Whose History?

The *Wende* in German Children's Literature

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The analysis of a small selection of children's books by authors from East and West Germany (published between 1991 and 1999) reveals major differences in attitude towards the events of 1989 and their impact on the lives of Germans. While none of the authors deny that the *Wende* was inevitable, their respective stances with regard to the process of unification and the narrative present and future of a unified Germany differ considerably. The West German authors adopt the position of the historical victor and do not contemplate a future in which any part of the former GDR culture or society could be preserved or developed. In their books we hear the voice of the coloniser – Western ways, despite their flaws, are bound to triumph over the inherently inferior culture of the East. The East German authors grapple with a greater difficulty in that on the one hand they cannot defend the political system of the former GDR, but on the other hand they are not prepared to condemn every aspect of GDR culture and especially GDR people. Their characters will not blindly follow the dictates of the West yet cannot rely on past experiences for guidance; they face a challenging future.

History is written by the victors – to what extent can this old adage be applied to recent German history as portrayed in children's books? The notion that West Germany was the 'winner' in the unification process and that the former GDR was taken over, even colonised by the West certainly entered the discussion about adult culture in general and literature in particular. During the *Literaturstreit* of the early 1990s, one of the underlying questions was which culture was to be dominant and whose interpretation of German history and culture was to be canonised. Even if the notion of a colonised East Germany is not accepted, it can hardly be disputed that the former FRG has been the politically and economically dominant power in the united Germany. The *Literaturstreit*, it can be argued, demonstrates that at least an attempt was made to establish cultural dominance as well. Critics may have made an example of Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller, but the drift of the argument served to undermine the credibility of GDR authors and the validity and reliability of their texts in general. One of the consequences of a political, economic and cultural takeover, of colonisation in other words, is shown by Edward Said (1995 20-21 and 33-35), in his groundbreaking study on orientalism, to be an appropriation of the voice of the colonised by the coloniser.[1]

[1]My own voice in this investigation is somewhat problematic: by birth, upbringing and life experience I must be counted on the side of the colonisers; by inclination and research experience, I tend to

Children's literature, of course, is all too often ignored by 'serious' literary critics. It is, however, worth asking whose voice we hear in texts for children which deal with the *Wende* and its aftermath. A further question concerns the intended or implied readers of such texts – are they East German children, West German children or is there what Zohar Shavit and Hans Heino Ewers have termed an implied second reader or *Mitleser*, an adult who reads the books before or with children? And if there is an implied second reader, does this person have a West German or an East German background?

When examining the version(s) of historical events transmitted to children, it would be interesting to compare school history textbooks used in the various *Bundesländer*; however, the focus of this contribution lies firmly on literary texts for children (or at least texts with literary pretensions). There has been a long wait for an adult '*großer Wenderoman*'; the seismic changes of 1989/90 proved difficult to transcend far enough to give them literary form. Children's literature[2] is often quicker to react to significant events, be it because it is often necessarily less complex than adult literature and therefore perceived to be easier to write, or because there is an urgent desire to 'explain' changes to children or because of an understanding that children, too, are part of history but their immediate, i.e. remembered history is shorter than an adult's and children want to 'make sense' of what concerns them as quickly as possible. How, then, do authors of children's literature approach historical events which concerned all of Germany but which had an immeasurably greater effect on the lives of East Germans?

This contribution, while by no means comprehensive, offers an analysis of a sample of books written as children's literature which address the *Wende* and its consequences.[3]

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sympathise with the colonised, without presuming fully to understand their experience. I will therefore attempt not to fall into the trap of speaking for any East Germans – there are fewer reservations in the case of West Germans!

[2]The term 'children's literature' is used here to include books for young adults in the sense of the German 'Kinder- und Jugendliteratur'.

[3]Originally I meant to look at books by East German authors, but the first difficulty arose from trying to find, in today's Germany, books by authors from the former GDR. Not that they do not exist, although anecdotal evidence suggests that there are fewer books for children by East German authors available now than in GDR times. The problem lies in identifying them. Even in one of the biggest academic bookshops in (West) Berlin, with a large children's section and well-trained staff, it proved impossible to get much useful information. Unable to spend time in Germany, I therefore turned to the www.buecher.de website, which still offers a search category 'Kinderbuch DDR'. From the information available on this site, I selected titles which indicated at least some inclusion of my chosen topic. The search result includes books by West German authors, and these brought about the focus of my investigation.

Four of the books under consideration are set in 1989, Franziska Groszer's *Julia Augenstern* (1991), Karin König's *Ich fühl mich so fifty-fifty* (1991), Maria Seidemann's *An einem Freitag im Mai* (1997) and Ilse Behl's *Schneewittchens Spiegel – eine Wendezeit* (1999). Franzika Groszer lived in the GDR until 1977, then moved to the FRG, Karin König and Ilse Behl grew up and live in West Germany, Maria Seidemann in East Germany. Interestingly, it was two authors living in West Germany who wrote their books very shortly after the *Wende* while the East German allowed (maybe needed) greater temporal distance.

