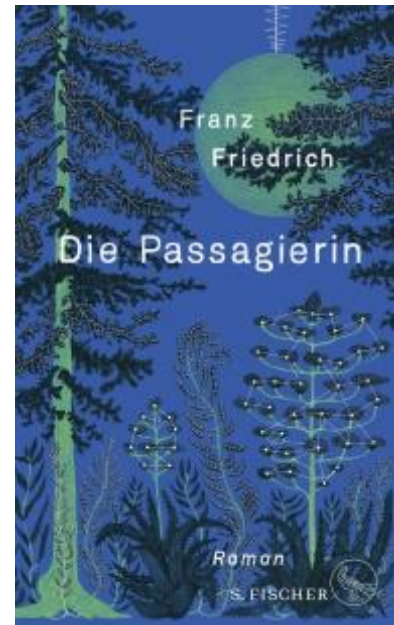




Franz Friedrich

The Passenger

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From a place that should have been the future

After years, Heather returns to Colchis. To the sanatorium where she was evacuated as a teenager – through time travel. Heather, like many other evacuees, has since suffered from phantom memories and the pain of loneliness, having left behind a life and a future she barely knew. She hopes to find inner peace, but Colchis has also changed. The sanatorium has fallen into disrepair, the remaining residents have retreated into their own world. Matthias, evacuated from the time of the Peasant Wars, nevertheless becomes a confidant for Heather, showing her that to surrender means the end of humanity.

Franz Friedrich virtuously tells of a future in which all the missed opportunities of the past are present. But also of friendship, community and the insatiable desire for change.

Franz Friedrich, born in 1983, studied experimental film at the Berlin University of the Arts and at the German Literature Institute in Leipzig. His debut novel "Die Meisen von Uusimaa singen nicht mehr" was awarded the Jürgen Ponto Foundation Literature Prize and was nominated for the German Book Prize. His new novel "Die Passagierin" was a finalist for the Döblin Prize 2023. Franz Friedrich lives in Berlin.

Summary

In a future world where time travel exists, some chosen individuals are whisked off their timeline and brought to a so-called safe future. In this new timeline, their first stop is a wellness retreat named Colchis, where they adapt to their new reality.

Among these 'time refugees' is a 15-year-old girl named Heather. She begins her new life at Colchis, only to come back after several years. Heather is haunted by what they call "phantom memories" from her past and the future she barely experienced. She, like many others, is unsettled and seeks to find answers in Colchis.

She is not alone in this: A number of people have gathered in the now almost deserted town who are in a similar situation to Heather. They are traumatized by their evacuation and by the reality that the rescue missions have now been declared a failure and have been abandoned.

Colchis is a visual delight. It's located by the sea and boasts of a grand spa park. Despite its deteriorating state—with wild overgrowths and crumbling buildings—it holds a unique charm. The place radiates a certain authenticity and feels cut-off from the outside world, and interestingly, it is the children who run the show here.

During her stay, Heather acquaints herself with fellow inhabitants at the sanatorium: Carlos, Edgar, KIND, Toni, and Matthias—the latter becomes a special friend. Everyone originates from a different time, introducing historical perspectives into the story. Matthias, who was rescued from the timeline of the Peasants' Wars and now has a particular enthusiasm for umbrellas, which he enjoys tinkering with in his workshop in his free time. But he is also suffering, sleepwalking and searching.

The sanatorium residents convene group therapy-like sessions where they dive into the memories of life before their evacuation. Using a method called "morphing," they attempt to manage their phantom memories. This is supposed to help them cope better with the phantom memories. These sessions also give rise to intense discussions that question both their own rescue and their own future.

One poignant remark from these sessions goes like: "I'm talking about those who evacuated us. They are cruel. There is something cruel about their progressiveness."

Author Franz Friedrich subtly incorporates this pressing debate: Can technological advancements remedy our crises? And what happens when we overestimate technology's potential? How do we grapple with feelings of helplessness?

It is a book that is convincing on all levels. Through the classic narrative tone, the complex and yet incredibly atmospheric world that Franz Friedrich builds and through its topicality, which does not impose itself at the first moment. He virtuously tells of a future in which all the missed opportunities of the past are present. But also of friendship, community and the insatiable desire for change.

