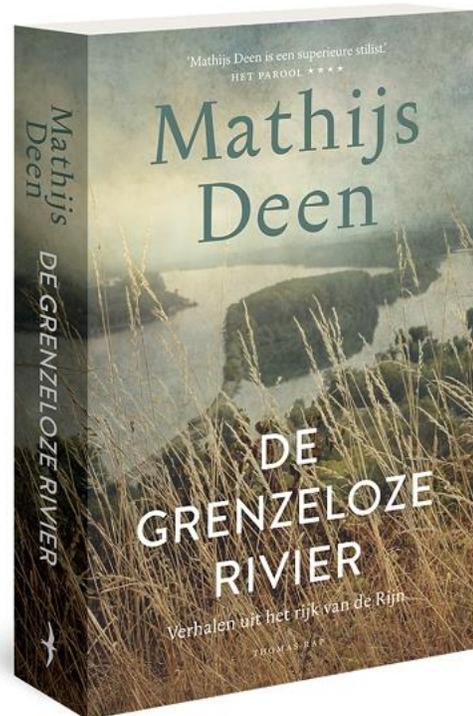


Mathijs Deen

# The Boundless River

Stories from the Realm of the Rhine

In *The Boundless River* Mathijs Deen brings the reader, as he did in his acclaimed books *The Wadden Islands* and *Down Old Roads*, into his unique world: the grey zone between fact and fiction, knowledge and imagination. ‘Imagine the river is a character, then she’ll have a birth and death as well. Tell me how she was born.’ That is the question Deen asks a geologist one sunny day in September. The answer that follows is the start of a journey that will carry the reader from a time far before we ever spoke of a European continent to the current day, in which skippers still see the Rhine as a living being, a person.



Meandering from the mighty hippos that once grazed on the river’s banks millions of years ago to the exhausted salmon that saw their habitat slowly change, from the girl from ancient Steinheim to the Roman general Corbulo, to the young Goethe and the North Sea fisherman Kommer Tanis – Deen tells stories in which the Rhine is ever present, at times in the lead role, at others as an extra. He shows how, since the beginning of time, the river has connected and divided, terrified, consoled, sustained and engulfed.

World rights: Thomas Rap – Option publishers: Dumont (Germany) – Non-fiction – 336 pages – September 2021 – English sample translation available



# Table of Contents (annotated)

## **Birth**

In which Europe slumbers in a time when nothing has yet happened and the author, accompanied by a geologist, watches the Alps rise from the sea

## **Riverbeds**

In which the author in the Swiss High Alps jumps over the Rhine, the river spends millions of years searching for the North Sea, and the author has it drummed into him that the river is more than just its bed

## **A hippopotamus**

In which a salmon three million years ago no longer recognizes her own Rhine and the author visits a man who has a hippopotamus at home

## **Home**

In which the author meets the first riverbank inhabitant in Stuttgart and the owner of the Steinheim skull dies in the river 300,000 years ago

## **The skating bear**

In which Wilfred Owen perishes at the Rhine's westernmost point, Goethe visits a tin washing plant at its easternmost point, the Frisian poet Tsjebbe Hettinga buries his father at its northernmost point, and the author realizes that the Rhine's basin is in fact a skating bear

## **Rubicon**

In which the Rhine tries in vain to hold its ground as a border but is thwarted by Caesar, Louis XIV, Blücher and Eisenhower

## **Canals**

In which Corbulo and Charlemagne try in vain to dig a canal to the neighbours



## **Islands**

In which Robinson of the Rhine refuses to leave his island,  
Louis the Pious breathes his last  
and Bishop Drogo drowns while fishing

## **Bathing**

In which the author's father learns to swim in the Rhine, a girl drowns in Rheinfelden,  
the river never gets the blame  
and the author is pulled against his will out of the Hinterrhein

## **Open gate**

In which the Vikings reach an agreement with Charles the Fat  
Bishop Liutbert of Mainz confesses without repenting  
and the Prince of Orange goes in search of a drowned river

## **Lorelei**

In which Daniëlle and Erhard of Warnemünde finally climb the Lorelei  
and a loyal husband walks into the water

## **Basel**

In which two homesick Swiss travellers take a lightship out of the sea  
and set it on land

## **Prayer and work**

In which Willibrord continues to spread his blessing over the delta  
the Rhine cures a terminally ill woman  
and a man from Besigheim tries in vain to get a tree out of the Enz

## **Away**

In which the author descends with the Terra Maris, a Rhine vessel full of stories, from the  
mountains to the sea



# Excerpts from *The Boundless River*

Translated by Anna Asbury

## *Birth of the Alps*

[pp. 23-26]

Mountains are like waves with a surplus of time. They rise from the earth, lift themselves up, peak and sink down, back to where they came from. Their rolling stones are like droplets, their avalanches like foam.

