

“Liebe Schwester” ‘Dear Sister’¹:
Luise Rinser’s Unique Relationship with Her Readers

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The life of German author Luise Rinser (1911-2002) spanned almost an entire century. During this time, she witnessed and chronicled two world wars as well as many political and cultural changes in her novels, short stories, essays, and biographical writings. Rinser is a problematic figure, as she retrospectively cleansed and embellished her life story when writing her autobiographical texts². However, the focus of this article is Rinser’s unique relationship to her readers in her autobiographical writing. I argue readers perceived their relationship with the author as a friendship and, even if Rinser did not return that friendship directly, there is a type of reciprocity between this author and her readers that is rare in the literary world.

Scholarship on Rinser’s work and biography is not extensive.³ Most publications about Rinser are contemporary book reviews and newspaper and magazine articles. A body of articles were published in 2011 on the occasion of her 100th birthday, yet they were published by journalists in newspapers and magazines instead of academic venues. Analytical works that focus on Rinser and her work are few. These include two articles by literary scholar Diana Orendi (Hinze), “The Case of Luise Rinser: A Past That Will Not Die” (1993) and “Luise Rinser’s Escape into Inner Emigration” (2003), examining Rinser’s memories and how she dealt with them. Other scholars who have examined Rinser’s biography are Germanist Elke Frederiksen, who analyzes Rinser’s autobiographical work in her 1988 article “Luise Rinser’s Autobiographical Prose: Political Engagement and Feminist Awareness,” and author and journalist Jürgen Serke, whose 1982 article “Luise Rinser – Es gibt nur eine Schuld im Leben der Menschen,” investigates Rinser’s life up to 1982. Serke’s account does not include the diaries or the autobiographies, as not all the diaries and neither of the autobiographies had been published by this point. I will fill this gap in the scholarship.

Analysis of Rinser’s autobiographical publications remains limited. In 1968, literature scholar Albert Scholz published his dissertation, *Luise Rinsers Leben und*

¹ A reader in a letter to Rinser. Leser B-7. „An Luise Rinser.“ Leserkuschriften. Literaturarchiv Marbach. Mediennummer: HS001320327

² One example, according to her biographer Sanchez de Murillo, is that she called herself a critic of the Nazis and therefore it would not have been possible to be invited by the government during the Nazi regime. She writes about this in her autobiography, but Sanchez de Murillo shows that she seems to have forgotten that she herself wrote about an incident like that in the Nazi-publication *Herdfeuer*.

³ This includes my 2012 dissertation about Luise Rinser.

Werk ('Luise Rinser's Life and Work'), about Rinser's life to this point in which he described and analyzed the author's works that had been published up to that point. German scholar Thomas Lothar published his analysis with the topic *Die Schuldproblematik in Luise Rinsers literarischem Werk* ('The Difficulty of Guilt in Luise Rinser's Literary Work'), which only partially covers Rinser's autobiographical works. There are two monographs that partly or completely deal with Rinser's autobiographical works: Gudrun Gill's 1991 analysis *Die Utopie Hoffnung* ('The Utopia Hope'), and Germanist Stephanie Grollmann's 2000 publication *Das Bild des "Anderen" in den Tagebüchern und Reiseberichten Luise Rinsers* ('The Picture of the "Other" in the Diaries and Travel Accounts of Luise Rinser'). Gill discusses a hopeful utopia of the developable human that Rinser portrays in connection with the main topic, which is the debate about violence. Grollmann explores Rinser's intention to show other cultures positively despite Eurocentric preconceptions present in her diaries. The most recent publication devoted solely to Rinser was a biography written by José Sanchez de Murillo, which was published in honor of Rinser's 100th birthday in April 2011. Another recent publication on Rinser is from 2019 by Benedict Maria Trappen titled *Luise Rinser und Lama Angarika Govinda*, which highlights her relationship to the Lama.

In this article, I break new ground in the scholarship in two ways. I include Luise Rinser's autobiographies and diaries in my analysis building on de Murillo's work (he based some of his Rinser biography on her autobiographical work in addition to being a close friend who had access to Rinser herself; and I examine the relationship of authors to their readers in general with a critical analysis of the letters that Rinser received from her readers and how this helped her in her quest for education and information, maybe even manipulation. Only one scholar touches upon the topic of Rinser's relationship with her readers. Ursula Reinhold analyzed Rinser's books as help for her readers in her 1993 article "Literatur als Lebenshilfe. Zum Literaturverständnis und Werk von Luise Rinser" ('Literature as Help with Life. About the Literature Understanding and Work of Luise Rinser'); however, she mostly used Rinser's fictional works and only a few of the autobiographical publications. These letters remain absent from current Rinser scholarship. My research looks at a side in the Rinser scholarship that is unique, adding a deeper understanding of her relationship to her readers.

