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“Less an examination of particular East German or European cultural context than an exploration of human nature and habits of human social organization,” writes Elizabeth C. Hamilton in her introduction, “Fühmann asks, in essence, what disables?” (p. 17). Why would Franz Fühmann (1922-84), one of the most important writers of the German Democratic Republic, be involved in the preparation and publication of an essentially beautiful book about people with cognitive disabilities? Why would such a publication be of interest to the English-speaking world more than thirty years after its first edition had appeared “behind” the Iron Curtain?

*What Kind of Island in What Kind of Sea* is a remarkable publication in various ways. First of all, it represents a search on Hamilton’s part for the author Fühmann and the photographer Dietmar Riemann (born 1950), both of whom began visiting the Samariteranstalten, Samaritans’ Institution, “a multi-faceted Protestant Church-run diaconal establishment ... about thirty-five miles east of Berlin,” starting in 1980 (p. 1). It furthermore represents a search on the part of both Fühmann and Riemann for the people then living at that institution, with whom they both “over an extended period of time” “independently and together,... formed relationships,” including with residents and staff members (p. 8).

“Photographs of the intellectually disabled,” Fühmann wonders early on in his essay, “How will they affect the viewer?” (p. 33). He does not answer the question directly but instead takes mental pictures of the residents by describing their faces, their habits, their likes and dislikes. With words as well as with photographs, Fühmann and Riemann delve into the world of the institution, quietly, affectionately, sensitively. Fühmann's words are poetic, so are Riemann's pictures: “Monika B., epileptic, fosterling of Station 1 in the Bethesda House, a tough, big-boned woman with coarse features, mid-thirties, is paralyzed from her knees to her feet; she moves herself by sliding on knee pads, very thick, green-trimmed rubber cuffs that extend over her toes; as awful as it looks, that is much better than moving in a wheelchair, she can go where she wants, can lift herself onto a chair or a toilet seat and then get back down to the floor again, she possesses the invaluable capacity to get around” (p. 35). Fühmann's descriptions are as vivid as they are complex. He starts out by describing Monika in almost brutal honesty, including aspects of her disability. Yet, at that point, the narrative breaks. Rather than dwelling on her limitations, Fühmann moves on to
point out the extent of her freedom, that is, her ability to go wherever she pleases, her autonomy even to look after personal needs. He does not settle on a brief and static glimpse of Monika’s appearance but instead emphasizes her agency, her making use of her possibilities.

Riemann’s pictures have a similar effect on the observer as have Fühmann’s musings. They depict the residents in everyday life situations, at times private, even intimate. They express a certain joy to be alive, such as the picture of four residents looking at and patting a dog, or the calm expression of content of one adult resident on a swing. The pictures show friendship and affection and even pride. Looking at the pictures one cannot help but think that they are essentially human, even “normal” in a sense that they portray life happening with its ups and downs in a community of people where there is room for all simply to be.

Fühmann allows the residents to come to life on paper, while Riemann does so with his photographs. They thus unassumingly enhance the residents’ dignity, as Hamilton points out right in the beginning of her introduction, the “dignity of cognitively disabled, institutionalized people” (p. 1). The descriptions are therefore in stark contrast to negative clichés about the cognitively disabled. Fühmann and Riemann manage to produce very different imagery, because they both actually engaged with the residents and staff. They became a part of the community rather than remaining as outsiders who observe and conclude from a distance. Hamilton notes that “Fühmann and Riemann began and completed their collaborative work over thirty years ago, before disability studies was firmly established in the United States and still virtually non-existent in either [East or West] Germany” (p. 3). They looked at people with disabilities with plain eyes untainted by negative expectations, so they were thinking about disability in a new way that was ahead of their times.

The book contrasts a still deeply rooted understanding in German culture of disability as something shameful, something to hide away, something that does not contribute to society in a productive way. Viewed from this angle, one would wish that Hamilton had opted for a bilingual edition rather than an exclusive English-language one, for the message is one that—although it does speak to us all beyond borders—is needed in Germany today. Germans still do not have a network of strong disability studies departments across the nation. The universities do not feature productive, adequately funded programs to break down barriers for students and faculty with disabilities. Desolate is the situation with regard to historical inquiries. Although a few disability studies historians have produced a notable body of works, they can hardly cover the broad range of subjects that would have to be explored thoroughly from historical angles. Such a historiography would be vital to explain Germans’ current difficult relationship with people with disabilities as well as the specific German approach to education and institutionalization that is reflected in rehabilitation and special education programs whose histories have not yet been studied extensively enough.

Hardly any people with disabilities obtain a higher education in Germany today, and certainly none with mental disabilities, although examples from other countries suggest that it may be done. German academia remains essentially ableist; hardly any professors are known to be disabled. Anything to do with disability tends to be pushed to disability studies, a marginalization happening even within the academy. Something is very wrong with Germans’ relationships with the “disabled other,” and we do not use up any of our rich resources to examine the reasons academically. Fühmann and Riemann beg to differ. Hamilton’s publication of their work from the 1980s illustrates that alternative ways of looking at the likes of mental otherness may be traced even in Germany with its grim and well-known history of discriminating against and even killing the mentally-
ill—among others—by the thousands during national socialism.

The English translation is structured into four parts. First, Hamilton provides background information in her introduction, which she titles “Here, Then, Awe of Human Dignity.” Then follows Hamilton’s translation from German of Fühmann’s essay on photographs of people with mental disabilities, which, alongside Riemann’s actual photographs that form part 3, was first published in 1986, that is, after Fühmann’s passing. In the fourth part, “Tending the Vine,” Hamilton shares her personal reflections on visiting the Samariteranstalten. Notes and a bibliography complete the volume.

What Kind of Island in What Kind of Sea is a small book but an important and an impressive one. It is a key document for future research into disability history that still needs to be studied in much more detail. This includes more than just the possible terrors of institutionalization that have been the object of much public debate and official inquiries in Germany recently. The book is, however, more than those particular themes. I highly recommend delving into it simply to unwind; it offers an excursion to some kind of island in some kind of sea where everyone seems to be content with what is now. It reveals that the “real lives of the residents and partners were distinctly richer than many might think: ‘We are people who write books’” (p. 198).

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