Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century
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Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century

Edited by Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner

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Introduction: New German-Language Writing since the Turn of the Millennium

Lyn Marven

Emerging Writing

Twenty years after German reunification, much German-language literary fiction, and particularly that written by a younger generation of authors, is distinctly globalized and transnational in outlook: from subject matter to setting, from the style and language of texts to their swift translation into other languages, a larger number of novels from the German-speaking countries than ever before participate in the worldwide circulation of literary fiction. With three German-language writers awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in just over a decade — Günter Grass in 1999, Elfriede Jelinek in 2004, and Herta Müller in 2009 — a variety of international bestsellers including Bernhard Schlink’s Der Vorleser (1995; The Reader, 1999), Thomas Brussig’s Helden wie wir (1995; Heroes Like Us, 1997), W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz (2001), Daniel Kehlmann’s Die Vermessung der Welt (2005; Measuring the World, 2006), and (as always) books by Günter Grass, not to mention high-profile film adaptations such as Stephen Daldry’s The Reader (2008), the beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a greater degree of attention focused on contemporary German-language literature than at any time in the last two hundred years.

The present volume concentrates on “emerging” writers — a term intended to describe a rise to prominence on a number of levels and in a range of arenas. Several chapters feature authors whose names have become increasingly familiar to international audiences in the last few years, including Ilija Trojanow, Karen Duve, Julia Franck, and Kehlmann, as well as one or two who have been established longer but are less well-known outside of Germany, such as Sibylle Berg and Sven Regener. Some chapters offer new, more reflective readings of an author’s best-seller than are typically generated in the immediate aftermath of its international success, such as Rebecca Braun’s chapter on Kehlmann’s Die Vermessung der Welt; others examine newer or less familiar works, or publications that have followed initial success, such as Valerie Heffernan’s
chapter on Julia Franck’s *Die Mittagsfrau* (Lady Midday, the noonday witch, 2007; published in English as *The Blind Side of the Heart*, 2009) or Heike Bartel’s chapter on Karen Duve’s *Taxi* (2008), and Kate Roy and Andrew Plowman’s chapters on sequels to acclaimed first novels by Yadé Kara and Sven Regener respectively. More pressingly, however, this volume also seeks to introduce a larger number of lesser-known authors and texts to an international audience whose access to German-language writing is often determined by the vagaries of the market and current fashions in publishing and translation.

Indeed, this endeavor is entirely appropriate — the novels analyzed here are for the most part globalized hypertexts, reaching beyond their local context through what Barbara Mennel, writing in this volume, calls “transnational and intermedial intertextuality.” The globalization of the novel as a literary form — indeed, the imbrication of literature and globalization — is further reflected in the cosmopolitan plots and content of the novels here, as well as their language. The texts situate themselves within the international (albeit largely English-language) cultural discourses that they reference: music, including rap, reggae, and Russian goth; Spencer Tunick’s globally situated photographic art along with the visual language of cinema; the international field of science and the universal sport of soccer; literature from *The Arabian Nights* through Dostoevsky to that bible of the globetrotter, the Lonely Planet guides. Although they are bounded by the specific language in which the texts are written, this too is porous, incorporating other languages, dialects, and even imagery, both as a matter of realism and as textual device.

**Contemporary Currents**

Yet at the same time, these novels nonetheless relate to the literary historiography of German-language literature and engage with local concerns; they are in that sense also “glocal.” The 1990s clamor to find the ultimate *Wenderoman* (novel dealing with the radical changes in Germany around the time of the opening of the Berlin Wall in 1989) or “Berlin novel” may have died down, but we might argue that it is only in the last decade that such texts have emerged. A continuing engagement with reunification and the after-effects of the demise of both East and West Germany marks Clemens Meyer’s Leipzig lads in *Als wir träumten* (When we were dreaming, 2006), who come of age around the *Wende* and who look back on the former East with something beyond nostalgia, and also Sven Regener’s knowing and sympathetic recreation of 1980s West Berlin in *Der kleine Bruder* (The younger brother, 2008), itself a text that rewrites the author’s previous version of the night of 9 November 1989. Similarly, the old/new capital Berlin retains its literary cachet. Terézia
INTRODUCTION: NEW GERMAN-LANGUAGE WRITING

Mora’s *Alle Tage* (2004; *Day In Day Out*, 2007), set in the global crossroads of an archetypal metropolis called “B.,” redefines the Berlin novel, while the third installment of Regener’s trilogy responds both to his earlier depiction of 1980s Kreuzberg in *Herr Lehmann* (Mr. Lehmann, 2001; published in English as *Berlin Blues*, 2007) — set chronologically later than the subsequent prequels — and to twenty-first-century spatial discourse of the city.

Of the many literary trends in the 1990s, one lasting development seems to be the *Neue Lesbarkeit* (new readability). Readability — largely meaning accessible, immediate writing — is a double-edged sword, as Braun shows in relation to Daniel Kehlmann’s bestselling *Die Vermessung der Welt*: its readable style garnered public attention while also leading critics to overlook its complex strategies of identification and familiarity and to dismiss it as merely populist. Readability is not simply a commercial decision, however — it is a distinct literary strategy and narrative technique, often just one among many in an author’s palette that is selected for particular effect. Sibylle Berg’s narrative style, for example, varies from the readable to postmodern polyphony and playfulness, both across and within texts. These different strategies are not mutually incompatible: in this volume Emily Jeremiah demonstrates that Berg’s novel *Die Fahrt* (*The journey*, 2007) returns to the “palatable and commercial qualities” of her earlier work without sacrificing depth. What is clear in both Kehlmann’s and Berg’s work is that style or form thus do not necessarily follow from content — difficult subject matter in no way entails a difficult narrative strategy — and indeed, the disjunction of these two elements can be a productive further dimension to a novel’s style.