Luise Rinser was not solely an author. She also saw herself as an activist and life coach (the German word *Lebenshilfe* captures it better, however, there is not a good English equivalent). In addition to writing, Rinser participated in political and social campaigns, from politics to the aid of the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. She did not just do this in a general capacity (for example in her commitment to leprosy aid and her advocacy for Sinti and Roma), but also in day-to-day life. Rinser also regularly supported her readers through her books and letters she wrote in response to their correspondence looking for advice. Rinser's role in her readers'

lives was two-fold: 1) readers told her how her books (fiction and non-fiction alike) helped them through tough times and how they used them for advice, and 2) readers wrote letters to Rinser with specific questions and problems and outright asked the author for help and support.

Phillippe Lejeune's discussion of autobiographical identity in his *Der autobiographische Pakt* (*The Autobiographical Pact*) provides a framework for this investigation of the closeness between Rinser and her readers. Lejeune claims that in the eyes of the readers, the person who is named as the author and the protagonist are the same person in an autobiography. He gives two possibilities of how an identity between author, narrator, and protagonist can be reached:

[D]ie Verwendung von *Titeln* läßt keinen Zweifel darüber, daß die erste Person auf den Namen des Autors verweist (*Geschichte meines Lebens*, *Autobiographie* usw.) [, und] der Erzähler tritt im *einleitenden Abschnitt* des Textes, in dem er dem Leser gegenüber Verpflichtungen eingeht, dergestalt als Autor auf, daß der Leser auch dann keine Zweifel darüber hegt, daß das „ich“ auf den Namen auf dem Umschlag verweist, wenn dieser Name im Text selbst nicht wiederholt wird.“ (Lejeune 28, emphasis in the original)

[T]he use of *titles* does not leave a doubt that the first person refers to the name of the author (*story of my life*, *autobiography*, and so on) [and] the narrator emerges in the *introductory segment/paragraph* of the text, in which he commits himself to the reader, as the author, so that the reader does not doubt that the “I” refers to the name of the cover, even if this name is not repeated in the text itself.⁴

Lejeune's theory continues to resonate in literary studies. Carole Allamand talks about the importance of the autobiographical pact and Lejeune in her article “The Autobiographical Pact, Forty-Five Years Later,” and a chapter on the autobiographical pact by Lut Missine is included in the 2019 *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* which points out Lejeune's continued relevance in the autobiography scholarship and analysis. Nancy K. Miller comes to similar conclusions as Lejeune in her 2000 article “But enough about me, what do you think about my memoir?” According to Miller, “what seems to be going on between memoir writers and their readers is a relational act that creates identifications (which include disidentifications and cross-identifications), conscious or unconscious, across a broad spectrum of so-called personal experience” (Miller 423). Miller, like Lejeune, shows the importance of an understanding between the author and the reader.

⁴ All translations from German to English are by the author of the article unless otherwise noted.

In Rinser's autobiographical works, both in her autobiographies and her diaries, the relationship between her and the reader corresponds with Lejeune's and Miller's theory. It seems that author, narrator, and protagonist are the same person. This entanglement of identity leads readers to think that they know the author very well because they think that they have gotten to know the protagonist through reading the book. Also, the second name identity that Lejeune refers to and that exists between author, narrator, and protagonist contributes to the trust that the readers feel towards Rinser. This second name identity is apparent, according to Lejeune, "auf der Ebene des Namens, den sich der Ich-Erzähler selbst verleiht und der mit dem Namen des Autors auf dem Umschlag identisch ist" (29) 'on the level of the name, that the first person narrator gives himself and is identical with the name on the cover.' But it does not stop with these two forms because this is just the author's perspective. There are always two parties involved in a pact, and both sides must comply with the contract. Readers also play a role: they must believe what the author tells them. If the reader does not believe that the author is the narrator of the autobiography, despite dozens of hints about the writer's identity, then the contract or pact is void (51). In Rinser's case, most readers believed her, so an autobiographical pact was formed. I demonstrate this in my analysis of the letters from the readers that show she built trust by honoring the contract. The problem, however, is that Rinser and the first-person narrator are not identical, which has been shown by de Murillo in his biography as he exposes Rinser's cleansing and embellishing of her life story (de Murillo 9-10).⁵

Such closeness between author and reader is very rare, and this article investigates how Rinser and her readers ardently adhered to this pact. The readers react especially to *Bruder Feuer* (1975) ('Brother Fire') because Rinser specifically invites and encourages a reaction. Looking at reader responses to her other works, the diaries and autobiographies solicit the most emotional reactions from the readers. Writing about Rinser's personal life, about her own experiences and thoughts, appealed to readers and created a feeling of closeness and trust. The way in which Rinser writes her autobiographical works (diaries and autobiographies), gives the readers the feeling that she reveals herself, that she shows her readers her innermost feelings, including her fears and weaknesses. This is not the case, though, because the identity between the author and the protagonist is fabricated, as shown earlier when discussing Lejeune's differentiation between author and protagonist. Nonetheless, the readers feel that they have a part in the author's intimate thoughts and situations. Rinser's diaries are not like private diaries published after an author's death: Rinser created her diaries with the plan to publish them. This way, Rinser creates trust within the readers, triggering the many letters Rinser received.

