



# READING GROUP GUIDE

## The Abolition of Species

By Dietmar Dath

Translated by Samuel P. Willcocks

### Introduction

The reign of genetically-engineered animals begins after a genocidal war. The indifferently wise Cyrus Golden the Lion, king of the Gente, rules the remaining three-city state of former Europe. Yet, other forces stir – the last struggling human resistance; the Atlanteans with their mysterious undersea plans; the factions of Badger, Fox and Lynx within the empire itself; and in the Amazon, an artificial intelligence named Katahomenleandrethal, who soon breeds an army of post-biological ceramic lifeforms.

Cyrus Golden sends the wolf Dmitri Stepanovich on a secret diplomatic mission, and in the course of his journey Dmitri discovers truths about politics, natural history, the faithful and the treacherous, and that Cyrus has a daughter and wife, both trying to save the Gente from destruction. The subsequent war that breaks out with the ruthless AI comes to span three planets and eons, encompassing treachery and massacres, music and mathematics, literature, decadence and savagery, as well as the terraformation of Mars and Venus and the manipulation of time itself.

By turns grandiose, horrific, erotic, scathing, and visionary, *The Abolition of Species* is a tale of love and war after the fall of man and an epic meditation on the theory of evolution unlike any other.



**Winner of the Kurd-Lasswitz  
Science Fiction Prize**

**Shortlisted for  
the German Book Prize**

"Readers who favor the sensual detail and daring brilliance of Brian Aldiss, Samuel R. Delany, Carol Emshwiller, George R.R. Martin, and Frank Herbert will find much to enjoy in this dazzling translation."

– William Grabowski,  
*Library Journal*



## REVIEWS

Here, the “abolition of species” is realized as the dissolution of boundaries between art, literary genres, languages and hierarchies. [...] A science fiction novel that is, at the same time, a symphony in four movements.

– *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Dath uses gender and evolution as underpinning motivations [in] a dense historical narrative, with an arc of centuries. [...] A story that ultimately leads to a promising, open-ended conclusion.

– Regina Schroeder, *Booklist*

Dietmar Dath joins the tradition of Voltaire and Jules Verne, of Thomas Morus and Mary Shelley. [...] A fantastic love song, an epic meditation on the theory of evolution.

– Signandsight.com

In Samuel P. Willcocks’s masterful translation, *The Abolition of Species* is a transgressive revelation, a worthy philosophical successor to [H.G.] Wells’s generative novel [The Time Machine (1895)].

– Michael A. Morrison, *World Literature Today*

*The Abolition of Species* is the magnum opus by Dietmar Dath. A book somewhere between Douglas Adams, George Orwell, and Philip K. Dick.

– GQ

Dietmar Dath is the most productive and radical writer in Germany.

– *Die Welt*

Dath’s language is a beautiful music.

– *Frankfurter Rundschau*

Science fiction for everyone who wants to think with more than only one particular consciousness.

– *Neon*



Poetic and violent. [...] There is so much love in it, love for culture, books, Shakespeare above all, as the only reverential relic from The Age of the Monotony.

– Volker Weidemann, author of *Summer Before the Dark: Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth, Ostend 1936*

Dath is not interested in how the world is. His lyrical prose is about how the world should be, hopefully will not be or why it stays the same. [...] Germany's only young author with attitude – and very interesting arguments for socialism.

– *Der Spiegel Online*

As a studied physicist and linguist, Dath is familiar with the worlds of structures underlying human existence. Word shards and phonetics [...] give the darkness of the future the necessary apocalyptic touch. This possibility arises from the next dimension of discomfort when reading the novel. This author makes us look relentlessly at the future, and what is revealed there is anything but pleasant.

– *Rezensionen.ch*

An enlightenment [and] a grueling intellectual pleasure – the first serious literary attention given to the epochal change in which technologies of the western world are ready to rewrite the codes of the living. [...] Anyone who sometimes glances eagerly into the bright sun, even if the eyes ache, should read this book.

– Iris Radisch, *Die Zeit*

Science Fiction, Fantasy, Creation History, Space Odyssey and Political Utopia are wired together into a genre-King-Kong. [...] This novel wants to promote action, a fictional rocket which can be used to change the world.