Julia Augenstern lives in West Berlin, but her family originally came from East Berlin. The protagonists of the other three books are East Germans. In Groszer's book, the events of 1989 provide a background to the main storyline; Behl attempts to interweave the political changes in the GDR with changes in the life of her protagonist; König's and Seidemann's books take the revolution in the GDR as their central theme. The latter two books will be discussed first. Both describe events from the spring of 1989 until a few months after the opening of the border, both have a young East German girl as the main character through whose eyes we see the world, and both have a third-person narrator. The narrative approach, however, and the voice which finds expression in these books, are of a very different nature.

According to the publisher's information[4], Karin König is a 'promovierte Erziehungswissenschaftlerin' with only two prior publications for young people (both on children of Turkish origin). Maybe her relative inexperience as a children's author combined with her interest in pedagogy explain why *Ich fühl mich so fifty-fifty* [henceforth IF] reads like a textbook rather than a novel. Throughout, König does not show, she tells, and in the telling leaves very little room for the imagination of her readers. Her protagonist Sabine is seventeen years of age, an *Oberschülerin* in Leipzig. We meet her first stumbling through a forest towards the Hungarian-Austrian border in the company of two boys of similar age. The author obviously tries to achieve instant suspense through conveying a sense of desperation and danger, but the didactic tone which characterises the book is apparent almost from the first page. Not only is the text frequently annotated with explanations about GDR institutions and personalities (the first footnote, explaining what an *Intershop* is, appears only three pages into the text), it also

spells out the motivation of even minor characters as soon as their motivation might possibly be questioned. When one of the boys voices some concern about the prospects of finding work in the West, the other replies: 'Kannst ja zurückgehen, Soldat werden an der Grenze' (IF: 9). This, one would think, gives a fairly clear indication of why they are on the run, but the point has to be made explicit: 'War es nicht so? Sind wir nicht abgehauen, weil wir nicht zur Armee wollten?' (ibid). And shortly afterwards, when Sabine thinks about her reasons for leaving the GDR, the fact that the text will now deliver a retrospective is well and truly rammed home: ''trotzdem wäre ich in der DDR geblieben, wenn…' Tränen schießen ihr in die Augen. 'Wenn die Geschichte mit Mario und Mutti nicht gewesen wäre.' Ihre Gedanken schweifen weit zurück. Sie ist wieder in Leipzig. Der Kalender rückt sechs Monate zurück. Sabine erinnert sich' (IF: 10). The reader is not given the slightest chance either to miss the point or to exert any intellectual effort in interpreting the text.

We then follow Sabine, her family, and assorted friends and relations through the six months until she tries to cross the border. The 'Geschichte mit Mario und Mutti' is soon revealed: her brother does not return from a visit to an aunt in Hamburg; not long afterwards, her mother takes early retirement so that she, too, can visit the West, and her son, and decides to stay for an indeterminate time. Sabine's father retires into himself, and Sabine continues to go to school and achieves her *Abitur*. In between she meets Thomas at a meeting of an environmental group and starts a (platonic) relationship with him. After watching, on western television, groups of GDR escapees in Austria, she decides that she wants to be with her mum and to try the Hungarian route herself. A friend of Thomas takes her to Budapest, and then we are back in the border forest. All the while, not a single opportunity is lost to explain the circumstances of everyday life in the GDR, while information about the historical events happening alongside the lives of the characters is inserted with tedious regularity. The least little detail comes with a gloss, for instance when Sabine is meeting Thomas in an ice cream parlour: 'Was ziehe ich bloß an? Eigentlich brauche ich gar nicht zu überlegen: Jeans, T-Shirt, Turnschuhe. Die Einheitskleidung unserer Clique' (IF: 48-49). Most of the impressions transmitted are negative: Sabine is not allowed to study what she likes, the environmental group fears black marks in their *Kaderakte* (which naturally merits an explanatory footnote),

[4] Cf www.dtvjunior.de

people wait years to get a telephone, and so on and so forth. All this is immensely irritating for any reasonably experienced reader, and things do not improve when Sabine finally arrives in the west. We are now treated to no doubt educationally valuable expositions of what is wrong with West Germany, including every possible cliché about the unfriendliness of materialistic Westerners and the corresponding friendliness and hospitality of other nationalities like Greeks and Turks. Sabine learns of the demonstrations in the GDR and later the open border via television (complete with all the well-known slogans) supplemented by letters from Thomas (complete with detailed descriptions about the actions, the atmosphere and everybody's feelings). When Thomas and other friends from Leipzig visit her, they talk about their new experiences, naturally, but again these dialogues are used as a teaching tool. What attitudes Westerners have, how Easterners react, how the material situation is changing, how uncertain they are of what the future will bring, all this is written in such a didactic and stilted style that is very hard to conceive of any real eighteen-year-olds interacting in a similar manner. The exercise ends with Sabine on holiday in Greece with her Greek friend Maria. She writes the first entry in her new diary, reflecting on where she wants to live, that soon Germany will be one country, so the decision is no longer that important, because the various forms of repression (a fair number are mentioned) of the GDR will cease to exist, and she ends as follows:

> Ich muß keine Angst mehr haben meine Meinung zu sagen, auch wenn die anderen dagegen sind. Das muß ich lernen.
>
> Ich werde versuchen, das nehme ich mir ganz fest vor, beide Teile, den Osten und den Westen, in mir zu vereinen. Vielleicht entsteht ja dadurch etwas Neues. Es kann doch sein, dass ich in zehn Jahren überall zu Hause bin, in New York genauso wie in Moskau. Grenzen können mich jedenfalls nicht mehr hindern (IF: 121-122).

