

**Publisher Droemer Knaur interviews RENATE AHRENS, author of the novel
FREMDE SCHWESTERN (ESTRANGED SISTERS)**

16 February 2011

You have written many children's books that inspire courage. But in ESTRANGED SISTERS childhood is a hell which inflicts wounds on the characters for the rest of their lives. Where does the underlying idea come from?

My starting point was to ask what happens when a child is not welcome in a family. In the case of my protagonists the marriage of the parents has broken down, the mother is mentally not able to take care of her children, and the father is not interested in the fate of his younger daughter Lydia. Thus Franka, the elder one, takes the place of the mother for Lydia from very early on, which is far too much for her.

In my novels, as in my children's books, it has been a concern of mine that a lot of demands are made of children, often without the adults realizing it. Children are very resourceful, and they invent survival strategies, sometimes at the price of developing a hard shell, as it is the case with Franka, from whose point of view the story is told.

The secret heroine in ESTRANGED SISTERS is little Merle. Are children sometimes wiser than adults?

Yes, they are. Children have unerring intuition and they are very honest in their reactions. It is emotional intelligence that distinguishes them – provided they live in a world which is conducive to their development. This world might well be quite unusual. By the time she is seven, Merle has lived in more or less precarious conditions in South Africa, India and Nepal, but her mother has equipped her with great inner strength.

The difficult childhood of the two sisters is thus contrasted with another kind of childhood: Merle represents hope. That can be seen in the way she forces her mother and her aunt to become more accepting of each other. She is the one who is most capable of development and it is with her that one can most easily identify. Therefore she becomes the true heroine of the story.

The past, and in particular that which has been forgotten and suppressed, plays an important role in ESTRANGED SISTERS. How does one find a form to depict that in fiction?

The question of how memory works and in what way a process like that can be transformed into literature, has long been a concern of mine. For Franka the world of her childhood has been buried for decades; in the course of the novel it is uncovered in the form of remembered images and scenes. They appear in a stream of consciousness which stands in contrast to Franka's terse and pragmatic language. These fragments of memory are woven into the text without following a linear chronology; their order corresponds more to the surfacing of the suppressed emotional layers which haunt Franka.

The images and scenes from the past are evoked partly by encounters with her grown-up sister Lydia who is now ill, but above all by the encounter with her niece Merle, who in her childlike openness, her trust and her vulnerability, throws Franka back upon herself and her problematic family history. The aim behind the integration of the flashbacks into the present was to create a form of suspense inherent in the story: is a real reconciliation of the sisters possible at all in view of their dark history of sibling rivalry and acts of revenge? How does this conflict affect Merle? What will happen with her if her mother doesn't survive?

Only by blending the voices of the child and the adult, in other words, by weaving the time levels together, is the character of Franka revealed.

Are you writing a new book? What is it about?

Yes, I'm working on a new novel. It is about a woman whose life is thrown out of joint when she meets her daughter whom she gave up for adoption twenty years ago.