



# **MAPPING MORALITY IN POSTWAR GERMAN WOMEN'S FICTION**

**Christa Wolf, Ingeborg Drewitz, and Grete Weil**

  
**Michelle Mattson**

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CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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First published 2010  
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.  
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA  
www.camden-house.com  
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited  
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK  
www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-443-1  
ISBN-10: 1-57113-443-3

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Mattson, Michelle.

Mapping morality in postwar German women's fiction : Christa Wolf, Ingeborg Drewitz, and Grete Weil / Michelle Mattson.

p. cm. — (Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57113-443-1 (acid-free paper)

ISBN-10: 1-57113-443-3 (acid-free paper)

1. German literature—Women authors—History and criticism. 2. German fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 3. Literature and morals—History—20th century. 4. Ethics in literature. 5. Wolf, Christa—Criticism and interpretation. 6. Drewitz, Ingeborg—Criticism and interpretation. 7. Weil, Grete, 1906–1999—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title. II. Series.

PT167.M38 2010

833'.91409353—dc22

2010004488

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe

*Mapping Morality in Postwar German Women's Fiction*

*Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture*

*To my parents, who provided  
excellent models of what  
it means to care for others*

## Acknowledgments

I AM GRATEFUL TO MANY colleagues and friends for their input on this project. First and foremost, I'd like to thank Matthias Kaelberer, who patiently and thoughtfully read numerous drafts of the manuscript. I am also grateful to my colleagues at Rhodes College who have listened intently and commented insightfully on different portions of this work. Karen Carr, Mark Rectanus, Sabine von Dirke, Monika Shafi, Russell Berman, and Andreas Huyssen also offered helpful suggestions at key points in the process. Additionally, I would like to thank Jim Walker, whose careful reading and editing of the manuscript have made the book clearer and more reader-friendly.

I thank Kurt D. Hollomon for allowing me to use his art on the cover of this book. The cover is based on his image "Land Survey Map No. 4." I also appreciate the willingness of several journals to let me reprint portions of articles that are included in the chapters of this book. Parts of chapters 2, 3, and 4 appeared, in earlier form, in "Mothers Care? Models of Motherhood and their Ethical Implications in post-WWII German literature," in *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 21.1 (Spring 2009): 101–30 (copyright © 2009 NWSA *Journal*) and are reprinted with permission of the Johns Hopkins University Press. Sections of chapter 3 were also published as "History, Politics, the Individual: Ingeborg Drewitz's Novels *Gestern war heute* and *Eis auf der Elbe*" in *German Quarterly* 76.1 (Winter 2003): 38–55. Parts of chapter 5 are based on "Classical Kinship and Personal Responsibility: Grete Weil's *Meine Schwester Antigone*," published in *Seminar* 37.1 (2001): 53–72, and "Grete Weil: A Jewish Author?," published in *German Studies Review* 27.1 (February 2004): 113–27.

# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1: The Individual, Memory, and History	11
2: Feminism, the Self, and Community	38
3: Ingeborg Drewitz: Families, Historical Conflict, and Moral Mapping	61
4: Christa Wolf: Rehearsing Individual and Collective Responsibility	96
5: Grete Weil: The Costs of Abstract Principles	142
Conclusion	185
Bibliography	193
Index	209



## Introduction

THIS BOOK CENTERS ON several novels by Christa Wolf (1929–), Ingeborg Drewitz (1923–86), and Grete Weil (1906–99). In particular, the study examines their attention to questions of moral responsibility in the second half of the twentieth century. All three writers seek to illustrate how our understanding of the historical present, informed as it is by our personal and our shared memories, shapes how we see our moral responsibilities in a world with increasingly porous and shifting community boundaries. They anchor their exploration of individual and collective responsibility within the family, moving out along different routes through local, national, and finally international communities. With little certainty, but a considerable sense of urgency, they attempt to map the moral geography of western European society in the second half of the twentieth century. In all three cases, furthermore, the inquiry is driven by their reflection on the individual's place within broader historical developments.