One legacy of readability might be seen in the preponderance of first-person narratives represented here: memorable voices that address the reader directly. Characters that verge on the picaresque are a notable feature of post-reunification novels in the 1990s, particularly from the former East Germany. Here they serve less for satire than for establishing the fictionality of the character, on the one hand, and the immediacy of the narrative, on the other. The strength of Yadé Kara’s two novels, *Selam Berlin* (2003) and its 2008 sequel *Café Cyprus*, examined here, is the “Hasan sound”: the chatty, irreverent, frank tone of her protagonist, Hasan Kazan. Saša Stanišić’s young Bosnian boy in *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon reparationiert* (2006; *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*, 2008) is a deceptively naïve narrator, while the spun-out narrative of Vladimir Vertlib’s eponymous Rosa Masur in *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (*The remarkable memory of Rosa Masur*, 2003) is as engrossing as it is unreliable. Sven Regener’s trilogy about the laconic drop-out Herr Lehmann, who became a cult character, was initially aligned with the phenomenon of “pop literature,” in part due to the author’s own star status. His affable protagonist remains too much in focus, however, to fit
with the ironic pop textual aesthetics — precisely what gives his novels their appeal. Berg’s *Die Fahrt* also displays pop tendencies, from the text’s narrative distance from her characters to their disaffection. In *Taxi*, Karen Duve litters the text with facts, names, and historical dates. Neither author fully upholds the political disengagement associated with pop literature, however, espousing nomadic ethics or feminist concerns through the form and content of their novels.

Conversely, many of the novels here wear their learning on their sleeves, from historical research and reenactment (on display in Kehlmann and Trojanow’s texts) to intertextual references and engagement with critical theories. Ulrike Draesner’s *Mitgift* (literally Dowry, 2002) draws its plot from the thriller genre, but the theoretically informed text is dense and nonchronological; Juli Zeh references Nietzsche and game theory in *Spieltrieb* (The drive to play, 2004); Berg cites the controversial, and linguistically challenging, French writer and poet Michel Houellebecq. Citationality is in fact a — perhaps paradoxical — aspect of some pop literature, although by no means a defining feature, and the texts in this volume are similarly hybrid in their style.

The end of the 1990s also saw the rise of the so-called literary “Fräuleinwunder” (wonder girls). Volker Hage’s oft-cited phrase was a media construct that drew much criticism for trivializing new literary voices that happened to belong to women. Three authors in this volume, Karen Duve, Julia Franck, and Kathrin Schmidt, have been cited among the young women writers so designated. “I was never a girl wonder,” Franck protested as late as 2007 when her *Die Mittagsfrau* won the German Book Prize. Their subsequent development, including the novels included here, proves — if proof were needed — that their acclaim is based on literary merit rather than looks, and the fact that this volume features a small majority of women writers should underline that tokenism and separatism are not warranted, if they ever were.

While a number of the women writers in this volume choose to adopt male voices (for example Kara and Mora), others — like Franck — choose to engage with feminist history and theory, although as Valerie Heffernan’s chapter on the women’s history in *Die Mittagsfrau* shows, one might equally label this novel’s focus as “history from below” — that is, a history of the disempowered. Duve depicts the effects of masculinist literature and philosophy on her vulnerable, taxi-driving female protagonist — although her own text references authors from Grass to Kafka — as well as the brutality of the sex industry. Sonja Klocke reads Kathrin Schmidt’s *Du stirbst nicht* (You are not going to die, 2009) as a search for feminine agency. These shifting concerns may well presage a generational change. Far from highlighting the author as girl, by contrast, Barbara Mennel argues that Alina Bronsky’s *Scherbenpark* (2008; *Broken Glass Park*, 2010) portrays in its protagonist Sascha the globalized figure of the “ghetto girl,” who func-
Franck’s novel can also be seen as extending the memory discourses and revisions that have marked representations of German twentieth-century history since reunification and the turn of the century. Her “mother literature” — as opposed to the 1970s and 1980s West German phenomenon of “Väterliteratur” (literature of fathers) — engages only obliquely with the Nazi past, while the striking image of parental abandonment of a child further complicates notions of perpetrators and victims. Set in the present day, Ulrike Draesner’s *Mitgift* traces the family narratives of conforming — which have physical consequences for her two sisters — back to wartime experiences of displacement and expulsion. More daringly, Vertlib’s Rosa Masur’s encounter with a twentieth-century dictator is depicted as fascinating to her German audience: the fact that the dictator in question is Stalin only legitimizes their interest. It is notable, however, that many of the novels here focus on more recent conflicts, particularly the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s during the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. Stanišić depicts the sheer violence of a war that turned friends against each other along ethnic lines, while the trauma of Abel Nema, in Mora’s *Alle Tage*, arises from that same conflict, which renders him stateless.

Perhaps indicative of the media age, the novels here share a kind of self-consciousness or self-awareness as literary texts, which is expressed in a number of different ways: Draesner and Duve embed intertextual references to their own oeuvre; Kara and Kehlmann write in a subtly anachronistic mode, where the issues of their novels’ ostensible time and place are overlaid with contemporary concerns. Other texts perform their literariness by employing genre features (Berg, Duve), situating their narratives within frameworks that draw attention to the narrating instance (Vertlib), employing alienation effects such as ironic or cryptic chapter titles (Stanišić), or by playing with realism as a mode (Duve). The ironic, cautious, happy endings of *Scherbenpark* or *Mitgift* restate a form of family, albeit almost unrecognizable as the biological, nuclear family unit. The premise of Duve’s *Taxi* offers an iterative as well as linear narrative; Franck frames the narrative of *Mittagsfrau* with a prologue and an epilogue that offer a counter-perspective and a challenge to both reader and protagonist.

While the novels advertise their status as fictional constructs, the authors seem only too aware of their role or position in the wider cultural field, and in many cases write this into the novels: Kate Roy argues that Kara’s Hasan ventriloquiizes the author’s own responses to interview questions, while Clemens Meyer was called upon to authenticate his characters’ physical bodies by displaying his own in the dust-jacket author photo for *Als wir träumten*. Berg subverts her marketing with knowing,
sarcastic cover images and author biographies for her novels: Die Fahrt features Flickr-style photos that evoke her travels to do research for the novel — the form of the publication thus reinscribes the author within the text. Duve includes a photo of herself as a taxi driver on the cover of Taxi, tempting an autobiographical reading that the text’s postmodern gestures undermine. Kehlmann’s examination of celebrity in Die Vermessung der Welt led to his own “celebrification,” as Braun demonstrates, and in turn begat his more recent novel with the telling title Ruhm (2009; Fame, 2010). Sven Regener meanwhile, as Andrew Plowman explains, has had to battle against his own celebrity as a rock musician to convince critics that his literature stands alone and that he cannot be conflated with his protagonist Frank Lehmann; Der kleine Bruder responds to the reception of the first two novels of the Herr Lehmann trilogy by stressing the difference between character and author. Conversely, Julian Preece suggests that Ilija Trojanow’s success with Der Weltensammler (2006; The Collector of Worlds, 2008) was aided by the fact that both the author’s biography and the novel’s themes struck a chord with wider discourses on migration and identity; the author himself has since published further texts where he puts himself into his historical protagonist’s shoes. Clearly, the author is an integral part of the narrative: both of the text and of its reception.

