

THE
GERMAN
HISTORICAL
NOVEL SINCE THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

More than a Bestseller



Edited by Daniela Richter

The historical novel is a genre which has enjoyed widespread popularity in Germany from its beginnings in the eighteenth century. At that time, increased literacy among the middle and lower classes had resulted in a greater demand for reading material aimed at a general audience. Because of its educational and entertaining characteristics, the historical novel quickly became a dominant genre among other forms of popular literature. To this day, it constitutes a major sector on the German book market and is, together with popular TV series, documentaries, and museum exhibits, an important part of German Geschichtskultur.

This collection of essays looks at aesthetic and thematic continuities, as well as changes in the development of the genre in Germany from the late eighteenth century to the present, and gives insights into the novels' political and socio-cultural implications. The articles investigate historical novels from writers such as Benedikte Naubert, the 'mother' of German historical fiction, nineteenth-century popular writers Georg Ebers and Hermann Sudermann, modern writers such as Alfred Döblin, Hermann Hesse, and Hermann Broch, post-Wende works such as those by Thomas Brussig, Christa Wolf, and Ingo Schulze, and contemporary historical fiction by Sabine Weigand, Eveline Hasler and Petra Durst-Benning.

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Daniela Ric

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INTRODUCTION

DANIELA RICHTER

On its front page, the weekly news journal *Die Zeit* from July 21, 2016 featured an illustration of the world map going down a water fall. Looming large above it was the headline “Worauf wir uns noch verlassen können” (“What we can still rely on”)¹. The paper was referring to the seemingly incessant stream of unsettling news that week, beginning with the massacre in Nice, France, the military coups in Turkey and its defeat, and the case of a seventeen-year old Afghan refugee, attacking train passengers near Würzburg, Germany. In the face of these atrocious events, the section entitled *Politik* featured an article by Gero von Randow, in which he turns to literature for advice during these trying times. Among the books he refers to is Stefan Zweig’s *Die Welt von gestern* (The World of Yesterday, 1939-1941) and Thomas Mann’s *Zauberberg* (The Magic Mountain, 1924), both of which look back to a tumultuous and horrific past and try to make sense of it. The article ends with “Nein, es ist nicht alles schon da gewesen. Die Vergangenheit belehrt uns auch nicht über die Zukunft. Wohl aber darüber, was man falsch machen kann.” (“No, it has not all been here before. The past does not teach us about the future. But it does teach us about what we can do wrong”). The lesson that von Randow draws from the above mentioned writers is the importance of maintaining a sense of rationality and objectivity, especially when it is so easy to give in to feelings of panic and blind hatred. Even though this article does not constitute a scholarly reading of literature, it does nevertheless reaffirm the relevance of literature, in particular literature that conveys a historical dimension. Literature is not only a source of personal entertainment, but can provide guidance, helping us to make sense of what is happening around us and our role in this world.

The treatment of German historical fiction, and the historical novel in particular, within scholarly literature is generally not very enthusiastic. The traditionally skeptical and often denigrating stance of literary scholars and critics stands in stark contrast to the overwhelming popularity which this genre did and does experience since its beginnings in the eighteenth century. In fact, the historical novel has become so popular on the German

literary market, that it has been given its own section in every book store. This popularity of historical novels is part of a larger infatuation with history also reflected in an increased offering of historical TV-series, such as Showtime production *The Tudors* (2007-2010), which did very well when broadcast in Germany, or the popular German TV production *Die Wanderhure* (The Whore, 2010) and its sequel *Die Rache der Wanderhure* (The Revenge of the Whore, 2012). In addition, more historical documentaries, such as *Terra X* and the ZDF-series *Die Deutschen* (2008-2010) have long been a staple in the German TV program, but also ever more spectacular historical exhibits and museums, which aim at directly engaging their visitors.²

Narrating history is clearly an endeavor in which both writers of fiction and historians have staked their interest. As one surveys academic writings on historical fiction, one central question becomes apparent: what does historical fiction contribute to the depiction of a historical subject that historiography cannot or does not want to deliver itself?³ This is a question more often investigated by historians than literary scholars.⁴ According to Katja Stopka, historians explore and value historical fiction for its ability not only to reach a general and large audience, but also for its greater ability to give voice to individual and personal experiences, especially regarding difficult subjects connected with trauma and experiences of war, genocide, and terrorism (86).

