

H-Net Reviews

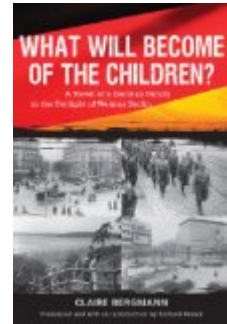
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Claire Bergmann. *What Will Become of the Children?* Translated and introduced by Richard Bodek. Rochester: Camden House, 2010. 180 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-466-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57113-464-6.

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Published on H-Holocaust (August, 2011)

Commissioned by Sarah Liu



At the Bitter End of Weimar Berlin

The publication of *What Will Become of the Children: A Novel of a German Family in the Twilight of Weimar Berlin* is the result of literary archaeology. Richard Bodek, a professor of history at the College of Charleston, found in the October 23, 1932 edition of *Vossische Zeitung* a review of a newly published novel by Claire Bergmann. Though Bodek was unfamiliar with the novel and its author, he admired the work of the reviewer: Hans Fallada. Bodek was prompted to track down Bergmann's novel, translate it, and bring it back into print.

Curiously, the reviewer, Hans Fallada, has himself benefited from literary archaeology. His books *Little Man, What Now?* (1932) and *Every Man Dies Alone* (1947) have recently been translated into English by Susan Bennett and Michael Hoffman, respectively, and published by Melville House. Indeed, Bergmann's novel belongs on the bookshelf next to *Little Man, What Now?*, with both novels providing visceral detail about the struggle for economic survival and the growing strength of the Nazi Party in the last years of the Weimar Republic. The shelf might also include Eric Weitz's fine history of that era, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (2009); Sebastian Haffner's *Defying History: A Memoir* (2002), a personal account of the dramatic changes in Germany in the first thirty-three years of the twentieth century and the rise of Adolf Hitler; and Irmgard Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl*, a bestseller in Germany the same year that Claire Bergmann's novel was published. Keun's book takes up the theme of the "New Woman" in Weimar, a theme that

Bergmann threads into her novel as well.

Who was Claire Bergmann? Richard Bodek, despite scholarly efforts, has learned very little about her. In his Introduction to the text, Bodek notes that she was born on October 27, 1898 (a fact he learned from the one lexicon of German literature that had a brief listing for her), and that she was a journalist who lived in Berlin from 1932-34 (information gleaned from online Berlin address books).

But then, "she simply vanishes" (p. x). Bodek uncovered another positive review, by the well-known film critic Siegfried Kracauer, and a negative review signed only by "Gertrud." As a historian, Bodek devotes the remainder of his introduction to a concise history of the Weimar Republic, with particular emphasis on the city of Berlin in 1932, the "central stage" (p. x) of *What Will Become of the Children* and the year in which it was published, just weeks before Hitler came to power in January, 1933.

Bodek's efforts to secure a copy of *Was wird aus deinen Kindern, Pitt?* in the original German through interlibrary loan were unsuccessful—only a dozen copies were listed in WorldCat. He is grateful to scholar Michael Brenner, author of *After the Holocaust* (1999) and several other books, and professor at the University of Munich, for providing a photocopy. Undoubtedly, many copies of the novel went up in smoke during the infamous Nazi book burnings, since the novel appeared on the list of

books banned by the Nazis in 1938.

Bergmann presents the story of a middle-class German family, with the symbolic last name of Deutsch, narrating their trials and tribulations between 1890-1932. The novel is only 125 pages long, yet provides a “thick description” of what life was like for such a family. The Christian patriarch, Pitt Deutsch, is a self-made man who works tirelessly to build his business into a multimillion mark concern. His wife, Martha, works hand in hand as his business partner and also brings seven children into the world: Klara, Peter, Elsa, Max, Jürgen, Susi, and Helmut, born between the years 1900 and 1914. Pitt’s children see him as “a fool” (p. 1); by the time they mature into consciousness, Pitt has lost his entire fortune to hyperinflation and the Depression. The narrator, too, finds Pitt a subject for ridicule and pity, adopting throughout the novel a tone of smarmy condescension. The narrator also occasionally indulges in direct address, admonishing the reader on various subjects.

We follow the family through World War I, the financial rewards for businesses in military production like Pitt Deutsch’s, the privations regarding foodstuffs, and the impact of the war on gender: “The relationship between the sexes took a radical turn” (p. 16). Women were expected to sexually yield to soldiers departing for the front; prostitution became widely practiced. Patriotic Pitt buys war bonds and as a result falls heavily into debt when Germany loses the war. The four oldest children are now mature enough to engage in debate about the war, economics, philosophy, and ideology, and through this device the narrative brings to the fore some of the key issues of the day. Peter and Max argue about how “people and races are so obsessed with each other and with their own territory.... Each group ... is afraid of mixing” (p. 19). Bergman thus foreshadows Hitler’s obsession with “race and space” in this conversation as well as the advent of World War II: “People will forget the consequences [of World War I] pretty quickly, and let themselves be driven by new powers into yet another fight” (p. 20).