Newest Literature

Our line-up includes a number of “minority” voices, reflecting the “Turkish turn” (Leslie Adelson) and “Eastern turn” (Brigid Haines) in contemporary writing. These include winners of the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis, instituted in 1985 and awarded yearly by the Robert Bosch Stiftung to authors writing in German as a second language or to authors from non-German backgrounds; an additional Förderpreis (“Promotional Prize”) is given for up-and-coming authors. Vertlib won the Förderpreis in 2001, Kara the Förderpreis in 2004, Stanišić was the main prizewinner in 2008, and Mora was prizewinner in 2010 as well as winning the Förderpreis in 2000. While this development and increasing visibility is entirely welcome, we should be wary of according this literature any special influence just because of the mere fact of the authors’ biographies: Stanišić, in Brigid Haines’s chapter, objects to the view that so-called minority literature functions to enrich the majority culture, while Kate Roy makes the point, in relation to Yadé Kara’s reception, that moving from the margins to the center — or merely reversing the polarity of these categories — does not per se constitute subversion of the mainstream. In the final analysis, these texts are included here as the “newest German literature,” the provocative subtitle of Jamal Tuschick’s
compilation \textit{MorgenLand} (OrientLand) from 2000, and not as representative of a particular background or minority group.

These texts thus demonstratively rewrite and challenge earlier categories of minority writing: it is hard to designate them as “migrant literature” — although a number of the texts’ transnational figures move from one country to another, whether unwillingly, through war, like Mora’s multilingual, stateless everyman Abel Nema, or by choice, like Vertlib’s Masur — as the texts resist such constricting labels. In \textit{Café Cyprus} the nomadic Hasan Kazan migrates from Germany to London, a move that he hopes will sidestep the identity issues of his origins as a West Berlin–born German Turk. Similarly, these novels could not be seen as \textit{Betroffenheitsliteratur} (literature of the afflicted), nor even as authentic accounts. Instead, their writers highlight the fictionality of the voices: they ventriloquize the characters (indeed, Bronsky even writes under a pseudonym). This fictionalization is perhaps most clearly seen where there is a visible disjunction between the author’s identity and that of the protagonist, as in Vertlib’s and Kara’s novels, both of whose narrator-protagonists have a different gender than the authors themselves, or in Stanišić, who uses a child narrator for distance. The act of imaginative creation and empathy resembles Kehlmann’s and Trojanow’s ventriloquizing of real historical figures. On the other hand, Vertlib shares his character’s Jewish background, while Stanišić draws on his own autobiography. These characters illustrate the multiplicity of affiliations and identifications that attend identity: a complex, overlapping set of factors interacting with one another rather than a binary opposition — indeed, at the end of his novel, Vertlib has his Russian-Jewish character Masur, who is a migrant in Germany, encounter French-Arab Muslims, while Turkish-German Hasan associates with expatriate Cypriots and British-Pakistani Londoners. In Mora’s \textit{Alle Tage}, almost all the characters are from ethnic or cultural minorities, relating to each other and purporting to be indifferent to the “majority” culture.

In many ways this literature approaches a “postidentity” literature, or what translator Katy Derbyshire memorably calls, in her review of Bronsky’s \textit{Scherbenpark}, “the ‘fiction about immigrants that isn’t about being an immigrant’ genre.” As Anke Biendarra writes in this volume, these novels are a testament to “a greater variety of German-language literature where classifications based on origin and ethnicity are becoming increasingly moot.”

It is the notion of “crossing borders” — as cultural process and identity formation — that is at stake here rather than the economic implications of globalization. The texts engage in complex processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, as Roy and Mennel demonstrate, as well as contesting notions of \textit{Heimat} (homeland), as analyzed by Bartel and Jeremiah. Globalization represents the aspirations of Meyer’s young men — who never leave Leipzig — and the cultural coordinates for
Bronsky’s Sascha, but in Berg’s novel it has the effect of engendering rootlessness as much as international connectivity. Travel and movement for its own sake is contrasted with displacement and circulation in Hasan’s London, which further displaces Cyprus to London, as the novel’s title implies, and overwrites 1990s Britain with contemporary German issues. The legacies of colonialization are also evident, not only in *Cafe Cyprus*’s engagement with British military involvement in Cyprus, but also in Burton’s explorations in colonial India. The multiple voices in *Der Weltensammler* allow the colonized to write back, while the “others” encountered by Berg’s travelers also puncture the latter’s stereotyped expectations; the polyphonic narrative of *Die Fahrt* thus contributes to an aesthetics that displaces the majority view.

Migration is in any case not the sole preserve of those usually designated migrants — as opposed to tourists, travelers, expatriates, or explorers. Berg’s globally restless characters as well as Kehlmann’s two explorer scientists and Trojanow’s Burton set off into the world. As portrayed in the novel, Burton is initially a (perhaps anachronistic, and certainly unexpected) paradigm of openness and willingness to engage with the “Other,” while Berg’s characters unwittingly reveal prejudices despite their apparently enlightening globetrotting. In Regener’s Kreuzberg of the 1980s, the large migrant population (mostly Turks) and the working class or inner-German migrants like Frank Lehmann only rarely interact, and when they do, do so only in the most basic transactions, like buying kebabs.

