

**Volker Schmidt**  
**THE LAND OF THE WHITE BIRDS**



**An environmental adventure that gives children  
hope and empowers them to create a better future**

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**Pictures by Barbara Hahn - Activities  
by Erika Steinle**

## **Not a preface but thanks.**

It is very rewarding to see how many people have come to realise how important their own contribution is when it comes to help change our society's attitude towards our environment. Love of nature as well as an active responsibility to preserve it are concerns we all share; our children in particular will be called to take action in this area. Respect for creation, knowledge of the natural processes and a willingness to accept our duty of care to preserve a planet worth living on - all this must become a taken-for-granted part of our children's thinking and feeling. These are the very aims towards which this book seeks to contribute.

It has taken a long time for THE LAND OF THE WHITE BIRDS to see the light of day in its present form. Many people have generously provided advice, support and criticism, and more often than not a great deal of time. This is not the work of a few individuals - it is a book by many for many.

To list the names of all those who were involved would not be of great gain to most readers. We hope that everyone who holds the book in their hands, aware of their own contribution, will be glad to have been part of its creation. They can be sure of our gratitude - and a harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature in the future might be their reward.

## **The author**

## About the author



Volker Schmidt has a background in biology, geography and teaching, and writes for the *Fränkische Landzeitung*. Alongside journalism, in his literary work he seeks to contribute to creating an awareness of the evolution of nature, people and society today and the many-faceted challenges facing us in these areas. His books are accessible too, and engaging for, adults and teenagers alike, and their scope reaches beyond narrow local concerns. The author spent significant periods of his life living and working abroad, and his literary fingerprint reflects this. His books straddle the divide between thought-provoking critique and fairytale.

On account of his many-layered and poignant environmental poetry and his original short stories, he has been dubbed – justifiably – a “Robin Hood with a witty pen” (*Süddeutscher Rundfunk*).

Volker Schmidt is married with grown-up children. He lives with his wife in a small rose paradise, in touch with nature, in the Frankonia region of Germany.

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This book is also available in German, titled "Traumland am fernen Ufer"



I'm Nick, a little hare. I live by the hedgerow  
and I have many friends there. I like  
the humans a lot, too, even though my  
experiences with them are not always nice.  
Let me tell you about them.



The other moles call me  
Mull. I live close to Nick's  
hedgerow. As you'll see,  
I'm a very special kind  
of mole.

My name is Croak, and I'm  
a city-dwelling raven.  
Because I can fly,  
I see a lot of  
what goes on in  
the town and  
in the countryside.  
You'll be amazed!



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# The First Evening

Dong - dong - dong - dong - dong - dong - dong.

The church bell had just struck seven o'clock, and the red disk of the sun was slowly disappearing behind the trees on the edge of the wood. Soon, dusk would begin to fall.

"Koark - koark - koark," a distant cry could be heard. The crying became louder and clearer, it was coming closer, and now you could see a dark bird soaring over from the city. It alighted on a bare branch of an elder bush just beside a long hedgerow. Its plumage was inky, almost black, and the sinking sun made it shimmer marvellously in all colours of the rainbow. The bird's legs were shining black, so was its beak, and one of its eyes, like a mysterious diamond, was even more black and beautiful. This was Croak, the old raven, who came here every night at the same time.

"Has the bleeding finally stopped? Is your head still aching? Can you really not see anything at all with your injured eye?"

The one asking was Nick, a young hare, who had already been waiting under the elder bush for a while. Every night, the two would meet here for a chat. Nick was a very beautiful hare. His back glowed golden brown, his slim ears were white on the inside with funny black tips. The fur on his stomach flashed bright yellow, and he had a bunch of strong black whiskers under his nose. But the most beautiful thing about him were his eyes. They gleamed like two honey-coloured pieces of amber, with a coal-black circle in the centre of each. Nick still had both his eyes.

"Why must this happen to me?" wailed Croak. "Why should that boy hit me in the eye with his air rifle? I haven't done him any harm; I have neither stolen anything from him nor

teased him, and really, I usually like them, those cheerful little humans!"

Nick couldn't understand it either. He was sorry to see Croak in pain, destined to live with one eye only, perhaps for the rest of his life, for an eye doesn't grow back like a feather or a broken claw.