This is trite; however, it is a fitting ending for a book in which the raised educational forefinger is always evident. It is ironic that a book written entirely in the present tense, presumably to convey a sense of immediacy, succeeds only in creating a distance to the characters and their story. The characters are vehicles for transmitting what the author considers the important facts about the *Wende*, they do not come to life. The book does contain a good deal of information, and its annotations and appended chronicle of events may further endear it to teachers for use as a class text.[5] A good *Jugendbuch*, a work of literature, it is not.

[5] Unsurprisingly, there is an *Unterrichtsmodell* to go with the book.

Apart from its shortcomings as a work of literature, what kind of reader is the book supposed to address? What are we to make of the narrative voice? Written in the third person singular, the book relates events exclusively from Sabine's point of view. The reader is told only what Sabine knows and feels. Clearly, an identification with Sabine and her trials and tribulations is aimed at. However, the book was written by a West German and, when it was published in 1991, must have been intended for a West German readership; for any East German of sufficient reading age, the innumerable explanations and footnotes would not only have been unnecessary but downright insulting. Even if, as seems likely, it was written with at least half an eye on a possible use as a school text, and probably with all good intentions, one must ask how legitimate such an enterprise is. König appropriates the voice of a young East German and invests her character with experiences, feelings and attitudes which the West German author thinks such a girl should have had. The reader is presented with a West German interpretation of what conditions in the GDR were like and how GDR citizens reacted to them. The book turns into an instructional text for the children of a colonising power who are to learn what the colonised 'natives' must have felt and thought. The fact that the colonising society is shown as flawed (unfriendly, materialistic etc.) does not detract from the clear message that the colonised society was inferior and had to be taken over for its own good. Human suffering may occur, but is a price worth paying for the greater good of all.

If König's book ultimately represents a West German's, a coloniser's voice recounting history, Maria Seidemann's *An einem Freitag im Mai* [henceforth AFM] gives an East German version; a version, moreover, which shows little interest in the West German view and in which there is no question as to where the protagonists find the centre of their lives and their identity. This does not lead to an exercise in *Ostalgie;* certain negative aspects of GDR society at that time are depicted much more brutally than in König's book, but the characters are rooted in the GDR, and the narrative voice is a native voice.

An einem Freitag im Mai begins with a passage which signals momentous events but which at the same time conveys an idea which is often hard to grasp for Westerners, namely that many people in the GDR, especially those who had grown up in it, did not find the fact that they were 'walled in' particularly irksome.

> An einem Freitag im Mai wurde Hannas Vater verhaftet.
>
> Bis zu diesem Tag befand Hanna sich im Einklang mit der Welt, in der sie lebte. Ihre Welt: das waren ihre Eltern und ihr jüngerer Bruder Tommi, das Haus in der Zeppelinstraße, die Stadt Potsdam und das Land DDR, das von einer Mauer umgeben war, so dass niemand es ohne Erlaubnis verlassen konnte.
>
> Hanna hatte nie den Wunsch verspürt, dieses Land zu verlassen.
>
> Sie kannte kein anderes. Sie lebte gern in der Zeppelinstraße, in der schönen Stadt mit den Schlössern, den vielen Seen und mit der Mauer, die schon in der grünen Parklandschaft gestanden hatte, als Hanna vor dreizehn Jahren geboren wurde.
>
> Aber seit diesem Abend im Mai 1989 änderte sich Hannas Welt (AFM: 8).

The protagonist is thirteen-year-old Hanna Herold. Her father, an author, is arrested after a reading and then deported to the West. In the only phone call he is able to get through, he urges his wife to stay in the GDR with the two children because, he firmly believes, things will soon change. Hannah does not understand why her father was arrested and even wonders whether he could have been a criminal after all. Her doubts gradually subside as the family are subjected to intimidation and harassment by the Stasi and her eyes are opened to the nature of the state she lives in. Some people of their acquaintance start to leave the GDR via Hungary. They hear that the father has got a semester-long grant at a US university. The mother, whose photojournalist's equipment has been confiscated, struggles to earn enough money to keep the family. Birthdays are celebrated, holidays enjoyed, life goes on, if somewhat precariously. In October, the family get caught up, after a visit to the staunchly communist grandmother, in the anti-government demonstrations on the 40th anniversary of the GDR in Berlin, and the mother is beaten up, arrested and released after three days. Still life goes on, the children attend school, eventually they hear about the opening of the border crossings, Hannah visits West Berlin in order to phone her father in America. They family is briefly reunited during a short visit to West Berlin but there is still a long wait until at last the father returns to Potsdam.