The City and the Individual

The twenty-first-century location par excellence is the city: according to a recent United Nations report, since 2008, for the first time in history, a majority of the world’s population lives in cities and towns. The texts in this volume tend toward city settings: Hamburg, London, Berlin, and beyond. One character’s assertion in *Der kleine Bruder* that Berlin is too small and provincial is the same spark that sends Kara’s Hasan to London in *Cafe Cyprus* (he makes a similar pronouncement at the end of *Selam Berlin*, Kara’s celebrated first novel). For Kara and Duve in particular, the city is an active part of the narrative, constructing the text as their protagonists negotiate the urban geography of London and Hamburg respectively; for Trojanow’s Burton, the city is a source of stories. The anonymous cities of Bronsky and Mora’s novels highlight the spatial organization of the metropolis and especially the marginalization of migrants in the ghetto. Cities are nodes, transit points within wider networks, but global interconnectedness often collapses within the city: instead, characters experience fragmentation, division, isolation, and disengagement from their surroundings.
The cityscape is marked by violence, or the threat of violence, and unwanted physical proximity. The sensory details—the dirt, smoke, heat, unpleasant smells, and disease—of Trojanow’s Bombay or Duve’s Hamburg engage the reader corporeally. Burton interacts physically with his populous environment, as a doctor, as a lover, while the fleeting moments of connection for Berg’s city-hopping characters come only with physical contact. Schmidt’s novel, by contrast, centers on the body, which constitutes the limits of her protagonist’s experience; the detailed depiction of the acute illness and painfully slow recovery of Helene Wesendahl draws on Schmidt’s own experience of aneurysm; the novel enacts an extreme form of body language. The constrictions of Wesendahl’s time in the hospital are, moreover, strangely reminiscent of the experiences of Meyer’s imprisoned gang members: all are subject to bodily surveillance and deprivation, to authoritarian power.

While the members of Meyer’s criminal fraternity test their masculinity in the confined, all-male environment of the prison, Bronsky’s ghetto girl Sascha—whose name, in German, is ambiguously gendered—appropriates signifiers of masculinity that sit uncomfortably on this young woman. At the same time, Bronsky’s coming-of-age novel appropriates a conventionally male-centered form, while her protagonist talks back to masculine voices by recycling rapper Eminem’s lyrics. Gender remains a contested site of identity: both Draesner and Schmidt highlight the arbitrary gender divide through characters who fall between these categories as transvestite, transsexual, or hermaphrodite; their “crossing-over from one sex to another or a strange, even uncanny, intermingling,” as Georgina Paul terms the contravention of gendered nature, has a profound effect on the social categories that seek to uphold division, albeit frequently one that provokes violence.13 These are by no means new manifestations of gender uncertainty, however: even the Victorian explorer Burton, representative of the patriarchal empire (at the time ruled by a woman), takes on a feminized status as he assimilates into other cultures, illustrating the gendered imagery of colonizer and colonized; he also alters his body to “pass” as a Muslim, but ultimately upholds binary divisions of identity.

How Do You Find It?

One reason for the shape of this volume was to consider the methodological challenge of dealing with “ultracontemporary literature,” especially debut novels by new authors who have no established reputation or textual history. Tom Cheesman’s study of contemporary Turkish-German novels of settlement14 begins with a riff on the ambiguously phrased question, “Wie finden Sie sie?” (How do you find them?). Rather than inquiring about Cheesman’s critical assessment of such novels, the questioner here,
noted critic Irmgard Ackermann, was in fact curious about how Cheesman manages to hear about them in the first place. Both questions are of interest to the current project, however: How do we seek out and discover new novels of worth? And when we do find them, how do we assess their qualities with no consensus or previous reception to fall back on? Critical exchange is invaluable here: the discussions and questions, collective knowledge and collegial atmosphere of the workshop that instigated this volume allowed participants to try out ideas relating to “ultracontemporary” novels. Dealing with often unknown and untested contemporary texts gets to the very heart of our task as academics and literary critics — we are faced with the question that our students so often pose: but how do you know if it is any good?

In selecting the texts, we have tried to cast the net widely. Our sources of new literature are as diverse as the reviews site Perlentaucher.de, the informative websites run by New Books in German and the Goethe-Institut, and the blogs by Katy Derbyshire, among others, which promote, review, and introduce new writing; the many literary prizes that draw attention to new writing, particularly the Bachmann Prize and the Chamisso Prize, as well as more established and mainstream awards such as the German Book Prize; and literary events such as the Lange Leipziger Lesenacht, organized to coincide with the Leipziger Buchmesse, where up-and-coming authors read en masse for a young and enthusiastic public. Our approach for this volume was to “crowdsource,” to draw on the collective knowledge of colleagues in the United Kingdom, Ireland, mainland Europe, and the United States who specialize in contemporary literature. In the first instance, we asked contributors to nominate authors or texts that had impressed them recently and deserved wider attention. In this way we hoped to draw on a collective knowledge that exceeded the editors’ own — indeed, one of the pleasures of this project has been discovering new names and voices — and the result was a noticeable enthusiasm, as well as a broader range than we could have put together ourselves.

A number of the names that came up were at the time unfamiliar to us, but have since become much more prominent. Clemens Meyer, for example, is rapidly turning into a literary phenomenon — aided in no small way by his self-assured and carefully staged performances at readings — and Alina Bronsky’s debut novel has garnered further attention outside Germany after Tim Mohr’s well-received translation, titled Broken Glass Park. Our focus here is largely on writers who are “emerging,” who have debuted or come to particular prominence during the first decade of the new millennium, and most frequently the novels chosen are the authors’ most recent. Many other authors could have had a claim for inclusion: for example, Kevin Vennemann, whose linguistically challenging novels Nahe Jedenew (2005; Close to Jedenew, 2008) and Mara Kogoj (2007) deal with
equally challenging histories, or Selim Özdoğan, whose novel *Die Töchter des Schmieds* (The blacksmitth’s daughter, 2005) features in Fatih Akın’s film *Auf der anderen Seite* (On the other side, 2007; released to English-speaking audiences as *The Edge of Heaven*), to name but two.

While we cannot claim to possess the gift of foresight, we have tried to pick texts and writers whose long-term future seems promising and eschew the one-off cause célèbre, such as Charlotte Roche’s *Feuchtgebiete* (2008; *Wetlands*, 2009), which attracted much media attention for its scatological and salacious content, both in German and in its English translation by Tim Mohr, and which has divided critics. On the one hand, Roche’s provocative debut catapulted her into celebrity — she has well and truly “emerged” — while on the other hand she has not yet published anything further, and it remains to be seen whether this will be the beginning of a long literary career.

