

BOOK REVIEWS

Brussig, Thomas. *Helden wie wir*. Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1995. 322 pp.

Right from the first page of Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* one begins to experience a phenomenon not generally associated with the German novel: the belly laugh. Or, "wer's liest, der wiehert," as Christoph Dieckmann of *Die Zeit* aptly puts it. Call it what you will, Brussig's book will make you chortle.

The premise of the book is none other than the story of the fall of the Berlin wall as told by the megalomaniacal Klaus Uhltscht, who claims responsibility for said fall. Lest one expect that this will be a tale of great moral courage in the face of personal peril, Klaus lets us know right from the start that his story will center around his penis. Why? Because it, and not those trembling "Wir sind das Volk" masses, brings about this seminal event in German history. The penis as hygienically compromised appendage, the penis as object of aggressive masturbatory delight, the penis as proud bearer of venereal disease: it's all there. Be prepared for a phallocentric onslaught.

There is, however, much more to the tale than Klaus's penis. He is a child of the latter-day GDR with the unnurturing parents typical for an East German novel. His father, a Stasi-agent and man of few words, speaks to his hapless son only in terms of derision and malicious sarcasm. The father takes particular delight in obscuring his occupation from his son, sowing the seeds of the latter's feeling that he is always "der schlecht-informierteste Mensch schlechthin." Klaus's relationship with his mother receives more detailed treatment, best characterized with words such as perverse and unhealthy. She instills in Klaus a maniacal fear of his penis – to her, a sanitary inspector, it is the epicenter of all things unhygienic – and thoroughly twists and distorts his sexual development. It comes as no surprise that Klaus emerges from his parents' household and enters the waiting arms of the Stasi completely unprepared for a normal life and devoid of many healthy human traits, among them compassion, love, and self-restraint.

Klaus's Stasi experience may surprise anyone who has read *Was bleibt* or similar titles. Brussig chooses to view the Stasi from the inside looking out, a rather novel approach. What we get is a collage of absurd characters whose passion is to unnerve people, but who are so bound up in methodology that they often lose sight of their objective. Those who suffered at the hands of the Stasi are sure to take offense at Brussig's portrayal. In his review of *Helden wie wir* for *Spiegel*, Wolf Biermann, whose Stasi-victim credentials are unassailable, forgives Brussig for this but rationalizes the book to a formula he can accept. Biermann feels that Brussig succeeds with the book because he restricts the narrator to a very narrow sphere. That is, he can only speak of the Stasi he knows,

which is a "vermickerte Straßenecken-Stasi." This may assuage Biermann's sensitivities, but it misses one of the more cutting points of Brussig's text, namely the complicity of average GDR citizens in their own torment. Brussig directs his unbridled venom – and I say Brussig because Klaus is not endowed with the gift of insight – toward self-righteous would-be Stasi victims. He has no patience for their tired formulae and rationalizations. Klaus, the cruel yet mindless arch-victimizer, only succeeds as a Stasi agent thanks to the unwitting assistance of average citizens. Biermann chooses not to challenge Brussig on this, focusing instead on the Keystone Cop-esque portrayal of Klaus's Stasi comrades. Biermann accuses Brussig of a *Verharmlosung* of the Stasi; ironic, then, that his review is a *Verharmlosung* of Brussig's text.

Brussig also raises eyebrows with his gloves-off treatment of Christa Wolf. Klaus refers to Wolf, sarcastically, as "unsere Christa" and takes great pleasure in pointing out her status as darling of the GDR. His jabs are merciless. An expression that he read in *Christa T.* becomes the soundtrack for his sexual climaxes. Klaus reads *Der geteilte Himmel* expecting to find erotic stimulation and dejectedly notes that it's not even a good love story. Brussig drops Klaus for a moment and personally steps into the fray with his chapter heading "Der geheilte Pimmel." The *coup de grâce*, ironically, is delivered by Wolf herself. Brussig simply quotes her speech – including the notorious "Stell dir vor, es ist Sozialismus und keiner geht weg" – of November 4 on Alexanderplatz and allows her own sentiments to slay her. Christa Wolf fan or not, it's hard to disagree with his point.

The only point of agreement in the numerous reviews and commentaries of this book is that it is downright hilarious. While the book merits reading both for that alone and as a primer on German genital slang, there is a novel element that permeates the text and elevates it beyond pleasure reading. By departing from the customary rhetoric of victimization to write the story of the victimizer, Brussig makes an unorthodox contribution to the process of coming to terms with the GDR past. Many East German readers, I suspect, will laugh the hardest, if only to keep from crying.

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