The Book:
Cora Bender killed a man on a sunny summer afternoon by the lake and in full view of her family and friends. Why? What could have caused this quiet, lovable young mother to stab a stranger in the throat, again and again, until she was pulled off his body? For the local police it was an open-and-shut case. Cora confessed; there was no shortage of witnesses. But Police Commissioner Rudolf Grovian refused to close the file and started his own maverick investigation. So begins the slow unravelling of Cora’s past, a harrowing descent into a woman’s private hell.

The Author
Hailed as Germany’s Patricia Highsmith, Hammesfahr has written a dark, spellbinding novel which stayed at the top of the nation's bestseller list for fifteen months. Hammesfahr has written over twenty crime and suspense novels and writes scripts for television and film. She has won numerous literary prizes, including the Crime Prize of Wiesbaden and the Rhineland Literary Prize.

Praise for The Sinner:
“...This hauntingly insightful and sensitive German bestseller goes straight to the heart of the greatest mystery of writing about crime: the why. Cora Bender is a woman with a five-year gap in her memory, a hole into which the fate of her invalid sister, the track-marks in her arms and the origins of the scar on her forehead have all disappeared. At the age of 24 she is struggling to maintain the appearance of a normal working mother. But one Christmas Eve, a song on the radio, combined with her husband's lovemaking, begins to fracture her fragile facade, and fear and loathing come rushing out to claim her. Clinging to her sanity by a thread, Cora resolves to kill herself to avoid confronting what she cannot bear to remember. Yet even this carefully premeditated act goes hideously awry - Cora ends up murdering a man instead, in broad daylight, on the shore of a lake. Investigating this shocking crime, police commissioner Rudolf Grovian slowly recovers Cora's lost years in all their horrifying detail. When all the pieces are in place - including sexual secrets and religious mania - it is little surprise that Cora shattered into a million pieces.”

The Guardian, 29 September 2007

"...However fascinated we are by the real-life mysteries of Diana, Princess of Wales or Madeleine McCann, and even as we devour the newspapers with what Margery Allingham saw as "the bright ghoul's eyes of the calamity fancier", we return to crime novels because they provide us with the satisfaction of a solution.

The best crime this year, though, reacts against that formula, asks questions as well as giving answers, and suggests that, even when the mystery is solved, something remains out of joint. One such delightfully unsettling read is Petra Hammesfahr's whydunnit The Sinner (Bitter Lemon Press, £8.99, pbk, T £8.99), translated from the German by John Brownjohn.

Cora Bender is a young wife and mother who is haunted by the memories of some dim disaster from her past. On her way to commit suicide, she finds herself, from a motive she knows is sound but cannot identify, stabbing a stranger to death. Her lawyer declares that he will "prove that you had a reason any normal person can understand" but Hammesfahr creates a sense here, as with the appearance of the glib psychiatrist at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, that finding a psychological label to stick on murderers does not necessarily bring us closer to solving their unique mystery."

The Telegraph, 24 November 2007: Jake Kerridge rounds up the year’s best crime novels
“One fine afternoon, a young woman called Cora Bender, having a picnic beside a lake with her husband and son, stabs a total stranger to death in full view of his friends and her family. Obviously it's a case without doubt: Cora admits what she has done, there were witnesses galore, and the police should be able to close the file quickly. But the Commissioner begins his own investigation, descending with Cora into the hell of her life as the child of a religious fanatic and an abuser. This novel by one of Germany's most successful crime writers is wonderfully written, gripping, full of psychological insight but (at least to me) so truthful about humanity's underside as to be depressing rather than enjoyable.”

*Literary Review*

“You won’t be reading a more harrowing and better psychological thriller this year than Petra Hammesfahr’s *The Sinner*. The twists and turns of this spellbinding novel keep the reader guessing to the end. The book spent 15 months on Germany's bestseller list and has been translated by John Brownjohn (who wrote screenplays for Das Boot, The Name of the Rose, The Piano).”

*Ilford Recorder*