

Book Reviews

Curtius, Mechthild. *Neisse und Pleisse: Erster Roman: Neisse.* Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuchverlag, 1992. 221 pp.

The author of this engrossing novel is a writer of film and radio scripts, novels and short stories in Frankfurt am Main. She received a prize from Nordrhein-Westfalen in 1988 for her script entitled "Annette von Droste." In the following year she was awarded the Lichtenberg prize for literature for her *Landschaftserzählungen*. Indeed, she has written many short story collections (1979, 1989, 1991). *Neisse und Pleisse*, too, contains several vignettes which can almost be considered novellas themselves. It is obvious that Mechthild Curtius shares with the protagonist of this novel an unusual facility for storytelling.

As the title indicates, this is a book dominated by the geography of the area around Görlitz, that unique place on the Neisse river where Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, and Germany come together with interesting political-ethnic-cultural results. Curtius writes in a vividly evocative way of the physical features of the countryside, the character and dialect of its people, its Catholic heritage, its architecture, history, industry, and grey pollution.

Like several recent commentaries, works of fiction, and television scripts, *Neisse und Pleisse* explores the theme of return to the former GDR. The protagonist, like many others, seeks to revisit the scenes of her youth, now layered with the grime of the present, with the heritage of the GDR, and, before that, of the Hitler era. In a familiar contemporary prose style, the author weaves reality and dream, fantasy, illusion, hope, and the evocation of the German cultural heritage into a montage of effects which hide as much as reveal the truth, or perhaps suggest that there is no discernible truth and there never has been.

There is a progression in the action, however, from Maria's first tentative efforts to attach herself again to relatives and surroundings, particularly to the memory of her "sainted" grandmother, the mythologized Agnes. These efforts result in both wonderful and fearful reminiscences, which owe much to the author's astute handling of the idea of boundaries, forbidden and permitted, to glimpses across boundaries, and to the symbolic ways in which we cross or fail to cross them.

Maria's early efforts are followed by her participation in the on-site filming of a television documentary. But while the filming and script-writing are taking place, the perceptions of the camera and technical crew are changing the tenuous

reality surrounding this place. Görlitz is changing dynamically itself in the brief compass of the reader's act of consuming the text.

After further visits, whose chronology is sometimes difficult to discern, Maria buys a house here. She brings her son, the obvious representative of a different generation, to view the countryside, her acquisition, and her family. Her/their "new" house is actually owned by the convent in the village and it is also protected by the national historical register. It is a nexus of past, present and future, rich with the stories of former owners. It is not so much the property of the author as a lease, like that which all Germans and Europeans hold, on a beautiful but troubled heritage.

Although the narrative technique, the use of symbolic and deconstructionist effects of montage and remnants of the German Romantic tradition are a compelling part of the book's interest, certainly its portraits are its most unforgettable characteristic--the Felix who is a confidence man and fraudulent "reclaimer" of Expressionist art, the town historian, the glutton-gourmet son, the shopkeepers and neighbors, the self-effacing narrator herself, all interwoven into the fabric of this conscious example of *Heimatsdichtung*.

A picture book of description and inquiry, this novel offers not only entertaining and thought-provoking reading in the present, but also the promise of a second volume to come. Although there are some populist, self-conscious elements in this book, it is commendable in its attempts to record the changing face of one dearly-loved part of the former German Democratic Republic even as it is disappearing forever.

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