ears of the woman sitting on a bench on the promenade at Scheveningen, practising deep breathing and not surprised by what she heard –

Write it, write it down, amongst the choir's whispering voices she seemed to hear the voice of her father, the little captain, the old cadet, as she called him, of course he would join in the talking and whispering here by the sea, his element, here's something for you, the story of the prince and his love affair –

A seagull swept past her, then another, the woman in the dark grey winter coat with the neat little hat sat quite still, concentrating hard, her neck craned forward like a concert goer, she was listening intently to the distant voices, gazing out over the leaden tinged sea to the horizon, attending to and listening in to the voice within her –

Listening in to her own decision to raise up the treasure of this story, to let it rise up out of the waves of the past, she was rather proud of the phrase waves of the past and wondered whether it was a quotation or a new invention, prompted by the wonderful sea air on the promenade, the old stories spurred on by the waves, rising up out of the waves –

You're writing it now Marie, never mind the others, she said half aloud to herself, while her gaze rested on a ship, a tiny point on the horizon, and she said it again at normal volume as there was no one near-by: you're writing it now, as if with this she would drive away the demands of the distant voices and the interfering comments of her father the captain and relatives and friends, which were unnecessary and disruptive, she didn't need this well meant encouragement, far less their suggestions and orders, she'd made her own plan many years ago –

At last, shortly before her fiftieth birthday, she could find the time, she could afford to write, after her husband's salary rise made a noticeable difference and a tiny inheritance eased the

financial situation for the family of six and she could at last put a stop to wasting precious hours typing up doctoral theses and dissertations for a little extra income –

At last it was all in place, she only had to rid her head of the expectations of others, of the choir of distant voices, she wanted to find her own voice and at last managed to hear this voice, her own, becoming stronger and clearer in the distant roar of the waves, it was her voice that mattered –

And the material, which she'd been turning over for a second day in the town archive in The Hague, material of interest to many, scandal, undying love, court intrigue, the hero a prince who later becomes the first king of the Netherlands, the heroine a dancing girl, a baker's daughter, whose child becomes the great-grandmother of her father the captain and the whole thing taking place before the picturesque backdrop of the costume drama, of palaces in Berlin and the Netherlands, on estates in Mecklenburg –

The story of your mysterious great-great-grandmother, hidden away in dusty files, that's what you're going to put on paper, you're the one to do it, it's got your name on it, she told herself, Fontane only started at your age, next week you'll have the plot outline ready, with the new finds and facts from the archives, there'll be no more excuses, you've just got to forget your father's orders and follow your own, finally the great love story you always wanted to write, you, the teller of love stories, she laughed and stood up –

A mild January afternoon with a tolerable wind, still you couldn't sit down for too long, there were only a few people in buttoned up coats sitting down for a minute or two on the welcoming curved white benches of the promenade, rather pretentiously described as a boulevard, the Dutch preferring to meet at this time of year and in the hour before dusk in cafes and beer halls –

But she, Marie von Schabow, the German tourist from Frankfurt, could not forego the majestic view over the Dutch North Sea, the chance to breathe in the unfamiliar strong salt smell of the sea after a day of paper and files in the Royal Archive, the chance to reaffirm a decision which she'd already firmly decided on, before the imposing coastal scenery –

She exhaled and inhaled deeply, anticipating with pleasure the work which lay ahead and was at the same time aware of the comic aspect of starting on a love story right now when she was losing her fertility and even in winter suffering from hot flushes, when her husband turned on his side more often and stayed turned on his side, responding with love stories, it could help,

yes indeed, put a bit of life back in things, she hoped, and straightened her coat and pulled her scarf tighter, strolled further down the promenade to the steps which led down to the beach –

She tramped across the uneven sand in shoes unsuited to this kind of walking, breathing deeply, filling her lungs for free with the bracing sea air, striding slowly she practised conscious breathing again and struggled on until she reached the flatter area where the sand was lighter and harder, and only a few people were walking beside the water, and she could observe the waves playing better than from the promenade above, the tide wasn't coming in but neither was it going out, it was somewhere between the two, she didn't know the tide times for this time of year in Scheveningen, she was only a guest here –

She tried to keep hold of the images of the grey green heaving water masses, rising up and rocking back and forth, the crests and crowns of the waves swaying at a great height before inclining and tipping over to one side, while the smaller waves fell and foamed and flattened out and formed and rose up again into new banks of water fed by the inexhaustible sea and then rolled towards the shore –