Literature does not stand still. As is always the case when dealing with contemporary literature, there is inevitably a time lag between a literary text’s publication and the publication of the first critical research on it, which we have tried to minimize as far as possible. When this project was launched (2008–9), many of these texts and even authors were relatively unknown and only recently published: three of the novels in this volume are their authors’ debut publications — those of Meyer, Bronsky, and Stanišić; *Alle Tage* is also Mora’s first novel after a collection of short stories. By the time this volume appears they will, we hope, have established themselves even further. Equally inevitably, other novels by authors in this volume have appeared that we might have liked to include: Ulrike Draesner’s *Vorliebe* (Preference, 2010) would have been as suitable as (and moreover creates links to) her *Mitgift*; Daniel Kehlmann’s interlinked short stories *Ruhm*, which draw on the author’s experiences with his bestselling *Die Vermessung der Welt*, might also have merited consideration in its own right; Bronsky’s second novel, *Die schärfsten Gerichte der tatarischen Küche* (*The Hottest Dishes of the Tartar Cuisine*), was included on the long list of the German Book Prize 2010.

As well, new authors have also appeared on the scene, such as teenager Helene Hegemann, whose vibrant drugs-and-nightclub Berlin novel *Axolotl Roadkill* made waves in late 2009, albeit not always for the right reasons, and is to appear in English (translated by Katy Derbyshire, a contributor to this volume) in January 2012. Finn-Ole Heinrich’s stories come recommended by Clemens Meyer; his novel *Räuberhände* (Thief’s hands, 2008) is a coming-of-age story with a subtle take on national identities. Larissa Boehning followed up a well-received collection of short stories with the novel *Lichte Stoffe* (*Light materials*, 2007), a generational novel and a quest to track down a missing painting — and grandfather. Benjamin Stein’s *Die Leinwand* (*The screen*, 2010) plays with the printed form of the book (a provocative decision in these days of electronic read-
ers), starting one story at the front of the book and one at the back: they meet in the middle. These names may well be ones to watch for the coming decade, though no doubt others as yet unknown will also make their mark.

A sign of the vitality of contemporary writing in German is that a substantial number of these novels have already been translated into English, and the chapters refer to published translations whenever available in the interest of bringing these texts to as wide an audience as possible. With that in mind, we are delighted to be able to publish here two translations of excerpts from texts that have not yet appeared in English, both commissioned especially for this volume: one is from Clemens Meyer’s *Als wir träumten*, translated by Katy Derbyshire, and the other is from Vladimir Vertlib’s *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur*, translated by Jamie Lee Searle. Many thanks are due to the British Academy for funding these translations, to the authors and their German publishers for facilitating the new extracts, to Camden House for recognizing the added value that these translations bring to a volume on contemporary literature, and finally to the translators who have rendered these fascinating and lively voices in English.

The Volume

If the novels here are united by anything, it is their lack of unity: together they highlight the productive variety of writing in the early twenty-first century. This variety extends through literary style, from the densely poetic to the readably colloquial, to the choice of protagonists that spans from young children to older citizens, Germans and non-Germans, and everyone and everything in between. A similar range can be seen in the novels’ historical settings, from the painfully contemporary or in some cases, deliberately timeless, to an intentionally anachronistic eighteenth century, and in their geographical locations, from the local specificity of Eastside Leipzig or North London to the global interchangeability of the Western tourist’s sightseeing itinerary.

The chapters in this volume focus on one text per author, placing the novel in the context of the author’s work as a whole (although three are debut novels), and within wider literary or theoretical trends. Each chapter thus offers a close reading of an individual novel as its main focus while also introducing the writer. The chapters are organized in chronological order to give a snapshot of nearly a decade of literary work.

Lyn Marven examines Ulrike Draesner’s *Mitgift* (2002), the author’s second novel, which revolves around two sisters, an anorexic and a hermaphrodite. The two sisters’ mutable bodies are a function of their family relationships and history; as corporeal fact and literary symbol, they desta-
bibilize notions of gender and beauty. Despite its theoretical self-consciousness, Draesner’s readable narrative ultimately emphasizes the embodiedness of the individual. Stuart Taberner reads Vladimir Vertlib’s *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur* (2003) as a performance of Jewish identity in a contemporary Germany where Jewishness still carries a burden of representation within the cultural field, particularly for authors. The eponymous Rosa Masur, an immigrant from Russia, plays up to these expectations with her lively but unreliable life story.

The story of another Pan-European migrant, the multilingual Abel Nema, is related in Terézia Mora’s first novel *Alle Tage* (2004). Drawing on diaspora studies and anthropology, Anke Biendarra analyzes the trauma that marks Nema’s life and underlies his remarkable linguistic abilities. The text, set in the cosmopolitan, deterritorialized city of “B.,” is a labyrinthine narrative: frequent intertextual references enact the decentered, nonintegrated existence of its transnational subjects. As Stephen Brockmann shows, Juli Zeh’s second novel *Spieltrieb*, also from 2004, develops the author’s interest in contemporary nihilism through its manipulative student protagonists. Evoking works by Nietzsche, Musil, and Horváth, and acting out modern game theory, the knowledgeable characters are philosophical ciphers as much as individuals, but ultimately, so Brockmann suggests, the text upholds a realistic morality.

Daniel Kehlmann’s fourth novel, *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005) transformed the author into a household name. Rebecca Braun shows how the two main characters — eighteenth-century scientists Humboldt and Gauß — present opposing approaches to intellectual fame. Kehlmann’s self-aware text further enacts the processes of identification and familiarity that constitute modern celebrity. Clemens Meyer also rose rapidly to media attention with his debut novel *Als wir träumten* (2006) despite — or perhaps because of — his self-stylization as an outsider figure. As Frauke Matthes shows, the novel’s appeal lies in allowing readers to enter an unknown, closed world of violence and criminality in the former East Germany, where the ghettoized protagonists act out their identity through exaggerated masculinity.

