

**Gerstenberger, Katharina and Patricia Herminghouse, eds. *German Literature in a New Century. Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations.* New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008. 300 pp. ISBN 978-1-84545-547-7 hardcover, \$90.00.**

**Reviewed for Women in German by Sonja Ellen Klocke**

The fifteen essays assembled in *German Literature in a New Century* grew out of a 2005 German Fulbright Summer Seminar in Berlin, Leipzig, and Hamburg on the topic of “Current Tendencies in Contemporary German Literature.” All but one contributor to the volume are located in U.S. institutions of higher learning, which is reflected in the viewpoints the essays offer on the latest trends in German literature. This particular angle presents a clear advantage of the volume for anyone interested in literature that “works” in an American classroom setting, especially because many of the analyzed texts introduce writers and topics to which American students are likely to be able to relate.

In their very helpful introduction, the editors set the stage for this outstanding volume, which significantly advances the research on most contemporary literature: They point to the topics that have dominated scholarship on German literature within the past twenty years, such as *Wenderoman*, *Ostalgie*, or *Fräuleinwunder*, before they explain their own project. Moving beyond the aforementioned discussions, the editors are engaged in focusing on the significant changes literature and literary culture are undergoing at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Germany, “marked by the emergence of a new generation of writers who not only pursue different topics than their more established predecessors, but who also write differently about traditional topics and often reach their readers in nontraditional ways” (1). Organized around four major themes, the essays offer in-depth analysis of individual works by authors who have emerged primarily since 1989. They are considered characteristic of a literature representing the perception of a younger generation, one that regards cultural diversity in a positive way, and whose wider and more inclusive perspective demonstrates that it has arrived in the age of globalization. The editors deliberately chose contributions that pay attention to the role of women and minorities in the cultural scene, participate in the larger discourse of German studies’ neighboring disciplines, such as gender studies, Jewish studies, and minority studies, and that “take into account changes in the literature industry, including marketing mechanisms, the growing convergence between commercial sponsors and the literary scene, as well as the changed self-understanding of many young writers” (9).

The first section, entitled “Trends. Literature in the Public Sphere,” focuses on changes in the distribution and consumption of literature in Germany. Sean McIntyre delves into aspects of cultural difference regarding the literary public sphere in Germany and in the USA, and offers an interview with Josef Joffe. Donovan Anderson’s fascinating account of Hamburg’s literary event culture points out a noteworthy change in the literary public sphere towards more communicative forms of literature. Taking Tobias Hülswitt, a graduate of the *Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig*, as the object of her case study, Rachel Halverson discusses the role of the institute in nurturing young, creative talents in a changing literary public sphere. All of the essays in this section not only examine what might be called the “eventization” of literature in Germany, ranging from authors’ involvement in politics to changes in the organization of the *Literaturhäuser*, but they also introduce topics that reverberate with various articles in the next three sections.

Part II, “Traditions. History, Memory, and Narrative,” inquires into literary responses to questions regarding the significance of history and the various understandings of self, community, and nation in the Berlin Republic. The essays seek to understand various cultural constructs of

Germanness and its boundaries, constructs based on the prominence of personal memories of divergent twentieth-century German pasts. Patricia Anne Simpson starts this investigation in a convincing essay in which she problematizes the notion of “normalization” with regards to identification as German in the twenty-first century. Backing up Simpson’s assertion that history cannot be ignored in constructions of German identity in the twenty-first century, Sydney Norton discusses the meaning of the Allied bombings for the revitalized discourse of Germans as victims. Reading Tanja Dücker’s *Himmelskörper*, Laurel Cohen-Pfister finds that the novel demonstrates the significance National Socialism and World War II continue to have for the youngest generation of German writers. Finally, John Pizer’s essay on Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s famous trilogy deserves particular mention here. He persuasively emphasizes the novels’ significance for establishing a counter-memory to the memory politics of contemporary Germany and Turkey.

Part III, “Transitions. Form and Performance after 1989,” encompasses three essays emphasizing the significance of form and performance for identity construction in contemporary literature. Of particular interest is the essay on GDR poetry, in which Birgit Dahlke, based on careful close readings, argues convincingly that the GDR brought about a different aesthetics than West Germany because of its stress on community rather than individualism. Erika M. Nelson analyzes the ways in which both the German and the Turkish literary traditions enrich Zafer Senocak’s poetry and simultaneously contest rigid understandings of ethnic identities. Finally, Gary Schmidt’s essay on the link between form and performance in the work of Feridun Zaimoglu analyzes the significance of a gendered narrative voice.

The four essays compiled in Part IV, “Transformations. Women Writing in the New Century,” center on questions regarding the *Frauenliteraturbetrieb* as well as writers Julia Franck, Martina Hefter, and Juli Zeh. In the introductory essay to this part, Julia Karolle-Berg and Katya Skow emphasize that while they recognize the problematically strong influence of media outlets such as *Brigitte* and Elke Heidenreich’s TV show “Lesen!” on what women read in Germany, they also see an advantage of this so-called *Frauenliteraturbetrieb* in exposing women to a wide range of literature, which they associate with “emancipatory potential” (232). Beret Norman’s essay links Julia Franck’s novel *Lagerfeuer* to the author’s three previously published works through the notion of gendered surveillance and argues that the female characters use surveillance to fill up their empty lives in the event-filled society of postunification Germany. Turning to two novels by Martina Hefter, Katharina Gerstenberger emphasizes this young author’s search for personal and historical connection, and particularly highlights the significance of the relationship between the fragmented narrative perspective and the portrayed characters’ unpredictable lives. The final essay in the collection marks another particularly strong contribution. In it, Patricia Herminhouse provides a convincing account of Juli Zeh’s writings by relating the young lawyer’s significance as a (female) writer to her political engagement and the prominent role she plays in the public sphere. Overall, the compiled essays speak to the breadth of writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which can probably best be summarized with the term “change.” Gerstenberger’s and Herminhouse’s volume is incredibly valuable for anyone interested in the latest scholarship on contemporary German literature, and will be particularly useful for anyone teaching in a U.S. institution of higher learning.

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