Why focus on these particular writers and these questions? The issue of responsibility played a considerable role in much of postwar German literature — one need only think of such writers as Heinrich Böll, Martin Walser, Max Frisch, Wolfgang Borchert, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Rolf Hochhuth (to name just a few) to realize that questioning responsibility is not unique to the three writers at the heart of this study. Nonetheless, my readings within German Studies have drawn my attention increasingly to these authors. Although they all come from different social and political backgrounds and thus offer distinct socio-political perspectives, they share a focus on questions of personal responsibility within the context of family. In fact, they use those primary human relationships to interrogate ever expanding issues of ethical responsibility. Furthermore, they cannot separate these issues from questions of historical imbrication.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they approach ethical responsibility not from an abstract, atemporal position, but rather always as embedded in specific historical contexts and within family structures.

More specifically, I chose the work of these three writers because it met three important criteria that are at the heart of my own scholarly and philosophical interests. First, while the Second World War naturally features prominently in all of the literary texts on which the study focuses, my interest does not lie in the war or the Holocaust directly. Rather, I am concerned with how reflections on the past inform our sense of moral

responsibility in the present. For this reason, the study excludes literary works that do not address social and political conflicts and issues relevant to the postwar period. Second, I seek to understand how broadly we can construe personal or collective responsibility. How far does it go beyond our immediate personal relationships? Does it include community responsibility? National (or even international) responsibility? All three of these writers ask these questions as well. I chose not to include texts that do not look at issues of responsibility beyond the personal or the local community. Finally, I wish to think through the way our various responsibilities compete with one another and make upholding responsibilities to one person or group quite difficult — if not downright impossible. For this reason, I was eager to deal with literary texts that thematized such competition. This made works that focused on characters within broad relational networks (extended families, schools, circles of friends, business communities, etc.) particularly attractive, but especially those that showed how our immediate responsibilities to family often conflict with what we perceive to be our possible obligations to individuals and communities more removed from us.

Of course, male writers also look at issues of responsibility. However, women of the same age cohort as these three writers underwent different kinds of socialization than men and asked questions about responsibility that men generally did not.<sup>2</sup> Thus, their primary focus on living life within their families provided numerous examples of how we must balance competing responsibilities, think through the sometimes conflicting moral choices we face, and try to locate ourselves within any number of intersecting moral communities.

One might also ask why the study does not include younger writers or, for that matter, the growing body of literature by writers with recent immigration backgrounds. Indeed, this latter group often addresses similar topics.<sup>3</sup> The answer to this question is partially a matter of pragmatism: there is only so much ground one book can cover. However, Wolf, Weil, and Drewitz have common concerns and perspectives on the central questions of the book that later writers do not share — at least not to the same degree. For Germans who grew up shortly before and during the Third Reich, the presence of history in the making loomed large. Although the connections are neither transparent nor undisputed, it is clear in the context of this particular time period that individuals played significant roles in how the Nazi regime cemented power in Germany and how the destruction process developed.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, after sufficient time had elapsed to begin processing memories of the war, the urge to understand how a highly cultured society such as Germany could have descended to such levels of cruelty and depravity grew in intensity.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the larger social and political roles of the individual during periods of relative stability are not as easy to specify.

However, what attracted me to these writers was also their insistence on drawing connections between Germany's pre-war and Nazi past and the socio-political realities of postwar Germany. For them, and for me, it is crucial to see the social spaces individuals occupy — both intentionally and unintentionally; self-reflectively and naively — in historical developments not only in moments of tremendous human crisis, but always. Doing this involves acknowledging and exploring how different historical settings in different social surroundings imbricate individuals in a variety of ways.