For all the world-changing events which happen during the narrated time in the book, some of them shown, some of them mentioned, the story is firmly anchored in the day to day life of the central characters. And this day to day life appears authentic; many details, about school life, the housing situation, the transport system, communications, shopping, leisure and so forth are revealed but not overtly explained or annotated. Seidemann, writing from a distance of several years, cannot assume that her young readers, whether East or West German, know or remember these details of a vanished society and on

occasion does provide illustrations, often through dialogue. The following extract, which occurs after a friend has found a bug in the Herolds' telephone, is a fairly typical example:

> 'Ihr leidet wohl an Verfolgungswahn', sagte Lombachs Großvater.
>
> Renate stemmte die Arme in die Seiten. 'Sooo?' rief sie grimmig. 'Hier bespitzelt doch jeder jeden! Sogar die Kinder in der Schule werden ausgehorcht. Wißt ihr, was Paulines Klasse im Mathe-Unterricht machen mußte, als sie die Uhr gelernt haben? Die Fernsehuhr sollten sie malen!'
>
> 'Na und?' fragte der Großvater.
>
> 'Mann, bist du schwer von Begriff', sagte Dörte. 'Die Uhr vom Westfernsehen sieht ganz anders aus als die Ostuhr! Da können sie sofort feststellen, welche Familien Westfernsehen gucken!' (AFM: 80-81).

Here, as in other passages, Seidemann touches on a number of aspects which might be unknown to a contemporary reader. There is the difference between the generations, with the older generation generally much more willing to believe in the official discourse, the fact that western media were forbidden for GDR citizens but still consulted by many, the spying, and the awareness of many GDR citizens that their state was not as it was officially presented. The information for readers is given naturally within the narrative, yet enough is left unexplained for interested children to have to ask, to find further information, thus possibly engendering a dialogue about 'what it was really like' which may augment or challenge the perception of German history held by today's children (and their elders). This approach works for both East and West German children; neither group is patronised.

Despite its conventional, rather unadventurous, narrative form, *An einem Freitag im Mai* works as a literary text for children, because both the characters in the book and the readers are taken seriously. Hanna's feelings and experiences are complex. The device of a coming-of-age narrative allows the author to gradually increase awareness and knowledge in her character and her readers without artificially inserting factual knowledge about the period. Not all questions are resolved, nor is there a manufactured happy ending. The father does return but the rest of the family knows that the old relationships will not simply be re-instated, that apart from life in their country, life in their family will change. There are no guarantees for a happy-ever-after. The reader is challenged to think. And if the book condemns the GDR's state apparatus and its servants, which it does in no uncertain terms, it does not condemn everybody who lived

in this state to either perpetrator or victim status; it very clearly deals with complex human beings.

Schneewittchens Spiegel – eine Wendezeit [henceforth SS] is another coming-of-age narrative set in the GDR in 1989/90. It differs from the two books above in that the political events remain quite nebulous; the *Wendezeit* of the title initially seems to concern the growing-up process of the protagonist much more directly than what happens in the wider world. The first-person narrator Annalene (13, then 14 years of age) lives with her maternal grandmother, a seamstress, in an isolated village, probably in Thuringia. The village and the region are not named. Annalene's hometown lies over the hills (echoes of '*hinter den Bergen, bei den sieben Zwergen*'). No modern media are found in the grandmother's house. The child does not know where either of her parents are and she is therefore practically an orphan. Together with the name *Schneewittchen* which the grandmother sometimes uses, these elements establish a not-quite-of-this-world setting for a tale which nevertheless recognisably takes place during the *Wende* period.

Annalene is in many ways a thoroughly modern character; she exhibits sexual feelings, has a crush on a handsome young factory worker, flies into violent rages and damages her grandmother's property – not the traits of a good little fairytale girl. She is also uninterested in and remarkably uninformed about politics. This would not be surprising in a girl her age, even in the GDR, but we learn eventually that her mother was a functionary of the SED, who left her child with the grandmother in order to travel and agitate in the service of the party (and, to be fair, her own ideals). Would such a mother not have seen to it that her daughter was initiated into a youth organisation like the *Junge Pioniere*? No state organisations intrude into the life of Annalene and her grandmother. Annalene's emotions, her struggles to understand her mother's absence, her friendships and the pains of growing up are firmly foregrounded. Certain aspects of daily life such as the difficulty to procure building materials, cautions about what one can say to whom, the fact that schools taught neither Christmas carols nor fairy tales, that the *Jugendweihe* had replaced church confirmation and so on are mentioned rather by the way and are not expanded upon. They would, of course, be taken for granted by anyone living in the GDR and so this treatment could be called realistic. Yet there is a discrepancy, a false note, when direct references to the political situation are introduced.

Throughout the book, politics hardly enter Annalene's sphere of interest and experience, yet she, the narrator, seems to understand exactly what is going on when some fairly obscure remarks about party membership and teachers' indoctrination are made:

> 'Was ist los in Berlin,' frage ich leichtherzig. 'Alles,' sagen sie und lachen, 'merkst du nicht, daß die Pauker klein beigeben? Eine andere Welt, das kann schon morgen losgehen, dann fahre ich mit meinem Paps nach Paris mit unserem alten Trabi […]' 'Du hast es gut! […]' meint Marko. Er sieht blaß aus und redet langsam. 'Wir haben es nicht gerade dicke, mein Vater war ja auch nicht in der Partei.' Marko sagt das extra, damit Gero nachdenkt. Aber Gero hört gar nicht hin. […] Psst, Hambach kommt, der kann allmählich einpacken mit seinen Parolen (SS: 60-61).