Picture yourself standing on the coast, time accelerating. The sun goes round like a sock in the washing machine, faster and faster, until there's no sock anymore, only a stripe, day and night merge into the dusk of a cloudy afternoon, the winds rise up from all corners, all the changes of weather and season, everything from which we normally seek shelter, it all falls away and we're left in a windless, soundless world in which not only the sea but the earth itself seems to have become fluid.

We look out over the sea, a turbid mirror reflecting a muted light. It's not clear where the light comes from.

A man has come to stand beside me. His name is Douwe van Hinsbergen. Like me, he comes from the east of the Netherlands, from Eibergen to be precise, where – contrary to the impression you might glean from its name – there are no mountains whatsoever. He left the Achterhoek region in search of real mountains and eventually became a professor of geology at Utrecht University. Now he's standing next to me and we're looking south. Tens of thousands of years fly by, but there's nothing to see just yet.

'The Mediterranean Sea is a pigsty,' he says. 'Only you don't see it, because there's water over the top. But under the water all is topsy-turvy motion. It's a mess.'

To Van Hinsbergen a sea is not the water but the crust beneath. Europe doesn't stop at the beach, he knows, she stretches as seabed far to the south, where a piece of broken-off African continent is on his way towards her like a messenger hurrying on ahead. He is a substantial chunk of continental crust and will eventually continue to push up against Europe in the form of



Italy. But for now he's still on his way and Europe bends to receive him. Her stone bed sinks downwards and thus she allows him, slowly, centimetre by centimetre, to climb her. Under his weight she allows herself to be pushed further down, into the heat and the depth, the syrupy mantle beneath, where she becomes limp and bends and turns and twists. Italy pushes up over her, scouring and scraping the rock of her skin along with him, over her curved back towards the surface, pushing it in front of him.

Italy himself remains under water for now, but the scrapings of Europe's skin which he pushed before him rise up out of the sea, first as islands, but gradually as an elongated stretch of land that is pushed toward the coast.

Douwe points to the horizon, in the far distance dark tufts have risen out of the sea, as if the weather is about to change. 'Those are the Alps,' he says. 'They're still low, but they're on their way.'

The ground beneath our feet has grown restless, it undulates slowly, and here and there plants burst forth over the surface. Europe's entire underbelly is trembling as it opens up for what's coming.

To our right, far on the horizon, the mountain ranges of the Vosges and the Black Forest tear apart and a rift opens up between them, growing deeper and deeper, until debris and avalanches pour down from the exposed mountainsides. On the edges of the rift, fire comes out of the earth, volcanoes climb like molehills, boiling over then dying down and collapsing back on themselves.

They are troublemakers, and short-lived.

'Keep looking,' says Van Hinsbergen. I look again to the south. In the brief minutes while I was distracted, the tufts of black on the horizon have climbed to become a tsunami more than a thousand metres high, which has blocked our view of the horizon from west to east. The ground beneath our feet is pushed aside, then back to the left, then right again, and here and there where the ground has been torn, rocks rise up from the earth.

It's strange to see all this happening in silence, with the exception of a deep rumbling coming from the earth, a tremor we feel more than see. The sea between us and the approaching mountains has narrowed, an enormous tension creeps along below the surface, as if Italy is now in a hurry and Europe is bracing herself. The earth vibrates, avalanches pour down into the sea,



surface as little islands and then, as if in consummation, there is a sound like a long sigh, from deep within the earth. Then everything relaxes.

‘Europe has been torn off,’ says Van Hinsbergen. ‘Italy pushed her down so far that in the depths the southernmost part of her plate broke off. Now she can get back up, pay attention...’

