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Granny Knows Best: The Voice of the Granddaughter in ‘Grossmütterliteratur’

This article explores a recent trend in German literature, namely the portrayal of the grandmother by women writers. The term ‘Grossmütterliteratur’ will be used of the selected texts, published at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to highlight the link with the genre of ‘Väter- und Mütterliteratur’, which dominated the German literary scene during the 1970s and 1980s. Research into grandmotherhood is discussed as a further context to appreciate how Jenny Erpenbeck’s Tand (2000) and Maike Wetzel’s Schlaf (2003) exemplify the changing relationship between grandmothers and granddaughters in today’s society.

This article will argue the case for a new term that may be applied to a number of recent German narratives, written by a new generation of female authors, stories which have the grandmother as the main character and/or the role of the grandmother as a central theme. The term ‘Grossmütterliteratur’ inevitably invites comparison with the literary sub-genre of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts, prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s and designated as either ‘Väterliteratur’ or ‘Mütterliteratur’. I shall therefore consider to what extent similarities and differences exist between the established genres and this emergent trend. Some recent research into the shifting role of grandmothers in today’s society will provide a further context. Writing in today’s unified Germany, a new generation of authors is further removed in time from the Third Reich than their parents’ generation, so that the accusatory exposure of guilt or bitter criticism of political faults expressed in the earlier father/mother memoirs may be less prevalent. Focus on intergenerational tensions in families has been one of the main ways in which German literature has reflected upon the past. Given the endless examples of prose narratives that explore the national or political past through generations in the family and the ever-growing distance from the Third Reich, the advent of a ‘Grossväter-/Grossmütterliteratur’ should thus not be unexpected. Examples of such texts include Monika Maron’s Pavels Briefe (1999) and Reinhard Jirgl’s Die Unvollendeten (2003). But a further non-specifically German reason might explain the advent of such a genre, namely current demographic and social changes. Moreover, even within the ‘Väter-/ Mütterliteratur’, there is a tendency in women’s writing towards a more intimate engagement with family relations in social and personal terms, which is rather different from the historical concern with a national past. In this article, I therefore note the continuing intermixing of familial and political history in some texts, but the main focus is to explore how some authors centre on the intimate relations of granddaughter and grandmother without a political agenda as such,
though their texts may raise other social questions. I will begin by looking at examples of the earlier generational writing before turning to some reflections on changes evident not only in Germany in the role and nature of the grandmother as a further context within which to consider two main recent examples. Ultimately, I will suggest that this kind of writing is symptomatic of the passage of time in unified Germany and of the advent of a generation more at ease with itself.

Given the limits of space, I concentrate on two key texts, Jenny Erpenbeck’s short story ‘Tand’ (2000) and Maike Wetzel’s short story ‘Schlaf’ (2003). The year 2000 seemed a good starting point to make a choice, given the advent of a new generation of German women authors who attracted international critical acclaim. In particular, Volker Hage, made headlines with two articles in 1999 for Spiegel magazine. In the first he caused controversy by using the label ‘ein literarisches Fräuleinwunder’ to describe the phenomenon of the number of young German women writers.¹ Hage reduced the literary achievement of writers such as Judith Hermann, Zoë Jenny, and Karen Duve to just one dominant characteristic, namely their ability to write about love and eroticism without inhibition. The label was factually unsustainable as well as belittling, since ‘Miss Miracle’ covered writers whose ages ranged between twenty plus to forty plus and included women, like Birgit Vanderbeke, who had been publishing for over a decade. For publishers, however, Hage’s new label became a useful marketing tool. New female writers could immediately be categorised and no allowance made for a variety of styles and themes. Later that year, a second article entitled ‘Die Enkel kommen’ coincided with the success of ‘young’ new German writers at the Frankfurt Book Fair.² Here, Hage referred to a new generation of writers, who were making an impact worldwide by dint of their ability to tell a good story, as the grandchildren of Günter Grass. Works by women included Birgit Vanderbeke’s seventh novel Ich sehe was, was du nicht siehst (1999) and Jenny Erpenbeck’s debut novel Geschichte vom alten Kind (1999).³ In both articles Hage suggested that this third post-war generation of authors have come to terms with their German past, and are writing with a new and refreshing freedom, which the Austrian author, Josef Haslinger, also described as ‘eine neue Unbekümmertheit’.⁴ It will be worth considering these comments again in the conclusion.

As noted above, Jenny Erpenbeck (born 1967 in East Berlin) is one of the new generation of German writers, whose success is reflected in the award of literary prizes. In 2001 Erpenbeck was awarded second prize at the Klagenfurt literature festival for an excerpt from her short story ‘Sibirien’.⁵ The jury praised her adeptness at understatement, her economical style and her ability to write non-judgementally.⁶ Like