If a reader is to make sense of this passage, s/he needs to know a good deal more about conditions in the GDR than are provided in the book itself. No examples of teachers' *Parolen* are ever given nor is the role of the Party mentioned elsewhere.

The discrepancy between what knowledge is assumed and what is explained becomes even greater (in inverse relation) later on, when Annalene's mother appears at last. In the above quoted passage, and several others, the characters speak against a background of GDR-specific knowledge which is not made explicit. When Annalene's mother tries to explain what she has been doing, she speaks as if to a child who did not go through the GDR school system, who is not familiar with the official version of what state and Party aimed for. The mother is called an idealist by the grandmother, an appellation which Annalene accepts, but her attempts at explanation smack of a desperate self-justification and an inability to accept that the old system had any flaws:

> Also, Annalene, Oma hat gesagt, ich muß dir den Knoten aufdröseln, da hat sie recht. Weißt du, ich fang aber von hinten an. Das, woran viele von uns geglaubt haben, daß wir eine gute Regierung und einen guten Staat hatten, das war irgendwie ganz anders. Ich erzähl dir das später genauer, wenn du willst. Also, es ging wohl nicht so weiter. Die Menschen wollten nicht mehr mitmachen. Ich habe getan, was ich konnte für die Partei und den Staat. Aber nun ist alles kaputt, wie dein Spiegel kaputt ist, ganz kaputt, nicht mehr heilzumachen, verstehst du? Es ist schwer zu begreifen, auch für mich (SS: 119-120).

And shortly after this rather pathetic attempt at blaming the people for not wanting to carry on with the Party line, she reinforces the point that the system was basically good and only brought down by human weakness and possibly some inexplicable other agency:

> Ich habe niemanden geopfert, aber es waren Meinungsverschiedenheiten da. […] Aber gleicher Meinung mußte man schon sein früher, sonst kam man gar nicht weiter, zum Beispiel mußte es eine starke Grenze geben zwischen Ost und West, sonst hätten die Leute hier nicht durchgehalten. Wir wollten die Menschen erziehen, einen guten Staat aufbauen. Aber leider, leider... Und du? Warst du bei Oma nicht gut aufgehoben? Viele Kinder wachsen bei den Großeltern auf. Das ist normal. Alle Eltern haben gearbeitet. Nun hat es

> leider im letzten halben Jahr ein Chaos gegeben. Keiner konnte das vorhersehen. Dabei habe ich dich nicht weniger lieb (SS: 122-123).

One wonders whether the author intended to dismiss the beliefs of what were, after all, quite a number of GDR citizens as comprehensively (and condescendingly) as she does, pillorying the hubris that sees 'die Leute' as insufficiently mature to know what was good for them; and one also wonders how much a child would understand of this. The callous dismissal of the daughter's longing for her absent parents seems clear enough but it could well be that these passages, which to an adult read like a condemnation, are actually meant to give a good reason for the mother's behaviour, especially in light of what Annalene reflects as mother and daughter make their way back after their talk: ' Das In-den-Fenstern-liegen, die ganze Heimlichtuerei, das 'Sag nichts davon' hat ein Ende jetzt, weil die alte Welt kaputt ist, wie die Häuser kaputt sind. Es war aber eine Welt, in der Mama Idealistin sein konnte. Wie seltsam!' (SS: 127). Although the girl at first rejects her mother's suggestion that she move to Berlin with her, Annalene seems to come to understand and forgive her mother as the story draws to a close. Is the reader therefore supposed to feel the same? Or is this yet another West German voice revealing how much was fundamentally wrong in the GDR, not as naively as König does, but all the more insidiously?

It is noticeable how the emphasis of the book shifts from Annalene's very personal problems and her perception of her physical surroundings as quite normal and acceptable (apart from the absence of her parents) to the repeated realisation that 'Alles ist kaputt', the state, the community, the houses, the commodities. But since the *Wende*, there is hope for improvement, symbolised by the grandmother's new scullery door. And true to a certain kind of fairy tale, there is a moral message at the end, expounded by the seamstress grandmother: 'Ja, das Leben ist wie ein Kleid … […] Man wird gar nicht fertig damit, man muß nähen und nähen an seinem Kleid – bis zum letzten Atemzug. Da ist immer eine Menge zu tun! Ständig kommt etwas Neues auf einen zu. Wer hätte das alles gedacht, was passiert ist? Und zum Schluß müssen wir noch vordenken und uns nicht immer nur überraschen lassen. Haben ja einen Kopf zum Denken, nicht wahr?' (SS: 132). It is a pity that the book, whose narrative form is quite challenging at times, ends with such a patronising platitude and the feeling that 'Denken' is made possible mainly by the changes the country has undergone. Remembering the *Schneewittchen* references,

one is led to assume that both Annalene and the country as a whole were awaiting the kiss of life after partaking of the poisoned fruit which had sent them into limbo.