We are slowly raised up, it looks as if Europe is wriggling her way out from under Italy with a sigh and, centimetre by centimetre, righting herself. What was left of the sea at our feet disappears, the bed rises, slowly like a cork out of syrup. The water trickles away, evaporated. We are no longer on the coast, we’re at the foot of the mountains.

We look up, see the rocks, which have been boiled, crushed, folded in the depths and then pushed upwards, towering chaotically towards the sky.

‘I told you,’ says Van Hinsbergen, ‘it’s a pigsty.’

Clouds have gathered above us, as their way south is now blocked by the new barrier of stone. The world around us has cooled, the tops of the mountains turn white and the ground beneath our feet is soaked. All the water that has always fallen here, but used to flow south into the sea, must now change course to the north, gathering first in an inland sea that is drying up, then seeking a way over the surface, on its way to the delta.

## *The salmon’s homecoming*

[pp. 45-49]

Three million years ago an Atlantic salmon left her hunting grounds in the Northern Atlantic to travel south, back to the river of her youth, in order to spawn. She was alone, large enough to deal with the river, sure of her route. The earth pulled at her, very gently, she swam against it.

That’s what she wanted: to go against everything.

As long as she was on her way south, the flickering daylight above and the black of the deep sea beneath, everything was effortless. When she swam from the ocean to the North Sea, she tasted the first rivers; fine veils from far-off estuaries. Nothing seemed familiar to her, she swam on.



Until she recognized something for the first time, the scent and flavour of her own river; a couple of minuscule, hovering granules of sediment, a hint of humic acid, somewhere in the turbid fan unfolding from the east into the seawater. She lost interest in the pull of the earth itself and switched her attention to the unmistakable traces of her own river, still so faint in that soft, rounded, fanning current spreading through the sea.

She beat her tail, changed course, against the current, into the turbid water, the view ever poorer, the counter-current stronger, the water first brackish, then sweet, her nose filled with all kinds of flavours.

It was as if something wound around her, a cocoon protecting her from the sweet water. She beat hard against the current, especially when it grew so strong that it pushed her back and the water became shallow and temperamental, stones against her belly, tailfin in the open air; then she searched and fought. She leapt, she flew, bears tried to throw her ashore, danger was everywhere, but she went on, for with every beat of her tail the traces of that one river grew a little stronger; in that dazzling mixture that one flavour still shone through, that of her youth, growing more familiar and clearer the longer she threw herself against it.

Thus she found the estuary, the river, the tributary, the spot in the headwater that she had imprinted as a young fish, the same bend in one of the tributaries of the headwater where she shook her way out of her egg, six years earlier. Everything tasted, smelt and felt the same as it had back then. Particularly when it rained and the bank's forest soil was washed into the river. No other river smelt like the spot where she hatched out of her egg, in that one bend in the headwater of her birth-stream. She was emaciated, spent, but she was home.

With her jaws she picked up the pebbles and slung them away. Thus she cleared a nest and deposited her roe inside. A couple of thousand tiny eggs in an elongated, shallow hollow. The father, born and raised a little way downstream, discharged his milt over them, then allowed himself to be carried along downstream, weary of life. With her tailfin she churned up the sediment around the eggs for another couple of weeks, wafting oxygen-rich water over them. She looked like a stalling zeppelin, a metre and a half of shadow just above her clutch, her dorsal fin above the water's surface.

Then she too left, skeletally thin, exhausted. The winter sun broke through upon the clutch.



This happened three million years ago, just before the Alpine Rhine found the Proto-Rhine and the river took on its current shape. The summers were still very warm and the winters mild. From the southernmost off-shoots of the Proto-Rhine and the northernmost meander of the Alpine Rhine, still separated but close together, forests stretched in all directions. Mastodons and rhinos barged around among the trees, tearing leaves from branches. Macaques and howler monkeys shrieked in the treetops. Hippopotamuses bobbed around in the river.

You could barely tell that change was afoot. In the winter a little snow fell on the mountains of the Black Forest and the Vosges for the first time in hundreds of thousands of years. And as spring came, it even took a while for it to melt away. The water that then came down was strikingly cold, not unpleasant in the slightest for the salmon's eggs, which do best when they remain cool. The water was clear, the roots of the trees on the banks held most of the sediment in place. Only when there were long downpours was the forest floor washed away, clouding the water for a while.

