Imperium: A Fiction of the South Seas

by Christian Kracht

Translated from the German by Daniel Bowles, German Studies Department

In 1902, a radical vegetarian and nudist from Nuremberg named August Engelhardt set sail for what was then called the Bismarck Archipelago, in German New Guinea. His destination: the island Kabakon. His goal: to establish a colony based on worship of the sun and coconuts. His malnourished body was found on the beach on Kabakon in 1919; he was forty-three years old.

Christian Kracht's *Imperium* uses the outlandish details of Engelhardt's life to craft a fable about the allure of extremism and its fundamental foolishness. Engelhardt is at once a pitiable, misunderstood outsider and a rigid ideologue, and his misguided notions of purity and his spiral into madness presage the horrors of the mid-twentieth century.

Playing with the tropes of classic adventure tales such as *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*, Kracht's novel, an international bestseller, is funny, bizarre, shocking, and poignant. His allusions are misleading, his historical time line is twisted, his narrator is unreliable--and the result is a novel that is a cabinet of mirrors, a maze pitted with trapdoors.