Like Mora’s writing, Saša Stanišić’s 2006 debut *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* is part of what Brigid Haines terms the “Eastern turn” in contemporary German-language literature. Depicting the Bosnian conflict of 1992 from a child’s perspective, the text employs nonrealist elements and, particularly, the metaphor of sport to investigate nationalism, identity, and violence. Ilija Trojanow’s own transnational biography finds an echo in the protagonist of his novel *Der Weltensammler* (2006), Victorian explorer Richard Burton. Julian Preece shows how Burton’s intercultural encounters in the novel — predicated on physical proximity, exchange, and imitation — fail to overcome the distance between cultures. Travel is also a theme in Sibylle Berg’s fifth novel, *Die Fahrt* (2007), which
according to Emily Jeremiah negotiates discourses of *Heimat* and Germanness through its peripatetic characters. Through its aesthetics and its critique of globalization, the novel develops a form of nomadic ethics and affirms the “glocal.”

Julia Franck’s 2007 novel *Die Mittagsfrau* depicts Germany in the first half of the twentieth century through the story of a woman who eventually abandons her own son. Valerie Heffernan examines the text as an example of matrilineal, woman-centered history. Like Draesner and Schmidt’s texts, Franck’s novel undermines conventional gendered images, here through a rejection of motherhood. The teenage protagonist of Alina Bronsky’s *Scherbenpark* (2008) also defines herself in relation to the memory of her mother, even while adopting masculine behaviors. Barbara Mennel analyzes Russian immigrant Sascha Naimann as a “global ghetto girl,” a figure that draws on a transnational discourse of youth and gender. The contemporary girl owes much to cinematic depictions of the ghetto, a marginalized urban space often associated with ethnic minorities.

The protagonist of Karen Duve’s intertextual and autobiographical *Taxi* (2008) negotiates the urban space of Hamburg as a taxi driver. Heike Bartel sees the spatial and temporal movement of both taxi and text as representing the postmodern individual; the car both distances driver Alex from the world and forces her into unwelcome intimacy with her passengers. *Cafe Cyprus* (2008), Yadé Kara’s second novel about Berlin-born Hasan Kazan, finds the protagonist exploring London in the 1990s. However, his observations of the city are, as Kate Roy demonstrates, directed toward twenty-first-century Germany. Employing Deleuzian theory, Roy thus elaborates the text’s strategies of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Sven Regener’s *Der kleine Bruder* (2008) also revisits a successful character — Herr Lehmann — in the third part of a trilogy, and like Kara’s novel, Regener’s responds to the way that the author himself and his previous publications were received. As Andrew Plowman shows, the novel maps the mythical West Berlin district of Kreuzberg SO36 in the 1980s, evoking its demise in the coming reunification without nostalgia. The self-conscious narrative is both a memory text and a performance.

Kathrin Schmidt’s *Du stirbst nicht* (2009) is a different type of performance, both physical and linguistic: protagonist Helene Wesendahl struggles to regain her memory in the wake of serious illness. Sonja Klocke examines how disability affects Schmidt’s protagonist’s positionality, forcing her to reconstruct her identity through language and review her previous relationships. The volume concludes with two translations: Katy Derbyshire’s rendition of a chapter of Clemens Meyer’s *Als wir träumten* shows the author’s stylized, colloquial, and studiedly unemotional prose; the episode demonstrates the characters’ boyish interest in drinking, gambling, and fast cars. Jamie Lee Searle translates a chapter of Vladimir
Vertlib’s *Das besondere Gedächtnis der Rosa Masur*, where Rosa writes a letter to her long-dead friend Mascha, reflecting on death and migrant connections. Rosa’s chatty reminiscences are detailed and intimate. These samples are a fitting conclusion to a volume that hopes above all to win new readers for some of the most exciting and innovative voices in German-language literature in the twenty-first century.

Notes


3 “Glocal,” a portmanteau of global and local, suggests the interplay between and simultaneous negotiation of the realms denoted by these terms.


8 For further consideration of contemporary writing by women, see Heike Bartel and Elizabeth Boa, eds., *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Women Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck*, German Monitor 64 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).

9 It is perhaps worth pointing out that the multicultural spread of authors in this volume also reflects the interests of the individual contributors and editors, and beyond that, further reflects a difference in UK and US German studies; minority writing has tended to be recognized more swiftly outside Germany than within German academia.
Details of the prize and previous winners can be found on the site www.bosch-stiftung.de/content/language1/html/4595.asp (accessed 1 September 2010).


Tom Cheesman, Novels of Turkish German Settlement: Cosmopolite Fictions (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), vii.

For an introduction to recent trends, see also Stuart Taberner, German Literature of the 1990s and Beyond (Rochester: Camden House, 2005) and Stuart Taberner, ed., Contemporary German Fiction: Writing in the Berlin Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007).
1: Ulrike Draesner, *Mitgift*: On Bodies and Beauty

*Lyn Marven*

The naked figure on the paperback edition of Ulrike Draesner’s 2002 novel *Mitgift* (literally Dowry) announces that this is a text dealing with gendered bodies, narratives and images of physicality, and ways of seeing.¹ Turning away from the camera toward an open door, and cropped at the shoulders and knees, the figure is illuminated from behind by a window and is, on second glance at least, relatively androgynous. *Mitgift* explores the embodiedness of individuals and their experience through the central relationship between Aloe, an art historian, and astrophysicist Lukas, who meet while studying at Oxford. The course of their relationship is in turn intertwined with the relationship between Aloe, who develops anorexia, and her sister Anita, born a hermaphrodite. The novel opens with a mystery — why is Aloe now the guardian of Anita’s son? But the dramatic revelation, when it finally comes, is underplayed: Anita is killed in a murder-suicide by her husband after she decides to transition (back) to a male body.