There are many writers whose work intersects thematically and chronologically with the novels in this study. For instance, there were a number of autobiographical texts published by women within roughly the same time frame that dealt with many similar issues. Eva Zeller, Ruth Rehmann, and Carola Stern<sup>6</sup> are three examples of writers whose autobiographical texts also offer well crafted, critically self-reflective works of literature that explore how women of the same generation as Wolf and Drewitz grew into the young adults they were at the end of the war. They examine the relationships within families in great detail and also the broader social pressures from friends and social institutions that influenced their perspectives and personal decisions. One could mention many other such texts with less literary ambition here as well.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, since virtually all of the works by Wolf, Drewitz, and Weil that I discuss in this book bear strong autobiographical traces, one could choose to examine them as part of a large body of autobiographical texts written by women after the Second World War. However, I have not found that these other autobiographical texts address the postwar period as extensively as Drewitz, Weil, and Wolf do, to say nothing of political and social concerns that go beyond central Europe. While they merit and have received scholarly attention,<sup>8</sup> they do not fit into the parameters of this study.<sup>9</sup>

There are most probably relevant works by other writers that I have excluded, but this book's focus on Wolf, Drewitz, and Weil yields substantial insights into its central questions, since they present many commonalities but also important differences. Additionally, their novels offer a rich vein of material with which to explore issues of vital significance to human existence both at the end of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Christa Wolf is Germany's most prominent female writer and thus requires little introduction here. She has been the subject of numerous scholarly works and the center of an extended literary controversy in Germany in the aftermath of German unification.<sup>10</sup> However, beginning with *Moskauer Novelle* (Moscow Novella, 1961)<sup>11</sup> and continuing all the way up through *Leibhaftig* (In the Flesh, 2002),<sup>12</sup> she has integrated questions about the individual's place in history and the various forms of personal and social responsibility into all of her works. As someone who was

a citizen of the former East Germany, she also offers a historical and political perspective that diverges markedly from that of West German writers. While this study could focus on a number of her novels and autobiographical texts, the issues central to this book crystallize most clearly in *Kindheitsmuster* (Patterns of Childhood, 1976).<sup>13</sup> Of course, *Kindheitsmuster* grew out of her previous works and had an impact on later ones, so the analysis will also draw in material from such novels as *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (The Quest for Christa T., 1968)<sup>14</sup> and *Kassandra* (Cassandra, 1983).<sup>15</sup>

Ingeborg Drewitz wrote numerous plays, essays, and biographies. She is, however, best known in literary circles for her involvement in both the German central committee of the international writers' association, PEN,<sup>16</sup> and in the organization and founding of the Verband deutscher Schriftsteller (The Association of German Writers) as well as for her work as a chronicler of twentieth-century German cultural history in several novels. She repeatedly demonstrates her characters' embeddedness in the historical struggles of their immediate present, and how they emerge from a longer-running historical drama, which preshapes — but does not predetermine — the way they view their own time. Drewitz's novels from *Wer verteidigt Katrin Lambert?* (Who Will Defend Katrin Lambert? 1974)<sup>17</sup> to *Gestern war heute* (Yesterday was Today, 1978)<sup>18</sup> and finally *Eis auf der Elbe* (Ice on the Elbe, 1982)<sup>19</sup> also reflect how her own thinking on individual and collective responsibility changed over time from an early emphasis on a moral perspective unique to women to one that is more inclusive.

Grete Weil, whose literary efforts have increasingly been the topic of scholarly work in German Studies, was a German Jewish writer. Born and raised in Germany, she was forced to leave her home during the Third Reich. However, she returned to Germany as soon after the war as she could, and worked through her experiences and her ambivalences about living as a Jew in Germany in her literary works. Weil's inclusion in this study may puzzle some readers, since her experiences as a victim of the Holocaust set her apart in many ways from Wolf and Drewitz. Indeed, the analysis of her work requires a somewhat different set of analytical tools than the analysis of either Wolf's or Drewitz's novels. Both *Meine Schwester Antigone* (My Sister Antigone, 1980)<sup>20</sup> and *Der Brautpreis* (The Bride Price, 1988)<sup>21</sup> — the two novels at the center of my analysis — query the rupture of historical perception that the Holocaust survivor experiences. For Weil, the Holocaust becomes an unavoidable filter to all questions asked of history, both the history that came before the Holocaust and the history that came after it. In contrast to the non-Jewish Germans Drewitz and Wolf, whose space within German history remained unquestioned, the Jewish German writer Weil can no longer find a secure footing from which to examine history. From

this unstable terrain, however, Weil persistently interrogates the nature of individual responsibility within political and social developments that seem largely beyond individual control.

