

**Gerstenberger, Katharina. *Writing The New Berlin: The German Capital in Post-Wall Literature*. Rochester, NY: Camden, 2008. 209 pp. ISBN 978-1-57113-381-6 hard cover, \$75.00.**

**Reviewed for Women in German by Friederike Eigler**

Katharina Gerstenberger's book *Writing The New Berlin: The German Capital in Post-Wall Literature* explores the complex cultural and literary constellations in Berlin at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Drawing on a large number of literary texts written mostly in the 1990s, she examines their role in confronting the multiple social, cultural, political, and economic challenges of the past, present and future. Specifically, the book is organized according to the following thematic clusters: "The Erotic Sites: Sexual Topographies after the Wall" (chap. 1); "Bodies and Borders: The Monsters of Berlin" (chap. 2); "Multicultural Germans and Jews of Many Cultures: Imagining 'Jewish Berlin'" (chap. 3); "Goodbye to East Berlin" (chap. 4); and finally "Looking for Perspectives: The Construction at Potsdamer Platz" (chap. 5).

Reviewing the extensive and at times rather self-absorbed debates about the role of literature in the unified Germany in the introductory chapter, Gerstenberger comes to the conclusion that "Literature may well have lost – or relinquished – its function of conscience of the nation, but there continues to be a connection between German literature and German national identity" (6). Within this larger context of literature's continued national implications as well as its emerging cosmopolitan reverberations, Gerstenberger focuses on "Berlin novels," i.e., novels that both record and contribute to the fast-paced transitions in the capital of the unified Germany, including the formation of a "post-wall German identity" (15). Among the vast number of texts that fall under this category, she considers some to have defined the genre of "Berlin novels." Most of them were penned by the younger generation of authors (born after 1965), including Tanja Dückers' *Spielzone*, Thomas Hettche's *Nox*, Tim Staffell's *Terrordom*, Ingo Schramm's *Fitchers Blau*, and Inka Parei's *Schattenboxerin*.

Each of the subsequent chapters starts out with a brief historical review of pertinent (literary) precursors, provides a helpful overview of pertinent contemporary texts, followed by a close reading of selected novels, and ending with a succinct conclusion. For instance, chapter one begins with a brief overview of the exploration of "Sexual Topographies" in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century texts by Döblin and Irmgard Keun, among others. Contemporary novels that are examined more closely in chapter two include Dückers' *Spielzone*, Parei's *Schattenboxerin*, Christa Schmidt's *Eselsfest*, and Zafer Senocak's *Erottomane*. In the concluding section, Gerstenberger argues that "trauma and healing" appear as subtext in many narratives and that the combination of sexuality and different forms of violence and (self-)destruction "keep open the city's metaphorical wounds" (48). While this reading convinces in some cases, it is not always clear to this reader that the Berlin novels discussed in this (and other) chapters have such far-reaching implications for the state of the capital and the (memory of the) nation. Instead, many novels appear to use Berlin as enticing urban backdrop for stories of (sexual) transgression and self-exploration.

Chapter two takes a fresh look at the specters that continue to haunt Berlin and the nation by tracing the ways in which images of pathology, most importantly the specimens on display in Berlin's Charité (intermittently since 1898), reappear in contemporary literature and the visual arts – challenging in explicit or implicit ways public discourses on Berlin's and Germany's "normalcy." In contrast to the preceding chapter, this one ends with open questions about the relationship between the "City and body in post-wall texts" (72), rejecting any simple analogies.

Chapter three starts out with a more comprehensive overview of the long and fraught tradition of German-Jewish literature and German-Jewish relations as they relate to the urban space of Berlin (with special focus on the modernism of the 1920s). Gerstenberger questions the existence of a “Jewish Berlin” and sees it rather as a marketing tool of the new capital at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Overall, the chapter provides insight into the wide range of Jewish characters and of representations of German-Jewish relations in contemporary German literature by authors that include Marcia Zuckermann, Wladimir Kaminer, Joachim Lottmann, Irena Liebmann, and Barbara Honigmann, among others. Embracing neither unfettered optimism nor extreme skepticism, Gerstenberger argues that many of these texts and authors point to “multiculturalism” as the larger context and space for Jews in Germany today.

More so than in the earlier chapters, “Goodbye to East Berlin” and “Looking for Perspectives” (chaps. 4 and 5) foreground representations of the city itself: the changing urban spaces of Berlin, including multiple borders and border crossings, are central to plot and narrative style of many novels discussed in chapter five (most prominently in Ingo Schramm’s debut novel *Fitchers Blau*); the changing faces of Potsdamer Platz take center stage in chapter 5. Gerstenberger succeeds in illustrating how the “cut-off” space of pre-unification Berlin has been opened up into a new (literary) space: initially this space was dominated by critical or nostalgic reflections on the GDR and on East-West tensions, but in recent years the changing city of Berlin has invited new narratives by authors as diverse as Marlene Streeruwitz, Yadé Kara and Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Other shifts Gerstenberger traces relate to literary representations of Potsdamer Platz: they include the changing role of the German past for notions of national identity and concerns over the effects of globalization.

Overall, Katharina Gerstenberger’s study establishes an impressive road map for making sense of the complex and changing cultural and literary landscape in the Berlin of the 1990s and beyond. One of the first comprehensive studies to look at the role of literary texts in constructing a new Berlin and a new Germany, her book makes an important contribution to the field of contemporary German studies.

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