Sample Translation: Alexandra Berlina

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Tezeta

One hundred thousand seven hundred and fifteen evacuees from the twenty-first century. Eighty-nine thousand four hundred and ninety-nine evacuees from the twentieth century. Seventy-seven thousand one hundred and forty-two evacuees from the nineteenth century. Fourteen thousand two hundred and thirty-two from the eighteenth, fifteen thousand four hundred and ninety-one from the sixteenth, fourteen thousand five hundred and thirteen from the fifteenth, thirteen thousand nine hundred and fifty-seven from the fourteenth century. Fifteen thousand two hundred and twenty-two from all the centuries before that. A total of three hundred and forty thousand seven hundred and fifty-nine people, I read, evacuated to Colchis, the harbour of time. I knew that about three hundred thousand were brought to Colchis in the two decades of the Great Evacuation, three hundred thousand from different eras – this number always came up when people talked about the evacuations. In the years that followed, the rescue missions were so drastically reduced that the added individual cases hardly made a dent in the statistics; Colchis was deserted now, the programme discontinued. But to read the precise numbers like that, all spelt out in absurdly long strings of words that went on and on, seemingly unending and then breaking off after all – this sight did not leave me untouched. It triggered something in me. They spoke Macedonian, Palauan, Yiddish, Kiruni, Sinhalese, Swazi, Tagalog. The list of languages alone took up almost half the board. Uzbek, Greek, Urdu, Arabic, Spanish, Guarani, Tok Pisin. I saw a sentence that I must have read somewhere before, or was it a song? We know we have no debt to anyone, and least of all to fate: there is no fate.

There is no fate – was it Mitsu who used to say that? Doomed to die but snatched away from death. The language of the text reminded me of how people used to speak in Colchis, that evacuee tone, harsh and full of pathos, which seemed inappropriate as soon as you left Colchis. Time-travel alumni

talking to each other, to others who, like me, had returned to Colchis to retrace that beginning.

The languages were followed by a list of cities, countries and professions; however, this one was more subjective, no longer endeavouring to name them all, which I secretly regretted, impossible as it would have been. Here, we had a list of spontaneous self-designations that differed greatly from one another in content and style, like the entries in a guest book or a poetry album. Anne-Pernille from Tirstrup-Fuglslev. Orhan from Mülheim an der Ruhr. Someone described herself as a proud Ashanti from the Delta of the Volta; someone else as a coupon-cutting valley girl.

The plaque was set in the centre of the square, not far from the large dove sculpture, and signed by a committee of Colchis alumni. When I tried to call Tezeta yesterday – she must have been annoyed that I hadn't contacted her yet, perhaps she'd left a message – I had overlooked this stone slab, placed as it was between the paving stones, surrounded by an area of white sand. Not a single weed was growing in the flowerbeds, the benches were freshly painted blue, everything looked meticulously cared for. The sand at my feet had even been raked into neat, wavy grooves and circles, and it was easy to imagine one of those righteous, orderly children of the Republic doing the raking, wiping the stone slab, plucking weeds from the flowerbed. Yes, someone like that must have felt responsible for this masterpiece of monument maintenance, while clearly not considering poor Cher Ami, dull, tarnished and soiled with the droppings of real birds, their responsibility.

[...]

The White Queen

This early in the morning, in a spa town not exactly overrun with tourists, I couldn't find a single place to have breakfast. No kiosk, no patisserie. I walked along the pier, past pavilions and food stalls that gave the impression of long, dusty inactivity. Pubs nailed shut, peeling pieces of foil... The few restaurants that weren't fully closed only opened up on weekends, and even then only for a few hours. I had already given up, was about to turn and drive back and

have breakfast at the resort, when a flashing string of lights under an awning suggested that it might be worth walking on till the tip of the pier.

And indeed: a restaurant was open there, a hand-painted sign spelling La Dama Bianca. I recognized that sign, that chess piece above the entrance that I'd been always happy to see, strolling past across the pier, a figure with round cheeks and full, red lips making a kissy mouth. The queen seemed unchanged, the paint not even sun-faded or peeling. I blew an air kiss to the chess piece and, for the first time, entered La Dama Bianca.

The interior design was quite eclectic: tablecloths with an orange-and-white gingham pattern, a garland of Chinese lanterns hanging from the awning... The only drink on offer appeared to be fennel lemonade in small, bulbous glass bottles, placed on beer mats advertising lychee soda in Thai script. A blackboard next to the counter listed a variety of dishes, but most of them were crossed out. What remained were scones with gooseberry jam, porridge, steamed carrots and something called poppies, which a note under an asterisk described as poppy seed doughnuts. I decided I'd have the poppies, and it wasn't long before a child – we were in the Republic, after all – appeared at my table.