The Rhine in its old form was entering its final days. The mastodons that came to the bank in the evenings to drink could already smell the other river on the southerly wind. They raised their trunks in the air, sniffed, shook their heads, walked into the water, drank.

What they smelt was the scent of the encroaching Alpine Rhine, expanding its course ever further to the north: grit, gravel, broken rock, ice. The world cooled down, the winters brought more snow on the mountaintops and every spring the meltwater came down from the Alps with a little more force than the previous year. The streams sought one another out, joined forces, twisted, lost their way, wore detours on their journey to the level of the Burgundian Gate, between the Vosges and the Jura, after which lay the Rhône valley. The water was greenish-white, milky and ferocious in spring. Boulders rolled, uprooted trees bobbed along with it, got stuck, gathered twigs and carcasses.

But around the salmon's nest there is not yet any sign of that violence this spring. The little eggs have hatched. Above the nest a swarm of little fish, still larvae, wriggle side by side in the current. They have fat little bellies, tiny tails, they hide amongst the pebbles, live off their yoke sacks, remain vigilant for flies and water fleas. They taste the water and imprint its flavour.

Life is precisely as it was for their father and mother six years ago; surviving around the nest, squabbling with their littermates, hunting little water creatures, hiding, first from the crested newt, then the kingfisher, the perch, the otters, the bears, until after two years during a downpour



the few survivors from the nest are carried along by the current for their first great journey, to the sea. The water is murky and that's reassuring, as the restricted view reduces them to silver flashes, tiny sunbeams, in the eyes of predatory fish. There were thousands of them when they emerged from their eggs, fewer than ten have survived the two years in the river. Now they swim, not in a school but each individually, away from the nest, away from the headwater of their own tributary to the Proto-Rhine. An otter glides into the water, sees one of them flit by, makes a rush for it, misses, watches her go, sees her disappear into the rapids.

The current sometimes almost stands still in deep pools or turns in whirlpools, slowly getting moving again after rainfall. The banks part, from all sides foreign flavours wash in. The nest scent fades, the river pushes and pulls, shadows of enormous fish hang in the water or rise from the depths.

On and on she swims, until the current slackens and a new, unimaginable flavour pushes its way up into the river. The water seems to hesitate, the river branches out and sandbanks rise from the bed, blocking the way. She hesitates on the threshold to another world, searches in the bends of the delta, until she has found an estuary and the sand drops away to the depths. The banks vanish, the water is salty and somewhere in the depths a faint pull is exerted, even fainter than the remains of the river flavour. Now and then she can still taste a hint of her birthplace, a granule of sediment that has travelled along with her. But it's time to say goodbye. She beats her tail and disappears northwards.

The river she leaves behind, whose scents and flavours she has imprinted for her return, will change radically during her absence.

## *The river basin*

[pp. 89-92]

As a teenager, when I took the dog for a walk, I would disappear across the road from my childhood home into the Teesinkbos, an estate of twenty-four hectares whose deserted house was derelict. The grounds remained in a pleasantly untended state. It was a wooded wilderness of manageable proportions, with monumental oaks and beeches, ferns and brambles, tufts of heather with scattered birches, lingonberries and wood anemones, the odd roe deer in the forest



meadow, squirrels leaping between the treetops, enormous rhododendrons, sometimes a kingfisher by the pond, and of course the brook, the Teesinkbeek.

‘What are you always doing in that wood?’ asked a classmate in the school playground. The girl listening in – whom I hadn’t the courage to look in the eye – burst out laughing and turned away. My classmate also lived next to the wood, but never went in.

I walked there with my dog, always following the course of the brook, which meandered its untamed route through the wood. In the sand of its bed there were ripple patterns and along the many bends the water had worn away steep banks to a man’s height, where sand martins dug holes for their nests. The November storm of 1972 had uprooted quite a few trees, some of which had ended up across the brook. Over the years colourful toadstools had grown along them.

I walked upstream along the right bank and rarely crossed. The couple of occasions when, balancing on one of the fallen trees, I ended up on the other side, I had the feeling I was on foreign territory. The dog barked across at me from the familiar bank.

I rarely managed to convince anyone to accompany me. When I finally persuaded a friend and, in an attempt to impress him, tried to jump Tarzan-style across the brook by grabbing onto a hanging branch and swinging full tilt, I lost my grip. The walk home in soaked trousers was so humiliating that my friend bade me farewell on the edge of the wood and took an alternative route home.