⁵ While similar, this is not the same as "autofiction" because Rinser intended to create nonfiction, and I believe that she herself believed that what she wrote was true. For more on autofiction, see Rita Felski's work.

This unusual relationship is rare in German literature as well as literature in general. However, Rinser's contemporary, French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir, generated a similar response with her readers. Or rather, like Rinser, Beauvoir kept the letters from her readers, and they are now in an archive in Paris, where Judith Coffin found them and analyzed them. Coffin concludes that de Beauvoir was not like other authors in having kept the letters from readers and having responded to them, creating a bond between herself and the readers that defies typical author/reader relationships (Coffin 237-51). I, like Coffin, argue that scholars should pay closer attention to the relationship between authors and readers.

Luise Rinser left many documents that can be found at the *Literaturarchiv* in Marbach, Germany, including 900 letters from her devoted readers. The letters I chose for this analysis were the ones that responded in detail to Rinser's books or to specific topics, as those give an insight into how the readers reacted to Rinser's oeuvre as well as into what kind of problems readers trusted the author with; shorter messages of thanks were recorded but not used for the analysis. These letters show who Rinser's readers were, where they came from, typical issues they dealt with, and the person they believed her to be.

The letters came from all over Germany (including the former GDR), Austria, Switzerland, France, Australia, New Zealand, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Israel, Sweden, Estonia, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia, and Egypt. The period of this correspondence spans approximately 30 years, from the early sixties to the mid-nineties of the 20th century. Among the authors of the letters are people of almost all ages, from a ten-year-old student to a 90-year-old retiree. A range of occupations were represented as well, from chemist to singer, from journalist to priest, as well as many high school and university students. The letters also show adult women were not the only readers of Rinser's books. Men, and especially young people, also felt understood by Rinser.

Most of the letters are responses to Rinser's books, mostly her diaries, even though some of the letter writers only deal with their personal problems: crisis of faith, love sickness, separation, marriage problems, loneliness, hopelessness. Other topics that I analyzed when looking at the letters are Rinser's urge to educate her readers, her being a type of "Seelsorger" (spiritual counselor), giving "Lebenshilfe" (supporting the readers in their lives), and finally the friendship between author and reader. With her books, Rinser inspires the readers to entrust her with these personal issues. The boxes with the letters K-Z contained correspondence that dealt with certain works, while others do not mention Rinser's books at all. Figure 1 is a chart of the books that were most referenced by most readers:

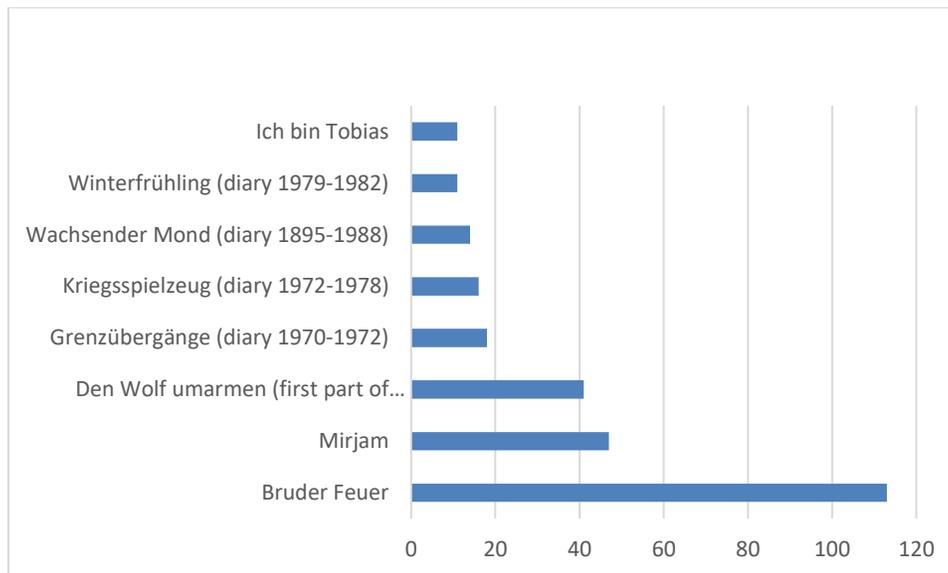


Figure 1. Bar graph comparing the numbers of letters to Rinsler mentioning different works she authored.
Source: Leserzuschriften. Literaturarchiv Marbach.

As the chart shows, the most people reacted to Rinsler's autobiographical works as well as to the novels that deal with young people (*Bruder Feuer*, *Ich bin Tobias* ('I Am Tobias')), and it includes *Mirjam*, which tells the Jesus story from the perspective of a woman.

