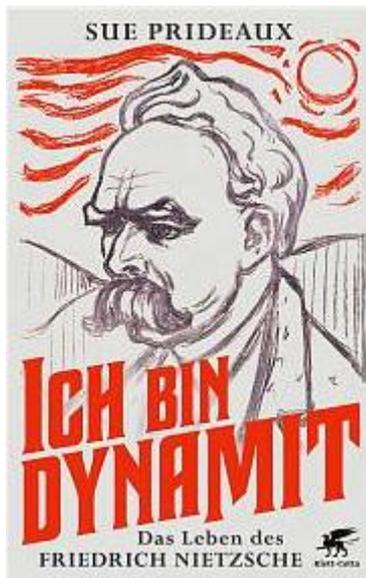


KLETT-COTTA BLOG



Nachgefragt:

Sue Prideaux, *Ich bin Dynamit. Das Leben des Friedrich Nietzsche*¹

13 Mai 2015: We have received the following answers from Sue Prideaux:

Heiner Wittmann: Which event, experience or occasion gave you the idea to write such an exciting book about Friedrich Nietzsche?

Sue Prideaux: When I was a teenager I wore black, and carried a copy of *Zarathustra* in my pocket. Then I grew up, threw away *Zarathustra*, forgot Nietzsche and became a writer. My two prize-winning biographies of Edvard Munch and August Strindberg led me back to Nietzsche. Strindberg discovered Nietzsche's writings in 1888 and began a brief correspondence with him. It was during that time that Strindberg wrote his masterpiece, the tragedy *Miss Julie*, based around the idea of the struggle between the *Übermensch* and the *Untermensch*. In 1892, Strindberg travelled to Berlin, where he met Edvard Munch, and introduced Munch to Nietzsche's writing. The following summer, Munch painted *The Scream*, greatly influenced by Nietzsche's statement "God is dead." Having completed the biographies of those two extraordinary men, it seemed time for me to go back and look at Nietzsche with an adult eye. If he could inspire two world masterpieces like *Miss Julie* and *The Scream*, maybe he wasn't just for angry teenagers?

H. W.: You embed Nietzsche's work in the cultural history of his time. A reader who takes your book in a bookstore hesitates ... how do you explain him in a few sentences Nietzsche's contribution to the cultural life of his time?

¹ See also our review: Lesebericht: Sue Prideaux, *Ich bin Dynamit. Das Leben des Friedrich Nietzsche* First published on the Klett-Cotta blog on the blog of Klett-Cotta (2006-2022) then on our Deutschland-Blog > <https://deutschland-blog.info/lesebericht-sue-prideaux-ich-bin-dynamit-das-leben-des-friedrich-nietzsche/> accessed on March 24, 2026.

Sue Prideaux He is a philosopher of his own time, and of our time. Like us, Nietzsche lived at a time when the world seemed to be at the edge of an abyss of crashing moral values: a time that saw the frightening and unattractive rise of unreason, racism, populism - even 'fake news' when his philosophy was hijacked and twisted by his Nazi-loving sister Elisabeth. I think so many people are looking to him today because we can relate directly to him. He raised the questions we are still thinking about. Nietzsche is not just a dead philosopher, but someone whose ideas are very much alive today.

H. W. In my review (Lesebericht: > blog.klett-cotta.de/sachbuch/lesebericht-sue-prideaux-ich-bin-dynamit-das-leben-des-friedrich-nietzsche), I wrote Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) lived a few years too early, was he ahead of his time?

Sue Prideaux: Nietzsche was exactly of his time. He was a schoolboy of 15 when Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published. Darwin's theory of evolution wiped out the great unifying vision, the great universal idea of form and design that had shaped European belief, culture, morality and purpose for almost two thousand years. Nietzsche articulated the problems that Darwin raised. If God is dead: how did we get here? Who are we? What are we? What is our purpose here? How do we find meaning in our lives? What Nietzsche saw was that without belief in God there is no moral authority. If religious rules no longer apply, what do you do for moral authority? This remains our problem. All his life, Nietzsche is thinking about how you live in a world that has killed God. How do you act morally? How do you make your life meaningful? These remain the big problem of our own lives.

H. W.: It was only after his collapse on January 3, 1888 that his fame began to set in, his books sold better and maybe in the following years he would also have been against the collection of his works by right scene preserved. What could be the reasons for his late but intensive fame?

Sue Prideaux: As a young man, when he resigned his professorship at Basel University to devote himself to a lifetime of solitary thinking and writing, there was no support network to promote his books. He had put himself outside the University Establishment. He was so alone that he had to self-publish most of his books and pay for them himself. Typically he could only afford to pay for small print runs of 300 or so. His books went unnoticed. His books received only a couple of reviews until two great intellectuals discovered him. The Dane Georg Brandes was a very influential literary critic and from 1888 onwards, he blew the trumpet for Nietzsche throughout Europe and America. Count Harry Kessler played the same part in the sophisticated circles of the German and French *avant-garde*, bringing Nietzsche's books to the attention of a world that was ready to hear.

H. W.: In 1869 (he was 24 years old) he accepted the chair for philology at the University of Basel for nearly ten years. He will hold his inaugural lecture> Homer and Classical Philology on May 28th – how do you explain this unusual success? Did Nietzsche have such a good network?

Sue Prideaux: He was certainly promoted to the Chair of Philology by a supportive network including Ritschl; but, once there, his unusual success was down to his own brilliance. Nietzsche loved teaching. We see from the reports of his pupils that he was an inspirational speaker. You have only to read his lectures to realise that Nietzsche was always intent on clarity. He studied the art of simplicity. He did not want to dazzle his pupils with complicated displays of his own brilliance, but to open the doors of perception for them, enabling them to proceed to further thought. As he says: ‘You repay a teacher badly by remaining merely a pupil.’ [Ecce Homo, Foreword, Section 4] What a generous observation!