All three books discussed so far condemn the GDR and its systems. The East German author Maria Seidemann actually depicts oppression, persecution and police brutality much more frequently and graphically than the two West Germans. All three agree that a change was desirable and inevitable. But where König and Behl end with conveying a sense that the *Wende* is a golden opportunity and that things will change for the better, Seidemann is considerably more cautious. This may be a function of hindsight, since her book was written several years after the events of 1989, but I would argue that it is also, perhaps mainly, the result of a different attitude to the people who lived in the GDR. In Behl we are told 'Alles ist kaputt' and Annalene is likely to follow her mother to West Berlin; König's Sabine is planning a life in the West, too. Seidemann, while never denying the bankruptcy of the system, seems to assert that the West is not the only option, that many people are willing to make their lives in East Germany on their own terms and that there were enough positive elements to make such a new life possible and the attempt worthwhile.

Julia Augenstern [henceforth JA], the fourth of the books set in 1989, is the only one with a West German protagonist. 12-year-old Julia lives near the Potsdamer Platz in West Berlin with her mother and grandmother and attends a Jewish school a long way off. The book touches on many issues – growing up Jewish in contemporary Germany, relations between working-class and middle-class children, fatherless families, the problems of adolescent friendships, first love. The political events of 1989 form a background to Julia's story, although a great deal of information is transmitted. Julia is only directly involved on 9 November, a day that for her had always been one of commemoration of the pogrom during the so-called *Kristallnacht*; the 9 November 1989 ends with Julia standing atop the Wall witnessing the celebrations as hundreds of East Germans pass into West Berlin. Because of where she lives, she also witnesses first hand and takes part in the destruction of the Wall. Otherwise Julia and her family are, like the great majority of West Germans at the time, spectators.

A certain twist is introduced by the fact that Julia's mother Ruth and her grandmother Hannah came originally from East Berlin. Julia's grandfather, we are eventually told, was first treated well as a victim of the Nazi terror in the newly formed GDR, but after the

uprising in Hungary in 1956 he was accused of subversive and traitorous activities against the state and died in prison shortly after his arrest. The vocabulary used in this passage draws a very clear parallel between the Nazi regime and the GDR authorities:

> Im Falle des Großvaters hieß es sogar, er wäre Agent des 'Weltjudentums', und er wäre an einer zionistischen Verschwörung beteiligt gewesen. Viele Menschen verschwanden in den schon bei den Nazis berüchtigten Zuchthäusern Bautzen und Brandenburg. Großvater aber starb in der Untersuchungshaft. Großmutter Hannah hatte nie irgendein Aktenstück zu sehen bekommen, keine Anklageschrift, nichts. Nur eines Tages den Totenschein (JA: 74-75).

This extremely negative image of the GDR is reinforced when Ruth and Hannah are finally able to visit the grandfather's grave in Weißensee (East Berlin): the Jewish cemetery has been despoiled, the gravestones daubed with Neo-Nazi slogans.

It is obvious that Julia has never heard anything positive about the GDR from her mother and grandmother. Early on in the book, when everybody is watching the demonstrations in the GDR with peopling shouting 'Wir sind das Volk', Julia, who finds this attention to all things GDR irritating, remembers what she has heard in the past: 'Sie hatte ja auch die ganzen Phrasen gehört, in denen davon die Rede war, daß DAS VOLK BESTIMME und das alles FÜR DAS VOLK geschähe, was, wie Julia längst aus Ruths und Großmutter Hannahs Erzählungen wußte, nichts als Lügen waren' (JA: 23).

It seems that Groszer, when she left the GDR, left behind any positive attitudes to her former country and now reflects a common West German attitude, one that would be quite familiar to both adult and child readers in the west. Julia's family and their friends celebrate the fall of the Wall. It is therefore somewhat surprising, when a family friend sounds a note of warning: ''Wenn die Leute aber wie verrückt in den Westen fahren', sagte Steffen, 'dann ist es schnell vorbei mit der neuen Demokratie. Dann wird bald alles nach der Wiedervereinigung schreien.' 'Ach, du alte Unke', sagte die Trulla' (JA: 35). It is not explained why the idea of unification should be considered a negative one, or indeed what is meant by the 'neue Demokratie'. Adult readers would know, of course, but this book does not generally address an implicit second reader. Children are likely to be confused, if they notice the short interplay at all. One wonders whether Groszer gives voice to her own reservations here. She returns to this topic towards the end of the book, when the same group of people discuss the rapid demolition of the Wall and Trulla expresses her frustration at remaining a spectator:

> Jedenfalls, das produktive Chaos, das ich mir gewünscht habe, ist ausgeblieben. Und aus einer Zusammenarbeit mit unseren Ost-Freunden ist auch nichts geworden, die machen ihre Sachen lieber weiterhin allein und bleiben unter sich. Man muß sich ja geradezu aufdrängen! Ich fühle mich zur Beobachterin degradiert. Und das hasse ich! Derweil liegen sich alle deutschen Kleingeister in den Armen und schreien nach der Wiedervereinigung (JA: 204).

