

You'd die for your family.

But would you kill for them?

# FEAR

THE MOST  
ORIGINAL  
THRILLER OF  
THE YEAR

DIRK KURBJUWEIT

## Praise for *FEAR*

‘I’m intrigued by Dirk Kurbjuweit’s novel *FEAR*, about a stalker living downstairs’ **LIONEL SHRIVER**, *Observer’s* Best Holiday Reads 2017

‘A terrific, original thriller, and a marvellous exploration of the psychology of menace – I loved it’ **JOANNE HARRIS**

‘Its layers of paranoia and memories are brilliantly done to play on every parent’s deepest fears – including mine’

**FIONA BARTON**, bestselling author of *THE WIDOW*

I loved it. So rich and claustrophobic. An unsettling tale of merciless self-scrutiny’

**RENEE KNIGHT**, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *DISCLAIMER*

‘*FEAR* shifts our moral codes. It makes us sympathetic to violent revenge, accessories to murder. Do we want the victim to survive? No, we don’t. Long after I had put this book down I still didn’t. A great achievement’

**HERMAN KOCH**, bestselling author of *THE DINNER*

‘*FEAR* grips you from the get-go. A creeping, creepy and darkly-hued tale of family, fatherhood and failure, it is also a deliciously suspenseful thriller, an intelligent investigation into guilt and a superb slice of bourgeois domestic noir’

**STAV SHEREZ**, author of *A DARK REDEMPTION*

‘Thought-provoking and intelligent, calling into question our own values when dealing with those on the fringes of society. Genuinely chilling, and a compelling read’

**ELIZABETH HAYNES**, bestselling author of *INTO THE  
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CORNER*

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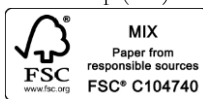
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# 1

**'DAD?'**

My father didn't answer me. He barely speaks anymore. He isn't muddled, doesn't suffer from dementia or Alzheimer's. We know that, because he does speak sometimes, and on those rare occasions he is lucid and rational. Dad is seventy-eight, but his memories haven't abandoned him, and he always recognises me when I visit him. I get a smile, not a big one, because that's the way he is—distant, reserved—but he recognises me, and he's pleased I come to see him. That is no small thing.

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‘Mr Tiefenthaler?’ Kottke prompted, when my father didn’t reply. Sometimes my father is more likely to respond to Kottke than to me. Does that make me jealous? I have to admit that it does a bit. On the other hand, Kottke is the man my father now spends his days with, and I’m glad—of course I am—that they get on. Kottke respects my father—I think it’s fair to say that. I don’t know whether he treats all the men here as gently and kindly as he treats Dad. I suspect that he doesn’t, although I have never seen him with the other men.

But today my father didn’t respond to Kottke either. He sat at the table in silence, half asleep, eyes drooping, hands hanging by his sides. Every now and then he would tilt forwards and I would get a fright, because if my father hit his face on the metal tabletop he would hurt himself. He never falls that far, though—he always checks the tilting movement and rights himself. It was the same today, but I can’t get used to it. It gives me a fright every time. I saw Kottke start forward and then relax—he too had been ready to intervene. We take good care that nothing happens to Dad.

I’ve been coming to visit my father in this place for six months, and it’s still sad to see him like this, in his threadbare shirt and the worn trousers he wears without a belt. We bought him new things to smarten him up, but he insists on wearing his old familiar clothes, and why shouldn’t he? He looks strange, sitting there, because his chair is too far from the table—as is mine. We sit opposite each other, but the

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table doesn't really connect us, doesn't allow us to sit together. Now, of all times, when we're closer than ever before, the table separates us. At least that's the way I see it. Unfortunately it's not possible to move the chairs, because they're screwed to the floor. The same goes for the table.

My father could speak if he wanted to, but he doesn't. He's tired, I think, worn out by the long life he found so difficult. We never understood him, but what does that matter? He had to cope with those difficulties, even if he maybe only imagined them. And we don't know everything about his life. Nobody knows everything about another person's life. We can only be continuously present in our own lives, and even that doesn't mean we know all about them, because things that affect us—often momentous things—can happen without our being there, and even without our knowledge. So we should be wary of making statements about other's lives in their entirety. I am.

As I was leaving the house this morning, I told my wife I was going to drop in on my father. I always put it like that, and when she goes, she uses the same phrase: 'I'll drop in on your father later.' Half a year is not enough to take the pain out of the word 'prison', not for people like us, who must first get used to the idea that such a place has become part of our world. It hurts us, even now. My father was sentenced at the age of seventy-seven and has already had—I won't say celebrated—one birthday as



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an inmate. We tried to make the hour's visit festive, but it was not a success. It wasn't so much the screwed-down chairs and metal table that were to blame, or even the barred window—another all-too-clear reminder that this was not a homey place, not a fitting place to celebrate the fact of your own birth. It was me.