Keeping this in mind, some of the books Rinsler published, such as her diaries and autobiographies, are very personal and readers felt they knew Rinsler because of these intimate genres. This led to readers trusting Rinsler with their problems, and Rinsler became an advisor for many people. The author could have just ignored those readers' pleas, as it seems quite intrusive to ask a virtual stranger for sometimes intimate advice. But with Rinsler's background as a teacher in her youth, she demonstrated that inclination to help people, to teach people, to educate them, and yes, to give them advice.

Predominantly, 113 readers comment in their letters on Rinsler's novel *Bruder Feuer*, a modern depiction of the Francis of Assisi story. In this story, aimed at young people, Rinsler transfers the story of Saint Francis of Assisi into the 20th century. A newspaper journalist travels to Assisi in Italy and visits the commune of Franz. He talks to the people, both Francis's supporters and his enemies. He then talks about how Francis of Assisi would have lived in the 20th century—as a doctor in the jungle, a working priest, a social worker, or a prison psychologist. The journalist is skeptical, yet moved by this man. At the end of the story, the reporter is at a crossroads. Will he stay with Francis, or will he go home? The book ends abruptly. In the afterword, Rinsler writes: "Das Buch ist ohne Schluß. Jeder Leser

kann sich selber ausdenken, was mit dem Reporter geschah. [...] Es wäre gut zu wissen, was die Leser darüber denken, vor allem die jungen, denen dieses Buch zugeordnet ist. Vielleicht schreibt der eine oder andere seine Meinung an die Autorin [...]“ (*Bruder Feuer* 127). ‘The book is without an ending. Every reader can imagine what happened to the journalist for themselves. [...] It would be good to know what the readers are thinking, especially the young ones, for whom this book is written. Maybe someone or other will write their opinion to the author [...].’ Many people complied with this request and wrote to Rinser describing how they imagined the ending of the story and how they reacted to it. This is the main reason why *Bruder Feuer* attracted more letters than any other book: the author asked her readers to correspond with her.

Readers also wrote about general topics, instead of engaging with a single book, for two main reasons: some thanked Rinser for her books, while others saw her as a trusted person and asked for her advice. There are several letters from the same people at the archive, making it clear that Rinser developed a correspondence with some readers. Also, the readers recognized themselves in Rinser’s texts and shared their similar experiences with her. Those experiences and problems include crisis of faith, relationship issues, and despair. Those are problems that the author herself writes about in both her fiction as well as non-fiction works. Some of the letters contain whole life stories. Rinser herself marked passages in the letters, presumably ones she planned to comment on in her answers.

Notably, Rinser referenced letters from readers in some of her published diaries. One of many examples can be found in *Kriegsspielzeug, Tagebuch 1972-1978*. ‘Eine Leserin schreibt mir, an meinen Büchern gefalle ihr das Einfache, Unmittelbare, der ‘Verzicht auf Kunst,’ das ‘Un-literarische’.” (*Kriegsspielzeug* 40) ‘A reader writes to me that she likes the simplicity, the straightforward, ‘the abstinence of art,’ the ‘non-literary’.’ Examining the letters in their entirety, it is noticeable that all letters are positive, insofar as all the writers of the letters look at Rinser’s oeuvre approvingly. Here one needs to ask the question if there were no negative letters or if Rinser simply didn’t keep them. This cannot be answered with the existing archival resources, however.

These letters reveal a dialogue between Rinser and her readers, yet scholars must consider whether this emanates from the author or from the readers. According to my analysis, the dialogue originates from both sides. In some of her novels, Rinser invites the readers to this dialogue, as can be seen in the afterword of *Bruder Feuer*. Moreover, she appears to invite dialogue with her readers by choosing to write in her diary about topics that are universal and concern many people’s lives instead of writing only about herself. The topics of the time that Rinser deals with over and over, including politics, the Cold War, and issues of the Catholic church, prompt readers to think and to voice their opinion. Rinser’s desire for communication with her readers could stem from her wish to help people. She

was also a trained teacher, and one can assume that the urge to educate and help never left her.

While the dialogue is initiated by the readers through their letters to the author, Rinser is the one who prompts the initiative. When the readers see the author as a person they trust, a person they can tell their problems to, they get inspired to reach out to that person. This trust comes from the type of books that Rinser writes; predominantly the diaries convey the appearance of knowing the author personally. When readers took the initiative to establish a dialogue, Rinser responded to it, and answered their letters.

