Jurek Becker: Five Stories

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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 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.

Aimee Kornfeld’s translation of Becker’s *Jakob der Lügner* has been the mainstay of English language Becker studies. Rock’s volume includes, however, the first English translation of Becker’s short fiction. The second section of the book contains the new translation of five of Becker’s short stories. The editor, David Rock, conceived the volume as a way of exposing English readers to this important author and to help them explore the texts through the medium of German.

Rock’s new translation of Becker’s short fiction is far superior to Kornfeld’s. Rock’s version is more idiomatic and natural, and it enhances my understanding of the stories. His translation is more accessible to English readers, and it preserves Becker’s idiosyncratic style and tone. Rock’s version also provides more context and background information about Becker and his writing, making it easier for readers to understand the stories.

The most striking difference between the two translations is in the language. Kornfeld’s translation is more formal and academic, while Rock’s is more conversational and natural. Rock’s translation is more faithful to Becker’s original text, and it captures the nuances of his language. Kornfeld’s translation, on the other hand, is more streamlined and less detailed. Rock’s version is more faithful to Becker’s idiosyncratic style and tone, and it captures the subtleties of his language.

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