British historian Brian Hamnett thinks along similar lines and values historical fiction for its ethical and artistic dimension and its ability to shed light onto the complex relationship between “religion and culture, law and violence, and the individual and society” (31). He argues that historical fiction provides causality to seemingly disconnected series of events in the past (31). According to Hamnett, historical fiction is also preserving regional histories, cultures and identities, an endeavor that is it at the same time a “pan-European enterprise,” with writers of historical fiction reading and influencing each other (55).

Some historians, like Rudy Koshar, have paved a new way by reading non-textual historical markers as historical text. His work on German monuments thus looks not so much at the buildings themselves, but at the narrative of memory of which these so-called *Erinnerungsorte* ‘places of remembrance’ constitute a considerable part. Koshar’s analytical gaze encompasses the “interactions between consumption, leisure, and memory” (7), the same nexus at which we find historical fiction, to create a more comprehensive and multi-faceted account of memory culture in Germany.

Projects like these are predicated on a shift within historiography itself, in which Hayden White and his *Metahistory* (1973) played a key role. White, who used terms such as 'poetics' and 'imagination' in his account of nineteenth-century European history, presented all historical writing as discourse shaped by the concerns of its time, and not as an objective reporting of dates and facts.

Literary scholarship, for a long time, regarded the historical novel as nothing other than trivial. Its popularity among readers became one of the leading arguments against the genre. The accusation that writers use history merely as a colorful backdrop or costume in their novels, is one that has remained constant throughout the ages. At times, the more acerbic opponents of the genre, such as nineteenth-century critic Rudolf von Gottschall, even termed it an aesthetic virus (55).

In recent decades, scholarly focus has begun to broaden its scope and has increasingly turned its attention to popular forms of literature.⁵ Literary scholars have found creative ways to bridge the chasm between canonical literature and the vast amount of non-canonical works, a chasm that has been traditionally considered very wide within German literary studies.

Günter Mühlberger's and Kurt Habitzel's *Projekt Historischer Roman* at the University of Innsbruck, is one of those early projects that took a completely new route towards investigating literature. Working with a database containing 6300 historical novels written between 1780 and 1945, Mühlberger and Habitzel used statistical analysis to arrive at an overview over trends, themes and publication numbers of historical novels within that time frame. Significant peak periods were thus identified and the historical periods, which were favored by writers at a particular time. This new approach to literary scholarship paved the way, particularly within nineteenth-century literary studies, to work with texts, such as journal publications, in the form of databases. This immense corpus of texts, which heretofore had been inconceivable to tackle, was now opened up to reveal new insights, especially on topics, such as representation and public reception of any given issue.

Wolfgang Hardtwig's and Erhard Schütz's collection of essays *Geschichte für Leser: Populäre Geschichtsschreibung in Deutschland im 20. Jahrhundert* (History for Readers: Popular Historiography in Germany in the 20th Century, 2005) represents a combined effort by historians and literary scholars to approach non-academic historical writing. Hardtwig articulates the opportunities for a new analytical approach which the study of these works initiates despite the fact that the works discussed in this collection encompass works of historical philosophy, memoirs and

biographies, and therefore cannot be termed historical fiction *per se*. The essays ask completely new questions, and explore issues such as the critical and reader reception of these works, the mechanisms underlying this reception, and the publishing background (15).

This trend towards a greater collaboration between history and literary studies is written into the projects featured in Barbara Korte's and Sylvia Paletschek's series *Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen/History in Popular Cultures* whose first volume *History goes Pop: Zur Repräsentation von Geschichte in populären Medien und Genres* (History goes Pop: About the Representation of History in Popular Media and Genres) appeared in 2009. The series in general, and this volume in particular, uses the term *Geschichtskultur* 'history culture' as the base for its individual essays, which explore a wide array of cultural expressions, such as historical fiction and non-fiction, comics books, computer games, documentaries and films, as well as museum exhibits and historical reenactments. The premise of *Geschichtskultur*, allows for an examination of the public's historical consciousness and the different interpretations of history at different points in time (11).⁶ All essays share a focus on popular media, which is crucial in the dissemination and development of *Geschichtskultur*. These media allow for general access to historical material presented in an entertaining way and thus allow people to engage with it in a multi-sensory fashion. Central to this approach is the understanding that this kind of popular dissemination is at the same time configuring historical knowledge itself (Korte, Paletschek, "Geschichte" 15).

