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Two Erwin Strittmatter books

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Gefängnismauern, hinter denen sich das Individuum tummelt, sind auch selbstgezogen, bzw. völlig system-unabhängig.

Fritz König
University of Northern Iowa

Mann, Klaus. Letztes Gespräch. Berlin: Aufbau, 1988. 379 pp.

Though Klaus Mann (1906-49) is primarily known for his novels Mephisto, Der Vulkan, and his autobiographies, he gained prompt celebrity at a surprisingly early age for the considerable amount of short prose he wrote before his exile in 1933. As an adolescent Mann struggled to establish himself as a writer with a large number of short stories, several dramas, and a short novel (Der fromme Tanz, 1925), and these swiftly earned him the reputation of a literary enfant terrible of his generation. Mann shamelessly used his father's name and connections to launch his career, yet insisted that his works not be judged against his father's. The comparison was, however, too enticing for Mann's critics, and the young writer increasingly felt both the competition and insecurity that accompanied his new métier.

Many of the short stories collected in Letztes Gespräch date from Mann's early period (1924-32), and they document the young writer's childhood and internal struggle to break from a father who viewed his son's ambitions and nascent talent with skepticism. This edition rounds out the collection of short stories first published in the West German Werkausgabe edition, Abenteuer des Brautpaars (1976), as it includes nine short stories which previously had appeared either in pre-war German newspapers or volumes long since out of print.

Friedrich Albrecht's epilogue summarizes the motifs, thematic concerns, and political development of Mann's short prose in succinct, perceptive fashion. He explains the importance of Mann's fascination with the irrational, with Todessehnsucht, narcotics, the relationship of death and Eros, and documents the autobiographical character of many of the stories. Albrecht highlights

the manner in which Klaus Mann combined the contradictory elements of his melancholy, sentimental Weltanschauung with his critical intelligence and need for self-identification, and stresses this fusion as the enduring basis for much of Mann's writing. The year 1933 was not as stark a division for Mann's literary production as some critics have asserted, Albrecht explains. Though his writing took on a distinct political character, Mann continued to deal with highly personal concerns in his novels and short stories, as the story Vergittertes Fenster (a tale of König Ludwig II's loneliness and madness) illustrates.

Letztes Gespräch deserves praise for its extended selection and fine commentary, and provides a useful service by bringing Klaus Mann's early short stories, which might have passed unnoticed, to the fore.

John Brawner
Washington University

Strittmatter, Erwin. Nachtigallgeschichten. Leipzig: Reclam, 1987. 322 pp.

Pankoke, Helga, ed. Erwin Strittmatter Lebenszeit: Ein Brevier. Berlin-Weimar: Aufbau, 1987. 191 pp.

Nachtigallgeschichten unites three separately published texts: Die blaue Nachtigall oder der Anfang von Etwas (1972); Meine Freundin Tina Babe. Drei Nachtigallgeschichten (1977); and Grüner Juni. Eine Nachtigallgeschichte (1985). The first two texts are a collection of short stories, and the third one is one lengthy story. Although the stories of these three texts are chronological, Strittmatter moves freely back and forth in time to relate his various experiences and recollections. In this respect, Strittmatter demonstrates his close bond with his Sorbian ancestors, because he is a natural storyteller who deftly weaves many seemingly disparate strands together into one main plot. Strittmatter's style is informal, and he pokes fun at the various people, events, himself, and the readers.

The turbulent period of Germany's history (1912-1945), however, recedes into the background. More-

over, Strittmatter himself often withdraws into the background to present the people whom he has encountered in his unusual life. Most touching are his portraits of the older generation--especially his grandparents. For example, "Wie ich meinen Großvater kennenlernte" is an affectionate recollection of the grandfather, who unhesitatingly assumes the responsibility for the Strittmatter family when Strittmatter's father is off at war. Another memorable portrait is that of his aunt Elli or "Schneewittchen," whose fairy-tale "happy ending" only occurs in death, for her life is one of continuing hardship and disappointment.

Strittmatter recaptures the awe and fascination of the circus in "Zirkus Wind," whose hero, Charlie Wind, a circus performer, unsuccessfully attempts to become a Normalmensch. Strittmatter's sensitive portrayal of this person mirrors his own struggles with trying to become a writer. "Meine Freundin Tina Babe" reveals the two increasingly different yet complementary persons in Strittmatter: the nascent writer and the ordinary man, whose job permits him to meet a host of different people. The preoccupations of these various people are heightened by the setting--National Socialist Germany.

"Grüner Juni" looks back at the Germans and Germany during that first post-war June, which represents an opportunity for a new beginning. Before this can happen, however, Strittmatter must deal with his past, and with ironic detachment, he narrates the demise of his first marriage.

Lebenszeit consists of excerpts taken from a number of previously published and unpublished Strittmatter works. Both the title and subtitle suggest that this volume is autobiographical, but Helga Pankoke, the editor, does not present Erwin Strittmatter's life in a traditional chronological sequence. Instead, the text is impressionistic: one topic leads to another. Thus, less than three pages after Strittmatter's birth, there is a passage dealing with a conversation with Brecht. Indeed, the accompanying family photographs actually provide a better chronological foundation than Strittmatter's anecdotal reflections and recollections. The central theme of Lebenszeit is Erwin Strittmatter's vision and concept of a writer. For Strittmatter,

writing and living are synonymous, and these passages reveal his charm, wit, and humility as a writer.

Of the two volumes, Nachtigallgeschichten is the more noteworthy, because it offers a glimpse of the ordinary people of a bygone Germany. As an ordinary person, Strittmatter succeeds in emphasizing the humanness which we all share, and that undeniably is what makes his stories and writings so enjoyable. At one point in "Wie ich meinen Großvater kennenlernte," Strittmatter states that "Großvaters Dichtungen bestanden nur aus Gesprächen." Fortunately for us, Erwin Strittmatter is a storyteller as well as a writer.

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Eckart, Gabriele. Per Anhalter: Geschichten und Erlebnisse. Berlin: Buchverlag Der Morgen, 1987. 143 pp.

The twenty-one interview transcriptions which Gabriele Eckart published in West Germany in 1984 as So sehe ick die Sache: Protokolle aus der DDR were sufficiently negative in their critical, dissident tone, that one is slightly surprised to encounter this collection of stories, a number of which paint a rather bleak and depressing image of the GDR. There are twelve of them, vignettes of ordinary individuals with whom one can identify, of varying lengths (4-37 pages). Men and women, old and young, in love and alone, happy and resigned--these dozen rather pointedly undramatic tales constitute a mosaic of human experience, which will be easily accessible to American readers. The book's title (also the title of the last story) is a metaphor for being on the road and meeting people on their own terms, listening dispassionately to their stories and reporting them in their own words; but these are fictional short stories, not interviews.

One of the most rewarding is "Die Lange," about an abnormally tall young woman to whom boys pay little attention until she meets a similarly shy and solitary construction worker who dances with her at the local disco. But the shyness keeps him from pursuing her seriously; one of his friends seduces the tall girl and gets her pregnant. The shy fellow, having given up