

Housebound

Selfhood and Domestic Space
in Contemporary German Fiction



MONIKA SHAFI

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Monika Shafi



CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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Housebound

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For Qaisar, Miriam, and Karim

Das Haus war schön. Es war *das* Haus. Und es war eine Ruine.

— Judith Hermann, "Sommerhaus, später"

Acknowledgments

WHEN I WAS ABOUT FIVE YEARS OLD, my parents moved into a new house. It was a single-family home built on farmland, offering pretty views of meadows, country roads, and a church tower in the distance. Yet what I remember most about the house is the sense of safety it offered my parents, a kind of all-encompassing shelter that went well beyond the protection expected from houses. The house seemed to allow them to cope better with the world and let them be. Some forty years later, my mother, no longer able to live on her own, had to leave the house for a retirement home, where she lost this sense of shelter. Both transitions — moving into and then leaving the house — reveal the intense emotions houses can evoke and the power accorded to them. So strong was the bond between house and body that breaking it caused excruciating pain. Such formative experiences have influenced my abiding interest in houses: location, design, materials, furniture, and, most importantly, the relationships we build in and through houses.

To transform this interest into a scholarly monograph was made possible through the support of institutions as well as friends and colleagues, whom I am very happy to acknowledge. The University of Delaware granted me a year-long sabbatical, which was crucial for the completion of the project, and I am profoundly grateful for this privilege. Earlier versions of chapters 3, 4, and 6, each expanded here, were published, respectively, as articles: “German and American Dream Houses: Buildings and Biographies in Gregor Hens’s *Himmelssturz* and Monika Maron’s *Endmoränen*,” *The German Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2006): 505–24; “Housebound: Selfhood and Domestic Space in Narratives by Judith Hermann and Susanne Fischer,” in *Neulektüren — New Readings: Festschrift für Gerd Labrousse*, ed. Norbert Otto Enke and Gerhard Knapp (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 341–58; and “*New Concept — New Life*: Bodies and Buildings in Katharina Hacker’s novel *Die Habenichtse*,” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 47, no. 4 (September 2011): 434–46 (special issue, *Globalization, German Literature, and the New Economy*, guest editors David Coury and Sabine von Dirke). I wish to thank the editors for allowing me to reproduce these essays here.

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Without the unconditional support of Qaisar, Miriam, and Karim, no project, be it in scholarship or life, could be completed. It is with tremendous gratitude for their love and kindness that I dedicate this book to them.

Abbreviations

- BM* Katharina Hacker. *Der Bademeister*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006.
- EM* Monika Maron. *Endmoränen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004.
- Es* Arno Geiger. *Es geht uns gut*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007.
- G* Edward S. Casey. *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993.
- GA* Katharina Hagen. *Der Geschmack von Apfelkernen*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2010.
- H* Jenny Erpenbeck. *Heimsuchung*. Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 2008.
- Ha* Katharina Hacker. *Die Habenichtse*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007.
- Hn* Katharina Hacker. *The Have-Nots*. Translated by Helen Atkins. New York: Europa Editions, 2008.
- HS* Emine Sevgi Özdamar. "Der Hof im Spiegel." In *Der Hof im Spiegel*, 11–46. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001.
- I* Margaret, Littler. "Intimacy in Turkish-German Writing: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's 'The Courtyard in the Mirror.'" *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2008): 331–45.
- L* Katharina Hacker. *The Lifeguard*. Translated by Helen Atkins. London: Toby, 2002.
- Mi* Judith Hermann. "Micha." In *Alice*, 5–48. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009.
- P* Judith Hermann. "Pimp." In *Nothing But Ghosts*, 153–87. Translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo. New York: Fourth Estate, 2005.
- Pl* Susanne Fischer. *Die Platzanweiserin*. Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 2006.