As if for the first time Marie marvelled at the play of the waves, she was only familiar with it from films and books and her father's stories, she was a child of the Baltic and, if you didn't count Hamburg, had never been to the North Sea, the war and the time after the war and then the scant family money had not allowed her such trips, she didn't know the sea's roar, only the whisper, the low smack and splash of the sea on her doorstep at Heiligendamm, not far from the Bismarckstraße in Doberan –

The sea had been her father's element, the little captain, who had travelled the North Sea, the Baltic and above all the Mediterranean in First World War submarines and had taken part in the mass sinking of ships, in competitively counting the Gross Registered Tonnage of the enemy ships destroyed or badly damaged, the little captain, who had counted the tonnage but not the sailors or the passengers sunk into the waves on his orders or by his actions –

The wild seas, the seas of the dead, the seas of war, remained eerie and strange to his daughter. She wondered if her father, his submarines pushing forward into the Atlantic, torpedoes on board, with the Channel cut off by England, had passed by Scheveningen, useless speculation, highly unlikely, just a fantasy triggered by the ships in the distance and England just a stone's throw away –

She resolved to read up on it at home as the old captain had recently written down his memoirs for his children and grandchildren, she had looked through them immediately, eagerly, and then, also, quickly drafted a secret plan: what a love story it would make, those rhyming love poems, written in a submarine for the beautiful general's daughter, right in the middle of the war to end all wars, this story of her mother and father also cried out to be written, also cried out for her –

At that moment, standing near the mighty waves, the strong wind on her face, breathing slowly, she felt a pang of homesickness for Mecklenburg, for her parents' house in Bad Doberan, for the cycle path that went from her front door, from the Bismarckstraße down to the beach at Heiligendamm, they flooded back into her mind, memories of her childhood at the Baltic, family outings, photos on the beach, memories of the afternoon when she'd wondered whether to give in to Reinhard von Mollnitz's smile with the prospect of an engagement, her life decision at Heiligendamm, which she'd not seen for 25 years, her corner of the Baltic, out of reach in an East Germany which was also out of reach –

But she didn't want to dwell on homesickness, she didn't want to moan like someone driven out of their homeland, she didn't want to be ungrateful, the good thing was, these days she could go wherever she liked in the West, it was just a question of money, a one way ticket from Frankfurt to The Hague, along the Rhine in a few hours and arrive at the North Sea via Cologne and Amsterdam or Rotterdam, it was enough to show your identity card at the border and you were in a different country before you knew it –

Lodging with the friendly Dutch in a small pension near the station in The Hague, a tram ride to the upper class suburb of Scheveningen, and after registering beforehand and receiving an official permit, she was allowed to enter the Royal Archive to research her old relatives, her father's ancestors, the lieutenant commander with a few drops of royal Dutch blood –

It was getting dark, she turned away from the waves' show and walked towards the long stretch of the promenade or boulevard, which was now in full view, but the only building which drew her attention was the *Kurhaus* with its beautiful but fading glory, there were few handsome houses and too many new buildings, advertising hoardings and neon signs spoil the integrity of the old façades, ghastly modern box- like hotels, not worthy of a Royal Resort –

She punted over looser sand, surprised that such an unequivocal word as ghastly had come into her head to describe this town which was far from ugly, just somewhat disfigured, perhaps she was being too harsh, she didn't want to sit in judgement, she was only a guest here and didn't even know whether Scheveningen was still a Royal Resort, whether Queen Juliana still bathed here with her family –

She found the buildings crammed together, crowded, the coast overdeveloped and commercial as if the elegance of the previous era had been completely pushed aside by mass tourism, but she had to be careful not to be too critical, German seaside resorts would certainly be no prettier, she should be grateful she told herself to be able to set foot on this sand, on this promenade, she shouldn't make comparisons, especially not with the Heiligendamm of former times, nor this era, the end of the 60s, with the 30s of a different world –

She didn't want to be ungrateful to the Dutch, even in her private thoughts, she liked them for their funny language and their coffee houses and cyclists, the leisurely, peaceable Dutch, with whom she felt related via Willem 1st, whom she could call her great-great-great-grandfather –

