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'In free fall'

Physicists in the lead of a fiction book or a play, that's a rare event! Writers in general do not understand physics, while physicists seldom have the talent of writing for a large audience. So when it happens, we should rejoice. The up-and-coming German author Juli Zeh [1] (1974), who studied law, has succeeded in combining beautiful prose, psychological drama, crime and physics in a challenging book 'In free fall' [2]. A good friend of hers, Bettina Bruinier, has put the core message of the book into a compelling play in the 'Volkstheater' in Munich [1]. Yes, it can be done.

Given the current awareness of improving communication with society at large, we should embrace this opening to literature. Having read the book and seen the play, I am still flabbergasted by the precision in characterizing the two physicists in the lead. In my experience of training 350+ physicists in a 42-year career at university, I could not have done better, even if I could write fiction (which I can't).

The plot entwines the professional life of two brilliant young physicists with their private lives and passions. Sebastian chooses for marriage and children, while Oskar remains single with his love for physics and Sebastian. In a certain way, Sebastian lives two lives in a multi(uni)verse which is also his research interest at Freiburg

university. The pace of life is accelerated when his son is kidnapped from his car during a stop at a gas station en route to summer camp. A mysterious phone call warns him off from getting in touch with the police. The message seemingly refers to a public outcry over ethical malpractice of the director of the research institute where his wife Maike works. Only when he acts accordingly, his son will be returned.

The 'Hauptkommissar' Schilf enters the story at this moment, when the director is decapitated while riding his bicycle downhill on his daily training run. Accident or crime, who can tell? The policeman/psychologist Schilf solves the problem in a Columbo-type approach, not only finding the outcome, but also leading the two friends to deep insight in their entwined lives. All is well that ends well, is the motto of

even a criminal act. I will not say more about the plot: just read the book.

The multiverse or many-worlds theory of quantum mechanics [3,4] is ingeniously entwined with choices that have to be made in real life. The character of the two physicists is well described in the book; the casting of Sebastian and Oskar in the play is a success that can hardly be improved on. The play would be an excellent evening event at one of the EPS meetings. The same holds for a lecture or interview with Juli Zeh at such an occasion. She can surely captivate her audience, as I experienced during a Crossing Borders event in The Hague.

Incidentally, author Juli Zeh is not related to emeritus professor in theoretical physics Dieter Zeh in Heidelberg, who is a strong proponent of the multiverse theory! Only when the book was finished, she heard about this strange coincidence of a namesake with the same interest, as she confided to me at the event in The Hague. ■



References

- [1] <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schilf> (Roman)
- [2] Juli Zeh 'In free fall' (Doubleday, translation from German by Christine Lo); original title 'Schilf' (BTB Verlag, 2007)
- [3] Hugh Everett III, *PhD thesis*, Princeton Univ. (1957)
- [4] Peter Byrne 'The many worlds of Hugh Everett III' (Oxford University Press, 2000)