

***Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain* edited by Nicole Moore and Christina Spittel (Anthem Press, 2016)**

Emine Sevgi Özdamer's protagonist in the tale *Career of Char: Memories of Germany* is 'a witness of the solitude of the German high rise dwellers'. As she goes through her daily routine she 'listens to the sounds of loneliness'<sup>1</sup> and is able to inhabit only a rigidly fugitive state of mind.

This fugitive mind-set seems to ripple through the collection of reviews, ideas, discussion and deliberation presented in the pages of the collaboration *Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain*, the fugitive state being one that still works to that old idea of supply and demand. Capitalistic, yes, in so far as one must sell to buy, but literature takes on a higher status than simply the paper and words on the page, and the GDR wanted ideas, cultural variances, the possibility of imagined travel to exotic places for citizens who could not leave. My aunt (born before the War in what became the GDR) remembers holidays spent at hotels by the lakes where sport was the fun and travel was never offered unless you were an Olympic medallist, or a politician. But they wanted ideas that supported their own ideology and, even better, ideas that showed how other countries behaved badly. The GDR loved to show how their sporty living (never mind that the athletes were being doped with massive doses of steroids), their equality and communist ideals, were better than the rest of the capitalist nations.

My own research and subsequent writing of a novel on the GDR doping scam Theme 14.25 attempts to unpack the phrase 'rigidly fugitive'. This oxymoron bears witness to a common exilic pathology of strain and estrangement. This strain and estrangement lives within this well-put-together collection. The often reactive writing, cross examination and highly original supposition on the relationship between authorship, the state of the GDR and the reading and writing of Australia – such a bright sunlit country – brought to mind a moment when I stood, over-dressed, in a fiercely air-conditioned room on Kangaroo Island, South Australia. The blazing sun was so fierce I'd had an ice cream melt before I even unwrapped it and I'd had to shelter on my short walk from our rental accommodation to this room – to speak to a somewhat bored crowd of students who resembled a kaleidoscope of butterfly. I began to tell them about a cold damp land where people were locked away for many reasons, including daring to read the *wrong* book. The locations could not have been more different, and I, being second generation German, could not have felt it more keenly. How wonderful was it then, to read other thoughts on this 'rigidly fugitive' nation and the literature of Australian writers. To be part of this discussion on the GDR. Take Anna Funder as one such modern writer, who brought the GDR to

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<sup>1</sup> Isolde Neubert, 'Searching for Intercultural Communication: Emine Sevgi Özdamer: A Turkish Writer in Germany', in *Post War Women's Writing in German*, ed. by Chris Weedon (Oxford: Berghahn Press, 1997) 165.

the world and Walter Kaufmann whose ‘works brought the world to the GDR’ (140); dark and light mixing to create a vivid connection of cultural psycho-geographical opposites.

Andreas Glaeser’s wonderful book *Divided in Unity* (not included in the reviewed collection) presents the reader with a study of the GDR police force (the people’s police, the Stasi etc.) and the Western police force during their amalgamation at the fall of the Wall. Both sides soon realised they were not only dealing with a wall made from bricks and mortar, but ‘walls in the heads of people’.<sup>2</sup> This notion resonates within the collection of essays that unpack the notion of censorship, for example ‘[Dymphna] Cusack’s and [Katharine Susannah] Prichard’s critical and socialist sympathetic work to demonstrate that “the grass isn’t greener on the capitalist side” made them highly desirable as writers’ (123). Censorship takes many forms: for example, William James Blake wrote how he was ‘a nobody in America relatively, but here [the GDR] I am a Marxian writer’ (211).

Oh to be a big fish in a small communist pond.

A theme that follows many of the chapters is how the GDR’s publishing industry monitored and took note of writings that focussed on the ‘depiction of discrimination against Australia’s indigenous population’ (167). Perhaps the ‘walls in the heads of people’ take on many forms, allowing the GDR publishing industry an alternative censorship, a partial blindness: this was a state that shipped women and men to prison for no more than the crime of listening to western radio, reading a book that was banned, being in the wrong club, saying the wrong thing. It would seem that it is easier to blame others than take blame for your own wrong doing.

Rigidity is considered. Funder is described as displaying ‘an almost brutal rigidity when it comes to “remembering” or “recollecting” the past’ (234). In her review of the film ‘The Lives of Others’, she states that ‘the Stasi provide no material for the expression of belief in humanity’ (234). Glaeser’s idea of ‘walls in the head’ could be extended (perhaps) to include how ‘the clock ticks differently’ in the GDR,<sup>3</sup> an expression used by East Germans to explain the differences between East and West thinking. This fugitive mind-set is a product of totalitarianism itself. The Stasi have ‘walls in their heads’; walls that have been carefully built by the communist state in which they were born and represented as its citizens. It is not that easy to be seen as human if you are made to do terrible things day in, day out. Time and time again history presents us with horror and we exclaim ‘how can this happen?’ How can people spy, inform, kill, on such scale, and each time we *cannot* imagine what it feels like to be without choice, to live in a way that is prescribed because many of us are ill prepared to inhabit such empathy, to imagine, truly, what it might feel like, and for many it was not them who suffered the consequence, but their children or grandmothers. The ones who can’t fight are often the ones held to ransom. I don’t believe Funder displays a rigidity as such: her writing is alive with

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<sup>2</sup> Andreas Glaeser, *Divided in Unity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Glaeser 143.

feeling and sensitivity. You only need to read her characterisation of Ruth in the novel *All That I Am*, to sense how Ruth is written as believable and empathic.

The collection has, at its base, this dilemma: how can *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (struggle to come to terms with the past) be addressed through comparison? How can we, here in our free world, understand how things were done then, and what those things meant for readers who had to live in them as they avidly pored through the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, or Ergon Kisch's *Landung in Australien*. I hope discussions such as *Australian Literature in the German Democratic Republic: Reading through the Iron Curtain* will continue and grow in scope.

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