This is a West German voice, notwithstanding the fact that the character Trulla also came originally from the East. It speaks for those who thought that the unification process was too rapid, that the chance to create something new and better from the ruins of the GDR was wasted. As Trulla says: 'Am Ende ist die DDR dann nur noch ein Abklatsch von dem, was wir hier haben, und so toll finde ich das nun auch wieder nicht' (JA: 205).

Julia, whose new love interest is a boy who crawls through a hole in the Wall to look for his mother in the West, is all in favour of unification. Grandmother Hannah, despite the desecration of her husband's grave, is determined to return to it: 'Ich will Kerzen aufstellen, und ich will mich nicht länger verkriechen!' (JA: 206). Since these sentiments come after Trulla's outburst, they carry more weight – whatever the minor character feels, the main characters assert that what is happening is ultimately positive.

Throughout most of *Julia Augenstern*, Franziska Groszer presents the reader with a West German view of the demise of the GDR. Since her story is set in West Berlin, this is not surprising. The East German boy, whom Julia meets, has nothing whatever to say about the situation in his country; he is concerned entirely with family problems which are not caused by where he lives. On a few occasions, however, Groszer introduces sentiments which express regret at how the GDR was taken over, at missed opportunities. On these occasions she seems to change her addressee to an adult reader, since most of the allusions are not likely to be picked up by children. It may be that she speaks for herself then as well as for a sizeable minority in both East and West Germany.

As a contrast to books which deal specifically with the time of the *Wende*, it is interesting to look at an East German author whose children's books, with one exception, depict a post-*Wende* GDR. Helmut Sakowski had only written for adults before but suddenly produced several books for children.[6] Leaving aside the question as to why Sakowski

[6]I am grateful to Frau Heide Hampel of the Brigitte-Reimann-Literaturhaus in Neubrandenburg for drawing Sakowski's books to my attention and thus giving me the first idea for this project.

should have departed from his usual kind of writing[7], we may ask how this author approaches children's lives in East Germany and their historical context.

Sakowski has published five children's books, two about an 11-year-old boy called Raoul Habenicht and three about Raoul's cousin Katharina Habenicht aka Katja Henkelpott.[8] The first Raoul book, *Wie brate ich eine Maus* [henceforth WbieM] is set before the Wende, the second, *Prinzessin, wir machen die Fliege*, after. There are not many overtly political remarks in these two books. In the first, they are restricted to the introductory passage, which manages to convey quite clearly both that the political situation in the GDR was unsatisfactory and that politics was the least important factor in the life of an 11-year-old:

> *Früher habe ich in dem anderen Deutschland gelebt, das von der Elbe bis an die Oder reichte. Es wurde DDR genannt und war ein ziemlich kleines Land. Jetzt haben wir ein größeres. In der DDR war manches nicht in Ordnung. Allerdings kriegt man als Kind nicht gleich mit, ob eine Regierung funktioniert oder nicht. Aber natürlich war es eine Gemeinheit, daß sich meine Eltern ratzbatz scheiden lassen konnten, und das noch hinter meinem Rücken. Außerdem wurde mir verboten, im Hochhaus eine Katze zu beherbergen. Und zum Schluß mußte ich noch einmal in die Vierte.*
>
> *Am besten, ich erzähle der Reihe nach, was mir vor der Wende zugestoßen ist* (WbieM: 5).

The second book contains references to parents losing their jobs and retraining, because of the *Wende*, and also the rise of neo-Nazi groups in the east of Germany. The *Prinzessin* of the title is an illegal Turkish asylum seeker who is pursued by a group of skinheads, but no connection is made between their ascendancy and the political situation. The rather superficial thoughts about xenophobia and the plight of the girl, who is in danger not only from the skinheads and the authorities but also from a Turkish fruit dealer (an offensively stereotypical caricature of a character), could be excused as the natural ignorance of the young first-person narrator; the final confrontation, when the leader of the skinheads is vanquished by a handbagging from Raoul's grandmother and the laughter of the (otherwise passive) spectators plays down the menace of the extremists in a thoroughly irresponsible way. These are people who earlier firebombed an

[7]Sakowski took ten years after the *Wende* to produce another book for adults, a historical novel. One wonders whether the children's books were a way of avoiding having to attempt the 'großer Wenderoman'.

[8]A meeting of the two characters is mentioned briefly but otherwise their stories do not coincide. There are, in fact, a number of highly irritating (at least to an adult reader) continuity errors, from family relations to the physical surroundings of their common grandmother's house.

asylum seekers' house. Nobody, incidentally, even contemplates calling the police. Even if this fact could be construed as a comment on the state of the East German police force (and I doubt it), this would surely be too indirect for a child reader. And that a group of twenty neo-Nazis should simply turn tail in the face of an enraged grandmother flanked by Raoul's overweight stepfather shows no connection to reality. Rather, I would contend, this laughable solution expresses the author's wishful thinking when it comes to the healing powers of a rural environment, the environment he idealises both in the Raoul and in the Katja Henkelpott books: the rural idyll of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, where Sakowski himself lives and where he sets most of the action in his children's books.

