

1997

## Jurek Becker: Jacob the Liar

Gregory Baer  
*Carthage College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Baer, Gregory (1997) "Jurek Becker: Jacob the Liar," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 24: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v24i0.1227>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in GDR Bulletin by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

## 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.

Gregory Baer  
*Carthage College*

**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

## GDR BULLETIN

releases her, prepared to seize her again momentarily. But she remains lying motionless, her eyes closed, and breathing heavily like after a great exertion (215).

By contrast, the flow of Vennewitz's rendition retains the Jewish oral storytelling tradition that characterizes Becker's text:

Rosa is still counting off names; her mother's upward glances give Mischa the push he needs. He grips Rosa tightly in his arms and carries her away from the window, intending to put her down on the bed and keep her there by force. But nothing comes of that; on the way they fall to the floor because Rosa is struggling. He lets her hit him and scratch him and pull his hair while he just keeps his arms gripped tightly around her waist; they lie on the floor for an eternity. She screams for him to let her go, maybe twenty times she screams nothing but the words "Let me go!" Until they can hear no more barking, no more footsteps; her blows become weaker and finally cease. Cautiously he lets go of her, ready to grab her again the next instant. But she lies there without moving, with her eyes closed, breathing heavily as if after some great exertion. (197)

Vennewitz's new translation consistently simulates oral discourse, and is thus more in keeping with the original's humorous and often ironic tone that is both frank and understated. It thus offers readers better access to Becker's voice than the previous translation.

Very often, the opening lines of a novel set the tone for a work. In Becker's novel, the first line, "Ich höre schon alle sagen, ein Baum, was ist das schon ..." (7), presents a difficult challenge for the translator with its idiomatic uses of "schon." In addition to talking about trees, this first line sets the mood for the story the narrator is going to tell and indicates how he is going to tell it. Here again, Vennewitz more successfully imitates Becker's style than Kornfeld:

Kornfeld: "I can still hear them saying: A tree, what's so special about that?" (3).

Vennewitz: "I can already hear everyone saying, A tree? So what's a tree ..." (1).

Kornfeld's use of the word "still" instead of "already" relegates the described incident to the past, while Vennewitz, in my opinion, more accurately casts the narrator as a reluctant storyteller who anticipates the difficulties he will have telling his story, a role consistent with the themes of Becker's novel.

As the novel draws to a close, we find the Jews from the ghetto in a boxcar heading east toward an unknown, yet all too obvious destination. Becker's closing lines

evoke both resignation and hope, a silent acceptance alongside a poignant will to resist. This is one of the most effective moments in Becker's prose: "Denn ich sehe noch die Schatten von Bäumen, und schlafen kann ich nicht, wir fahren, wohin wir fahren" (283). Kornfeld translates the last few lines thus:

"Let me stand a little more yet," I say.

"But you don't see anything any more," I hear him saying.

"Yes I do."

Because I still see the shadows of trees, and I can't sleep. We're going. Wherever we go. (266)

Vennewitz, by contrast, writes:

"Let me stand her a little longer," I say.

"But there's nothing more for you to see," I hear him say.

"Yes there is."

For I can still see the shadows of trees, and I can't sleep. We are heading for wherever we are heading. (244)

Here again, Vennewitz's translation provides a smoother rendering of the oral style for which Becker has become famous. Yet her last line is unfortunately awkward. She misses the poetic simplicity of the original German, trying to impose linguistic accuracy where poetry might have been more appropriate.

In spite of this shortcoming, Vennewitz's translation is excellent. It captures Becker's use of language in a way that Kornfeld's translation does not, making the thematic complexity and poetic sophistication of *Jakob der Lügner* accessible for English-speaking readers in a way that had been impossible until now. With Jurek Becker's recent death, it is fitting that we revisit his best novel, and Vennewitz's translation invites us to do so.

## WORKS CITED

- Becker, Jurek. *Jakob der Lügner*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969.
- Becker, Jurek. *Jacob the Liar*. Trans. Melvin Kornfeld. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
- Paschek, Carl. *Jurek Becker: Begleitheft zur Ausstellung der Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek*. Frankfurt am Main: Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, 1989.

Gregory Baer  
Carthage College