In literary scholarship studies such as Brent Peterson's *History, Fiction, and Germany: Writing the Nineteenth-Century Nation* (2005) also follow new trajectories to present literature within a wider context of forms of cultural expression. Peterson's interest in the development of nineteenth-century nationalism in Germany is based on White's concept of the inherent constructed nature of historiography. Therefore, Peterson leaves aside the old debate about fact vs. fiction in order to focus on the larger cultural process that created in the minds of the Germans the notion and image of one German nation combined with a sense of identification with that same nation and its cultural and historical heritage. As Peterson demonstrates, this process was very much influenced and shaped by historical fiction.

Hans-Edwin Friedrich's recent collection of essays *Der historische Roman: Erkundung einer populären Gattung* (The Historical Novel: Exploration of a Popular Genre, 2013) widens the scope to look at works of popular historical fiction from Victor von Scheffel's *Ekkehard* in the

middle of the nineteenth century, to contemporary German writers such Iny Lorentz, Tanja Kinkel, and Christian Kracht. Even though the individual essays do not necessarily present us with drastically different methodological approaches, the fact that popular historical fiction is examined using the established analytical methodology of the field of literary scholarship represents an encouraging and important step in and of itself, pointing the way towards expanding the field of literary scholarship in general and the study of historical fiction in particular.

This is also the task in which this present collection of scholarly essays participates. Chronologically it draws an even wider arc than the works previously mentioned by going back to the late eighteenth century and extending to contemporary historical fiction. This collection also draws a wide arc by encompassing popular historical novels as well as works by canonical writers. Even though the approaches taken by the scholars in the individual essays differ widely, all essays are united in their emphasis on contextualizing the historical novels in terms of the historical period which they portray, the period of their publication, and the respective writers' creative vision. The scholars' multi-faceted perspectives allow for a representation of the historical novel with its tenuous and numerous ties to often contradicting concepts and fields of interest; fact and fiction, personal and communal, past and present.

Whereas the beginnings of the German historical fiction in general lie in the Middle Ages with Heinrich von Veldeke's *Aeneasroman* (1170), the genre of the historical novel, as we know it today, has its beginnings in the late eighteenth century. According to Hugo Aust, the genre develops in tandem with a change in historiography towards a more empirical methodology. While historiography was thus beginning its process of specialization, the historical novel developed in the opposite direction, disseminating historical material in a way that it reaches and educates a general readership.

Julie Koser's essay on Benedikte Naubert, widely considered to be the foundress of the German historical novel, therefore marks the beginning chapter in this collection. Naubert, who published anonymously, wrote during the late eighteenth century, a period when literary production in tandem with the literacy of the upper and middle classes was increasing dramatically. Young women were a new and growing group of readers, and among the most voracious readers of historical fiction. By situating Naubert within this realm of a booming popular literature, Koser is expanding the time frame for a popular historical culture as stipulated by other scholars such as Korte and Paletschek, who see its beginning within the nineteenth century (18). Naubert's reflections on historical fiction and

its role in society show that this rare prolific and published female writer felt herself part of a distinct historical literary movement. As a true member of the Enlightenment, Naubert moreover stressed the educational value of her novels while also being keenly aware of the precarious tightrope she walked between the realms of fact and fiction. In a close reading of Naubert's novel *Walter von Montbarry* (1786), which takes place during the time of the crusades, Koser highlights the inherent tensions and juxtapositions in the depiction of the Oriental/Muslim and European/Christian.

