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Jurek Becker: Amanda herzlos

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Book Reviews

Becker, Jurek. *Amanda herzlos*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1992. 384 pp.

With his most recent novel, Jurek Becker brings us another portrayal of an outsider looking for a place to fit in. Unlike several of his other works that featured characters more obviously at odds with their surroundings than the title character here, Amanda is not portrayed as someone questioning her heritage like Hans Bronstein or Aron Blank, or as an "Aussteiger" like Simrock systematically turning away from the complexities and contradictions of life to search for a simpler existence. Instead, Amanda is presented as a woman searching for a role in a world characterized by change.

Amanda's story is told by three men with whom she lives in the course of several years: Ludwig Weniger, an East German journalist whose loyalty to the state is a constant source of strife in his marriage to Amanda; Fritz Hetmann, an East German dissident writer; and Stanislaus Doll, a West German radio correspondent reporting from East Berlin. Though all three are writers, their world views and politics differ strikingly, thus allowing them to provide varying insights on Amanda and their respective relationships with her. The resulting portrayal of Amanda is therefore multifaceted. In addition, Becker has proven his skill in character continuity by ensuring that, despite the three perspectives, the core of Amanda's character remains constant throughout the novel. Nevertheless, those familiar with Becker's work for the screen will recognize that Amanda's character is not entirely new. She has much in common with Wanda Brink in *Das Versteck* for which Becker wrote the screenplay in 1977.

Becker's expertise as a storyteller is apparent in the multiple narrative perspectives he uses in *Amanda herzlos*. He combines Ludwig's monologue to a divorce lawyer and a conversation with Lucie; Fritz's mixture of "fiction" and "non-fiction" as he weaves his memories of the time with Amanda into a retelling of his novella based on that relationship; and Stanislaus' diary style entries cataloging their courtship, marriage, and ultimately successful application to leave East Germany for the West. The resulting mixture of narrative styles not only provides variety for the reader, but reflects the natures of the narrators themselves. Strangely enough, the narrators remain somewhat stereotypical and flat--they are never truly fleshed out. Amanda, on the other hand, despite never getting to speak for herself, is a much more believable figure. A measure of her complexity is perhaps the phenomenon that

we are at times unsure of whether our sympathies should lie with or against her.

For some, however, such ambiguity--in evidence not only with Amanda but, at first glance, on a more general thematic level as well--might be reason to find fault with the novel. What is the reader to make of this seemingly inconsequential, though well-written series of relationship stories? In considering this question we might recall those western critics who often criticized Becker and others identified as East German writers for not providing a detailed (i.e., "critical") enough view of the society in which their stories took place. In *Amanda herzlos* the abundance of these contextual details provides the push that propels the novel beyond the confines of the well-written, rocky romance narrative into the realm of literary "Gesellschaftskritik" and "-analyse." The three narrators, though not necessarily representatives of particular periods of GDR history, do take very different positions toward the East German state: enthusiasm for the possibilities of socialism and a willingness to make sacrifices for the cause, skepticism and dissent, and, finally, western orientation. Amanda's progression from one man and perspective to the next is part of her conscious attempt to find a self-definition with a more satisfactory orientation to the world around her, an odyssey that has more recently been forced upon all of those formerly called GDR citizens.

Despite the serious issues surrounding German unification that are at the core of *Amanda herzlos*, it is a funny book--Becker's funniest since *Jakob der Lügner*. The dust jacket would have us believe it also has a happy ending, but Becker knows better. The success of Amanda's move to the West is all but certain. The time for easy answers is not yet here. But as he has done in his best novels, Becker uses his recognized gifts as a storyteller to begin asking important questions. "So ein Unglück ist das ja auch nicht" (384).

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