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Erwin Strittmatter: Der Laden

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Der Laden is the final volume of a trilogy (of the same title), whose focal point is the Matt family store during the postwar period. The text follows a flexible chronological time line, in which a merging and separating of the past (prior to 1945), the narrative present (the postwar era), and the actual present (post-unification) occur.

As in the earlier two volumes, Strittmatter invites his readers once again to return home with him to Bosssdom. Understandably, almost everything--the surroundings, events, and especially the people--trigger countless memories and reflections. As Strittmatter portrays the many people with whom he interacts, he is careful to provide a brief yet informative sketch of their past and future. This narrative advice establishes and fosters an intimacy between the reader and Strittmatter.

With its postwar setting, *Der Laden* can be viewed as a continuation of an earlier Strittmatter short story, "Grüner Juni" (1985). By focusing on the ordinary citizens, Strittmatter once again shows himself to be a keen and sympathetic observer of humanity. With ironic detachment he depicts how he and others attempt to rebuild their lives. A powerful and recurring theme in *Der Laden* is the cyclical nature of human events. To reinforce this theme, Strittmatter often draws parallels about conditions which followed the two world wars. Though he describes in particular the hardship and suffering of this postwar period, he is nonetheless able to infuse his narrative with some humor. For example, the rationing of electricity allows him to comment on the fragility of such concepts as progress and civilization: "Nun sind wir wieder von der Zivilisation abgeklemmt. Während der Sperrstunden feiern Karbidlampen und Kerzen ihr Auferstehen" (412).

Der Laden (Vol. 3) also provides Strittmatter with an opportunity to deal with his own past, especially his Party membership. A skilled storyteller, Strittmatter carefully establishes his true motives concerning this decision. From the outset, then, the author stresses that writing was (is) his single and overriding goal, to which almost everything else, including his family and his life, was subordinate.

Strittmatter is thus able to portray his conversion to Communism as opportunistic, devoid of any real conviction: "Ich prüfe alle Gründe, die ich in Verdacht habe, und der triftigste ist und bleibt die Aussicht, unangefochten von meiner Umgebung,

schreiben zu dürfen" (449). Undeniably, this decision enabled Strittmatter to achieve a literary career in the former German Democratic Republic; however, unlike some of his more controversial colleagues, he did not politicize his writing. His interest in the ordinary people is shown to stem from experiences in Bosssdom, not from any ideological or political dogma: "ich, der ich das Getu der Menschen beobachte und nach dem Sinn des Lebens suche" (336).

The post-"Wende" era, however, does finally provide Strittmatter with an opportunity to be somewhat more critical of the now discredited and defunct Socialist system. He notes with sarcasm how effortlessly many former adherents of National Socialism (most notably his brother, Tinko, and his father) were able to embrace Communism, while he continued to remain the aloof, skeptical observer.

In the concluding pages of *Der Laden*, Strittmatter expresses a growing weariness and disenchantment with life in general and physically retreats back to Bosssdom. Indeed, *Der Laden* (Vol. 3) becomes, in a sense, a literary withdrawal to a more familiar period. It may represent Strittmatter's attempt to gain as well as to offer a better understanding of the present post-"Wende" period.

With *Der Laden*, Strittmatter once again demonstrates his mastery as a storyteller as he deftly interweaves the lives of the ordinary citizens with the emerging Socialist state. While Strittmatter does indeed depict a flawed Socialist reality, his true and continuing focus remains the ordinary people.

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