– Jutta Person, *Literaturen*



## READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Dath's presentation of a dystopic future can be seen as social criticism. After the near-extinction of mankind and the end of The Age of the Monotony, new animal species reign with the ability to continuously transform themselves genetically. What does this manipulation of evolution reveal about human ambition to create a social utopia at the cost of natural destruction?
2. Discuss your specific interests that overlap with the subjects of this book. Were you most intrigued by the technological aspects (gene-splicing, artificial intelligence, terraforming)? By the environmental (mankind's self-destruction, species evolution, off-planet habitation)? The socio-political (socialism, feminism, advanced warfare, genocide)? Futuristic physics ("pherinphonic" communication, ceramic-based life forms, multi-dimensional travel, particle entanglement)? The literary/sci-fi tradition (H.G. Wells, William Shakespeare, George Orwell, Philip K. Dick, etc.)? Other aspects or ideas?
3. What are some examples of Dath's socialist themes? How is the idea of collective agency represented, and by which characters? Where do echoes of 19th- and 20th-century socialist and communist governments appear?
4. What does the role of Cyrus Golden the Lion, the ideological ruler of the Gente, tell us about indoctrination and absolute rule? How is his reign confronted by political opposition, and what is his role in the human and animal genocide?
5. What is the role of religion in the book? Discuss the way the Temple of Isota and its caretakers preserve and determine the Gente's history.
6. On Mars and Venus, the Gente's quest for new habitat introduces the concept of terraforming. What are some examples of the genetic alterations this travel necessitates in the remaining Gente?
7. How do the eons of existence of the Gente on three planets reflect on the last several centuries of human existence? Consider colonization, political movements and the evolving notions of identity, to name a few examples.





8. What is the role of ethics in the evolution of the Gente? Which characters best present an ethical model for technological development, in your opinion?
9. The Gente's various physical forms raise questions about the nature of our physical existence. Are bodies even relevant in this new epoch? What social impacts does Dath imply?
10. What do you think about the possibility that someday we might develop the ability to manipulate genes to create hybrid creatures? How do these ideas relate to ancient myths?
11. How do Western and Eastern philosophies mix in *The Abolition of Species*, and how do they compete for dominance in the book? How are they hybridized? Can the characters' names give you clues?
12. The characters have the ability to alter themselves at a molecular level. How does this book fit into the discussion of radical identity theory, especially in regards to social constructs such as gender and race?
13. After reading the book, what do you think Dath suggests about the human aspiration for eternal life?
14. How are the technological efforts made by the Gente germane to the current evolutionary path of our world? About our enthusiasm for finding new forms of life on extra-solar planets?
15. Discuss the role of music throughout the book and the central hidden radical human figure of the composer. Who is she, and what does her identity and experience with love contribute to Dath's conclusions about biology and technology?
16. Would you prefer to live a future existence as a disembodied intelligence or as a creature? How does this mind/body split, originating philosophically with Descartes and The Scientific Revolution, reflect on the challenges facing humans and our technology today?



Photo credit: Hanke Wilsmann.

**DIETMAR DATH** (b. 1970) is an author, translator, dramaturge, lyricist, and presently, the film critic for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ). In the past he was the chief editor of the rock magazine *Spex* before becoming the feuilleton editor for *FAZ* from 2001–2007. Dietmar Dath has written fifteen novels, as well as books and essays on scientific, aesthetic and political topics, including *Maschinenwinter* (2008), the biography of Rosa Luxemburg (2010) and his prize-winning sci-fi novel *Pulsarnacht* (2013). The German original of *The Abolition of Species* won the Kurd-Lasswitz Prize for Science Fiction in 2009, was staged at the Deutsches Theater Berlin in the same year, and was short-listed for the German Book Prize. One of Germany's most celebrated contemporary writers, Dath has distinguished himself through works that deftly combine popular culture – particularly music – with left-wing politics and the fantastic. *The Abolition of Species* embodies the best of what Dath is known for and will cement his reputation among English readers excited to discover one of the freshest voices in contemporary literature. He lives in Freiburg and Frankfurt.

**SAMUEL P. WILLCOCKS** was the 2010 winner of the German Ambassador's Award for Literary Translation (London). In his lifetime, he translated dozens of books from Czech, German, Romanian and Slovene into English and lived in Giurgiu on the Danube with his family.



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