Pitt, who longs for the good old days of the Kaiser, finds the politics of Weimar confusing: “he lumped together the Social Democrats, Communists, Bolsheviks, even the Democrats” (p. 23). Stark divisions occur among the children: two of the sisters become secretaries, holding the only regularly paid employment upon which the family can rely; a third sister serves as a mistress to a wealthy man and occasionally brings home rich delicacies: “a leg of mutton, a sausage as thick as your arm,

ham, butter, even a loaf of white bread” (p. 42). Of the four brothers, two earn their doctorates, in chemistry and economics, yet remain unemployed, while the youngest two join the Nazi Party. Defending Hitler in another brotherly debate, Jürgen asserts: “Why do you think so many people are turning to Hitler? He knows how to put people to work, how to give them things to do. This alone makes him a genius”; to which Max replies, “you’re right here, he is quite the psychologist—he decided to work with racial hatred and militarism” (pp. 55-56). The handwriting, as they say, appears clearly on the wall.

Yet Max, the PhD in economics, will soon become embroiled in “racial” matters himself. Strolling down the street, he happens upon Nazi thugs beating up a young woman and quickly comes to her rescue. Maria Sommer gratefully takes him home, introducing him to her Jewish family. Max and Maria begin a loving relationship and plan on marriage; the reader cannot help but wonder what happens to them in the months after 1932, when the novel closes. In chapter 8, the pair goes on an excursion to Hamburg by rail, on various boat trips, and to several scenic locations and hotels, all of which is described in considerable detail. This rather strange peroration detours the reader from the plot revealing Germany’s growing infatuation with Hitler.

“Politics gobbles up everything in sight: love, family life, joy, humor, and respect” (p. 112). In the final pages of this novel, Jürgen is offered gainful employment, confirming his faith in Herr Hitler, while his father Pitt unsuccessfully tries to negotiate the bureaucracy necessary to gain welfare benefits. Maria’s uncle agrees to underwrite the production of a substance that chemist Peter has invented, and the family seems to be back on secure footing. To celebrate, they embark on an excursion to an outdoor restaurant where they enjoy the sights: fireworks, “an exploding zeppelin,” and two airplanes “dragging lighted advertisement signs behind them” (p. 126). As if these symbols of the air war to come were insufficient, the narrator describes a scene the family can vaguely discern: across the lake, the *Sicherheitspolizei*, paramilitary police, break up a crowd of impoverished Berliners, too poor to pay admission for the show. Bergmann has given us both a plausible explanation for the German embrace of Nazism and a chilling prediction of what will follow Hitler’s ascension to power.

What Will Become of the Children is eerily contemporary in its descriptions of unemployment and family deprivation. The novel also makes several references to

the film industry in Germany during this period; at one point, the Deutsch family go to a film to forget their woes; at another point, Pitt attends a film on his own “in which Arabs attack a French fort, destroy the telegraph station, and sabotage wells” (p. 7). Deeming the film “crummy,” Pitt nonetheless begin to ruminate after the screening about Germany’s allies and its enemies and what would become of the Fatherland if it were similarly surrounded. Such thoughts echo the *lebensraum* theme found elsewhere in the novel, as well as links between German colonialism and racial hierarchy. Worth mentioning, too, are Bergmann’s chapter titles, for example: “Chapter One: The Paterfamilias is Brought on to the Stage and Becomes a Rich Man with Ideas.” These titles function almost as stage directions, or fairy tale introits,

and usually assume an ironic tone.

Bodek has produced a fine edition of *What Will Become of the Children*, including many helpful footnotes on names, dates, locations, political events, and terminology, as well as the introduction described above. Camden House has chosen four photographs of Berlin during the Weimar Republic to create an informative and inviting cover. This novel would make an excellent text to teach in classes on Weimar Berlin, twentieth-century German literature, and forebodings of the Nazi catastrophe. It is brief (a good length to teach) yet packed with tactile details about daily lives, the circumstances of women, contentious politics, and the economy, with enough plot and character development to keep students reading. Strongly recommended!

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Citation: Elizabeth Baer. Review of Bergmann, Claire, *What Will Become of the Children?*. H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. August, 2011.

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