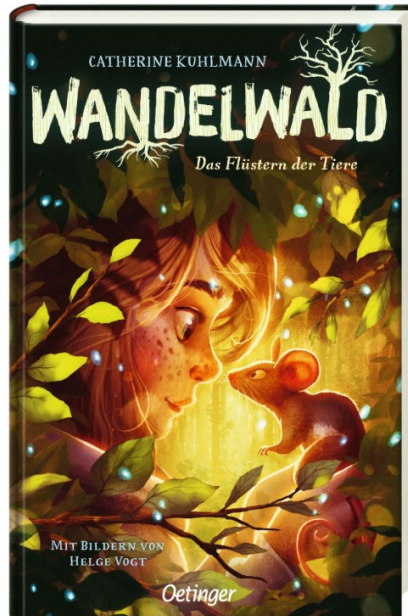




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Wandelwald 1. Das Flüstern der Tiere

The Wandering Wood 1. The Whisper of the Animals

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Eight-year-old Martha lives in the middle of the Dragonfly Forest with her parents, who run an animal shelter there. When a girl hands in a rabbit with a mysterious chain around its neck and an owl becomes her secret pet, a fantastical adventure begins for Martha. The two girls explore the Dragonfly Forest together and find a secret forest club. They swear to protect the forest and the animals living in it. When they shortly afterwards magically transform into squirrels, it becomes clear: the Dragonfly Forest holds great secrets, just waiting to be discovered...

- A mysterious rabbit, a secret owl and a magical forest – Martha and her new friend discover that the Dragonfly Forest holds extraordinary secrets.

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But then she hears it. A barely perceptible whisper rustles through the leaves, so soft, it is almost nothing. Is it the wind, gliding gently over the treetops today? Or the squirrel, skipping lightly from branch to branch? Martha peers between the trees ... It almost feels as though the forest is calling out to them.

The Most Beautiful Home

Deep in Dragonfly Wood, beneath tall trees, stands the house of Martha Maple. The only neighbours here are deer that nibble at the vegetable patch in the morning, and owls that call from the roof ridge at night. The treetops lean protectively over the grey slate roof, their leaves whispering. Sometimes Martha closes her eyes and imagines it is the ocean, sending its waves crashing against the house walls in steady rhythm. In autumn, the colourful leaves rain down onto the roof, as though someone has sent summer off with a shower of confetti. Only in spring does the melting snow wash them away. Why is Dragonfly Wood called Dragonfly Wood? Well, the moment you step inside, everything hums and flutters. The dragonflies and butterflies spin their pirouettes as if inviting you to dance. Of course, Martha doesn't live here entirely alone. She is, after all, only eight years old. The house at the address Forest Shadow Lane 1 is also home to her parents, Florentina and Adam Maple. Her mother has painted a maple leaf on their letterbox instead of writing a name. Some postmen understand this, and some don't. Martha, at any rate, is quite certain that Forest Shadow Lane 1 is the most beautiful home in the world. Only today, that thought offers her no comfort. She kicks a stone defiantly along the forest path. Exactly 34 minutes ago, the summer holidays began. Martha should really be jumping for joy – like that ridiculous stone. But when your best friend is spending all six weeks of summer at his grandmother's place in Sardinia, there isn't much to celebrate, she thinks. She gives the stone one final kick. It lands in the bushes with a rustle. Martha sighs. She and Elio sit next to each other at school. As best friends do. Outside of school, they spend every spare minute together too. Which is, of course, why Martha has had no time to make other friends. But perhaps, she thinks now, it isn't all that clever to have only one single friend. On the forest path ahead, the shadows of the leaves dance. If she were in a better mood, she would join their dance, hopping from one shadow to the next. But today she has absolutely no desire to dance. Then she notices something else darting across the path. A small, somewhat portly dachshund crosses the track in a series of stretched, galloping leaps. Martha is just about to run after him and catch him, but he has already vanished into the undergrowth. She knows exactly who the dachshund named Griffin belongs to. To Mrs Toadstool! She owns Dragonfly Wood. She is a real countess, you see, and countesses sometimes own entire forests. Even if she doesn't look quite like one imagines a countess to look. She usually wears checked trousers, wellington boots, and a green jacket with a fly agaric brooch always pinned to it. That is why Martha secretly calls her Mrs Toadstool. The house where Mrs Toadstool lives does, thankfully, look like something belonging to

a proper countess. In fact, it isn't really a house at all – it's a castle, right in the middle of Dragonfly Wood. Its towers rise above even the tallest trees, and it is so white that it blinds you when the sun shines on it. And at least half the castle is probably reserved for Mrs Toadstool's wellington boots alone. Every time Martha sees her, she is wearing a different pair. Once she had glittery ones; another time, a pair that looked like cowboy boots. Martha would give away all her cuddly toys for the chance to step inside – into the castle, not the wellies, of course. Martha looks around. She can no longer spot Griffin and shrugs. Mrs Toadstool must have things to do in the wood today, and her dachshund has surely already found his way back to her.