Even my dog wasn’t always pleased to be dragged along. Especially when I sat for a while on a fallen tree beside the brook and looked over the forest meadow in the hope of spotting the long-eared owl on the branch where he’d sat the previous year. She would look at me, stop wagging her tail, hang her ears and sigh.

Since Kim Cohen admonished me for my excursion to the source of the Rhine, I have realized that my walks along the Teesinkbeek were really little trips along that river. After all, the Teesinkbeek carries the water from the border marshlands via the Boekelerbeek, the Oelerbeek, the Twickelervaart, the Regge and the Vecht to the northern tributary of the Rhine delta, the Ijssel.

The river is not its bed alone, Cohen had impressed upon me, it is the entire river basin. The Rhine encompasses the tributaries running down into it from the Alps to the North Sea; the mountain streams from Austria and Liechtenstein, the muddy woodland brook from the Black



Forest, the water sprayed on the vineyards of Alsace, the melted snow of the Fichtel Mountains on the Czech border, the rainwater which gargles from the roofs of Nancy down the drains, the droplets of the sacred spring in the crypt of Echternach which, however holy, nevertheless eventually run off via the Sauer and the Moselle to the Rhine, the waste water from a street car-wash in Düsseldorf, the drizzle descending on the Meuse, which comes together just before the sea, in the Rhine.

And the Teesinkbeek.

The only real source of the river is the rainwater that falls upon us, from France to the Czech Republic, from Friesland to Italy.

There are maps of the river basin of the Rhine and the Meuse. Wikipedia has a clear one. It is a map of a country no one knows, whose borders are determined by the interplay of water, altitude differences and gravity. With a little imagination, the shape of the area is reminiscent of a skating bear, forefeet spread wide, balancing on one hind foot as he glides westwards.

The river basin is narrowest along the Freiburg-Mulhouse line, a corridor of a mere 100 kilometres between the realm of the Danube and that of the Doubs-Rhône. That's the bear's crooked standing leg; further north, the region fans out to east and west. Level with Frankfurt, the bear reaches its free leg back, as far as the Czech border. His outspread forefeet reach from the capillaries of the Sambre in northern France to the headwater of the Lippe near Paderborn. His skate rests on the northern border of Italy. The tip of his ear pricks up into Friesland. His flat snout protrudes into the North Sea.

By miraculous and fortunate coincidence the line from northernmost to southernmost point of the basin and the line from easternmost to westernmost point cross precisely at the Lorelei. The rock is apparently not only culturally but also cartographically the centre of the river.

## *Daniëlle and Erhard*

[pp. 265-268]

When I walked out onto the ferry in Sankt Goar, on the left bank of the Middle Rhine, it was still early and calm on the river. The little boat was briefly gripped by the current, turned to the



correct position, then made its way to the other side. There lies Sankt Goarhausen, once a village of wine, salmon fishers and goats, now mainly dependent on what's left over of the Lorelei tourism.

Next to the ferry pier a bust of Heine gazes upstream to the spot where the nymph Lorelei looks down on the tip of a spit of land on the water's surface. Lorelei is naked. Her front is lifelike in shape, her back a hunk of congealed fat, like wax on an extinguished candle. Other than the bleating of goats dwelling on the mountain slopes, there is no song to be heard.

From the Rhine's bank various footpaths climb up to the Lorelei Plateau. After a tough ascent, the path of the Rheinsteig hiking trail, first takes in Katz Castle, then meanders rather more gently among deciduous trees to the Lorelei. A bench has been placed just after the steep slope flattens out a little, so that hikers can catch their breath and look into the depths, down at the river, the two little villages, the trains, the boats. The Rhine is as tiny as a model railway. Since the bench is so high up, for those able to tear their gaze away from the scene below, above the mountains on the other side there is also a horizon on show.

On the bench sat Daniëlle and Erhard, a retired couple from Warnemünde, on the Baltic Sea. They shuffled up a little, made space for me.

'We've wanted to come to the Lorelei all our lives,' said Daniëlle. She removed her sunglasses and looked at me with light-blue eyes. Erhard, seated on the other side of Daniëlle, leant forward a little so that he too could make eye-contact with me.

'So you're on pilgrimage,' I replied.

