

David Sornig, *Spiel* (UWA Publishing, 2009)

When reading fiction, we are inherently aware that the tale unfolding before us is a fabrication, an unreal reality. In literary novels we seek verisimilitude, a resonance with the world in which we live, no matter how far-fetched the narrative's setting or unusual its characters. We anticipate tidy beginnings and endings of the sort life outside the book cannot provide. In his first novel, David Sornig subverts such simple expectations and, like the Lord of Misrule, turns them upside-down.

Spiel is a carnivalesque palindrome. Beginning and ending on a leaving-arriving train, smudged with the ash of bush fire, its plotline lures us away from the familiarity of suburban Melbourne and plunges us head-first into a metaphorical underworld (Berlin swept up in the Twelfth Night atmosphere of New Year's celebrations) only to repeatedly loop back into the narrator's reminiscences of the life he abandoned in Australia. This circularity – the persistent appearance of the past in the present, the narrative attempts to demolish history and reinvent memories, this ending where we began – is carefully and effectively engineered. Much like the parable by Kafka referred to in the first chapter, the novel's structure suggests that the point of this story is not about reaching a conclusion, but is instead about the process of going.

Like the narrator, we are never sure where we are being led – yet the compulsion to follow is undeniable. We can't help ourselves: there are so many secrets to be unravelled in *Spiel*. 'I think everyone should have a secret' (66), our narrator confesses in a letter to Rosa Stumm, his childhood pen-pal, signalling to readers that the withholding of truths, the suppression of identities, and the controlled release of information are foundational themes in this book. Pseudonymously identified as 'Karl' only once in the narrative, the narrator seems perpetually attracted to mysteries – to people who will keep things from him and places that will prevent him from getting too close. As a child he is obsessed with ancient cities, lost civilisations; for years he persists in writing letters to a little girl in Germany without ever receiving a reply; his love interest, Annie Rivers, is always out of reach, but tantalises 'Karl' with her late-night confessions and the false impression of intimacy they create. Years later, he keeps a tryst with Annie Rivers hidden from his girlfriend, a woman whose work in MRI technology is, by contrast, designed to reveal all. Perhaps most importantly, 'Rosa Stumm' – 'Karl's' absentee guide through the chaos of Berlin – is a code name as well as a person, one whose true identity is lost to amnesia, or cover-up, or both.

All of these elements are simultaneously known to and completely concealed from the narrator. He learns how ancient cities function; as an architecture student, he can trace their layers from inception to destruction and understands them right down to their bones – but he will never be able to visit them. He may sleep with Annie Rivers, but he will never possess her. He may find Rosa Stumm, but he will never know who she is or if she is real – and it is this *not* knowing that drives him on. The secrets, the walls, the questions unanswered: 'Karl' seems to crave this *spiel* more than he seeks a resolution.

Since the protagonist is a perpetual student of architecture, one would expect to find precise descriptions of the buildings, skylines, and constructed landscapes of Berlin – yet such specifics are almost entirely lacking. Street names are offered in

Book reviews: *Spiel* by David Sornig. Lisa Bennett.
Transnational Literature Vol. 3 no. 1, November 2010.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

abundance, laid across chapters like lines on a map: two-dimensional and unrevealing. *Spiel*'s Berlin lacks the sense of place we get from the passages set in Melbourne. Its environment remains foreign, unfamiliar; its details vague and sketchy as though seen from afar through a blurred telescope. But instead of detracting from the narrative, this ambiguity enhances the surreal dream-like quality of the episodes occurring in Germany. The sense of displacement we experience here, in contrast to the tangible 'reality' of the Melbourne passages, seems to be part of Sornig's point. Any frustration we feel at the lack of more intimate knowledge of the city evokes the narrator's literal and existential confusion. The Berlin we experience in *Spiel* is not really Berlin. It is an invention, a figment of the narrator's imagination, a place where his ideas and ideals coalesce.

He cannot rebuild his father but imagines in Berlin a city that might express the clarity and certainty of an ideal world, all his father represents to him. Berlin is his entry into the senselessness of the infinite. The unbreakable chain of the universe. All artists must assemble, must arrange the pieces of the world they wish to inhabit. And so it is with architects. Architecture is the first art. It is the tectonics of the first instance. The orderly entrance into chaos. (88-89)

For 'Karl', Berlin is a doorway between his past and his future, not a destination. It is no more real than the bomb blast, or the blind woman who leads him to and from the explosion, or the suitcase he never retrieves. Berlin is the backdrop for the game in which he finds himself entangled; the city is a theatrical set in which wide strokes and broad gestures are used to convey details that are secondary to the play being performed in the foreground.

Despite its name, *Spiel* does not set out to swindle us. The narrative certainly evokes the 'game' the blind woman mentions in the prologue, and though the rules are left up to 'Karl' and the reader to decipher, Sornig provides plenty of clues to help us along the way. A key left on the coffee table in Rosa Stumm's apartment signals that the narrator can leave, but also that he can return – significant not only for his immediate situation, but also in terms of his flight from (and eventual return to) Australia; his fumbling for the light switch in the dark of midnight in Chapter 7 tells us he still has a way to travel before he can see things clearly enough to go home. We are more than willing to be implicated in this game, to accompany 'Karl' until he emerges from the darkness, because Sornig's prose is beautifully crafted, his turn of phrase refined – and because, as all great works of fiction should, his novel asks more questions than it answers.

Lisa Bennett