- S Ian McEwan. *Saturday*. New York: Anchor Books, 2006.
- Se Walter Kappacher. *Selina oder das andere Leben*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2010.
- SL Judith Hermann. *Summerhouse, Later: Stories*. Translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo. New York: Harper Collins, 2001.
- Ss Judith Hermann. "Sommerhaus, später." In *Sommerhaus, später*, 139–56. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008.
- SSW Emine Sevgi Özdamar. *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde: Wedding-Pankow 1976/77*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2008.
- TT Leslie A. Adelson. *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Toward a New Critical Grammar of Migration*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- V Jenny Erpenbeck. *Visitation*. Translated by Susan Bernofsky. London: Portobello, 2010.
- W *We Are Doing Fine*. Translated by Maria Poglitsch Bauer. Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 2011.
- Z Judith Hermann. "Zuhälter." In *Nichts als Gespenster*, 153–93. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003.

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Introduction

THIS STUDY OFFERS interpretations of works by contemporary German and Austrian authors that focus on the topic of the house. Houses are powerful objects and can provoke great passion. Like love or travel, with which they share the key element of desire, houses belong to the basic inventory of literary traditions, and the interaction between dwelling and traveling, stasis and movement — or between being housebound and travel-bound — has yielded ample fictional material. Providing for our most basic needs, offering both shelter and identity, and representing specific historical formations, houses touch upon virtually all aspects of individual needs and collective organization. As an intensely emotional experience, major financial investment, and a material reality embedded in architectural, aesthetic, and social traditions, houses can be regarded as the building blocks of culture. Houses can also produce and echo subjectivity, thus occupying a unique place in life stories. They reflect and shape the psychological, socio-economic, and political conditions of those who live in them, thus making them a potent and complex expression of characters and their circumstances. In houses, subjectivity, changing regimes of taste, style, and power, and the numerous associated discourses (such as architecture, economy, and aesthetics) form a dense, multi-layered, and over-determined arrangement of materials and signs. People need a place to live and to store their memories and belongings, a place where they can feel at home and to which they can return. Being without a home most often spells social exclusion and endangers survival. This primordial quality of houses has led the two British critics Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft to conclude that the house “simply *is* society, *is* history, *is* life itself in all its contradictions and confusions.”¹ To understand these contradictions and confusions, they argue, one must analyze domestic space “for it is there — in our use of, and attitude towards, the house — that the human subject is constantly constructed and deconstructed” (25). This wide-ranging claim is, however, as Smyth and Croft emphasize, primarily based on the bourgeois representation and cultivation of space and thus grounded in specific historical developments. Yet within these contexts, the house and domestic space can be regarded as a key medium through which subjects ground themselves and establish selfhood. Equally, homelessness has to be defined in relation to prevailing concepts of house and home, with which it entertains a dynamic, and not necessarily an oppositional relationship since homelessness can mean the lack of a physical

place as well as the lack of a safe and supportive place.² Both the presence and the absence of housing implicate issues of shelter, selfhood, and social relationships, but the stigma associated with homelessness tends to obscure such structural similarities. Having a home yields social status, but being homeless is, as Wasserman and Clair argued, “an all-out assault on one’s identity.”³ It defines all aspects of identity thus underscoring the momentous role of houses in personal and social contexts.

An impressive number of contemporary German-language narratives that prominently feature houses highlight this relationship between selfhood and domestic space and suggest an intense awareness of the material and emotional bonds that hold identity in place. Moreover, this interest is shared both by highly acclaimed, prominent writers and by new voices, thus cutting across generations, literary traditions, and styles. The main novelists and texts discussed in this study are Jenny Erpenbeck (*Heimsuchung*, 2008), Katharina Hacker (*Der Bademeister*, 2000; *Die Habenichtse*, 2006), Arno Geiger (*Es geht uns gut*, 2005), Katharina Hagen (*Der Geschmack von Apfelkernen*, 2008), Walter Kappacher (*Selina oder das andere Leben*, 2005), Monika Maron (*Endmoränen*, 2002), Judith Hermann (*Sommerhaus, später*, 1998; *Nichts als Gespenster*, 2003; *Alice*, 2009), Susanne Fischer (*Die Platzanweiserin*), Emine Sevgi Özdamar (“Der Hof im Spiegel” and *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde: Wedding-Pankow 1976/77*, 2003), and the internationally renowned British author, Ian McEwan (*Saturday*, 2005).⁴