H. W.: In your biography you describes in detail the friendship and the intense intellectual exchange with Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and Cosima Wagner (1837-1930) - 23 visits to Nietzsche from May 1869 to April 1872 in the Villa Tribschen on Lake Lucerne, where he also attended own study got lived early, was that a friendship for mutuality? or has Nietzsche benefited from these commitments more than Wagner?

Sue Prideaux: Both men benefited from the friendship. Wagner was basically uneducated, and so the *imprimatur* of a Professor of Philology was important and valuable to him while he was trying to raise the money to build the opera house in Bayreuth. Nietzsche benefited enormously from his experiences at the Villa Tribschen: the affectionate and intellectually brilliant friendships with Wagner and Cosima broadened his horizons, his humanity, and his understanding of the creative process, enabling him to write *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*.

H. W.: *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) (pp. 117-147), the experiences from his many conversations with Wagner and the sharpening of his profile as a philosopher, became one of his major works Not all of his followers did understand tis book Friedrich Ritschl (1806-1876), whom Nietzsche had followed to Leipzig, marked his copy of The Birth of Tragedy with exclamations such as "megalomania":

Sue Prideaux: It is a revolutionary book in its identification of the Apollonian and the Dionysian creative forces. However, not even Nietzsche’s greatest fan could say it is clearly expressed. It was to all intents and purposes his first book of philosophy and it shows all the faults of an over-excited young man who has discovered a world truth and hits you over the head with it. Ritschl was harsh in calling it megalomaniac but it’s certainly a book that often neglects reasoned argument for unsupported statement.

H. W.: Nietzsche praised Wagner's music, but also felt how it robbed him of free will - does your book also express a criticism of Wagner, or do you just want to explain Nietzsche's reaction?

Sue Prideaux: Personally, Wagner robs me too of free will! I find his music absolutely sublime! So I am very glad that you think I might be expressing criticism of Wagner. Your questions shows I have succeeded in explaining Nietzsche's reaction in an unprejudiced and balanced way.

H. W.: Immediately afterwards follows his writing on> On the Future of our Educational Institutions The "return to education as an end in itself" is important to him and you underline his criticism the state does not want brilliant minds, but functioning cogs in Gearboxes, specialists who are trained to the extent that they can make their contribution uncritically and submissively ..., again, Nietzsche was too modern for his era? He was not only making friends with his criticism.

Sue Prideaux: Again, Nietzsche is both so modern and so of his time. I think we must read his essay on education very much in his own historical context. Nietzsche was a passionate educationalist. He voted for women students to be admitted to the University of Basel (the vote was defeated). This was very forward-looking for his time. He was an elitist who recognised that the "return to education as an end in itself" was then – as it is now – vital to humanity. However, he also lived in the great age of industrialisation. The people were deserting agriculture to become factory workers. I think he saw the need for the cogs in the machine and didn't like the idea of it at all. This relates to his ambivalence towards Ancient Greece, which he idealised as the perfect society, while finding it very problematic that Greek civilisation was founded on slavery. He hated that.

H. W.: An erratic mind was Nietzsche. The many trips to Italy, the many different places where he always settled for a few weeks, a few months, driven by his own thoughts, or why was he traveling so much a restless mind?

Sue Prideaux: "When the facts change, I change my opinion. What do you do, sir?" said W.M.Keynes, the great economist. Nietzsche put it differently; "The snake that cannot change its skin perishes. Likewise those spirits who are prevented from changing their opinions: they cease to be spirits." [Daybreak, Section 573.] Certainly he was driven by a restless mind: a restless mind never ceases to search for truth. But also, prosaically, he was driven by the climate. He felt healthiest in the mountains in summer and on the warm Mediterranean coast in winter. We are all migrant birds.

H. W.: Of course he was aware of the extent of the criticism of his poorly sold books but it seems, that his failures were always a new impetus for him to think ahead.

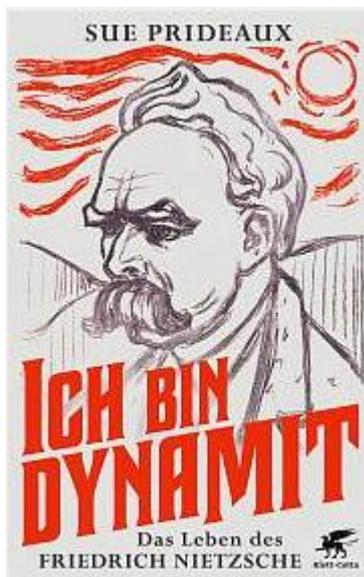
Sue Prideaux: We are all defined by the consequences of our failure. Here I might dare quote the much over-quoted; “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” One of the deeply attractive things about Nietzsche is that he is always looking forwards, and up to greater heights. In that sense, you can certainly call him an optimist. Rightly, he feels that looking backwards on past failures only fuels resentment, an emotion that inhibits progress and corrodes the soul. As Freud observed, Nietzsche is a great psychologist.

H.W.: Which of Nietzsche's books should be read today and why?

Sue Prideaux: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to feel the Dionysian connection to the spirit of the world. *Beyond Good and Evil* for the unblinking Apollonian gaze upon reality - and my biography of course!

H.W.: Thank you so much.

Sue Prideaux: Thank you. It has been a great pleasure.



Sue Prideaux

> [Ich bin Dynamit.](#)

[Das Leben des Friedrich Nietzsche](#)

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