In the Katja Henkelpott [henceforth KH] books there are more frequent references to east and west and the changes. They are also more ambiguous and clearly aimed at the implicit second reader. Katja, the first-person narrator of all three books, is six years old and not yet in school. She is given a narrative voice which is obviously intended to be humorous (mostly successfully) and equally obviously utilised to reveal, under the mantle of childish naivety, a few truths about life in East Germany which are addressed to adults. When Katja introduces herself and her hometown of Rostock, she says 'Sie liegt in den neuen Bundesländern und ist ganz nahe ans Wasser gebaut' (KH 1992: 7). And when she is farmed out to live with her grandmother because the kindergarten has closed, 'weil die Stadt zu arm ist' (KH 1992: 9), this carries a message for adults who are conscious of the economic situation in the east of Germany. There are many such little asides, some easily missed, others more direct. Discussing the return of the storks and their routes back to Germany, Katja and her grandmother have the following exchange: „Sind denn die westdeutschen Störche anders als die aus dem Osten?' fragte ich. „Ich weiß nur eins,' sagte meine Großmutter, „wer so lange hat eigene Wege ziehen müssen, der unterscheidet sich' (KH 1995: 50) There could hardly be a clearer comment on the German-German situation – for adults, not for a readership of 6 to 9-year-olds.

Despite the undoubtedly funny and entertaining aspects of the books, the constant awareness of the implicit second reader leads to the author patronising both his protagonist and his child readers. The following passage may serve to illustrate the strange and uncomfortable mixture of knowingness and naivety with which Sakowski invests Katja and that often tempts a more mature reader to laugh not with but at the child, something that must surely be considered illegitimate in a children's book:

> Ich stellte ihm meine Familie vor. 'Weißt du, mein Vater hat sehr lange studieren müssen, bis er ein Doktor war und alles über den Schiffsmaschinenbau wusste. Aber in den neuen Ländern werden nur wenige Maschinen gebaut. Er ist entlassen worden. Gott sei dank hat er eine ABM, eine Ar-beits-be-schaf-fungs-maß-nah-me.' Ich sagte das Wort Silbe für Silbe vor, weil es für einen Hund schwer zu verstehen ist. 'Mein Vater hat früher mit dem Kopf gearbeitet, jetzt arbeitet er mit dem Körper. Er ist nämlich beim Straßenbau und darf sich bei heißem Wetter das Hemd ausziehen und seinen Rücken bräunen lassen. Meine Mutter kann sich das nicht leisten. Sie sitzt bei Aldi an der Kasse' (KH 1998: 15-16).

Sakowski seems unable, particularly in the Katja Henkelpott books, to take his child protagonist, and by implication his child readers, entirely seriously. The rather sly references to the situation in East Germany after the Wende may be highly entertaining for adults but he is short-changing his child readers. It seems that in Sakowski we have an authentic East German voice which, however, fails to do justice to his medium – children's books. And although East German children are more likely than West German children to recognise some of his allusions, I feel that he is not playing fair with any child readership.

The *Wende* and its aftermath are apparently no easier to portray in children's books than in novels for adults, if not necessarily for the same reasons. Authors writing for children should by definition address a child readership; if the authors discussed above are indicative of others, many find it difficult to avoid thoughts and comments more appropriate for adults. And it seems that history is indeed written by the victors: the West German authors (including Groszer) tend towards a discourse which assumes the superiority of the west in a way which leaves little dignity to the people of East Germany. In every case there are some almost shamefaced reminders that not all is gold in the glittering west, but the narratives are clearly written from a position of power – our system is still better than theirs was, so it was natural and desirable that our system triumphed and theirs foundered. This is the voice of the coloniser justifying the colonisation of another people 'for their own good'. The fact that two of the West German authors presume to speak for East German people only serves to reinforce this perception.

The East German Sakowski, on the other hand, seems to have adopted a pose often found in oppressed or colonised peoples – the pose of a jester who hides the sharpness of his comments under a humorous cloak. Choosing the medium of children's books, a medium that is so often regarded as either harmless or irrelevant (at least in the west) is not an uncommon stratagem for authors who wish to express subversive or unpopular

thoughts. Nor would it be desirable to shield children from all such thoughts in their reading matter. Sakowski, however, can be accused of misusing his chosen medium in that his addressee is often clearly the implied second reader instead of the ostensible primary reader, the child. Sakowski has written books which are highly entertaining, no doubt also for a child reader who misses all or most of the political allusions. His narrative voice is that of a colonised person who clearly recognises and resents his colonisation and who mainly addresses others of like mind, fellow colonials as it were. This is an attempt at history as written by the vanquished, but it is presented in a form which patronises the declared (if not necessarily intended) readership and continually casts conspiratorial winks at the implied second reader. Seidemann alone finds a voice which is neither condescending towards her child readers nor belittling her subjects. She does not disguise her rage at a system which dismally failed its people or her contempt for those who continued to support this system and profit from it at the expense of others. Yet her characters are not reduced to helpless victims whose only alternative is to seek a new life in the west. Her book resounds with the voice of the colonised who have not lost their self-respect and who insist on telling their own story, warts and all. From my limited research, this seems to be exceptional.

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Biodata

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