Contemporary German and Austrian literature is, of course, too broad and varied to be summarized by a few themes or styles. In fact, diversity is, as Stuart Taberner repeatedly emphasized, “one of the defining characteristics of contemporary German-language narrative.”⁵ New authors, often discovered through literary prizes, constantly add to this polyvalent, evolving field. Yet diversity can, of course, coexist with thematic clusters or key features.⁶ What unites the group of authors discussed in this present study, beyond their textual focus on houses, is their distinguished literary achievements and their widespread impact, as I will explain in more detail in the chapters to follow. These writers represent some of the most prominent names in the contemporary literary scene, and their reception, as documented through the prestigious prizes and in-depth critical attention they have received, as well as by translations into numerous languages, has aligned them with dominant literary trends and historical turns.

A case in point is Monika Maron (b. 1941), who, next to the late Christa Wolf, is one of the canonical women authors of the former GDR. Maron’s oeuvre, from her first novel, *Flugasche* (Flight of ashes, 1981), which took aim at environmental destruction in East Germany, to *Stille Zeile Sechs* (Silent close no. 6, 1991), which dealt with the GDR’s authoritarian regime, to the later, overtly autobiographical work *Pawels Briefe* (Pavel’s letters, 1999), which focused on family memory and genealogy,

delineated her critical engagement with the problematic legacies of East as well as West Germany.

Judith Hermann, Jenny Erpenbeck, and Katharina Hacker, the generation of the 40-year-olds, are highly successful women authors whose short stories and novels have won major literary prizes and garnered a wide readership both in Germany and abroad. They have also contributed, as the chapter discussion will reveal, to significant shifts regarding the evaluation and marketing of literature written by women.⁷ Similarly, Emine Sevgi Özdamar is widely regarded as the leading woman author of so-called Turkish-German literature; her fame also stems from her work as an actress, playwright, and essayist.⁸ While Walter Kappacher (b. 1938) and Arno Geiger (b. 1968) belong to different generations, their respective oeuvres have contributed significantly to contemporary Austrian literature and have been recognized through major literary awards. Susanne Fischer (b. 1960) and Katharina Hagen (b. 1967), on the other hand, belong to the category of literary newcomers. Each had published non-fiction work before their first novels, which garnered considerable critical attention. I include McEwan in this study, as I will explain further in the chapter overview at the end of this introduction, to show the transnational appeal of houses and selfhood.

These authors' attention to houses extends well beyond a common thematic interest or the pursuit of an old literary motif; it features in addition a more complex, conceptual engagement. Houses appear in their works not simply as a backdrop to narrative developments or a primarily symbolic representation of a character's identity (though interior space commands, of course, great metaphorical weight) but also as a place that, in its history and physical substance, shapes and mediates lived experience and connects it to a vast storehouse of the home imaginary. Whether delineating the body/building connection (*Heim-suchung*, *Der Bademeister*), exploring the material and emotional clean-up following in the wake of a house inheritance (*Es geht uns gut*, *Der Geschmack von Apfelkernen*), describing life in the countryside residence (*Selina oder das andere Leben*, *Endmoränen*), depicting haunted houses (as in Hermann's narratives), showing experimental living arrangements (as in Özdamar) or beautiful homes turned uncanny (as in Hacker and McEwan), in each instance the house allows its inhabitants to comprehend their own desires and fears. Not only are plots and characters centered in houses, apartments, or rooms, but the personal, aesthetic, and political issues that individuals are struggling with are also intimately connected to interior spaces. These houses trace, shape, and mirror biographies, but more importantly they act as windows onto the world, as a mode that can allow for insight, learning, and moral choices. Since it matters how rooms are arranged and furnished, or who lives next door, these texts pay great attention to the physical qualities of houses and their geographical location. Doors, windows, floors, and building

materials thus warrant as much consideration as the varied histories of the tenants and the life stories embedded in their homes.