"A delicious choice", said the girl, took my order and recommended me the fennel lemonade. I asked about other options and learnt that it was indeed the only one; there was nothing else to be had, no coffee, no tea. In the absence of alternatives, I chose the lemonade, if you could call it a choice.

The only other guests were a mother and a young woman, easily recognisable as her daughter, seventeen or so, with the same haircut as her mother, much shorter in the front than in the back; probably tourists, the two of them. They were eating porridge, and every time they dipped their spoons, their feet touched. The sea stretched out behind their heads, as blue and still as the morning before. From the pier, they had a good view of the resorts built into the hillsides. Above them, there was the cable car station, by now probably only visited by birds, the viewing platform, and at the very back, almost like a mirage, the battlements and towers of a castle, the Medieval House.

The child waitress brought me breakfast and wished me a good appetite. She asked if I was happy with the music selection – I hadn't even noticed there was music playing, a melody of the spheres consisting of overlapping, undulating steel drum sounds – she could switch it off or turn it down if I preferred.

"No, leave it on, it's nice", I said, bobbing my head to the music to illustrate that I meant it.

The mother at the next table nodded at me, which made her daughter a little embarrassed, and yet everyone seemed content, relaxation spreading in a benevolent wave. Back behind the counter, the girl turned up the music; I took a sip of the lemonade and a bite of the poppy doughnut. Now I remembered the mother and daughter again: it had been them with their walking sticks whom I had to dodge yesterday in front of the children's palace.

The mum leaned over the table, raised her voice against the music.

Was I an evacuee, too?

Yes I was.

She at once stood up, came over and held out her hand: "Then we're sisters." She introduced herself as Winda, sat down next to me and motioned her daughter to another empty chair at my table. She so rarely had the chance to talk to another evacuee, she said; unfortunately, she had lost contact with her friends from the Colchis days.

"Just like me", I said.

Winda had travelled from Jakarta to show her daughter what she had experienced here. She had been wanting to do this for quite some time but had somehow never dared. In the end, it was her daughter who had booked a room at the Tourism Office of the Children's Republic as a birthday present.

They had spent the first few nights in Boreal, Resort No. 3, before moving to Bohemia-Locarno. "It looks worse from the outside than it really is." Fortunately, the Republic is taking care of it, she said, they've done a lot of good work here, making places accessible again, campaigning against the decay, organising events, even. Just yesterday, for instance, there was a lecture at the House of Sciences: Architecture in Colchis: planning and building between optimism and mourning, the hall was packed, the speaker

a member of the alumni committee, she mentioned the main resort, too, a truly beautiful building, what with the pillars and the ribbon windows – was it just as beautiful on the inside?

As it turned out, Winda had also lived in the children's palace, but a few years before me; we'd never met. We searched for mutual acquaintances, but the names she mentioned – Rosalina, Vernor, Wim, Aram – conjured up no faces, no voices, no gestures in my mind, and every time I said no, her disappointment grew, the corners of her mouth twitched, grew bitter. Finally, we found someone we both knew: Henrik, one of caregivers, a teach, as she put it. But as far as Henrik was concerned, our memories differed. I told her how he'd once stormed into my room at night in a rage because Mitsu and I had been talking with the balcony door open – perhaps about the diabetes we had both suffered from, though before our evacuation I had thought that my fatigue had to do with puberty, my failure at school or maybe my parents' separation. Perhaps that night, Mitsu had been telling me how he had once been so hypoglycaemic on an orchestra trip that he had lost consciousness during a performance. Never being able to just relax and forget it, the constant fear of dying – we had been talking about something serious; our voices had certainly not been too loud, even with the balcony doors open. And still, Henrik had stormed into my room and furiously explained how many people we had robbed of their sleep, and how many of them would then take their moods out on others – all because of us. Seemingly we'd managed to spoil the day for the whole town, for all of Colchis, with that one open balcony door. Still, I kind of liked Henrik, but unlike all the other caregivers, who were always patient, he had an anger issue. Winda, though, had the opposite impression: "But no, Henrik was the gentlest of them all!"