A Bright Green Surprise

When Martha's house appears between the trees, the first thing she sees is the cloud of dust circling it like a moat. She knows what this means: an Amalia Attack. Amalia is usually a calm dog. But for at least five minutes every day, she goes completely wild – running so fast that all you can see is dust. She is a proper greyhound, after all. "And they need that every now and then," Florentina Maple has explained to her. So for a greyhound, Amalia is perfectly ordinary. Afterwards, she shakes the dirt from her coat and settles onto the sofa, where she rests until the next attack. Amalia is not the only animal living with the Maples. There are so many, in fact, that Martha can never quite remember the exact number. 67? Or 76? At least! But only if you don't count the spiders in the attic or the mice under the floorboards. Martha's parents run an animal shelter. They take in any creature that needs help. They simply cannot say no to a pair of pleading puppy or kitten eyes. Martha finds this quite a practical quality in parents. When she has been up to mischief, she just puts on her puppy-dog look – and just like that, Mr and Mrs Maple forget they were ever cross with her.

When Martha reaches the veranda in front of the door and Amalia flops down panting beside her, she hears excited fluttering and chirping from inside the house. The doorbell is nearly drowned out by the twittering, but her mum opens the door all the same. Under her arm she has clamped a cardboard box that lurches back and forth in an ominous manner. Martha looks at her questioningly. "Come in quickly, before they escape!" she whispers, pulling Martha inside.

She nearly trips over Amalia, who squeezes through the narrow gap in the door ahead of her. The chirping is coming from the living room. And then Martha sees the whole spectacle. Yellow-green birds are flying around the room. Cardboard boxes and cages are stacked everywhere: on the floor, on the sofas, on the coffee table. Something flutters suspiciously from within. Amalia hops up and down restlessly. Even her favourite resting spot is covered in boxes. "Nothing but trouble! Nothing but trouble!" squawks Charly from the chandelier. Charly is an African grey parrot who always has the right thing to say. He does not appear to be particularly thrilled about his new housemates. The only one keeping calm amid the chaos is Gerry. He is a Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoise, so

small that it is easy to overlook him as he makes his way across the floorboards in slow motion. That is why a helium balloon is tied around his shell whenever he is not in his terrarium – there have been a few very near misses. Martha and her parents have almost stepped on him more than once. At the moment, he is trailing a shiny pink heart behind him. "Peace" is written on it in colourful letters. That way, you always know where Gerry is. Martha's papa is standing on a chair, flailing a butterfly net around in a panic. He very nearly loses his balance. He doesn't catch any of the birds – only the chandelier, which starts swaying dangerously and sends a shower of dust drifting down from the ceiling. Charly flaps away in a hurry. Martha could swear that as he flies off, he rolls his eyes in exasperation. "They were all confiscated!" Adam Maple calls out to her. "From a pet shop! Far too small cages!" he says, in that trembling voice he always has when something cruel upsets him. Confiscated – Martha knows that word. Animals are confiscated when their owners fail to care for them properly. Dogs that no one ever takes for walks, and ponies that stand in a dark stable all day long. Or birds kept in far too small cages. Sometimes Martha's parents find new owners for the animals, but often they simply stay on and live with them. "They're like our own children!" her parents say at such times, and Martha isn't quite sure what to make of that, being the only actual child for miles around. She is still standing in the middle of the fluttering chaos when her mother presses a cardboard box into her hands. Martha looks down in surprise at the grey box just as it starts to wriggle. "They need to be let out of the crates. Four to a cage!" her mother gives her a quick instruction. Martha opens the box carefully. Two eyes stare up at her. Black and shiny, like coffee beans. Gently, Martha cups the small bird in her hands. It has a bright yellow head, black streaks along its sides, and a bright green belly – like an unripe lemon. "That's a budgerigar," Mrs Maple explains, as though she has read Martha's thoughts. "I think his name should be Bean," says Martha, looking into his coffee-bean eyes. Her mum nods. Martha can feel Bean's heart beating very fast – he is so frightened. She carefully loosens her grip once he is safely inside the cage. She is just about to reach for the next box from the coffee table when the doorbell rings.

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Catherine Kuhlmann was born in 1993 in the Münsterland region and studied illustration in Hamburg. Over time, she realised that wonderful stories can be told not only through pictures, but through words as well. Catherine Kuhlmann lives and writes in Hamburg.

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