Indeed, correspondents saw Rinser's diaries as a form of personal communication. One letter writer states: "I consider your diaries a novel form of communication with the reader, which gives me direct access – access to your feelings and thoughts and to those of numerous people to whom you reply in your diaries" (HS001320327 K-6)⁶. Another reader supports this with his appeal to Rinser not to answer his letters, as there are more important things for her to do: "Your diaries are indeed letters to all your readers!" (HS001320327 N-2) The beginning of a dialogue initiated by Rinser happens, according to those letters, through her books and continues through the replies she gives her readers in the form of letters or in her diaries. The readers, on the other hand, only have the letters to show Rinser their feelings. Some readers are satisfied with Rinser's communication through her books, while others ask specifically for her help with their own personal problems. For those readers, it is not enough to read Rinser's books. Many readers specifically thank Rinser for the "*Lebenshilfe*" (help with life) she gives through her books and emphasize that she changed and enriched their lives through her books.

Writing became a saving grace for Rinser herself during a very challenging time in her life due to the Nazi regime and the looming war. She describes how she started writing in her 1981 autobiography *Den Wolf umarmen* ('Hugging the Wolf'). This book includes her account of September 1, 1939: the German attack on Poland, the day that started World War II. After she hangs up the laundry in the attic, she does "etwas Unerwartetes, sie selbst ganz und gar Überraschendes: sie setzt sich, noch in der feuchten Schürze und mit kalten Händen [...] an ihren Schreibtisch und beginnt unverzüglich zu schreiben, wie gejagt, sie schreibt und schreibt als gehe es um ihr Leben..." (*Wolf* 11). '... something unexpected, something that surprised even her: she sits down at her desk, still wearing the damp apron and with cold hands and she starts writing at once, like haunted and writes as if her life depends on it ...' And her life really does depend on it. It is the writing that helps her. She and her husband are poor, she is pregnant, and her political stance against the National Socialists puts her in danger. At least this is how she perceives it herself

⁶ The quotes from the letters appear in translation by the author of this article. The original letters are all in German.

and how she presents herself in regards of her political commitment. In his biography, Murillo points out that her political positions were not as committed as Rinser herself makes it seem in her autobiographical writing (de Murillo, 9-10) During this phase in her life, writing is making her life easier and she starts working on her first fictional work, *Die gläsernen Ringe* (1941) ('The Glass Rings'). In her autobiography, she continues and goes back further in the past. She talks about the year 1938 in which she decides "endlich schreiben zu lernen" (15) 'finally learn how to write.' And here the decision that becomes her destiny is being made: she becomes a writer. "Die Schlinge um meinen Hals, ich wußte es noch nicht" (22) 'The noose around my neck, I didn't know it yet.' It becomes clear that writing is not just a pleasure for Rinser, it rather is often a compulsion, something without which she cannot live. "Am 1. September 1939 begann ich zu schreiben. Ich schrieb um mich zu retten, nicht um Schriftstellerin zu werden" (22) 'On September 1, 1939, I began to write. I wrote to save myself, not to become an author.' In short, writing became a *Lebenshilfe* for herself, but furthermore, her writing became a *Lebenshilfe* for many readers. By replying directly and concretely to the letters, she helps them to overcome and to deal with their problems. She helps them with her writing the same way that she has always helped herself with writing.

Readers cite specific Rinser books that helped them come out of a low point in their lives or to find the right path. One young woman writes that Rinser's book *Geh fort, wenn du kannst* (1959) ('Leave If You Can') helped her: "It hit the mark right in the middle, where decisions are being made. It helped with its acidity, severity, clarity, the characteristics of truth, to make out the right position. It opened a door. Thank you!" (HS001320327 B-7) The novella deals with guerilla fights in Italy 1943-1946. The narrator and her friend Angelina are part of the resistance. After the fights, they end up in an abandoned cloister which they try to restore. When the nuns return, the two girls decide to stay and become novices. They say goodbye to the world and Angelina leaves the man she loves. The title of the novella is the motto of the cloister, and it becomes the law: *Geh fort, wenn du kannst*. (Leave if you can.)

While this reader can clearly name the book that helped her, other readers do not identify a specific book. Another reader started with Rinser's novel *Die vollkommene Freude* (1962) 'The Complete Happiness' (a portrayal of a family of the intellectual German middle class), for example, but there were also other books that gave her strength: "With every additional book you gave and give me strength to continue – but exactly not in the despair, in the addiction, but in the liveliness, in the opening up of oneself, in the wanting to understand, in the empathy and the suffering in oneself, in short: in the flow with life and on the way that the master, as you call him, lead for us" (HS001320327 B-1). This reader not only found her way back to life, she also found God through the author, as it is God the letter writer is referring to when saying "master." At the end of her letter, she mentions

something that makes Rinser's influence very clear. "If someone, who sees that I am doing well, asks me today, who I get 'therapy' from, I say: 'From Luise Rinser.' And for this I thank you." According to this letter, Rinser is someone, in her capacity as a writer, who gives *Lebenshilfe* and is something like a therapist for some readers.

