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This is the author's radio script of this article.

David Sornig. *Spiel*. (UWAP, 2009)

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 19 September 2009.

A young Australian of German descent arrives in Germany, where he encounters a blind woman on the street. She asks him if he wants to play a game. Intrigued, he agrees.

This is the premise of David Sornig's novel *Spiel*, and so begins a vertiginous chase through the streets, theatres, clubs and dwellings of Berlin, high culture colliding with the most debased pornography, secrets and echoes from the East German Stasi and the Nazi era infecting the protagonist's most intimate connections. In the background to the story runs the most famous *singspiel* of all, *The Magic Flute*.

Karl is an architecture student who has lost his faith in the profession. 'I feel more and more,' he muses, 'that the fate of civilisations is to fail and that the fate of cities, if they are the face of that civilisation, is to collapse under the irresistible weight of nature's blind will to find balance, to disrobe humanity of its imperial mantle' (142). Karl's apocalyptic tendencies lead him to behave with reckless abandon, and seem to have removed him from the world of normal human morality.

In parallel with the German narrative, which covers only a couple of days, we follow a long back-story: of Karl's grandfather, an architect in Berlin in the Nazi era, and his uncle who gave up architecture when the Berlin wall fell; of Karl's one-sided childhood correspondence with an East German pen-friend Rosa Stumm, and of his frustrating relationship with Annie Rivers, close as a friend but unobtainable as a lover. Annie is a beautifully drawn character: 'Voluminous, voluptuous: grave and greedy,' she has her own inimitable way of controlling people: 'She never really asks for my help. Asking isn't her thing. It's more an enlistment' (16). Interspersed in the text are extracts from the Stasi file of Rosa Stumm, rescued from a freezing river in childhood, afflicted by blindness and amnesia. The several strands of the story interweave and build together to a chilling, though explosive, climax.

*Spiel* is the kind of book you'll want to read twice: there's so much on a first reading that is mysterious. Some of the mysteries will be clarified, but Sornig leaves us with an intriguing residue of uncertainty. The prose is wonderfully stylish and maintains the sense of danger and threat at a perfect pitch throughout. It's artful, sinewy, elegant and enigmatic.