They laughed and shook their heads. They weren't on pilgrimage, or they didn't want to call it that. 'We live by the Baltic Sea,' said Daniëlle, 'in Warnemünde.' She'd said it before. I realized they'd grown up in East Germany, and that the border still had some kind of presence, somewhere in her conscience.

'But you have to have seen the Lorelei,' I said, 'even if you grew up in the east.'

Both nodded.

'We lived most of our lives in the DDR,' said Daniëlle.

In 1986 I'd bought the complete work of Heine in East Berlin. Five volumes, Aufbau Verlag, gold on blue, seventeenth print run, with an introduction by the former resistance fighter and East German cultural politician Helmut Holtzhauer, who opens his piece with the observation that Heine not only shook hands with Marx and Engels, but that he was also witness



to the revolutions of his time and the advance announcement of the inevitable downfall of civil society.

‘Did you have to learn Heine’s poem by heart?’

‘No,’ said Erhard. He thought about it. ‘But it was allowed,’ he said then.

‘But a visit to the Lorelei wasn’t,’ I said.

We looked downwards in silence for a moment.

‘Heine was a desperate person,’ Erhard interrupted the silence, ‘a bit of a victim too.’

‘But now we’re here,’ said Daniëlle. She looked over her shoulder at the way the wooded path continued on up. ‘Almost,’ she said. She looked ahead of her again and pointed into the distance above the mountains the other side of the river. ‘You can see a long way here. I like that. The horizon.’

Now all three of us looked at the clouds in the west, floating slowly over the Hunsrück mountain range northwards.

‘What do you think is the difference between people who live by a river and those who live by the sea?’ I asked.

‘To me a river is a path, a connection,’ said Daniëlle. ‘The people here are busy, there’s always something going by.’

‘People by the sea are more resigned,’ Erhard agreed.

‘A sea has an other side too,’ I said. ‘It’s just further away.’

‘There used to be a ferry from Warnemünde,’ said Erhard. ‘It went to Denmark. There was a man who took his boat and hung on beside the ferry and crossed the sea that way. Then they installed border guards and watch towers and you couldn’t do that anymore.’

‘Yes,’ said Daniëlle, ‘they took good care of us.’

We laughed.

‘The idea was good,’ she said. ‘But the people were bad.’

‘Why didn’t you go straight to the Lorelei when the Wall fell? The Lorelei can’t have seemed that urgent.’

‘We lived on the Baltic,’ said Daniëlle again. ‘When the Wall fell, we immediately got into our Wartburg – we had a Wartburg – and drove to the North Sea. You know why?’

She looked at me expectantly, laughter wrinkles around her clear blue eyes.

‘Tell me,’ I said.



‘We wanted to see the ebb and flow of the tide. We don’t have that on the Baltic. We’d heard of it and wanted to see it with our own eyes. So we drove to the nearest stretch of North Sea coast and spent our entire time there watching the sea. The water came up and went down, just as we’d been told. We had no money to stay overnight, so we slept in the Wartburg. Once we’d seen it, we drove back home.’

On the rocky spur of the Lorelei a landscaped park has been created. There is a toboggan run and a concert stage, and there are little pillars all over the place which, if you put in a euro, recite a poem. From the visitors’ centre a straight path leads to the lookout point, where 130 metres above the bend in the Rhine, high on the rock, masts are planted on which enormous German flags flap in the wind.

Because I’d left the bank and walked on before Erhard and Daniëlle, I ran into them again on my way back from the lookout point. I stood still once they’d passed me and watched them go. They walked side by side, unhurriedly. They seemed to shrink ever smaller against the immense flapping of the German flags.

## *Accompanying the Terra Maris to the sea*

[pp. 326-328]

A day later, after midday, the Terra Maris is loaded up and sets off on the Main. The river is sluggish, the water tamed between dozens of weirs. She makes her way easily from lock to lock. Tomorrow is Friday and at nine o’clock the children are arriving in Duisburg by train from Dordrecht. Christiaan calculates. If he makes it through the last lock this evening and then sets off on the Rhine at four tomorrow morning, everything will work out precisely.

There is barely a ship on the Main. On the banks are trees, heavy with late summer foliage. It’s rained heavily in recent days and a swell of water from all corners and holes in the river basin is on its way toward the Rhine. The water level forecast for Kaub is around 240. Christiaan has loaded on 2189 tons, the draught of the Terra Maris is just over 2.8 metres deep.



