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Jurek Becker: Five Stories

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BOOK REVIEWS

Becker, Jurek. *Five Stories*. Ed. David Rock. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. 168 pp.

Aimed at students of German, David Rock's edited volume of short stories by Jurek Becker represents a valuable contribution to German Studies as it makes Becker's prose accessible to a wider audience. Rock, a lecturer in modern languages at the University of Keele, edited the volume for the Manchester German Texts Series. As the liner notes indicate, this is "the first critical edition of any of Becker's work. The editorial apparatus is designed to introduce English readers to this important author and to help them explore the texts through the medium of German."

This volume includes five stories: "Die Mauer," "Der Verdächtige," "Allein mit dem Anderen," "Das Parkverbot," and "Das eine Zimmer." Thematically, these stories address many of the same topics as Becker's longer fiction—the Holocaust, truth and lies, storytelling, outsiders, the individual and the state—and thus represent a microcosm of Becker's fiction. While the stories are all in the original German, Rock's 34-page English introduction provides students with valuable information on the stories' origins, reception, narrators, themes, and contexts. At the same time, it highlights some of the facts about Becker's life that will give readers important insight into his stories.

A section of "Notes," perhaps more aptly labeled annotations, appears after the stories and explains difficult passages and references. They not only define words or phrases, but contextualize the passages in terms of Becker's other works or in light of their historical context—certainly a valuable tool that will increase students' understanding, especially if they are unfamiliar with Becker's novels or other GDR texts.

An "Arbeitsteil," though somewhat confusingly organized, nonetheless provides some helpful tools to further student understanding and engage them to reflect on what they have read. The first part of this section consists of questions about the specific texts and about broader issues the texts address. The second part contains source materials and includes period documents and selected passages from reviews and articles on Becker's stories. A selected bibliography, which follows, provides an excellent range of additional sources, and will prove useful to students seeking additional information on Becker and his writings. Finally, a "select vocabulary" contains unfamiliar words and expressions as they are used in the volume.

Both in his selection of texts that touch on Becker's dual concern with the Holocaust and with life in the GDR, and in his choice of ancillary materials, Rock shows a keen awareness of the scholarly issues raised by Becker's writings and a sensitivity to the needs of students of German.

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Becker, Jurek. *Jacob the Liar*. Trans. Leila Vennewitz. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1996. 244 pp.

Jakob and I first met in my undergraduate GDR literature course. I was struggling to get through all of the reading, but Jurek Becker's characters and his story of life in a Jewish ghetto made it easy. Becker's *Jakob der Lügner*, and indeed much of Becker's writing in general, is very accessible with realistic characters and seemingly straightforward narratives. These factors, when combined with Becker's relaxed style and humor, made it difficult to put the novel down. I have probably read *Jakob der Lügner* ten times since I first found it on my reading list. I still think of it as an "easy" (not to mention enjoyable) book to read, but I must add that each additional reading reveals layers of sophistication and complexity that continue to draw me back to the text.

Others must share my continuing fascination with *Jakob der Lügner*, since the novel has been translated into twenty languages (Paschek 50). After the novel's German publication in 1969, it was translated into English by Melvin Kornfeld in 1975, making it accessible to a wider English-speaking audience. In a discussion with me about the translation, Jurek Becker said that while he was happy when his novel was originally translated, he had been rather inexperienced in the world of literary translations when it all happened, and thus had had very little to say about the choice of translators or the results of their efforts. Over the years, Becker explained, he had grown dissatisfied with the first English translation, and thus asked Leila Vennewitz, known for her translations of Heinrich Böll's works, to retranslate *Jakob der Lügner*. The new translation initially appeared in the United Kingdom, and then in 1996 was published in the US.

The most striking difference between the two translations of Becker's first novel is the style and tone. Kornfeld often uses constructions that sound almost academic and phrases that seem unlikely to have come from the lips of Becker's no-nonsense narrator. Consider the following passage from Kornfeld's translation in which Mischa prevents Rosa from seeing her parents as they are marched off by the Nazis:

Rosa is still enumerating names. Her mother's glances provide Misha his final impetus. He clutches Rosa and carries her away from the window. He wants to put her down on the bed and detain her there, but nothing comes of it. They fall down on the way because Rosa resists. He lets himself be beaten and scratched and his hair pulled. It is only her body he is clutching. They lie an eternity on the floor. She screams for him to let go. Perhaps twenty times she screams "Let me go!" Until no more barking can be heard, no more steps. Her blows become weak and finally cease. Carefully he