Furthermore, Weil strongly identified herself as a German writer. Indeed both *Meine Schwester Antigone* and *Der Brautpreis* recount the struggles of her narrative stand-ins to see herself meaningfully as anything but German. While she accepts the fact that the Nazis and even her contemporaries see her always as German and Jewish, she also feels this is the result of a process of violence formalized by the Nazis' arbitrary definitions of Jewishness. Thus, although serious biographical differences distinguish her from Drewitz and Weil, I believe that the thematic and stylistic similarities warrant her inclusion. I would also like to echo Pascale Bos's frustration with a widespread tendency to isolate the study of German Jewish literature from other branches of literary study rather than to see it as an integral part of German literary production.<sup>22</sup> Of course, studies of German Jewish literature *as* German Jewish literature remain valuable. On the other hand, Weil's markedly different experiences and her distinctive approach to the two questions that are key to this study — the questions of individual historical positioning and of moral responsibility — create new angles from which to view the issues that all three of the writers considered here address.

In sum, the work of these three authors creates an intersection of two very important questions. First, how do individuals see themselves in relation to their historical present? The second question rests of necessity on the answer to the first. Namely, how do they then explore the extent of their personal responsibilities to their families and friends, and as part of both local groups and intersecting global communities? All three women take up the major political and social issues that Germany and Western Europe faced after the Second World War and follow them forward into the present. They zero in on the questions of competing political systems during the Cold War, on terrorism, political repression, the emerging social movements of the '60s and '70s, and address the implications of an increasingly heterogeneous German population. Together they speak to virtually all of the major events of twentieth-century German and European history. Furthermore (as noted above), all of them represent the lives of individuals as located not only generally within a set of intersecting interpersonal relationships, but also specifically within families. They explore how these relationships of immediate personal responsibility co-determine the spectrum of actions available to individuals and shape the way that they define and defend their choices.

This study looks at the literary tools Wolf, Drewitz, and Weil use to approach answers to these questions. It also shows how they use literature as a moral laboratory, locating within the extended narrative structures of the novel the conceptual spaces to map out a discourse



on ethics. This will prove key to combining the discussion of plotting the individual's place in history — or *histories* — and determining from there how individuals negotiate and understand their ethical responsibilities, both as individuals and as members of social collectives. As Peter and Renate Singer point out,

It is surely true that the detailed and creative exploration of a situation that can emerge from a good novel can help us to understand more about ourselves, and how we ought to live. In contrast to the examples discussed in works of philosophy, discussions of ethical issues in fiction tend to be concrete, rather than abstract, and to give a rich context for the distinctive moral views or choices that are portrayed. Literature therefore often presents a more nuanced view of character and circumstances than is to be found in the works of philosophers.<sup>23</sup>

Narrative, the act of telling stories, is also the most plastic point at which ethics, philosophy, and literature intersect. Margaret Urban Walker argues in her book *Moral Understandings* that narrative plays an essential role in the formation of our moral understandings of ourselves and others. She points out that the “resolution of a moral problem itself takes a narrative form, the form of a transition which links past moral lives (individual, interpersonal, and collective) to future ones in a way not completely determined by where things started, and open to different continuations that may yet affect what the resolution means.”<sup>24</sup> It is through narrative that we test the validity of our moral precepts and come to an understanding of ourselves.

Traditionally in Western philosophy, ethicists have tended to use short, situational examples — generally rather sparing of detail, nuance, or socio-historical context — to illustrate possible moral conflicts and to reason through their resolutions. Feminist ethicists, however, have long recognized that the contextualization necessary to address a situation of need requires rich narrative, a full description of the factors that pertain to the dilemma at hand. Fiction offers us the narrative spaces to weave even broader tapestries of relationships and to expand the landscape of our moral experimentation and the thought processes we engage when deciding how we can best act. For this reason, literary texts can give us the chance to play through ethical models to test our satisfaction with their relational results. Indeed, they can do so even before the philosophers lay these models out in more abstract form.