This chapter focuses on *Mitgift* rather than more recent publications because, though written after *Lichtpause* (Light break, 1998), it marks her first major novel, one that has only belatedly gained recognition. More importantly, *Mitgift* also sets out and distils the thematic interests that recur in subsequent texts; namely, bodies, relationships, gender, sex, and reproduction. The novel also demonstrates Draesner’s continuing exploration of language and competing discourses of understanding, represented most notably by science in the form of astrophysics; the text displays a self-aware interest in critical theory and an informed interrogation of notions of “women’s writing.”²

Draesner wrote a doctorate on Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* before giving up academic work for writing. Her writing is both playful and intellectual. She published the first of several volumes of poetry in 1995 and to date her poems have met with a wider reception in academic criticism than her prose; her first novel *Lichtpause* is now out of print. She has written short stories, including the collections *Hot Dogs* (2004) and *Richtig liegen* (2011), and a novel about the Munich Olympics hostage crisis and
its after-effects, *Spiele* (Games, 2005); she also translates (mostly poetry) from English.³ In *Vorliebe* (Preference, 2010), astrophysicist Harriet comes back into contact with her first love Peter, a priest, after Harriet’s partner Ash accidentally knocks down Peter’s wife. The novel details the unraveling of these relationships as Harriet and Peter begin an affair, and, through Harriet, attempts to reconcile scientific and religious modes of understanding the world. *Vorliebe* and *Mitgift* are linked by the theme of astrophysics, and concretely through a minor character, the scientist Erick, who appears in both novels. *Vorliebe* is a love story in the same way that *Mitgift* is a mystery, which is to say it takes the premise but works it into a complex, thoughtful narrative in which not the characters’ actions — the plot as such — but the repercussions and reflections take center stage.

Draesner has also published a number of critical essays about literature, which set the parameters for her fictional prose and to some extent anticipate critical analysis of it. In the collection *Schöne Frauen lesen* (which could be translated as either “Reading beautiful women” or “Beautiful women read,” 2007), Draesner’s choice of authors demonstrates her interest in issues pertinent to *Mitgift*: poetic wordplay (Gertrude Stein, Friederike Mayröcker, the Oulipo poet Michèle Métail), gender images (Virginia Woolf, the cross-gender recommendations for “Further Reading,” which direct interested readers from Ingeborg Bachmann to Max Frisch, for example), and scientific discourses (A. S. Byatt, for whom the “Further Reading” lists Charles Darwin). The collection subverts the obviously marketable category of women’s writing by also considering Gustave Flaubert among female authors. The essay on Flaubert is called “Madame Bovary, c’est moi” and interrogates the novelist’s cross-gender claims, suggesting that his famous phrase should in fact be translated as “she is me,” not “I am her,” and calling Emma herself “‘Madame Charles Bovary,’ a strange hybrid of man and woman.”⁴

*Mitgift*: Legacies and Histories

The *Mitgift* of the title is perhaps best translated as legacy, or even inheritance, rather than dowry. In the novel, the term is used in a wider sense — which in fact harks back to the historical etymology of the word⁵ — to signal literal or symbolic forms of inheritance: the inescapable chromosomal, psychological, and legal legacies that affect the characters, and that are traced through the multiple narrative levels of the text. The main protagonist Aloe echoes this linguistic shift when she suggests that the old-fashioned notion of the dowry lives on in testamentary endowments: “now the parental donation wasn’t when you got married, it came later” (346).

The notion of inheritance links the generations: Aloe’s and Lukas’s parents are marked by their early experiences during the Second World
In a key scene, Anita and Aloe’s mother Ingrid describes Anita’s condition as “something that defined my life, a role I had waited a long time for. Now she was there. For Holger it was the expulsion, for me it was this” (110). Ingrid believes that she was somehow responsible for Anita’s condition (279), although no genetic explanation for Anita’s hermaphroditism is given in the text. The effects of these experiences are visited upon their children in turn. Their lives are defined by decisions made according to their parents’ determination to fit in rather than stand out: Anita by the decision to operate on her, and Aloe by the secrecy surrounding Anita’s body; the sisters’ difficult adult relationship is a further legacy of this regulated childhood (104).

In a self-conscious conversation early in the text, Aloe, Lukas, and their friend Patty posit themselves as heirs to their parents, to history, and to their genes: “No one gets away without inheriting something. Maybe what actually matters, Aloe, is that you know where something came from” (46). This phrase is echoed later by Brigitte, Lukas’s mother, who comments about her son’s precocious mathematical gifts that “you have no idea where something like that comes from” (97). The characters discuss the connotations of *Mitgift*, which contains the German word *Gift* (poison) as well as the English “gift” (which is etymologically linked to *Mitgift*). In the same conversation, Lukas defines it as “the share that you receive from your beloved parents. A gift [*Geschenk*] in fact, or . . .?” and Aloe adds, “. . . a bit of poison [*Gift*]” (46).

Finally, the title also refers to the “dowry” that Anita brings to her marriage; namely, her other male self, which also causes problems for legal bequests: Aloe is first made aware of Anita’s decision to transition when she is summoned to her parents’ house by a fax that reads “Inheritance issues. Their own house on the one hand, and on the other hand Anita, Stefan, and Aloe — they, Ingrid and Holger, wanted to get things in order for their will” (346). Toward the end of the novel, Aloe ponders the word *Mitgift* when she discovers that Anita had left her a sum of money in her will. A legacy in legal terms, this gift also evokes the sense of a dowry, coming shortly after Aloe’s fantasy of taking a trip to the seaside with Anita after the latter’s operation: “father, mother, and son, the happy trio. She would enjoy it too, no: Axel, he” (361). The fantasy posits Aloe as mother, postoperative Anita as father; the sisters are reconfigured as a male-female couple (prefigured in the details of their parents’ will), with “Anita as a man/husband” (361) — significantly, the German term *Mann* can mean husband as well as man. Anita’s gift of money to Aloe is a dowry in two senses: it is what she (Anita, writing the will as a legal woman) brings to their parental pairing, and her will also transfers money from the future male partner (Anita as Axel) to the female partner.

It is of course Stefan, Anita’s son, who is the most prominent *Mitgift*, and Anita’s money will allow Aloe to raise Stefan as a single parent, as
dowries are intended to do in the event of a husband’s death. The relationship between Aloe and Stefan frames the novel: the text opens with a vivid description of Stefan’s seventh birthday party, and each of the five chapters begins on this narrative level. Their initially unclear relationship purports to be the impetus for the retrospective narrative: “Mostly he calls her Aloe, and it will soon be time to tell him the story” (9). The image of nonbiological parenthood is highlighted by an intertextual reference — a literary legacy, one could say — to Kleist’s “Das Erdbeben in Chili,” where Don Fernando is left with an adopted child after Josefa and Jerónimo are killed: Kleist’s texts ends: “when Don Fernando compared Felipe with Juan and the ways in which he had acquired the two of them, it almost seemed to him that he had reason to feel glad.” Toward the end of Draesner’s text, Aloe experiences a similar emotion: “When Aloe looked at him and thought about the way in which she had acquired him, it almost seemed to her that she had reason to feel glad. Later she felt ashamed of herself for that” (367). Aloe is ashamed for feeling glad to have a child, given her own difficulties in conceiving, but this shame is perhaps also a textual gesture of discomfiture at the self-conscious quotation and an acknowledgement that the “real life” situation exceeds the impact of its literary forebears.