We wondered what Henrik was doing now. She supposed he'd gone to Peristera as a settler, like so many of the Colchis people. Had I ever been there, on that other Earth?

I said no. Neither had she. At least now we had found something in common again.

Then, all at once, Winda complained of a severe headache.

“Popkin”, she said, touching her temples and helplessly looking at her daughter, who at once got up from her chair. “I think it’s starting again.”

From the front pocket of her rucksack, her daughter pulled out a sachet, and Winda poured its contents into her mouth.

“I thought we had it under control”, she said, trying for a smile. “Don’t you worry, I’ll be better in no time.”

I offered her a lift back, but she said she didn’t want to put me to any trouble. The railway station was just around the corner, and she wasn’t that unwell, really, “it’s not that bad at all!” Her daughter, only then introducing herself to me as Tiine, “Tiine with an ii”, finally persuaded her to accept my help. And a good thing, too: on the way out, Winda would have fallen if we hadn’t caught her.

Fortunately, I’d left the car right at the pier, in an open space next to a drinking fountain, which – as a note stuck under the windscreen wipers now informed me – was not a parking space: PLEASE DO NOT PARK HERE. THE REPUBLIC. We helped Winda into the car and let her stretch out along the back seats.

“Does she often get like that?” I asked Tiine.

The daughter shook her head. “No, it’s just that being here turns out to be rather overwhelming.”

I got lost on the way to Bohemia-Locarno and then had to take a detour because of the spa railway tracks. By the time we finally reached a sign pointing the way to her resort, Winda had fallen asleep.

“This trip is a disaster”, Tiine said to me quietly. “What a stupid present.”

“But she’s grateful to you!”

“That makes it all the worse. You know, in the last few days, I’ve realised for the first time how old Mum actually is – like, ancient. You know what I mean?”

Of course I did. Like me, Winda came from a world where time travel was science fiction, where the furthest humanly accessible destination was the moon. To be evacuated, she had boarded a shuttle that must have seemed alien, strange and inexplicable – to her, it was a UFO, an unidentifiable flying object, a spaceship from the future, a flying saucer, as people said. What madness, what a risk, to get in and race through a wormhole!

What's more, she had left behind everything she was used to, all the people she knew, her friends, her parents, everyone who mattered in her life, all in one fell swoop – a decision the implications of which no one, let alone a child, could fully comprehend. Sure, the commission responsible for her evacuation had carefully considered her case; these people really did know so much more than she did. She had joined them, trusted them to openly discuss all eventualities, all consequences, all dangers, both before and after her arrival in Colchis. And yet, despite all the care, all the planning, all the goodwill, this step had been overwhelming, so much more than any one person could comprehend. Her breakdown, I thought, was not only understandable but appropriate, a headache was the least one could expect. Who wouldn't react to such a confrontation with the past?

"I know how your mum must feel", I said to Tiine, who was rummaging through her rucksack in search of the remedy that had always helped her mum so well, as she kept saying. Relaxants against so-called PTPEs, which I suffered from myself: the brain producing pseudo-memories, mis-coordinated transmission processes cascading down the nerve impulses, neurotransmitters and synapses conspiring to remember things that never happened. I, too, had been prescribed relaxants. They made some people very sleepy, others merely relaxed, as the name suggested; as for me, they left me with a feeling of utter indifference, as if it didn't matter whether I had experienced something or not – an indifference that turned even my most certain memories, even the reality in which I lived, into phantoms.

"You did the right thing", I told Tiine with as much conviction as I could muster, feeling like a hypocrite. Maybe it would have been better to stay at home.

The entrance gate to the Bohemia-Locarno garden appeared on the right; I turned in and brought the car to a halt under a tall palm tree covered with bright yellow dates. Tiine bent toward her mother and stroked her cheek. Winda opened her eyes. She looked exhausted but at once began repeating that she was feeling much better.

Two teenagers noticed us as we were lifting her from the back seat. They'd been busy repairing a cracked conservatory window, lifting a pane of glass with the help of suction cups. They at once interrupted their work and came

over. Together, the four of us helped Winda into the building, up the steps and into the foyer.

“Does she need a doctor?” the boys asked, but Tiine said no:

“I think all she needs now is some sleep.”

Not knowing how else to help, I asked the two boys to check on her again in half an hour, to which they chorused that this was a matter of course: “We’ll take it from here!”