We had carried off the first half-hour fairly well. We all sang 'Happy Birthday to You'—my wife, Rebecca, and I; our children, Paul and Fay; my mother; and even Kottke, who had granted us certain exemptions that day. We ate the almond cake my mother has been baking for her husband almost all her life, and which she wanted to present uncut on a baking sheet the way she always does, because she enjoys cutting it with everyone looking on, waiting to have some. But the exemptions didn't go that far. When we were searched at the door, my poor mother, my seventy-five-yearold mother, had to watch as a prison warder cut her almond cake into little pieces. 'I assure you I didn't bake a file into it,' she said, with a forced cheerfulness that made me sad. They probably believed her, but of course there are rules. I hate those words, hate having it pointed out to me that there are rules preventing what is reasonable. But they are words I have heard often since my father has been in prison.

We talked about other birthdays—birthdays my father had celebrated as a free man—when I suddenly found myself sobbing, quite unexpectedly. At first I thought I could stop

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and I fought back the sobs, but they grew heavier until I was weeping uncontrollably. My children had never seen their father in such a state and stared at me in horror. Kottke, bless him, looked away, embarrassed. My mother, who was sitting on one of the screwed-down chairs, stood up and came towards me, but my wife reached me first. She took me in her arms, and I buried my face in her shoulder. After a few minutes my sobbing fit was over, and I looked up. My eyes still blurred with tears, I saw my father regarding me with what can only be described as interest—a peculiar interest I did not know how to interpret. I have often wondered about it since, but have come up with nothing that could explain that look. My mother passed me a paper napkin, and I apologised and began, quickly and far too cheerfully, to recount some story about another of my father's birthdays. But this time it was no more than an attempt to speed up the clock, because I wanted to get out. We all wanted to get out.

I shouldn't write that—it seems a bit much, when your father's in prison. If anyone had to get out, it was my father, but he couldn't. We, on the other hand, would be leaving as soon as possible, and as four o'clock approached, we transferred what was left of the cake from the baking sheet to two paper plates—one for my father and one for Kottke and his colleagues—and then we hugged him and left, not forgetting to say thank you to Kottke. My father remained behind, of course. He'd been sentenced to eight years. The

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six months he spent in remand count towards that, and he's served another six months here in Tegel, which leaves seven years. If he behaves well—and we firmly expect him to do so—he might be released in three or four years' time. Kottke has told us repeatedly that there is no better-behaved inmate than my father, and that fuels our hopes. It would give him another few good years of life as a free man. That's what I tell my mother. 'If only he doesn't die in there,' my mother often says, and immediately repeats herself: 'If only he doesn't die in there.'

'He's healthy,' I tell her, when she says that. 'He'll make it.' 'Dad?' I asked again, after chatting a while with Kottke. That's how I tend to spend my time here: Kottke and I talk. He does most of the talking—Kottke's nothing if not talkative—but that's a good thing. It's a help. I find the silence of the prison intolerable, because eerie sounds emanate from it that can be heard in the visitors' room—metallic noises I can't identify, not ringing out sharply, but flat and dull. At first I thought I could hear rhythms, as if somebody was tapping or filing, but over time I realised that I had become the victim of my own expectations—namely, that a prison must always be filled with the sounds of thwarted communication or attempted flight. There were no rhythms, nor was there any quiet sighing such as I once thought I heard—only unfamiliar, unaccountable noises coming from deep inside the building. I was glad when Kottke drowned

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out these sounds with his grating Berlin accent. He has a long career as a jailer behind him—more than forty years serving the law—and has a great many stories to tell. I never really wanted to know so much about the world of crime and criminals, but that world is not without interest, especially now that it intersects with our own.

Kottke was soon looking at the clock. He has an unerring instinct, always knowing when our hour together is up. ‘Time we made a move,’ he said, as usual, and I was grateful to him: this turn of phrase makes it sound as if the two of them have to leave a pleasant coffee party and drive home. Home for my father is a cell, but this uncomfortable fact is obscured by Kottke’s wellchosen words. A jailer’s sensitivity—there is such a thing. We’ve been lucky.

Until then, Kottke had been leaning against the wall next to the window. Hardly had he spoken when he took two steps across the room towards my father and put out a hand to touch his upper arm. He always does that—there are a whole host of rituals here, of repetitions and routines. In this place the gesture seems almost official, a warning that it’s not worth trying to escape, because Kottke, friendly though he may be, must do his duty. But I think he acts out of solicitude—he wants to support my father, even though there’s no need. Dad is quite capable of getting up by himself.

When Dad stood up, so did I. We gave each other a brief hug (we can now), and then he left, Kottke at his side. My

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father is taller than his guard: a slim six foot two to Kottke's corpulent five foot six. He is still as trim as ever, but he has lost his hair, and with age his legs have become bowed, giving him a rolling gait like a seaman. Not that he ever was a seaman—my father was a mechanic and then a car salesman.

When they had left, another jailer appeared, one whose name I don't know. He too was fat (a lot of the men here are), and he looked dutiful rather than friendly.

We didn't exchange a single word as he accompanied me to the door. At last, the street—cars, birds, wind in the trees, life. Twenty paces off, my Audi winked cheerily when I pressed the button on my car key.