Thomas Brussig: Helden wie wir

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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 megalomaniac Klaus Uhltsch, 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 hygenically 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 associated with the German novel: the belly laugh. Or, Christa Wolf fan or not, it’s hard to disagree with his 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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