

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School
of Theatre and Film

Theatre and Film, Johnny Carson School of

7-2016

Rev. of *Encrypting the Past: The German-Jewish Holocaust Novel of the First Generation* by Kirstin Gwyer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. x, 246 p. ISBN 9780198709930.

William Grange

University of Nebraska, wgrange@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theatrefacpub>



Part of the [German Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Grange, William, "Rev. of *Encrypting the Past: The German-Jewish Holocaust Novel of the First Generation* by Kirstin Gwyer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. x, 246 p. ISBN 9780198709930." (2016). *Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Theatre and Film*. 21.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/theatrefacpub/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theatre and Film, Johnny Carson School of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Creative Activity, School of Theatre and Film by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Kirstin Gwyer. *Encrypting the Past: The German-Jewish Holocaust Novel of the First Generation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. x, 246 p. ISBN 9780198709930. £65.00 (hardcover).

This superbly researched monograph re-investigates (and in some cases, re-discovers) works of fiction written in the aftermath of the Holocaust experience. Critics at the time of publication often found such narratives by “first generation” German-Jewish writers incomprehensible; some branded them unethical, immoral, or worse. They were narrative attempts to “express the ineffable” (20), after all. It was better, some believed, to allow preterition to be the better part of disclosure. Author Kirstin Gwyer successfully debunks such biases, a process she calls “mapping the blind spot” (18). The narratives of H. G. Adler (1910-1988), Jenny Rosenbaum Aloni (1917-1993), Elisabeth Augustin (1903-2001), Erich Fried (1921-1988), and Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1916-1991) constitute her primary focus. Gwyer then makes a surprising turn in a concluding chapter on W. G. Sebald (1944-2001), who unlike the others, had no direct contact with the Holocaust and was not Jewish.

Among Gwyer’s most valuable observations is exposure of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno’s self-warranted postulation, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, eroding the recognition as to why it has become impossible to write poetry today,” as oxymoronic. The enthusiastic critical response accorded has led to constructions such as *thinking the unthinkable*, *imagining the unimaginable*, or *speaking the ineffable*. The problem with such fantasies, Gwyer notes, is the relegation of the Holocaust to someplace outside any possible exegesis. Many regarded the novels of H. G. Adler, who spent two years at Theresienstadt and another two in Auschwitz, merely as “monuments to the author’s survival, not as texts in their own right” (62). Gwyer squelches comparable analyses by probing characters in novels by Adler, Augustin, and Aloni, who exist in an “unhoused past, meandering through a realm suffused with

images of both the recent and the distant past” (93). Everything seems insurmountable to them, because exile and psychological disruption have resulted in the “traumatic persistence” (30) of loss.

Finding oneself in an unhoused past is nothing new; Dante’s Guelphs and Ghibellines suffered similar relegation, both in the Fifth and the Sixth Circles of Hell. Characters in Aloni’s *Der Wartesaal* [*The Waiting Room*] lurch likewise between bewilderment and perplexity, as they do in Augustin’s *Auswege* (the original title of which was *Labyrinth*). Complicating the sense of dislocation in Aloni’s narrator is her experience as a Jewish survivor who collaborated with the Nazis. Having successfully disguised her Jewish identity, she got a job with the SS typing up deportation lists; one of these lists contained the name of her own mother. Because time seems to be stretching behind her and also in front of her, she narrates her memories to an imaginary daughter. Navigating this kind of labyrinth is difficult, and Gwyer’s work is exemplary for “decrypting” the significance of such episodes. Erich Fried’s *Ein Soldat und ein Mädchen* [*A Soldier and a Girl*] dislocates “meaning” throughout, creating an atmosphere encrypted in what Freud termed *das Unheimliche*, best understood in English, Gwyer believes, as “uncanny.” Her treatment of Hildesheimer’s *Tynset* (1965) and *Masante* (1973) recalls a recent analysis by Mary Cosgrove. Both novels contain numerous “micronarratives,” but the atmosphere in both is, instead of “uncanniness,” one encrypted in pervasive *Schrecken*, or terror.

The case of W. G. Sebald is altogether different, and its inclusion in this volume is as surprising as it is altogether welcome and convincing. How does a non-Jewish writer with no direct connection to the Holocaust figure in an analysis of encryption? By creating work which is

“in a category unto itself” (207), venturing into “wholly uncharted territory” (208). The result is “an eloquent spokesman of the Holocaust and an effective guardian of its traumatic memory” (208). He was barely one-year old when the war ended and grew up largely ignorant of its consequences. Family photographs, documentary films, and newsreels from the period, however, began to have a cumulative effect. He fell under the shadows of *nicht erlebten Schrecknissen* [unperceived horrors], never able to emerge from underneath them.

In Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), the narrator encounters Jacques Austerlitz, whose Czech parents sent him as a tiny child to Wales. In his sixties, Austerlitz returns to Prague, seeking to find traces of the family left behind. There are very few left, and he suffers a nervous breakdown after visiting the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Sebald’s writing features the digressions, sudden revelations, illogical conclusions, and other stratagems characteristic of authors in this volume. Sebald’s accessibility sets him apart from the others. His prose is not tortured but almost transparent; his narrator listens empathically and responds to Austerlitz’s account. While the narrator cannot overcome a sense of “belatedness” (222), he nevertheless becomes a “postmemorial witness” (217) committed enough to Austerlitz and his search for scattered memories, but “belated enough to preserve what minuscule traces of Austerlitz’s ineffectual life are left” (217).

Sebald’s strategy of breaking through the unrepresentability of the Holocaust conflicts with the insistence among some scholars that any attempt to “normalize” Hitler would be tantamount to rehabilitation. Kirstin Gwyer’s book neither normalizes nor demonizes; it decrypts perceptions which to date have often remained inchoate and even impenetrable.

--William Grange