Teenagers and young adults were especially grateful for Rinser's understanding. These young readers of the 1960s and 1970s did not feel understood by adults. It was different with Rinser, however, and one young reader let her know: "I know that you are just a human being like we others are too, but you at least listen to us young ones. You understand our fears" (HS001320327 D-1). The reason why young people felt understood by Rinser was that she wrote books like *Ich bin Tobias* (1966) when she was over 50, and she was over 60 when she wrote *Bruder Feuer* (1976). On the back cover of the 1979 edition, Rinser herself said about *Tobias*:

Was ich wohl mit dem Tobias gemeint habe? Wie konnte ich so einen zur Welt bringen, einen Zwanzigjährigen von heute, schwierig, nicht angenehm, mit Problemen, die nicht die meinen sind? Was mir beim Schreiben widerfuhr, erlebte ich nie vorher: dieser von mir konzipierte Tobias (ein desorientierter junger Mann, der mit seinem leiblichen Vater unzufrieden ist und glaubt, er sei ein uneheliches Kind) machte sich bald in einem Maße selbständig, daß ich nicht IHN schuf, sondern er MICH.

What could I have possibly meant with Tobias? How could I bring one like him into the world, a twenty-year-old of today, difficult, not pleasant, with problems that are not mine? What befell me while writing, I never experienced before: this Tobias I produced (a disoriented young man, who is unhappy with his biological father and believes he is an illegitimate child) made himself immediately independent, so that I did not create HIM, but he created ME.

Especially *Bruder Feuer* was met with approval by young people, which they kept telling Rinser through their letters. They responded to the issues of fear and insecurities of young people and to the alternative way of living, detached from material things.

Another reader specifically calls Rinser's books *Lebenshilfe*. She writes that she has read *Wachsender Mond* (1993) ('Growing Moon') and that she reads everything by Rinser with excitement, "because everything written by you constitutes a *Lebenshilfe* as well" (HS001320327 C-1). Rinser's work is also *Lebenshilfe* for the son of another letter writer. The son is a drug addict and works at a kibbutz. The mother tells Rinser about a letter he wrote to her: "The book by Luise Rinser totally builds me up. It is one of the books that I almost do not want

to read, because I am sad when it is over” (HS001320327 C-2). The book he is referring to is *Kriegsspielzeug* (1978) (‘War Toy’), one of the diaries. This is not the only time that Rinser either hears about or from a drug addict who got help from her books. Many letters, if they don’t just comment on her books, are from people who either have problems with drugs or deal with other serious problems, illnesses of body or mind. One reader shows her gratitude accordingly: “I rejoiced in your books and had help. Especially the help means something because I have serious nervous diseases” (HS001320327 D-2). But not all people who got help from Rinser’s books are sick or an addict. Others are in the midst of a life crisis from which Rinser helps them to emerge, showing them a way out of their desperation with her books. A young reader writes that she wanted to quit university because she was in such distress:

Some time before, a good friend of mine loaned me your book “Den Wolf umarmen.” I read it during that time, and it became a saving companion. [...] Then it came out of me like a boost, like a power that was located in the underground: of course I am capable of finishing my studies! [...] I do not know how you do it, but you appeal to my deepest desires: to stay strong and steadfast, to fulfill the tasks I gave myself with all my power. [...] Dear Frau Rinser, I want to thank you that you have so much courage for change, for transformation on the inside and with that give me courage as well. (HS001320327 K-5)

The reader’s gratitude to Rinser for the encouragement to change oneself was in return surely a validation for Rinser to continue in this way, to keep writing books that would touch her readers to still have the courage for change and also an incentive to keep the dialogue with her readers alive.

For some readers, Rinser’s books are not enough for *Lebenshilfe*; they ask her directly for help solving their problems. The problems vary, but they are similar in one aspect: the hope of the reader that Rinser can help them. Some deal with their lost faith while others write about their relationship and marriage problems and others again talk about loneliness and hopelessness. A review of the letters that mention specifically that Rinser replied to the letter writer makes clear that Rinser answered especially those readers who tell her about their problems. This can be seen by the fact that one can find several letters by people who told Rinser about their problems and who have written to Rinser several times. A letter by a 22-year-old man shows this very well. “It is admirable, with how much love you answered my two letters to date – and for that I am very very grateful! I took your advice to heart, and maybe I was able to get a little closer to ‘progress’” (HS001320327 K-3).

Here it becomes obvious that Rinser apparently replied to the letters of her readers in a very understanding way, and that they appreciated this. Furthermore,

some readers wrote more than one letter to Rinser in the hope for more advice. The letter of one reader makes clear how directly readers turn to Rinser in order to get help.

Actually, I didn't mean to write you the way I'm doing now. If I wanted to write to you then only to thank you for your books, to say how much you have given me through your books. But I can't do it like that anymore, I can't anymore. At the moment I'm at my end, totally at the end. I've been sitting around for days, not knowing what to do, taking pills to calm myself down, because I suffocate because of restlessness, drinking red wine every evening just to go to bed with a headache. (HS001320327 K-2)

This indirect but clear call for help from a reader who apparently deals with depression and who evidently is looking for a *Seelsorgerin* 'carer of the soul' in Rinser was probably a challenge for the author. Other letter writers are more direct and ask for help point blank. "I can't tell you anything positive about myself again, unfortunately, and so I want to take refuge with you and ask you for your advice and help, after you helped me recently with your dear and helpful letter" (HS001320327 M). This excerpt shows that Rinser replied to some readers multiple times, giving help and advice.

