

## Notes on JENNY ERPENBECK

Jenny Erpenbeck was born in East Berlin in 1967. “It probably wasn’t much grayer than the Western part,” she said in a First Person account in *The Paris Review* in 2014. “It’s just that there were no billboards and neon signs on the bullet-pocked walls and in front of the vacant lots full of rubble.” But she remembers “a sort of small-town peacefulness...a sense of being at home in a closed-off—and for that reason entirely safe—world.” Her parents would take her to roller skate in the area right in front of the Wall “where it was as quiet as a village...no through traffic beyond. This was where the world came to an end. For a child what could be better than growing up at the end of the world?”

Erpenbeck grew up in a family of intellectuals and writers. “Everybody in my family sat at desks,” she said in an interview in the Australian *Quarterly Conversation* in 2012. The sound of typewriters was common. Her father, John, is widely known as a physicist, philosopher, and author. Her mother, Doris Kiliyas, who died in 2008, was a translator of Arabic literature into German. She is credited with advancing the worldwide recognition of Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz. Erpenbeck’s own family is a microcosm of 20<sup>th</sup> century German history. Her maternal grandmother living in Poland was sent to a prison camp in Siberia and survived; her paternal grandparents, Fritz Erpenbeck and Hedda Zinner, were communists who, fleeing the Nazis, immigrated to the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Miraculously, they survived Stalin and returned to Berlin after the war to become leading figures in East Germany’s literary establishment.

Perhaps because of the prolific careers of her family members, Jenny was not pressured into becoming an author and felt free to pursue other passions. She first trained as a bookbinder and then as an opera director. She directed her own productions in different opera houses in Germany and Austria. After about fifteen operatic productions, when her child, Franz, born in 2002, started school, she switched to writing. For her first book of stories, called in English *The Old Child*, she carried out a crazy experiment, enrolling for a month in a secondary school, pretending to be 17 when she was actually 27. (If you saw

her photo you'd understand why nobody guessed!) The book garnered her a reputation as one of "Günter Grass's grandchildren" and the weekly *Der Spiegel* showed her on the cover with her head resting on a tin drum.

In 2007, she published *The Book of Words* and in 2010 *Visitation*. In 2014, she and her superb translator Susan Bernofsky shared the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize for *The End of Days*. The novels are stylistically original. *Visitation* gives the reader the stories of twelve people who make their home in a forested property on a Brandenburg lake outside Berlin. The narrative weaves in and out of history and the house is a silent observer of many of the horrific events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: as the book jacket says, "tearing open wounds and offering moments of reconciliation." "Erpenbeck is the weaver bird of German fiction," says an interview in *The Guardian* in 2015: "Her stories densely thatch motifs into one another; endings loop back to beginnings and invite you to read her books back to front." In *The Quarterly Conversation*, Erpenbeck says the house was modeled on the summerhouse of her grandparents. "I always start with a very personal issue. Then once I start to look at it closely it becomes historical." In *Visitation*, "I started with my own story about the house, and then I saw that there were so many stories involved. Stories that occurred long before I came to the place that I write about." She does a great deal of research for her novels. "It started with the Jewish family from *Visitation*. I wanted to find out who they were. I went to an archive in Berlin, I found some family members who had survived, and who were still living close to Berlin." "Then I found an old lady who had the same type of memories that I have because she spent her childhood there as well. She learned to swim there, and she picked berries from the same bushes as I did. This was a kind of research that was very moving for me." "Archives are places full of treasures, you can always find it if you look carefully enough."

*The End of Days* also experiments with narrative form. The novel is composed of five shorter "books" each leading to a different death of the same protagonist (she is not named). The books are separated by brief "intermezzos" in which the omniscient narrator interjects to show how actions taken or not taken lead to a different end. How could it all

have gone differently? As one critic in the *Kenyon Review* states, “It is a probing portrait of various possibilities for one woman’s life.” Like *Visitation*, it gives the reader an overview of the often dark historical events in the twentieth century. “Erpenbeck’s speculative use of narrative depicts how altering the slightest of actions—turning right at a street corner instead of left—results in drastically different fates. At the same time, she unearths what’s hidden in the lives we lead, where and how boundaries are defined, and how in an instant the roles we inhabit can change.”

In an interview she gave at Harvard recently, for the Writers Speak series in March of 2018, Erpenbeck explained how this, the differences that come about simply by chance, connects to her latest book, *Go, Went, Gone*. Who survives the treacherous passage by sea from North Africa and who doesn’t? In the same interview she discussed her approach to writing: to waste no word, leave out everything not necessary. “I like to cut. I am my first reader: if I get bored then something is wrong.”

The interview in *The Guardian* in 2015 suggests that if Jenny Erpenbeck’s novels are “East German,” perhaps it is because linear storytelling simply doesn’t reflect experience. In a country whose borders were redrawn as frequently over the last two centuries as they were in Germany, a straightforward narrative may seem false. Erpenbeck says, “I do believe that East German authors have an experiential advantage from having lived through a period of such radical change. I grew up constantly being reminded that I lived on the poorer side of Germany. Then the whole thing gets turned upside down and you suddenly belong to the wealthier side. But you can’t forget. You can’t forget what it felt like to be on the other side of history. It allows you to relate differently to other people, especially those for whom things haven’t always fallen into their laps.”

So it must have seemed a natural progression for this perceptive young German writer, who knew so well how borders become explanations of identity, to turn her attention to the plight of the African refugees in her country. *Gehen, ging, gegangen* was published in Germany in 2015.