Upstream along the Main, in the other direction, is the canal to the Danube, the other Europe. But even if that route is wide open, it rarely happens that ships from the east come to the Rhine. The canal is still young, but the division is millions of years old.

‘They really are different,’ says Anna, who has also come to sit in the wheelhouse.

Rain still hangs in the air. Swallows skim low over the water, wagtails land on the ship and fly off again towards the other side. In the clearings between the trees on the bank there are little benches and on those benches people sit watching the ship go by. The Terra Maris still needs to pass seven locks, and from the bridges crossing the locks, dismantled cyclists look down at the scrap. Once in a while someone points, someone waves.

In Frankfurt office hours have just ended for the day, young voices ring out over the water. Paddleboards, canoes, rowers, the odd party boat. Blocks of flats drift by on the starboard side.

At midnight Christiaan moors the boat. He didn’t make it to the last lock, so he’ll have to move on at half past two. The engine falls silent, sleep descends over the ship.

It’s four in the morning and still dark when the Terra Maris reaches the Rhine. She travels out of the mouth of the Main and the current that takes hold of her and carries her along is only noticeable in her speed and the gently rocking calm that settles over her. Without any change to the engine sound, she accelerates from 9 to 11 to 14 kilometres per hour. Mainz glides by in the dark, the cathedral a dark shadow against the night sky.

As it grows light just before Bingen, and we move into the mountains around the Mouse Tower, I see that the buoys are being pulled diagonally to the left and right in the current. It’s as if the Terra Maris is being lifted from behind and the water is carrying us and chasing us forward and downwards. The speed increases still further, mountains enclose us, sharp bends obstruct our view of what is coming upstream to meet us.

We have come out of the Main valley where Einhard was born; at Mainz we passed the spot where Charlemagne had the Roman bridge rebuilt; we’ve passed the island where Louis the Pious died with Drogo at his side. And now that morning has broken and the daylight is chasing away the darkness right and left through woods, vineyards, rock faces, colourful little villages, commuter trains, jetties and quays, my thoughts turn to what lies ahead: the inflow of the Moselle with the sacred droplets of Willibrord, the banks of Kaub, Remagen and Tolkamer, where officers crossed the stream with their armies. We pass the lookout point where William



Turner gazed down on the river, we pass Xanten, from where the Romans in their triremes rowed north to subjugate the Chauci, we pass the Waal, which Julius Civilis swam across and yes, we pass the Lorelei.

It's a cloudy day, the water remains grey beneath the sky, the woods on the slopes are beginning to change colour. Church bells and locomotives sound from the banks.

Past the rock of the Lorelei, Christiaan sleeps. Anna makes me coffee and takes the wheel. She sees me looking at the river.

'We once had an elderly man on board,' she says. 'He sat on the aft deck looking around and I saw that he was crying. I went up to him and asked him what was wrong. He said, "All my life I've seen pictures of the Rhine and the mountains and those little half-timbered houses, and now I'm there and I'm old."'

We look on in silence and the Terra Maris follows the channel from one bank to the other. Outside in the open cargo hold lie 2000 tons of scrap metal. We're a ship full of stories and a big, gentle surge of rainwater has lifted us and is carrying us to the sea.



Praise:

‘An **enviably well-written journey** between present and past.’ *Het Parool*

‘Mathijs Deen shows that the Rhine is not a stale river, but a **stream full of life and stories.**’ *Trouw*

*“The only real source of the river is the water that falls on us, from France to the Czech Republic, from Friesland to Italy. There are maps of the basins of the Rhine and the Mass. On Wikipedia there is a clear one. It is a map of a land that no one knows, whose borders have been established by the play between water, elevation changes and gravity. With a little bit of imagination, the shape of the area reminds one of an ice-skating bear, front paws outstretched and balanced on one hind leg, winding its way to the west.”*



**MATHIJS DEEN** (b. 1962) is a writer and radio producer. His short story collection *Brutus is Hungry*, nominated for the AKO Literature Prize, was followed by among others *The Wadden Islands*, *Down Old Roads* and the novels *Among People* and *The Light Ship*, which was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize. His work has been translated into German, Italian and Korea.

