

# H-Net Reviews

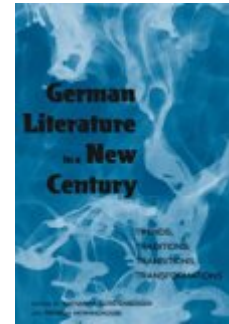
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Katharina Gerstenberger, Patricia Herminghouse, eds. *German Literature in a New Century: Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008. ix + 300 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-547-7.

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## The New Canon?

In this intelligently compiled collection of articles, Patricia Herminghouse's and Katharina Gerstenberger's stated goal is to portray not only German literature, but also the German *Literaturbetrieb* in the twenty-first century. The volume emerged from a 2005 Fulbright Summer Seminar that discussed not only literary critique, but also a plethora of aspects fundamental to the German literary scene, including writers' training, cultural policy, marketing, and reception. The collection therefore includes articles that try to illuminate a variety of trends, transitions, and transformations (clad in promising alliteration) in those realms, and not without a glance at traditions. The volume convinces the reader that it is extremely helpful, indeed, to look at least as far back as the 1990s in order to understand the discontinuities, continuities, and innovations described in these fifteen articles. The significance of this particular context is especially evident in the article by Julia Karole-Berg and Katya Skow, a formidable illustration of the recent evolution of *Frauenliteratur* (and of the term itself) that shows that reaching back even further, to the 1970s, is crucial. Understandably from a twenty-first-century U.S.-grown German studies point of view, Herminghouse and Gerstenberger apologize in the preface for not including film and theater in the work. But even this slightly unnecessary disclaimer does not justify any fear readers may have that the volume will only be of interest to Anglo-American scholars.

The editors group their articles neatly according to

the latest and hottest topics of the last ten years. The book is organized into four sections. The first, on trends in the literary public sphere, includes contributions by Sean McIntyre, Joseph Joffe, Donovan Anderson, and Rachel J. Halverson. The second, on discussions of the interdependence of history, memory, and narrative, presents articles by Laurel Cohen Pfister, Patricia Anne Simpson, Sydney Norton, and John Pizer. The third group is comprised of articles by Erika Nelson, Birgit Dahlke, and Gary Schmidt that discuss form and performance as means of representing identity. The final block of articles, on women writing in the twenty-first century, originates from the editors themselves, Beret Norman and Karole-Berg and Skow. These groupings do not, however, exist in isolation from one another. Strikingly, readers of this volume will constantly detect implicit but felicitous cross-referencing of issues among and between the articles, which makes the volume a fascinating read. These references are most apparent in Patricia Ann Simpson's article, in which the author successfully connects but simultaneously challenges notions of a coherent national identity that narrates a national past from a migrant perspective, an East German perspective, and from an occupation with the ubiquitous issue of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, thereby creating allusions to the interconnectedness of all articles in this volume.

The volume opens with a discussion of the literary scene. In this part, Sean McIntyre's comparison of the involvement of German and U.S. fiction writers in pub-

lic discourse on sociopolitical issues is highly enlightening. In it, the reader gets an idea of those traditions in the *Literaturbetrieb* that both enrich and burden the self-conception of young (or at least current) German authors. But the issues of this section are also retraced in articles in other locations in the book, as the themes of many fiction works are also concerns of the literary public sphere. In section 2, for example, Laurel Cohen Pfister discusses Tanja Dücker's *Himmelskörper* (2003) in the context of memory culture, clearly one of the dominant topics in German cultural studies even before the turn of the millennium. In her novel, Dücker narrates simultaneously a typical modern story about the coming-out of a homosexual loved one and the—for Germans all too familiar and paralyzing—coming-out story of beloved grandparents as formerly fervent supporters of National Socialism. It is thus not surprising that Dücker is constantly solicited to write on social issues for German feuillets. The same applies to Zafer Şenocak, who is also well known to readers of German feuillets—in addition to public awareness of his work as a German transnational poet, a role discussed successfully by Erika Nelson in her analysis of his linguistic material in part 3. Herminhouse also describes Juli Zeh as a public intellectual in the fourth section of the book. Zeh has gained public recognition for her commentaries on human and civil rights issues as well as on the role of women in families and society at large.

All of the articles in this volume offer interesting insights into various themes in German literature in the twenty-first century, most of them originating and evolving from twentieth-century issues of which specialists are already aware. The interesting discussion of recent developments in the *Literaturbetrieb*, however, distinguishes this volume from earlier treatments of these subjects. Anderson's article mentions new, innovative—though not necessarily disturbing—ways in which literary production and presentation have become marketable commodities in the German support of named-

event culture, which has intensified to the level of a craze over the last fifteen years or so. Halverson follows (self-declared non-Germanist) Tobias Hülsch's evolution as a writer in this new *Literaturbetrieb*.

If any criticism were to be leveled at this productive collection, it would have to concern a slightly static notion of the works and authors it discusses as central to German literature in the new century. Although the editors warn the reader up front that they prioritized in-depth analysis over blanket coverage of their themes, more mention could have been made of sub-cultural, non-institutionalized developments, especially outside Hamburg. Though the editors certainly do not claim to be compiling a canon for the new century, it is nonetheless slightly troubling to read some names over and over again. Readers may wonder what is happening outside the Leipziger Literaturarchiv and beyond Text+Kritik, perlentaucher.de, and the feuillets, or outside the range of the literary production recognized by the Goethe Institut. What is going on in the Russian-German scene in Berlin-Charlottenburg, for instance, or in the invitation-only salons in Berlin-Kreuzberg, -Friedrichshain, or even -Wedding? Can we learn something from the (fate of the) obscure Forum der 13 or the multitude of literary circles on the Internet that try to produce more than blogs? This issue aside, this collection is definitely useful in its ability to identify tendencies among a wider array of themes treated by a more diversified yet thematically interdependent pool of German authors in the so-called globalized world. The articles show convincingly that this atmosphere inevitably gives birth to new forms of production as well as unconventional marketing strategies. What is more, the volume reminds us that "normality"—a term for which German society has always had a peculiar longing—remains unattainable in Germany and the German cultural scene, unless we agree that normality can be defined as the constant challenge of the very need for itself.

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