Occasionally, Rinser emerges as *Seelsorgerin*. The term *Seelsorger* is not used in its literal meaning, namely that a clergyman or minister gives advice, but Rinser does still respond to religious problems and crises of faith as well. Rinser herself had a very close relationship to Catholicism (and issues with it) and she was friends with religious leaders as well (for example Karl Rahner). With Rinser's help, some people have found their way back to their faith, and one can use the term *Seelsorge* in that sense. This becomes especially clear in one letter: "Through your books, I have found God again. I believe, I recognized the right path. God is the NEVERTHELESS and BUT of our time. To find God means to avow oneself" (HS001320327 L). Another woman writes that she found her courage to face life and the path back to faith through Rinser (HS001320327 S-2). These examples show that the author gives her readers *Lebenshilfe* as well as *Glaubenshilfe* 'help with faith' and that she tends to their mental and emotional well-being.

After looking at some examples that show how Rinser responded to her readers' plea for help, we have to ask about the responsibility that Rinser has towards her readers. The responsibility that is put on Rinser with the letters and especially with the pleas for advice is occasionally asking for a lot. One reader seems to take the word *Lebenshilfe* very literally and writes the following letter to the author:

Honored Frau Rinser! You will be surprised to hear from me, but because I have long been an admirer of you, I just have to write to you today. As a result of a nameless grief, I am in such desperation, that I'm planning to end my life by suicide. I can't calm my conscience over this plan and therefore ask you, if an unhappy person like me has the right to lay hand on oneself. If you think yes, maybe you would like to send a comforting goodbye note. (HS001320327 B-6)

This reader goes very far with the trust he puts in Rinser and especially with what he is asking from her. It is not known if and how Rinser answered, because this is the only letter from this reader that can be found in the archive, but this letter asks a lot of the author and imposes a substantial responsibility on her. While most readers do ask for her advice and some are in desperate situations, the desperation of above quoted reader is immense. Rinser makes her feelings on this topic very clear in her diary *Wir Heimatlosen* ('We Displaced People'), even though this is not a direct response to a reader: "Nach dem gestrigen Gespräch mit einer körperlich und seelisch Leidenden fühle ich mich beinahe krank, mit den selben Symptomen wie die Kranke. [...] Bei mir ist die Kraft der Identifikation sehr ausgeprägt. Ich lasse mich beladen mit den Lasten anderer" (*Wir Heimatlosen* 141). 'After I talked to a physically and mentally suffering person yesterday, I almost feel as sick as the person with the same symptoms. [...] The power of identification is very distinct within me. I let myself be burdened by the burdens of others.'

Finally, we have to return to Lejeune's autobiographical pact and ask how the relationship between Rinser and her readers can be evaluated and understood. The readers put a lot of trust in Rinser and believed that they knew her through the very personal genres of diary and autobiography. One letter makes this particularly clear: "I also had the pleasure to acquire your newest diary chronicles "Wachsender Mond" shortly before my birthday and read them with excitement as the report about the emotional development, the continuation of your life story, which I believe I know a little, like a personal letter from you" (HS001320327 C-1). Other readers also imply that they think they know Rinser. A 20-year-old woman writes: "I got to know you pretty well through intensive reading, even if only a tiny part of your personality, but this part fascinates me" (HS001320327 K-1). Someone else confirms that many readers have the impression of knowing the author and that they trust Rinser, despite knowing the author not as a person but as a character in her books: "Dear Frau Rinser, forgive me the intimate salutation, but because I know almost all your books and I also got to meet you in person in Freiburg, I feel a familiarity towards you, which makes every other salutation seem wrong" (HS001320327 N-1). Many readers express the trust they feel towards Rinser, and even if they don't say it directly, they do show it through the topics they are writing about and the problems they are telling her.