And rightly so, as had been proved again to her today in the archive, three times great, that was a direct and quite a close relationship, not that she wanted to boast about her background, rather that she found it amusing, a royal infidelity in Berlin, and of course every aristocratic family was related to some king or other and all of them to Charles the Great in any event, anyone who could produce a reasonably long family tree claimed descent from him, even she had lying in a drawer a typed up family tree with no gaps and a line from her mother straight up to the great Charles –

Back on the promenade – or boulevard – she came across a memorial to Willem and she didn't need a dictionary to translate what was written there. It was on this beach in the fishing village of Scheveningen on 30th November 1813 that Willem, then Prince of Oranien and *Stadtholder*, first set foot on Dutch soil after his exile to England, before becoming king in 1815 –

It was on this sand that Willem, long ago, had gone ashore, the crowds cheering, wearing boots probably, it was on this sand that she had walked just now, alone, in silence, wearing shoes, the granddaughter with the three great syllables, suppressing her mild irritation that there was no mention of the long exile in Prussia, just the very short one in England, on the memorial and resolving not to be petty, not to be a know all, she strolled on –

Two seagulls hovered above her and she thought quick as a flash: those ones poo, don't tell me they're going to poo on my hat now, the Willem gulls, but they tipped away screaming in derision, Marie scrutinised the few passers-by and in her imagination bowed with reverential respect before the sea or before the king, she didn't know which, the bow an unintentional expression of her happiness, of the freedom to be able at last to start on what she wanted to do –

As she did this her attention was caught by a young couple kissing passionately for all to see, more passionately than they should be doing in a public place, the young man's hair was almost as long as his girlfriend's, both wearing long tatty coats, layabouts they'd say in Frankfurt, and the observer slowed down without meaning to and in a tentative sideways glance saw the couple French kissing, the play of the tips of their tongues –

Marie thought she'd seen while passing the hand of the long haired young man on his girlfriend's breast and her forearm at his crotch beneath their coats, half undone, both laughing out loud as they broke off their game momentarily, she found it repulsive and arousing at the same time, as they both seemed so brazen, so happy in their shamelessness –

She looked away, started walking more quickly, wanting to return to her pension, the twilight had intensified into a darker grey, and before she turned into the street with the tram stop, she turned round once more, she envied the couple, still standing close together, the image of the tongue tips playing against the backdrop of the North Sea waves, the image of a moment would take longer to fade, she felt, as she returned by tram to the centre of The Hague –

At the station kiosk she went up to the German papers, wedged tightly one behind the other, her local *Frankfurter Blatt* announced the swearing in of President Nixon, other headlines reported continuing unrest after the self-immolation of a student on Wenceslas Square in Prague a few days ago, and although she'd been deeply moved by the Czech student's act, she didn't buy a paper, they were too expensive, she'd rather spend her precious guilders on another of those delicious bread rolls with a fish filling for her supper, and, not wanting to spend any more money, she headed back directly to the pension –

At a small table in her narrow room with the charming old furniture she ate the rolls, washed her hands thoroughly till the smell of fish had gone from every finger, and leafed through the notes she'd made during the day in the Royal Archive, she'd quite got over her annoyance at having to make handwritten notes of everything at speed and at not being allowed to make

photocopies, despite there being those wonderful new machines in the archive, where you could place a page of the original and 10 seconds later hold a perfect copy in your hand –

Those machines hadn't yet arrived in Neuwied 6 years ago when she and her father had taken their first look at the material, at that time you had to go through the rigmarole of requesting photocopies and paying handsomely for them, the copy of the 1812 christening book of Wilhelmine, later called Minna, with the name of the father von Dietz, the disguised Prince of Oranien, and the mother Marie Hoffmann, secondly the copy of a letter from Frau Hoffmann, who'd been abandoned, to King Willem who was paying maintenance, thirdly an extract from the King's Will, in which his gift to Minna, the child of Marie Hoffmann, was almost as generous as the legacy to his legitimate daughter, Princess Marianne –

How simple the work could be, if only the Royal Archivists had allowed her access to the Xerox copier, but they didn't want to make it easy for her, she picked that up however polite they were to her face and she'd decided to stop getting annoyed, it was much more important that she finally started writing properly after 30 years of waiting and that her time as the typist of doctoral theses came to an end and a new life with her typewriter could begin –

She leafed through the handwritten pages, she was satisfied, there was material, there was drama, there was history which gave it flair and the timeless power of love, she'd wanted to make a start right then after the discovery at Neuwied, but she could only get going now, thanks to Richard's rise and the inheritance of 2000 Marks –