"Listen," Nick said, trying to get Croak to think of something else. "Have you heard the news from the hedgerow where I live? The Partridge family have fourteen children this year, the nightingale has returned from Africa and has already started building her nest, and many other birds have returned home from down south, too. There are lovely butterflies about and colourful beetles, and the bumblebees have settled in the mouse hole again, just like last year, and all along my hedgerow you can smell beautifully scented flowers and aromatic herbs. I have built three snug hollows to sleep in for myself there. They are warmed by the sun and well concealed so that neither the fox nor the hawk will find me; and a pretty young lady-hare has moved in just a few steps further down."

"Nice place you live in," groaned Croak, still in pain. "You know, there seems to be an evil spell on my park in the outskirts of the city. All the leaves on the trees are turning yellow already in mid-summer rather than in the autumn as they used to. There's a piercing stench all over the place and sometimes my feathers are covered in sticky dust. The noise in our town makes my ears ring, and all the birds are much more tired than in the past; we're just tired, tired, tired all the time. None of us any longer feels like playing around in the branches of the trees, let alone sing joyfully."

For a long while, Nick and Croak sat together silently, thinking of the park, the hedgerow and the boy with the air

rifle. Countless stars had risen in the sky, there was a faint mist, and a cool smell of grass made the two feel sleepy.

"There aren't any more stars in the sky above my city either - almost none. There are only lights, neon signs and dirty black smog" Croak said, and with a frown he took off to return to the tree that was his sleeping place, in the park on the edge of the city.

Nick watched a bat zoom past and cleaned his eyes, ears and whiskers with his front paws. Then he lolloped leisurely towards his favourite spot under the blackthorn bush, where he would dream until the new day.

# Mull

While Croak and Nick were talking, something eerie had been happening at the bottom of the elder bush. Small cracks had sprung up in the earth and a little mound of loose black soil had risen out of the ground as if pushed by some invisible hand. From the centre of this mysterious mound the tip of a tiny pink snout was now poking out, gentle and moist, with a pair of little nostrils sniffing the air cautiously. Little by little, a head was coming into sight, covered with a silver-black, soft and velvety fur. A few strong, stubby whiskers were recognisable in the twilight. This peculiar creature didn't seem to have any eyes - but of course, there they were, but they were such tiny little black dots that they were easily overlooked in the dark fur even from a short distance. The little ears, too, were hardly noticeable.

The head of this strange creature was moving slowly from side to side, pushing the loose soil steadily outwards until a circular hole had formed. Now, two cute pale yellow little paws were appearing, as tiny as the hands of the dolls which the little humans played with.

This was Mull, the very special mole of the area. He lived in a maze of subterranean corridors only he alone knew his way around. His residence boasted a bedroom, several pantries and larders, a proper toilet, a secret emergency escape route and even a well chamber, situated deep down in the earth and always filled with fresh, clean water from the ground.

His friends considered Mull very special because he understood the different languages of all sorts of creatures,

those of plants, animals and humans - and also because he was very knowledgeable about the world, even when it came to that peculiar world of the humans living in their towns and in the countryside. And what's more, he was a very special mole because in observing what was going on in the world he was always full of hope and happiness. And then, as the other moles put it, he had a wise eye for the future. He had a foreboding, sometimes even a clear vision, of the things that would come to pass.

Mull couldn't talk, he had no speech, but he was an attentive listener whenever there was something to be listened to. Then his thoughts would wander off to years to come, pondering the meaning of current events in nature and in the human realm for the future of our planet. On such occasions, he would actually see pictures of tomorrow's world before his inner eye.

Mull enjoyed listening in on Nick and Croak's evening conversations. Virtually every time the two met for a chat, his curious head and the two pale-yellow paws could be seen appearing in the centre of the mole-hill.

Mull knew about the evil spell hanging over the town that Croak had just described to Nick. But his intuition told him that there was hope that perhaps the future would be different.

When the two parted, Mull would retire very quietly into his subterranean world. Of course, he never forgot to carefully cover the door hole with loose soil, because of the cold and in case it would rain during the night. But as well as that, he was eager to conceal the existence of a lived-in mole's house at the elder bush from his enemies, the fox, the buzzard and the weasel. Better to be safe than sorry!