

1981

Joel Agee: Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany

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Recommended Citation

Blomster, Wes (1981) "Joel Agee: Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v7i3.602>

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Twelve Years: An American Boyhood in East Germany.
By Joel Agee. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux,
1981. 324 pages. \$14.95.

Joel Agee was eight years old when he departed from Mexico with his mother and her second husband, the German communist writer Bodo Uhse, for the Soviet Zone of Germany in 1948. He resided there until 1960, when, upon the dissolution of her marriage to Uhse, his mother returned with him to the US. Two questions trouble the reader of this unusual autobiography. Why was Agee so selfish with concrete data? Only from the dust cover does one learn the year of his birth; a sketch of his life would have put the reader on more secure ground. Why--and upon this problematic issue the author offers no comment--did Agee wait twenty years to assemble this chronicle of intimate experience? Uhse, editor of Aufbau and, after Peter Huchel, of Sinn und Form, died in 1962; consequently, the delay could hardly have been out of respect for the step-father of whom he was indeed fond. An indication of motivation would have been of value. It might further be asked whether this book would have found a publisher, were the author not the son of a noted American writer. This is not to imply that publication is undeserved; quite the contrary, this account is to be read with profit and fascination by every student of the GDR--or, as Agee always calls it in his English text, "the DDR." In this untranslated reference to his adopted land, one hears the staccato with which the abbreviation is pronounced by its natives, emphasizing the degree to which young Agee identified with the fledgling nation. And identify he did: he was in both the Pioneers and the FDJ; he studied at various schools, in most of which the inhibiting spirit of old Germany survived. Agee was a difficult young man and he portrays a largely losing battle, in which he appears at the end as a common laborer in a Baltic shipyard. Uhse's family was among the "privileged" of the GDR, permitting Agee a life of well-being shared by few in those early days. His awareness of this special position informs his entire account. It is somewhat uncanny to hear an American boy relate Johannes R. Becher's fulminations against the nudist beach in Ahrenshoop, accuse painter Otto Dix of "kissing Alfred Kurella's ass" with his pseudo-Socialist Realism, and tell of the visit to his parents' home of French songstress and Auschwitz survivor Fania Fénelon. The stories in themselves are nothing new; they derive their fascination from the tension with which Agee experienced them. This tension, in turn, is not the result of split national identity in the narrator. Although there is talk of his going to the States to live with his father (who died before his return), Agee is in no way torn between countries--he reads Musil in German and comments upon his reading in his English-language journal. This tension is derived from Agee's inner turmoil and personal agony. Echoes of Golding's concern for an "end of innocence" are often heard; further, Agee is the helpless victim of his own developing sexuality. The personal and public dimensions of his life counterpoint each other in recalling the dream which removed itself ever further from the reality of the GDR during the years in which Agee lived there.

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Zum Roman in der DDR. Edited by Marc Silberman.
Literaturwissenschaft, Gesellschaftswissenschaft 46.
Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1980. 174 pp.

With the exception of Marc Silberman's own article on Hermann Kant's Aufenthalt, all the pieces in this anthology previously appeared elsewhere--mostly in prominent journals (NDL, WB, SuF, Basis) between 1966 and 1977. It is useful to have them collected into one volume, but given the amount of good criticism on the GDR novel that has appeared in less accessible places, it is curious that the editor did not choose to bring some of that more obscure but no less deserving material to light. It is fine to see Frank Trommler's well-known article "Von Stalin zu Hölderlin" (Basis II) again, but in order to fit in here, it has had to undergo such extensive cutting that the reader interested in the GDR Entwicklungsroman would be well advised to consult the original anyway. Such reservations aside, it seems to me that Silberman has presented a well-balanced picture of the kinds of GDR novel criticism that have developed in both the GDR and the FRG. Aside from Trommler's piece, other articles which broadly survey and orient are Lutz-W. Wolff's on the proletarian factory novel from 1948-1956, Dieter Schlenstedt's on "Ankunft und Anspruch" and Kurt Batt's on "Realität und Phantasie." Specific interpretations, necessarily uneven in their insights and conviction, are devoted to Noll's Werner Holt (Hans Jürgen Geerdts), Kant's Aula (Heinrich Mohr) and Aufenthalt (Silberman), Wolf's Geteilter Himmel and Christa T. (Wolf Promies) and Kindheitsmuster (Sigrid Bock). In the confines of so short an anthology, this may be too much Kant and Wolf, but it does emphasize their centrality in the topic, which can hardly be debated. The editor has divided the nine articles into five categories, and his attribution is usually judicious: "Wandlung," "Bewahrung," "Eingliederung," "Die sich befreiende Subjektivität," and "Auseinandersetzung mit der faschistischen Vergangenheit." Silberman's introduction is a 17 page capsule summary of the development of literary criticism in the GDR. Although it necessarily omits a number of significant issues, it seems to me that the accents are correctly set. This will be a useful volume to Germanists who have not been following GDR criticism for very long and who do not have library access to the original sources.

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Roman im Gespräch: Beiträge aus sechs sozialistischen Ländern. Hrsg. von Ilse Seehase und Dieter Ender. Halle-Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1980. 392 pages. 12 M.

As the title indicates, this collection brings together sixteen contributions on the development of the novel in six socialist literatures: Bulgarian, Polish, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian and Rumanian. The volume aims at introducing the range of prose writing in these literatures during the sixties and seventies within four clearly marked categories: the historical novel, the worker-hero novel, the social novel of the sixties and the interiorized novel of the seventies. All contributions were previously published in the country of origin, most in 1977/78.