

Contemporary Jewish Writing in Germany

Edited by Leslie Morris and Karin Remmler (University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 245 pp. \$60)

Are Americans interested in contemporary German literature? Very few recent German works of fiction have enjoyed the privilege of an American audience. The only exception being Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader*, which climbed U.S. bestseller lists as Oprah's protégé in 1999. But the success of *The Reader* was not based on Oprah alone. It also flourished because of the sexually risqué relationship of its Nazi perpetrator protagonist with a member of the young German generation, acknowledging the continuous German ambivalence toward addressing its Nazi past.

Schlink's success in the U.S. corresponds to the appeal of young Jewish German authors in Germany. It may well be a variant on the same attraction that draws German audiences to the works of writers like Barbara Honigmann, Maxim Biller, and Esther Dischereit, whose Jewish perspectives onto Nazi Germany grant German readers the illusion of shared victimhood. While the originals of these German texts are primarily read by non-Jews, this English translation clearly is meant for the non-German and, I would argue, the Jewish American audience in particular.

This volume is part of the University of Nebraska Press series entitled *Jewish Writing in the Contemporary World*, which has already brought forth English translations of texts from South Africa, Poland, Austria, Britain, and Ireland. Included in this book are translations of Katja Behrens' *Arthur Mayer, or The Silence* and *Solomon and the Others*, Esther Dischereit's *Joemi's Table: A Jewish Story*, Maxim Biller's *Harlem Holocaust*, and excerpts from Barbara Honigmann's three novels *Sohara's Journey*, *On Sunday the Rabbi Plays Soccer*, and *Novel by a Child*. A thorough introduction contextualizes the texts by carefully mapping the situation of Jews in Germany today and providing insightful interpretations of the selected works, complemented by comprehensive notes and a glossary of names, terms, and organizations.

The editors present original translations of texts by four contemporary Jewish authors of German language literature. These four belong to the established second generation of Jewish German writers after the Shoah, whom Morris and Remmler wish to introduce to a wider audience. The editors chose texts that critically assess the way in which

the Shoah is represented in German cultural discourse today, juxtaposing the void left by the murdered Jews with the awkward fetishization of Jewish culture by contemporary non-Jewish Germans. This contrast is evident even in form, through fragmented language, half-empty pages, and the lack of a coherent storyline. The writers seek to overcome notions of victimization that paralyze Jews in Germany today and question the normalcy of their Jewish German heritage, while exposing the nonexistence of communication between Germans and Jews. Three of the four authors are women, whose gendered experience fractures these debates around their identity, because they are doubly stigmatized, as women and as Jews. Indeed, the sexist attitudes of the main characters in Biller's text pointedly expose this even further.

The texts demonstrate what is indeed representative of recent Jewish German writing, as the work of other authors like Jeanette Lander, Daniel Ganzfried, or Rafael Seligmann confirms. This is an enthusiastic romanticization of America as the land of harmoniously melted hybrid identities, a renewed affirmation of Jewish German history that acknowledges the Holocaust as a German-made catastrophe and not as a teleological endpoint of Jewish history, and an interest in exposing non-Jewish Germans' inability to acknowledge private memories — hiding instead behind state-ordered memorialization.

In their very fine translations, Morris and Remmler provide a diverse mix of material from Behrens' account of a journalist's struggle researching the life of Jewish country doctor Arthur Mayer to Biller's self-critical parody of the relationship between American and German Jews. Despite the unfortunate fact that Honigmann's texts could not be included in their entirety, the volume provides an excellent selection of original works that provide American readers an intriguing glimpse into the contemporary German literary spectrum, and further the continuing German Jewish dialogue as it expands to become a German Jewish American conversation.

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