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Jim T. Reed. *Genesis: The Making of Literary Works from Homer to Christa Wolf*. Camden House, 2020.

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Abstract

Review of Jim T. Reed. *Genesis: The Making of Literary Works from Homer to Christa Wolf*. Camden House, 2020. 301 pp.

Keywords

Genesis, Jim Reeds, Literary works, authorship

Jim T. Reed. *Genesis: The Making of Literary Works from Homer to Christa Wolf*. Camden House, 2020. 301 pp.

Jim Reed's *Genesis* delves into what he sees as the creation of literary text, expanding on what readers need to fully comprehend the linguistic system that produced a particular literary work. Reed applies the concept of genesis from a biblical vantage point into literary analysis while offering a new perspective on the literary event that mutates across time and space. The author seeks to understand the roots of great literary works that enable *Genesis* to offer a more extensive and critical illumination of the creative process from the beginning of idea gathering to inspiration, formulation, revision, and then publication. *Genesis* elucidates the making of an author, the political orientation from which they were writing, and the historical forces that shaped the product of their creative writing. Considering the wide range of authors under study—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Georg Büchner, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, Paul Celan, and Christa Wolf, along with non-German authors like Homer, Michel de Montaigne and William Shakespeare—Reed's selection is representative of diverse periods, genres, and geographic locations.

Divided into four parts, the book covers the creation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which Reed describes as the genesis of the epic genre. The author also discusses the Bible as a literary production with poems, stories and aphorisms (38) with similar issues of coherence and consistency to Homer's works. Reed's analysis of Montaigne's *Essays* stands out as he describes the French author's self-repudiation as a pretense of modesty. Comparing Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre with Homer's *Iliad* as having its roots in material history (78), Reed demonstrates that Shakespeare's fame was orchestrated by two actors: Henry Condell and John Henige, who republished Shakespeare's earlier works. Reed examines Goethe's practice of rewriting, editing, and improving his most renowned works, which focuses on the entanglements between his personal and professional writing lives. It is not hard to notice that Reed places more emphasis on the German authors than their European counterparts, which he describes as less of a disparity in *Transition-Tradition* (100). Therefore, my review focuses on the texts from the perspective of nineteenth and twentieth century German literature.

Genesis spotlights the relationship between the authors' rationality and their creative mind, which according to Reed, is crucial to the productive process of the works they produce (10). Reed's work complicates literary history and the authors' creative process, details the tentative and inchoate process, formulation, and impulse surrounding writing and publishing literary works, and shows the uncertain outcome these works undergo before publication. The book makes an important contribution to the historicization of literary authorship. The book contains an introduction, thirteen chapters, and an afterword. The chapters provide case studies

for literary works from the standpoint of their creation (2), for example, Georg Büchner's extraordinary career as a dramatist or Samuel Fischer's role in pushing Thomas Mann to literary fame. Reed also dives into Kafka's struggle to prove himself as a novelist and Brecht's depth of historical context and the nuance of real-life characters that elevated his works to a new plane (211). By focusing on diverse authors who published during different epochs, Reed's *Genesis* pays more attention to the fabrication of literary works and the authors' creative impulses that shaped such writing at any given time.

In chapter nine, Reed argues that Mann drew inspiration from two Norwegian writers, Jonas Lie and Alexander Kielland, and the French poet, Charles Baudelaire, by taking his advice on becoming industrious and reading in the lexicon (175). Writing about his sexual lifestyle in *Death in Venice* and calling *The Confessions of Felix Krull* "the homosexual novel" (189), Reed notes that Plutarch's *Erotikos* and Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*—texts that discuss homosexuality and erotic love—were impactful in Mann's life, especially in defending his sexual orientation against the prevailing attitudes in Germany. Reed's assertion illustrates the central role German authors like Mann played in contemporary German society, especially in discussing homosexuality as a taboo theme.

Chapter thirteen, *Genesis*'s shortest and final chapter, is crucial to the book's thesis since it discusses the work of Christa Wolf, whose works are important to contemporary literary history. Reed's analysis of *Was bleibt* (*What Remains*) reframes the discourse about the relationship between readers and the author, which Reed sees as controversial. Examining these controversies, Reed argues that *Was bleibt* interrogates the integrity of Wolf as an author, who cooperated with the Stasi Ministry for State Security (in East Germany) at the expense of her readers—especially her East German readers. Reed makes a persuasive argument that Wolf's position as a member of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany addresses the complex structure of being under surveillance in the German Democratic Republic. *Genesis* emphasizes the performativity of authorship, what it means to write as an author who follows specific unwritten rules or protocols. Given that the author focuses on several male authors and one female author, the book shows an imbalance between the genders of the examined authors. One of *Genesis*'s great strengths is its analysis of the evolution of literary reality and how the book describes the process of writing and waiting for the right time to publish.

Reed's introductory chapter fails to provide readers with summaries of the thesis and scope of the chapters. Notwithstanding, *Genesis* is a strong addition to the scholarship on literary history, German literature and culture, and linguistics. I recommend the book to those interested in learning more about authorship and the connection between the creative mind and authors' biographies.

Genesis is not only meditation on the creative process of literary authors but also a reading praxis that offers readers the history behind Germany's canonical literary works. What Reed puts together in this masterpiece appears significant and privileges a deeper understanding of "literary genesis"—both from a biblical standpoint and within the broader context of the analyzed texts. The presentation of the analyzed works is enjoyable, and it is compelling to finish the whole book once readers take a dive into the text.

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