And she saw right away 3 new books in front of her with the name Marie von Schabow, she'd kept her maiden name from the start with the first small things she'd got published right up to the much admired biography of her former teacher Thadden, as a writer Marie had always wanted to remain a Schabow, a daughter of Schabow, while Richard's name, with its equally aristocratic ring, was reserved for the wife and mother of four, now at last Marie von Schabow was to become more visible than Marie von Mollnitz –

Gradually she became aware of a feeling of freedom and a loosening of her powers, even in the narrow, plush pension room she could set her imagination to work and note key points for a first draft: the State Opera House Unter den Linden, the evening, stage entrance, the Prince of Oranien, *Stadtholder* of the Netherlands exiled to Berlin, waiting for his lover, the dancer Marie Hoffmann –

She went on with her draft in this way, boldly including the heading French kisses, it tripped off her pen, with the biography she'd taken a back seat well behind her role model Thadden, now, with the novel, she could give her own personality free rein, she wrote until she was tired, went to bed, turned out the bedside light and went on painting the scene with Marie and Willem, she didn't want to stop and she let her imagination soar quite beyond that which it would have been proper to write in a love story –

Drenched in sweat she woke up, winching herself up out of a submarine tower in which she'd been hemmed in, the space stuffy and confined, her breathing panicky, the air thick with oil, squashed between riotous sailors, not one of them noticing a woman beneath their uniform, even her father hadn't noticed, she'd wanted to help him in his hour of need, the captain, who from one moment to the next was no longer to obey the admiralty but the Sailor's Council with their command to hoist the red pennant and to sail to Kiel in November 1918, truce, revolution, the red flag, however small it was, went against the oath and honour of a German officer, a battle for life and death in the submarine, the crew against the captain, what use were torpedoes in that situation?

It was a long time since she'd dreamed about her father, whose stories she carried round with her, it seemed like the waves of the North Sea had brought on the dream, the view from the bench in Scheveningen out over the sea and down into the depths of the submarines of the First World War, where she wouldn't have lasted 5 minutes, in the confines of such a steel cigar, in which you'd have to either suffocate or drown, her father deserved respect for that if nothing else, that he'd held it out for almost 3 years, first as an Officer of the Watch, then as a Commanding Officer, a First Lieutenant in several such floating, rickety prisons made of steel, tube shaped prisons, riveted together –

That's what she wanted him to describe to her, once and for all, in every detail, the terrible and dangerous life in such amphibious vessels, a home in a canon, half the men on the submarines had drowned in the course of the war, but she didn't want to think about the little captain and his dubious achievements now, early in the morning in her bed in the Dutch pension, she wanted to shake him off, her ever present old man, he was here again, like he was yesterday in Scheveningen, he interfered the whole time in her thoughts, her plans, her dreams –

Even while enjoying her breakfast, called *Ontbijt* here, with its strong smelling coffee, called *Koffie*, and fresh rolls, called *Kadetjes*, she thought that was funny and must tell her father,

the old cadet, who at the age of 10 had proudly put on the child soldier's uniform and had learnt to obey, who for 18 years had worn the Kaiser's uniform with unbroken pride and at the end as a submarine commander had almost capitulated before a scrap of material, they tasted heavenly the rolls, he had such a sense of humour, the old man, he'd laugh about the rolls, the cadet now almost 80 years old, he laughed a lot, the strict family captain –

He's turning 80, she thought, it's about time I got it into my head, soon he'll be gone from me, from all of us, I know how he sees the world, his rather simplistic world view, his closed system of good and evil, Kaiser and chaos, Jesus and the devil, his warnings about the times we live in and the demonic power of sexuality, what's going on beneath the surface, I hear his voice the whole time, the voice of his conscience, but what about his darker side, what about the deep wounds in his soul, the wounds beaten into him by the war, what about the great taboo, his mother locked up in an institution, my grandmother, hidden and not talked about –

So many questions about her father still not answered, so much uncharted territory in his carefully formulated memories and at that Dutch breakfast she couldn't dispel the thought that she could connect with her father, her parents and their love story by writing about them, by writing about the captain's love and his paralysis when the Kaiser abdicated, about his conversion after he'd been cured of the paralysis, about his awakening as a preacher and a missionary for convalescents, after the iron period of orders was over and father and mother could gaze into heaven and put their lives in God's service and leave everything up to Him, just like they said –

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