

Margaret McCarthy

Braun, Rebecca. *Authors and the World: Literary Authorship in Germany*

Bloomsbury, 2022. 368 pp. \$130.

The title of Rebecca Braun's 2022 volume – *Authors and the World: Literary Authorship in Germany* – seems blandly prosaic, and readers might expect a dutiful cataloging of post-WWII authors and their resonance within and beyond Germany. Yet her introduction quickly weaves together something far more complex and compelling, with only brief nods to Roland Barthes' and Michel Foucault's circumscribed notions of authorship. Drawing on the socio-criticism and literary sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and Jerome Meizoz, she imagines a far more animated, iterative framework for understanding literary production in a "Kulturnation" that has long venerated public intellectuals. (Indeed, the 180 literary prizes it currently offers far exceed any other European nation in number.) Literature, she argues, involves "different drivers, both human and non-human, that will determine what 'the literary' looks like." It requires attention to "[...] the material and sociological norms that influence whose voice gets heard and which figures are more likely to be cast as representative when placing literary activity within a broad public setting" (4–5).

In the widest sense, *Authors and the World* provides a cultural history that draws from film and televisual documentaries, journalistic pieces, political speeches, and sometimes material objects. At the same time, Braun performs close readings on literary texts that consider their linguistic, affective, and symbolic "world-making significance" (18). Here her framework consists of four organizing categories that include celebratory, commemorative, satirical, and utopian modes of authorship. These demarcations originate not so much with the authors themselves than with how they are placed – or place themselves – in a broader physical and intellectual context. Throughout her analysis of various texts, Braun examines the way such modes often overlap, moderate, and inflect each other, stoking historically familiar images of Romantic writers in garrets, Enlightenment men of science and letters in royal courts, and the post-WWII politically committed writer.

At the same time, Braun's introduction sets up a juxtaposition that expands and complicates these touchstones, one which unsurprisingly brings gender to

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the fore. Once a much lauded, award-winning, and highly visible author in various media realms, Gabriele Wohmann ultimately faded from view, her diminished status already glimpsed in the epithet “Vielschreiberin” that contemporary critics applied to her. Tellingly, a 1990 TV autobiopic, *Schreiben müssen: Ein elektronisches Tagebuch*, depicted Wohmann in rural settings interacting with others over coffee and cake. Though a celebratory portrait, it incorporated, as Braun observes, “a regional inflection that will work against her in the long run” (12).

Goethe’s trajectory relied on its own mediating frames, which Braun links first and foremost to Johann Peter Eckermann’s three volume *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (1836–48). Eckermann prepared the ground, Braun argues, by giving us Goethe the “world author,” and later scholarship embraced the designation “Welt-Literatur” as a definitive frame for understanding his work. Taken together, Braun observes, “this unlikely pairing helps us grasp authorship as the iterative product of an expanded network of people, processes and material things that [...] relativize the autonomy of individual authors with the literature network [...]” (16). In this regard, the “world” invoked in the book’s title indicates something far less grandiose than Goethe’s branding via Eckermann. Instead, it signals a living, breathing network that oxygenates authors to greater or lesser degrees.

Individual chapters mine similarly unexpected juxtapositions, with authors like Günter Grass, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Heinrich Böll as one pole granted representative status in the early years of the Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Braun also examines authors like Gisela Elsner, whose experiences, she argues, provide an “inverse” of Grass. Such attention uncovers alternative viewpoints not fostered by the normative structures more inclined to celebrate the *Gruppe 47*, for example. Parallel to the canonical authors above, she also examines the work of German Democratic Republic authors Johannes R. Becher, Anna Seghers, and Christa Wolf and how their status emerged within a state-sanctioned rubric designating them as “exemplary pedagogues.” Other chapters focus on major publishing houses like Suhrkamp, with Siegfried Unseld as a shaping force for fifty years, and Walter Höllerer’s influence at both the Technische Universität and the *Literarisches Colloquium* in Berlin. The final chapters examine individual case studies in the wake of reunification, with an emphasis on the performative formats impacting Christoph Ransmayr, Herta Müller, and Felicitas Hoppe (chapter five) and Maja Haderlap, Olga Martynova, and Katja Petrowskaja (chapter six). This latter grouping, of course, bespeaks a turn towards transnational authorship, which diminishes the centrality of Germanness and shifts the “place-bound understanding of cultural affiliation” of post-WWII authors (23). Significantly, the Austrian literary network has become an important driver by awarding many authors of non-traditional backgrounds with the annual Ingeborg Bachmann prize.

Three highly engrossing and substantive interviews with the authors Ulrike Draesner, Olga Martynova, and Ulrike Almut Sandig round out this excellent volume. Braun thus takes on the Eckermann mantle, performing and contributing to the iterative process that ensures their voices will continue to matter to the wider world. *Authors and the World's* deeply researched and original approach deserves its own share of attention beyond the realm of German literary scholarship.