As Mühlberger and Habitzel note, it is around the middle of the nineteenth century, after a brief hiatus, that the historical novel experiences a second surge in popularity (11). This period is the focus of the essays by Jason Doerre and Daniela Richter. During this period the form of the historical novel was reconfigured by writers in different, and often contrary, ways, a development that resulted in a large variety of subgenres.⁷

One of these subgenres was the so-called *Professorenroman*, which is the focus of Richter's essay. The nineteenth-century German Egyptologist Georg Ebers is the most prolific representative of this subgenre. His bestselling novel *Uarda: Historischer Roman aus dem alten Ägypten* (*Uarda: Historical Novel from Ancient Egypt*, 1877) is, despite its setting in ancient Egypt, a reflection on contemporary social and political concerns, as they were perceived by the German *Bildungsbürgertum* 'educated middle class.' Despite the predominant entertainment value of the novel—very popular with female readers because of the prominent romance plot—*Uarda* can also be read as social commentary on such issues as the *Kulturkampf* 'cultural struggle' and the perceived juxtaposition of science and religious faith. Besides presenting contrasting views on faith and institutionalized religion, Ebers also negotiates in the novel his ideal of political leadership through the character of Ramses II. By depicting Egypt's political situation in ways that parallel that of the German Empire, Ebers has his pharaoh work towards peace and national stability, even expressing his own role within the state in strongly democratic terms.

As the *Professorenroman* already indicates, two dominant trajectories become visible in the historical novel of the nineteenth century. The first is the interest of the German bourgeoisie in self-representation and the second is the dominance of national themes, even in those novels, whose plots are situated in non-German contexts (Aust 88-89). First and foremost among these was Gustav Freytag novel cycle *Die Ahnen: Bilder aus der deutschen Vergangenheit* (*The Ancestors: Images of the German Past*,

1859-1867), which aimed at drawing a panoramic picture of the German past. Other historical novels focused on reflecting national history through the lense of local and regional history, such as Theodor Fontane's *Vor dem Sturm* (Before the Storm, 1878).

This is also the approach of Hermann Sudermann, whose novel *Katzensteg* (Cat's Bridge, 1890) is explored in the essay by Doerre. Sudermann's novel critically engages with the theme of nationalism in a narrative style that lets Doerre argue for its inclusion into naturalism, a literary movement usually associated with drama, not prose fiction. Doerre's reading of the novel furthermore challenges existing conceptions of the nineteenth-century German historical novel by elaborating on the political left-liberal criticism expressed by Sudermann. In his narrative, which is based on a local legend from East Prussia, Sudermann positions his educated, rational main protagonist, a decorated officer of the Napoleonic Wars, and the narrow-minded, boorish village population around the question of nationalism. Through a close reading of the novel as well as his comprehensive contextualization of *Katzensteg* within Sudermann's oeuvre and the critical reaction to both, Doerre emphasizes the politically critical and subversive potential of nineteenth-century historical novels.

Following a second larger hiatus during the time of World War I, publications of historical novels again increased in its aftermath (Mühlberger, Habitzel 12). Not surprisingly, it is the theme of war which dominates these novels as can be seen in the essays by Carl Gelderloos and Vassilaki Papanicolaou. In this period there is again a greater diversification of the genre ranging from the *Bildungsroman* 'novel of education' to the generational or family novel, as exemplified by Joseph Roth, to the war novel and even forays into the genre of the legend (Aust 113). As the essays in this collection demonstrate, this period saw the greatest degree of experimentation with concepts of narrativity and character depiction.

Gelderloos focuses in his chapter on Alfred Döblin and that writer's reinterpretation of the biographical genre in his novel *Wallenstein* (1920). Döblin radically reconfigured the concept of the historical character. By drawing on Döblin's theoretical writings, Gelderloos investigates the various implications of this new conceptualization of subjectivity in the context of the historic epic. Döblin breaks with the traditional focus on the interiority of the literary subject and, by subverting the dichotomy between exterior and interior, configures his protagonists as collective beings, whose actions are depicted as encompassing more than the single individual. Acting against this notion of collectivity is a tendency towards

fragmentation and both together result in a complete destabilization of the subject. Döblin's renegotiation of the character of Wallenstein, emerges as part of a larger project aimed at reconfiguring the individual subject in other literary genres as well.