Drewitz, Wolf, and Weil offer good examples of how literature can function in this way. In particular, their narrative experiments in thinking through moral paradigms pertain directly to the two main questions that I pursue in this book. To approach these questions, the book draws on two areas of academic discourse that — with few exceptions — have remained isolated from one another. The first deals with the intersection of collective

and individual memory. The second engages feminist discussions of ethics to explore conceptual frameworks that acknowledge the myriad articulations of responsibility in contemporary society. Together, these two academic discourses provide tools with which to examine the central questions of the book. For this reason, the study opens with two chapters that introduce these theoretical discussions broadly, but also begin to weave in how the theoretical issues relate to and help clarify the literary texts of Drewitz, Wolf, and Weil. Chapters on each of the three writers follow the discussion of the theoretical and philosophical questions.

From the middle of Europe, these three writers attempt to map the connections between the lives of their characters and events happening in areas geographically remote from them: in Vietnam, Chile, and Japan to name only a few examples. The characters ask themselves what their relationship is to these distant events and places and wonder just how “distant” they really are. Based on their always-provisional conclusions, each writer offers us views on individual agency in a world that seems somehow too big.

All three writers use their exploration of history to think about issues of moral responsibility in the present. While they acknowledge the shifting boundaries of the spaces that individuals occupy socially and geographically, they insist that understanding how individuals experience and impact their historical present builds a foundation for thinking about the spectrum of human responsibility. Wolf, Weil, and Drewitz ultimately cannot specify exactly how individuals “fit in” to history or what the parameters of individual and collective responsibility should be. This is so precisely because moral understandings are subject to collaborative negotiation and thus change over time and space. However, these writers can and do offer their readers pathways to examining how human beings struggle with themselves and with others to answer these two questions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Technically, the word *imbrication* applies to a geometrical pattern in which objects overlap. However, when discussing the individual’s relationship to historical developments and or the impact that history has on individuals, the term implies more the multiple, overlapping layers on/in which individuals are implicated in historical developments. It thus conjures up an image of a web of relationships and interdependence.

<sup>2</sup> Weil was born in 1906 and was, thus, much older than either Drewitz or Wolf. However, because she had to go into hiding during the Nazi period, she established her public and professional identities at roughly the same time as did the two younger writers.

<sup>3</sup> Early plans for this book, for instance, included the work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar. I was at the time particularly interested in incorporating Özdamar’s

*Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei. hat zwei Türen, aus einer kam ich rein, aus der anderen ging ich raus* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1999). However, the very different cultural and historical context of this work would have required a considerably different interpretive framework.

<sup>4</sup> Raul Hilberg describes the systematic murder of Europe's Jews as a "destruction process," made up of a "series of administrative measures that must be aimed at a definite group." The term "process" thus indicates the breadth and scope of activities involved in destroying such a large number of individuals from such a great variety of countries. See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews. Student Edition* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 27.

<sup>5</sup> This dynamic is discussed in greater detail in chapter 1, below.

<sup>6</sup> Eva Zeller, *So lange ich denken kann* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1981) and *Nein und Amen* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1986); Ruth Rehmann, *Der Mann auf der Kanzel* (Munich: Hanser, 1979); Carola Stern, *In den Netzen der Erinnerung* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 1986) and *Doppelleben* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Margarethe Hannsmann, *Der helle Tag bricht an: Ein Kind wird Nazi* (Hamburg: A. Knaus, 1982), Renate Finckh, *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit* (Baden-Baden: Signal Verlag, 1978), and Melita Maschmann, *Fazit: Kein Rechtfertigungsversuch* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance, the volume edited by Elaine Martin, *Gender, Patriarchy, and Fascism in the Third Reich* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993), which contains individual contributions that focus on several of these writers.