But how to explain this widespread interest in houses, particularly in the last two decades, that goes well beyond the pragmatics that fictional characters, too, need a place to live? In the case of some of the younger women authors, Katharina Hacker, Jenny Erpenbeck, Judith Hermann, and Katharina Hagen — known for featuring cool, detached women characters roaming the global urban streets — such interest in houses is even more surprising. Domestic space is after all deeply gendered space, and it is closely linked to the history of the bourgeois family. Thus one might assume that these contemporary women writers would want no truck with the domestic, middle-class life of previous generations and its entanglements in routines and responsibilities, and therefore that they would keep far away from the house and its past. Surprisingly, however, houses are given a significant role in these works, prompting us to consider how they relate to gender and national selfhood. What then does this fascination with living spaces, a focus shared by such a diverse group of authors, signify? In which ways does this interest relate to previous representations of houses and the interior, and what can it tell us about present-day German culture and literature — specifically, about the impact of globalization, the dominant contemporary reality and signpost? These are the basic questions explored in the present work, which argues that domestic space is emerging in this recent literature as a prime site of identity, powerfully registering conditions of contemporary life, explored in both local and global environments and bearing the imprint of national traditions and transnational contexts. Precisely the critical focus on houses, I contend, allows us to better understand the ways in which selfhood, social relations, and materiality intersect and influence each other. By analyzing these fictional houses — their diverse locations, histories, and physical realities, as well as the hopes and desires invested in them — I hope to show that this multilayered site with its overlap of public, private, and affective domains can function as an important but hitherto rather overlooked realm through which to assess the interplay of subjectivity and space. The house is thus not conceived as a stage — a mere backdrop for the important forces such as ideology, gender, generation or power — but as a space in which and through which these factors are shaped, articulated, and comprehended.⁹ In other words, houses and domestic space appear as a generative site that allows for a close-up look at how selfhood is articulated and comprehended and that provides another potent example of how local spaces respond, interact, and appropriate global economic, cultural, and social forces. In their interest in houses and domestic space, these texts look back to nineteenth-century domestic images while also responding to contemporary experiences of space, in which ruins figure rather prominently.

In analyzing the residences in the texts selected, *Housebound* draws on a wide range of theoretical ideas and paradigms taken from cultural studies, anthropology, and feminist theory, as well as German and Anglo-American literary studies. Recent work in cultural studies on everyday objects and commodities approaches houses as highly ambivalent cultural and psychological artifacts, and it also emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of such investigations. By drawing on architecture, material culture, consumer studies, and identity politics, Leora Auslander, for example, is able to generate a thick, multi-layered framework through which to explain the changing preferences in furniture and housing styles in nineteenth-century France.¹⁰ In her analysis of the multiple meanings of housing space, and its impact on memory, relationships, and identity, Auslander delineates how personal histories intersect with tastes, styles, and materials. A model analysis of the everyday world, her investigation “seeks to grasp how the large-scale transformations of the world are crystallized, reproduced, and changed in the small gestures of the everyday” (425). A similar interest in the interlocking of the symbolic and the concrete characterizes Anglo-American investigations into the literary representations of the house, while the few wide-ranging German studies on houses have tended to focus predominantly on nineteenth-century and turn-of-the century literature, as a brief overview provided later in this introduction will show. An analysis of houses, one of the crucial items in the register of the everyday that allows us to study the nexus of the symbolic and the concrete, can provide novel routes for insights into the construction of the self, its relationships to the social world, and how objects function in this process. Through close readings, I will show how each author engages with the house trope, takes up literary (house) traditions, and creates the unique interaction between selfhood and space that I see as one of the hallmarks of the writing on domestic space examined in this study. Looking at these houses both individually and as a group will also reveal that they share similar memories and face similar challenges. Wedged between nostalgic remembrances of a distant house ideal and often threatened in the present by destruction and disembodiment, residents and places reveal a need for stability in an increasingly fragmented and volatile world. These twin feelings have been identified by Andreas Huyssen as signature emotions of a post-9/11 world.¹¹ Beginning with a quotation that illustrates some of the key topics related to houses, the remainder of this introduction will provide a short summary of important studies, explain the main theoretical concepts used, and conclude with a brief outline of the six chapters.

“What do college students talk about with their roommates? Sex. Twenty years later, what do they talk about with their friends and associates? Real estate. And with the same gleam in their eyes,”¹² states Marjorie Garber in *Sex and Real Estate: Why We Love Houses* (2000), a witty