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Abstract

Review of Nina Schmidt. *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First-Century German Literature*. Camden House, 2018. 235 pp.

Keywords

illness, German literature

Nina Schmidt. *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First-Century German Literature*. Camden House, 2018. 235 pp.

Nina Schmidt's *The Wounded Self* is an astute and insightful investigation into the "(non)place" (2) of recent autobiographically-informed illness narratives within the field of German Literary Studies. Schmidt's book not only addresses this gap in the academic reception of these narratives, but also offers curative measures. Making a compelling case for the need to include, value, and take seriously these life-writings as literature worthy of more nuanced and informed academic inquiry, Schmidt also advocates for the recognition and inclusion of disability studies within a broadened understanding of the field of *Germanistik*.

Schmidt situates her study within the German feuilleton debate that began around 2009 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, a German newspaper, with Christoph Schlingensiefel's response to Richard Kämmerlings's dismissive piece explaining why no one wanted to read any more stories about cancer and chemotherapy treatments. Schlingensiefel, who published his cancer diary a year earlier, clarified and justified his work by describing that when he was diagnosed with his disease, he could not find any published literary works that spoke of illness not simply as an abstract, thematic, or theoretical concept, but as an actual lived experience. Schlingensiefel's diary was one of what became the most significant and diverse resurgence of personal life writings and autobiographical illness and disability narratives since the *Neue Subjektivität* 'New Subjectivity' movement of 1970s. The diversity of this new wave of texts lies not only in the range of illnesses and disabilities these writers describe but in the variety of narrative forms they employ to do so. Ranging from prose to poetry, their memoirs include autobiographical writing styles, such as diaries, essays, documentaries, and graphic novels, as well as more fictional forms, such as autofiction and experimental autobiographical novels.

This wave of diverse, popular German-language narratives chronicling lived experiences of disease, disability, death, and dying garnered great public interest and critical media attention, while also eliciting an antagonistic and exclusionary response in their literary and academic reception, as demonstrated by Kämmerlings's piece. Several texts have been publically denigrated and dismissed as not being literary works of aesthetic value, continuing an all-too common socio-cultural denial of disability and bodily dysfunction that further marginalizes the disabled and those suffering from illness. Many works also remain absent from academic scholarship and critical literary debates. In the cases where they are discussed, observable oversights in the analytical approach and critical frameworks used to contextualize the texts often present problems. In some cases, for instance, the central illness experience in the texts is contorted, judged, or not even addressed or acknowledged as relevant.

Schmidt notes additional shortcomings in the field of *Germanistik*, where the dominant critical apparatus of literary criticism and textual analysis is not free from prejudice. Too many critical analyses and close readings of texts are still predicated upon preferred and privileged “ableist” assumptions and “natural” attitudes, which emphasize, for instance, the diagnostic gaze of the doctor over the patient’s lived experience. Schmidt thus suggests infusing the insights, core concepts, and key objectives gained from disability studies from the Anglo-American academic context into all aspects of *Germanistik*, especially its literary studies.

Schmidt’s study narrows in on five diverse German language illness narratives that were part of the new wave of autobiographical texts dealing with disease, disability, death, and dying as a lived experience. Schmidt considers the ethics and context of each piece of writing and juxtaposes the five distinctly different German language texts in terms of how they narrate their illness or disability experience. These texts include Charlotte Roche’s *Schoßgebete* (*Wrecked*, 2011), Kathrin Schmidt’s *Du stirbst nicht* (‘You Are Not Going to Die,’ 2009), Verena Stefan’s *Fremdschläfer* (*Alien Sleepers*, 2007), Christoph Schlingensiefel’s diary *So schön wie hier kanns im Himmel gar nicht sein! Tagebuch einer Krebserkrankung* (‘It Can’t Be as Beautiful in Heaven as It Is Here: A Cancer Diary’) and Wolfgang Herrndorf’s online blog that later became a book, *Arbeit und Struktur* (‘Work and Structure,’ 2010-13). Schmidt’s analysis reveals the authors’ wide range of diverse aesthetic and narrative innovations as they develop, rediscover, or rearticulate their sense of self in and through narration of their illness or disability. Striking is their ability to write exceptional expressions of liminal experiences of serious diseases and disabilities that break out of the normative bounds of stereotyped clichés and genre into new forms and where the autobiographical elements becomes foreign, other, and fictional. Such writing has re-invigorated and revitalized the autobiographical genre for contemporary audiences. Through her analysis, the different ways that illness or disability influences, informs, and affects an author’s writing, identity, and narration of the illness experience are presented as giving rise to highly individualized and innovative aesthetic expressions that break through common misperceptions as well as narratological conventions. Schmidt argues, when recognized as central to literature, these narratives can help reveal how fragile, vulnerable, and unstable our assumptions of ourselves and our ideas of the subject are. In Kathrin Schmidt’s book, for instance, the text mimics the protagonist’s loss of self-image by becoming increasingly unstable as writing and narration.

Schmidt’s study demonstrates and teaches by example. Schmidt introduces the nexus point of autobiographical writing and disability studies as a fertile framework for studying such illness narratives. Her thorough explication not only of key concepts in disability studies, but of the widening definitions of the forms

and genre of autobiographical and life writing remain some of the most elucidating parts of her book's contribution to expanding the field of German literary studies. Offering both analytical frameworks and critical insights that help the reader better approach, contextualize, and understand the narratives from the stance of informed literary scholarship, she underscores the value of a literary disability studies approach in both theory and praxis.

Schmidt's exceptionally rich book makes a strong case for the need not only to include but better integrate the field of disability studies and its ability to enable greater, nuanced readings of illness narratives within the scope of German literary disability studies. This book contributes meaningfully to how we read and understand innovative narrative strategies, structures, and experiences of illness and disability beyond assumptions of what is often characterized as normal or natural, and its critical perspective would also be of great value to those interested in the fields of literature, narratology, and narrative medicine.

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