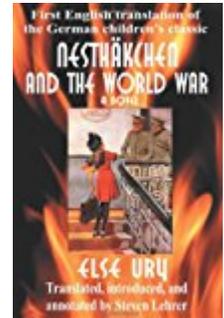


**Else Ury.** *Nesthäkchen and the World War: A Novel.* New York: iUniverse, 2006. 164 pp. \$13.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-595-39729-7.



**Reviewed by** Benita Blessing

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Scholars of German history go to great pains to expose their students to multiple sources that help clarify various time periods and events. Among the easiest and most difficult of these artifacts are novels written and, often, read during the era in question--Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (begun 1914, published 1925), for instance, or Peter Schneider's *The Wall Jumper* (1982). Assigning students novels in translation seems a relatively simple task: by reading these authors' insights and opinions about their compatriots, contemporary political and ideological tensions, or even what sells as popular literature, students gain a unique insight into ideas and social practices of the time. But as those scholars too often learn, undergraduate students at any level struggle to differentiate between primary and secondary sources. Interpreting the meaning and degree of fiction in a book is no easy task, nor is contextualizing the author's biography, intent, or audience reception.

One helpful solution to this dilemma of helping students make sense of fiction is the annotated edition--one that goes beyond detailed introduc-

tions and epilogues (well written though they may be, they are not usually the focus of students' readings). The tradition of extensive explanatory footnotes is rich for those authors of "high" prose, such as William Shakespeare or Marcel Proust. But as Steven Lehrer has demonstrated with *Nesthäkchen and the World War*, simple yet enlightening clarifications of even children's literature allow instructors to assign important books that would not otherwise lend themselves to classroom use.

As Lehrer discusses in his introduction, the ten *Nesthäkchen* volumes of children's books followed the life of an "ordinary" girl growing up in the first decades of twentieth-century Germany (her actual name is Annemarie Braun). Daughter of a medical doctor and the popular friend of her classroom peers, the blonde "quintessential German girl" (Jewish characters are absent from the stories) continually finds herself in situations where she must learn from her mistakes about judging people, correct social behavior, and responsibility to her family and country. This volume about World War I sold three hundred thou-

sand copies, more than any other of the very popular *Nesthäkchen* series. If those statistics alone do not convince the instructor and student of the book's historical value, Lehrer's statement that 55 percent of German women have read Else Ury's books, with an even larger number of women having listened to them on the radio or watched them as television episodes (p. ix), should do so. Lehrer used the original illustrations by Robert Sedlacek for the first editions of the book, allowing the reader to see the "subtle erotic quality" that accompanied the text (p. 161). Finally, Ury's biography is worthy of discussion in a classroom on German history: her family belonged to Berlin's wealthy Jewish population, rather assimilated without ignoring their Jewish background. And, like the majority of European Jews in the Second World War, Ury's family suffered exclusion from German organizations after the National Socialists came to power. Many family members immigrated; her brother committed suicide; she died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz at the age of sixty-five and as one of Germany's most successful authors.

The book's audience is young adolescents, so that undergraduates (and their professors) will enjoy the prose without feeling like they are reading a "mere" children's book. Indeed, the foregrounding of the many scenes of sibling rivalry, exasperated teachers, and misbehaving pet dogs against the omnipresent background of wartime battles, worries of the fate of conscripted military friends and family members, and consistent references to all German citizens sacrificing for the nation make this novel one that permits the reader of any age the possibility of imagining the everyday lives of families amidst the everyday realities of war. In this particular volume, for instance, *Nesthäkchen* suffers the temporary absence of both her parents—her mother left for England to visit relatives and cannot return or send uncensored letters, while her father treats German soldiers in France. Left in the care of a maternal grandmother overwhelmed by caring for three

children, a cynical family cook who sees the war in terms of what it will cost the people, and a dotting nanny, *Nesthäkchen* gets caught up in many discussions about national duty, understanding the objectives of the war, and what her own role should be as a young woman. In what is, according to Lehrer, a theme about evolving gender roles for boys and girls in the series, *Nesthäkchen* gets caught up in her brothers' zealous patriotism for the war cause, even lamenting bitterly that her feminine role of knitting socks for soldiers is not nearly as exciting as her brothers' more soldier-like duties. This sort of scene is not any sort of feminist manifesto by the author; rather, it is a reflection of how tensions surrounding male and females' places in society played out in small, rather ordinary moments that are, in fact, quite extraordinary.

Concerning the background of the war itself, Ury assumed a level of knowledge about battles in World War I that not every undergraduate today will have. For this reason, the numerous footnotes with information about particular remarks made by the characters or the author are enormously helpful. One chapter about food shortages claimed that Germany made extensive plans to husband supplies in order for the country to "hold out for years if necessary" (p. 144). Lehrer corrects this statement in a paragraph-long, well-written footnote about the fact that Germany made no such plans and the resulting numbers of deaths due to starvation and malnutrition. The footnotes provide more than additional information, however; they allow for discussions in class about why the author made certain, incorrect assumptions. Did she believe the government's information at the time, or were such statements merely useful for her storyline? Make no mistake: Ury wrote a book with a female protagonist for a female audience. Male undergraduates may not be able to relate to the very girlish feel of the story. Even so, Lehrer's many instances of inserting

"history" into the story make this book accessible to all readers.

The weaknesses of the book are Lehrer's own artistic license in the introduction and epilogue. It is disappointing that he did not try and find a better translation for *Nesthäkchen*, a teasing endearment that might have been faithfully rendered by "princess," for instance, or even a circumlocution about Annemarie's personality, that of an almost-spoiled yet wise young adolescent. Lehrer also engages in a level of "what-if" history that is unnecessary and even confusing. Although it is true that Ury's murder in the Holocaust was poignant, it is questionable that it "stands out ... of all the millions of murders the Nazis committed" more than that of any other victim (p. xii). The follow-up question of whether anyone could imagine A. A. Milne (author of the *Winnie the Pooh* books) being murdered is irrelevant here as well. The epilogue contains enough editorializing and speculation that I would consider instructing students not to read it. There is no evidence to support Lehrer's conclusion that "Else Ury, by passionately supporting the disastrous war, had in effect written her own death warrant," or, in the same paragraph, that "[h]ad there been no war, Hitler probably would have spent his life as an obscure Munich painter of architectural scenes" (p. 160). The one-sentence description of the "vengeful French" and the Versailles Treaty is too heavy-handed to be of use in explaining the terms of the end of the war (p. 159), and the concluding statement that Ury's death was equivalent to the "ultimate price" paid by "the two million German men" who fought in the war simply confuses Lehrer's definition of what constituted death for the fatherland and how many women died in that same cause. With those caveats, Ury's work has been long overlooked in German history, and Lehrer's annotated translation of this work has made an important contribution to students and scholars of German history who would otherwise not have access to this important genre of literature. I hope

that Lehrer's publishers will decide that the other *Nesthäkchen* books also merit translation.

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