<sup>9</sup> Several colleagues who have read portions of this work in earlier versions have suggested including a deliberate discussion of feminist autobiography theory in the interpretation of Wolf, Drewitz, and Weil's texts. This suggestion has some merit, since all three writers borrowed heavily from their own life experiences to write them. Furthermore, their literary efforts have all been variously characterized as autobiographical in both their popular and their scholarly reception. This characterization is not completely incorrect, but it is problematic. Weil was, in fact, the only one of the three to write a work that she herself labeled an autobiography, although this work, *Leb ich denn, wenn andere leben*, did not appear until 1998, one year before her death. A fairly recent dissertation on Grete Weil by Carmen Giese, *Das Ich im literarischen Werk von Grete Weil und Klaus Mann: Zwei autobiographische Gesamtkonzepte* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), devotes considerable energy to convincing us to see Weil's work as autobiography. On the other hand, in an interview appended to the dissertation, Weil addresses directly some of the aspects of her life that she changed in her literary texts and why this was important to her. She also emphasizes that until her 1998 autobiography her works were novels, and however much autobiographical material they contained, they were independent works of fiction. Although Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* has been read as an autobiography, the book begins with an explicit disclaimer that all the characters are inventions of the narrator. Thus, although there is ample evidence that Wolf is in fact relating to the reader much of her own biography, the writer quite clearly does not wish us to make any facile equations between the narrator, Nelly, and Christa Wolf herself. Similarly, readers familiar with Ingeborg



Drewitz's life will know that many of the characters in her book resemble people from the writer's own family. Nonetheless, she chose to edit and mold the material from her life into a less explicitly autobiographical form. Part of the problem with calling any of these writer's works autobiographies lies in the generic designation itself. To a great extent owing to feminist work on autobiography, but also as a result of general shifts in the conception of the subject beginning around the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the genre of autobiography has undergone vast redefinition. Various reformulations of the term: autography, autogynography, and auto/biographical practices — to name just three — have arisen to address from a feminist perspective the inadequacies of the term “autobiography” as it had been understood. While I have no objection to calling any of these works autobiographical, I am not convinced that doing so really furthers the analysis this book pursues.

<sup>10</sup> For a collection of the contributions to the public controversy over Christa Wolf, see Thomas Anz, ed., *“Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf”: Der Literaturstreit im vereinten Deutschland* (Munich: Spangenberg, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Christa Wolf, *Moskauer Novelle* (Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1961).

<sup>12</sup> Christa Wolf, *Leibhaftig* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1976). All quotations from the German are from this edition and will be indicated by chapter and page number in parentheses. Whenever possible, English translations of such passages will be from *Patterns of Childhood*, trans. Ursule Molinaro and Hedwig Rappolt (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976). Occasionally, Wolf's translators chose to leave certain passages out of the English translation. When this occurs, the note will indicate that the translation is my own.

<sup>14</sup> Christa Wolf, *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand Verlag, 1971). All quotations are from this edition and will be indicated by chapter and page number. English translations of such passages will be from *The Quest for Christa T.*, trans. Christopher Middleton (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Christa Wolf, *Kassandra* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> PEN is an international literary and human rights organization. The acronym PEN was derived from the three words “Poets, Essayists, and Novelists.”

<sup>17</sup> Ingeborg Drewitz, *Wer verteidigt Katrin Lambert?* (Stuttgart: Verlag Werner Gebühr, 1974). All quotations from the German are from this edition. All English translations of passages from the work are my own.

<sup>18</sup> Ingeborg Drewitz, *Gestern war heute. Hundert Jahre Gegenwart* (Düsseldorf: Claassen Verlag, 1978). All quotations from the German are from this edition. All English translations of passages from the work are my own.

<sup>19</sup> Ingeborg Drewitz, *Eis auf der Elbe* (Düsseldorf: Claassen, 1982). All quotations from the German are from this edition. All English translations of passages from the work are my own.

<sup>20</sup> Grete Weil, *Meine Schwester Antigone* (Zurich: Benziger, 1980). All quotations from the German are from this edition. Whenever possible, all English citations will come from *My Sister, My Antigone*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Avon