Anita’s Story

The third-person narrative of Mitgift focuses on the elder sister, Aloe, who develops anorexia as an adult, but the tale of her younger sister Anita’s body is the traumatic center of the narrative and has received the most critical attention. “Anita. One story circles the other like a cat round the mouse’s escape route; no wonder she can only recall them in conjunction. Lukas and Aloe, Aloe and Anita” (241). Anita’s appearance in the text is preceded by the images Aloe has of her external physical form, and particularly by Aloe’s feelings toward her: “A life completely devoid of Anita Aphrodita, without having to endure her beauty, having to think about her, without continually seeing her everywhere, without envy. That’s what she wanted” (71). As Stephanie Catani shows, Anita’s body is thus “doubly constructed,” from outside, by Aloe’s perspective and her process of remembering, a process reiterated by the novel’s associative structure.

Anita, born a female pseudohermaphrodite, undergoes a series of operations as a child to “normalize” her genitalia: “Anita had corrective surgery, she became an unambiguous creature in the realm of men and women, blessed gender binarism” (105). The decision to operate is made by Ingrid, who recounts the horror of giving birth to this monstrous, ambiguously sexed baby — an “it”: “The feeling: it came out of your
body, Ingrid. Disgusting!” (279). She exhorts the doctors to “make a woman out of her for god’s sake” (280). Ingrid’s formulation presumes the gender (her) that will be created by surgery (to make a woman) and fixes Anita in the female pronoun. Her imperative enacts explicitly the speech act that produces sex in a newborn child, what Judith Butler refers to as,

the medical interpellation which . . . shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girled,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary. . . . The naming is at once the setting of a boundary and the repeated inculcation of a norm.12

Anita’s condition remains an unspoken family secret, but the process of constructing her femininity is ongoing, as Catani posits: in exclaiming “just look what a beautiful girl she is turning into” (167), Ingrid draws attention both to the exaggerated femininity of her young daughter and to the deliberate construction thereof.13 Exaggerated femininity is a common physical effect of hermaphroditism, which is further enhanced by the female hormones Anita takes as well as Ingrid’s deliberate pursuit of an erotic adult femininity for her.14 Before deciding to undergo hormone treatment and further surgery to adopt a masculine/male body, Anita lives as a woman: she gets married and bears a child. At Ingrid’s suggestion, she even works as a semi-naked model, given her striking, beautiful appearance and the fact that she has no shyness about showing her body after frequent medical examinations.

In puberty, Anita develops a tendency toward pyromania,15 and nearly burns the family house down; her furious mother yells at her on the street, calling her “Scheißzwitter” (213). This is the first time that Anita’s status is acknowledged in public. The term Zwitter, which has no real equivalent in English, means hermaphrodite, but here carries the sense of freak (an English term that is also directed at Anita elsewhere in the novel) and is clearly intended as an insult: it enters public discourse and recurs in an encounter with punks, who yell “Hey Zwitter” (269) at Anita. The word fascinates Aloe — “Aloe only had a vague idea what Zwitter meant; but she immediately understood that it was a particularly hurtful word for Anita” (214) — and much later she looks it up: “Zwitter, masculine, was in the dictionary, between zwitschern and zwölf” (266).

Anita’s overdetermined body remains a set of mutable signifiers, inviting interpretation; “you just need to look at her, that’s a story in itself” (104), remarks Lukas, inferring from Anita’s “little belly” (104) that she is pregnant. The first suggestion that Anita is taking male, rather than female, hormone supplements as a prelude to transitioning is in her changing physical shape, as seen by Aloe:
I work out every day now.
A glance, sideways, at Aloe.
A glance, from Aloe, at Anita’s arm muscles. Like Madonna’s.
. . . Anita’s voice was deeper than usual, rising when she asked ques-
tions. A new look on her face, like it belonged to someone who
wants to get used to giving orders, but doesn’t fully trust his own
authority. (263)

As in many places throughout the novel, the German text here slips
between genders, using the masculine form of “someone” and “who,”
which is customary usage but in this context appears to reveal what Aloe
herself does not yet realize or acknowledge. When Anita explains to Aloe
that she is preparing for the first stage of gender reassignment surgery, this
is preceded by Aloe’s vision of Anita’s now-masculine features:

Anita looked completely different.
Hey! she said, in a deep, rich voice.
The light was falling on her at an angle from behind. So Aloe couldn’t
be sure, but it looked like Anita had a faint beard on the chin and
around the mouth. She seemed less bony than before, with more
sinews and firmer muscles. (353–54)

Anita’s decision to transition to a male body is an act of regaining control
over the form of her body and, more importantly, its meaning: “My body
has been constantly fiddled around with and I was never asked. Now I
would like to be the one who determines its form” (356). It is only as she
exercises her own agency, in choosing her physical form and gender signi-
fication, that Anita comes into focus in the text, conveyed through her
own words in conversations with Aloe.

As befits the focus on her physical appearance, Anita’s story is told in
the third person, which allocates her a grammatical gender corresponding to
the external view. By comparison, Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel Middlesex
(2002), also about a hermaphrodite, uses a first-person narrative to sidestep
Calliope’s shifting gender identification.16 Gender-assigned as a child, Anita
is almost entirely fixed within the feminine pronoun, only taking on the
masculine in Aloe’s daydreams of their possible postoperation trip to the sea.
Whereas Eugenides’s novel narrates an incestuous family history in order to
explain the genetic inheritance that causes Cal’s hermaphroditism, Anita’s
condition is medically unexplained, but the bare facts of her condition are
spun into stories by the family: “You always appropriated my body for your
fantasies” (270–71), Anita complains to Aloe, while Lukas comments:

There was a fact — Anita born with an enlarged clitoris, admittedly
one that was enlarged like a penis, but all the same: just a bit of flesh,
a deformity of the vagina — and you all built an incredible story
around it. (214)