The question remains whether scholars can call the relationship between Rinser and her readers a friendship. In the publication *Psychologie sozialer Beziehungen* (2009) ('Psychology of Social Relationships'), the authors define friendship as something "informal." but have difficulty defining the term more precisely (23). They draw on the following definition from A. E. Auhagen: "Freundschaft ist eine *dyadische, persönliche, informelle* Sozialbeziehung. [...] Die Existenz der Freundschaft beruht auf *Gegenseitigkeit*; sie besitzt für jede(n) der Freundinnen/Freunde einen *Wert*, welcher unterschiedlich starkes Gewicht haben und aus verschiedenen inhaltlichen Elementen zusammengesetzt sein kann" (Auhagen 17) 'Friendship is a *dyadic, personal, informal* social relationship. [...] The existence of friendship is based on *reciprocity*; it possesses a *value* for every friend, which can have different strong weight and can be compounded by different elements in terms of content.' It can be supposed that some readers probably saw a friend in Rinser, a confidante, a woman they believed to know. The readers do not really know her, however. They know a character, a text; maybe they have the impression of knowing her because they met her at a public reading. Even diaries and autobiographies are a text in which a character is created. Therefore, there is a distance between the author and the reader that makes it harder to build a personal relationship with the author. The readers forget this, however, and because of this they believe it is the author they know and whom they trust. From the reader's point of view, there is the desire to build a friendship, a close relationship to Rinser. Rinser, on the other hand, takes care of the readers, answers their letters, and tries to help them. But it is impossible to keep up a friendship with so many people. Yes, there is *Lebenshilfe*, as mentioned before, and Rinser tries to have a relationship that fosters trust with her readers. It is a close relationship, but it cannot be classified as friendship because it is not a mutual trust and appreciation. While the readers believe that they know Rinser very well because they have read her books, Rinser's knowledge of her readers is limited to their letters. It is an uneven relationship.

Some readers explicitly refer to Rinser as a friend, and they focus on the length of time that they have "known" Rinser. One reader shows this as follows: "Dear Luise, please allow that I use the informal you to address you. – You have become a friend in all those years that I have been reading your books" (HS001320327 S-3). The "Du" this reader uses in the original German is used to address someone who one knows for very long or very well. Another reader does not go as far as to use the informal address, but she still feels as if Rinser is a friend: "I have been reading your books for many years, and you have become – if I'm allowed to say something like that – a dear friend" (HS001320327 S-2). The feeling of friendship that the reader expresses, is based on the *Lebenshilfe*, and the encouragement to have faith taken from Rinser's books. This reader puts Rinser in the same category as the friends she has in real life: "Somehow I'm surprised by

this letter, but after “Winterfrühling“ (‘Winter Spring’) and half of “Dunkel“ (‘Dark,’) I’m not timid towards you anymore. You have become so humanly familiar like my friends” (HS001320327 S-1). The excerpts from these letters demonstrate clearly that it was important for some readers to believe that they had a friend in Rinser. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the friendship was one sided in the way that Rinser did not share her problems or seek advice from her readers specifically, however, she also got something out of the relationship, namely adoration and the feeling to be influential and helpful.

The influence Rinser has over her readers can also be called *Aufklärung* ‘education.’ This analysis of her reader correspondence validates that Rinser absolutely has an influence over her readers. One reader writes, for example, that he was inspired by *Bruder Feuer* to donate a bigger sum to the Africa aid in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi (HS001320327 B-2). Someone else tells her that in his opinion, *Bruder Feuer* should be given to everyone, especially to young people, because it entails so much truth. The book has given him food for thought for which he is very grateful to the author (HS001320327 B-4). Another reader writes about the influence Rinser’s books and person had over her: “Such people or rather women like you should exist more in this world, and I will try, where possible, to use and pass on what I learned from you” (HS001320327 B-5). One reader is going so far as to say that Rinser had a big part in reinforcing her worldview (HS001320327 B-3). She credits her with challenging her constantly as well as with advancing her growth (HS001320327 F-1). Someone else sees it the same way: “The statements of your books have an essential part in my Christian and therefore humane and mental development” (HS001320327 B-5). Rinser not only has influence over her readers’ worldviews or their spiritual growth but also over their views on women. “I oriented myself on ‘Nina’ or rather ‘Mitte des Lebens’ ‘Middle of Life’ and ‘Daniela,’ at least concerning my image of women” (HS001320327 F-2). With these female protagonists, Rinser created women who weren’t discouraged, even in the face of major life problems. These readers see Rinser less as a friend and more of an educator or a role model, someone they can shape their life after, or rather after the characters she created. This relationship is reciprocative as Rinser always wanted to educate and influence.

As demonstrated by my analysis of about 900 letters, there is little doubt about the nature of Rinser’s influence over the readers. Her influence on later readers, readers who read her books after her death, however, cannot be known. We know that Rinser reached her readers during her lifetime because of the letters they wrote. Today’s readers of her work do not have that opportunity. Rinser faced her readers and their problems by dealing with both and taking them seriously. The author manipulated her readers and saw herself as an educator. The way she writes her diaries by not just using personal experiences but also political and historical topics shows that she wanted to educate, and one can assume that Rinser also

wanted to educate so her readers would evolve in a direction she favored, and the readers would see the world as Rinser saw it, for example, being an empathic human being but also leaning towards the more liberal parties in Germany. This analysis of Rinser's work demonstrates that she became a person to whom readers built a trust without really knowing her. While she was alive, she was an author who appealed to readers and inspired trust, so that the readers turned to her with their problems. This unique relationship contributed to her reputation as a liked and respected author with a loyal following of readers.

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