The urge to rethink narrative conventions is also at the center of Papanicolaou's essay on Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922) and Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil* (The Death of Virgil, 1945). Papanicolaou argues for a reconsideration of these two novels as historical novels by critically engaging with elements and aspects of the historical novel as he sees them reflected in both works. Both Broch and Hesse aimed at portraying history as a process rather than a series of individual events and persons. Both writers emphasized a universalist approach to the depiction of characters and societies, and introduced an element of spirituality. The figures of both Gautama Siddhartha and Virgil are, similar to Döblin's Wallenstein, presented as fragmented and are often represented through secondary allegorical characters. There is a strong tendency towards escapism in both works, but it carries positive connotations, symbolizing the writers' efforts to break with historical determinism and thus implicitly illustrating their attempt to break free from the conventions of the historical novel as a genre.

The theme of liberation carries over to the following essay by Sean Eedy on the theme of nostalgia in post-*Wende* novels. Novels dealing with the theme of the German reunification and its aftermath have so far been largely relegated to their own separate niche within German literary studies. Discussing them in the context of the German tradition of the historical novel, indicates the next logical step in the process of further integrating these works into the larger literary framework and points towards a new way of positioning post-*Wende* fiction in the future.

By focusing on Christa Wolf's *Leibhaftig* (In the Flesh, 2002), Thomas Brussig's *Helden Wie Wir* (Heroes Like Us, 1996) and Ingo Schulze's *Neue Leben: Die Jugend Enricho Türmers in Briefen und Prosa* (New Lives: The Youth of Enricho Türmer in Letters and Prose, 2005), Eedy analyses the connection between memory, nostalgia and historical authenticity. The essay illustrates the complex and nuanced ways in which each author approaches the East German past. Far from producing simplistic *Ostalgie*, each writer reflects on the inherent subjectivity and general imperfection of memory. In fact, all three writers consciously draw attention to the constructed nature of memory and nostalgia, while at the same time stressing the authenticity of memory as perceived reality. Each work employs a variety of narrative perspectives and/or narrative levels to portray the inherent struggle of coming to terms with the East

German past. This complicates the long standing conflict between historical truth and fiction, a dichotomy which the historical novel has been negotiating almost since its beginning. The generational differences between Brussig and Schulze on one hand and Wolf on the other hand, add another layer to Eedy's reading of the three novels.

The final three essays focus on the popular historical novel in Germany throughout the last two decades. These works share several things in common, such as their thematic focus on the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. This thematic trend began in Germany with the publication of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in 1982 (Friedrich 7). The trend continued with the successful 1986 novel *The Physician* (in German: *Der Medicus*) by American writer Noah Gordon, followed in 1989 by Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*. In 1993 Tanja Kinkel was among the first German writers to produce a historical bestseller with *Die Puppenspieler* (The Puppeteers). Ever since then, there has been a steady and ever increasing offering of German popular historical novels, whose plots are mostly set within the German-speaking region. These novels, long a staple on the German literary market, have only recently made their appearance in academic literature, which, at this point, is still trying to create a conceptual framework in which to categorize and further analyze this ever growing corpus of novels.

The essays in this volume can be seen as part of this scholarly endeavor. Katya Skow's, Waltraud Maierhofer's and Debra Stoudt's analysis is based on a large number of historical novels published within a given time frame of about fifteen to twenty years. They each chose one theme to trace throughout their selection of novels in order to analyze the development of this topic as well as to further contextualize these novels by looking at their reception, the authors' own creative vision and other forms of cultural institutions and events which also provide information on these historical themes.

Debra Stoudt's essay on the depiction of German mystics in popular historical fiction is comprehensive in its chronological approach, taking stock of all historical novels dealing with German mysticism and its representatives not only in German-language novels, but also including Danish, Dutch and English-language publications. The depiction of German mystics, such as Hildegard von Bingen and Meister Eckhart, began in the early twentieth century. After a hiatus between 1940 and 1990, they are now again regularly appearing as main protagonists in historical novels focusing on the Middle Ages. The German mystics make attractive protagonists for writers of historical novels, because of their well documented lives and the writings they left behind. Moreover, they