

Introduction: Ulrike Almut Sandig's universe

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Ulrike Almut Sandig has established herself as one of the most important German voices of the current literary generation.¹ She is a writer with extraordinary range, whose social and political vision of local and global interconnectedness is expressed in terms which are at once profound and playful, that spring from a distinctive combination of existing traditions with new possibilities for literature in German. Varied in genre and style, her work to date is invested in the creation of fictional worlds that are grounded in specific realities. Like individual planets within a solar system, each work has its own distinctive character, its flora and fauna – from the densely populated, multifarious ecosystems of her two major prose collections to the more mysterious atmospheres of her poetry volumes.² And at the furthest reaches, yet orbiting the same centre, are works such as her 2017 film libretto; in between, collaborations, rewritings, performance work and ephemera. Each work represents a coherent whole, but neither their positions within her emerging body of work, nor their relation to one another, is fixed.

The six essays in this volume, the first major critical approach to Sandig, offer numerous reasons for thinking of her work in this way. For one thing, the contributions on her poetry, prose, films, performances, collaborations and translations show her as a writer with a markedly global imagination whose works are starting to have international reach. Her writing has been translated into several languages, and she regularly collaborates with writers in Germany, Ukraine, India, New Zealand, the UK and elsewhere. Indeed, her connections in Britain have proven particularly important for both her writing practice and the reception of her work: a regular visitor to the UK, she works closely with her main English translator Karen Leeder, has contributed to numerous UK literary festivals and worked with British students and staff as a Writer in Residence at several British universities, including Nottingham and Lancaster. In 'Mein Löffel, mein Fluss, mein Pfefferminzsprechen', the previously unpublished autofictional text that opens our volume, Sandig's I-narrator talks about her relationship with language in a way that encapsulates the force of these complex currents:

Meine Sprache liegt nicht irgendwo vergraben, sie ist ziemlich beweglich. Vielleicht lässt sie sich besser als Fluss denken. Kaum steigen wir ein zweites Mal rein, schwimmen wir in ganz anderem Wasser, mal frei nach Heraklit, dem Gewässerverschmutzung noch ein Fremdwort gewesen sein muss. Kaum hör ich ein zweites Mal hin, hat sie sich schon wieder verändert.

¹ Her work has received numerous awards and accolades, including the Lyrikerpreis Meran (2006), the Leonce-und-Lena-Preis (2009), the Märkisches Stipendium für Literatur (2012), the Droste-Förderpreis (2012), the Literaturpreis des Kulturkreises der deutschen Wirtschaft (2017), and the Wilhelm-Lehmann-Preis (2018).

² We might think here of what authors of science fiction and fantasy frequently refer to as a fictional 'universe': the trope of linking the fictional settings of multiple works in this way can serve as the basis of a coherent artistic project, a platform for knowing in-jokes, and all manner of functions in between. For example, one might recall Günter Grass's Tulla Pokriefke in *Katz und Maus*, *Hundejahre* and *Im Krebsgang*, the various minor characters in James Joyce's *Ulysses* who appear in his short story 'The Dead', Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Ursula le Guin's Earthsea or the multi-million dollar Marvel 'universe'.

The international aspect of her work, at the level of both text and practice, makes her a writer who speaks to the age of globalisation in more ways than one. Sandig is profoundly interested in questions of scale, voice and perspective. Although neither a nature writer nor an environmental activist in any traditional way, her work nevertheless conveys a deeper sense of what Timothy Clark has called ‘derangements of scale’ – the butterfly effect, the global interconnectedness of matter, social and natural. Indeed, it is also true of her understanding of language and its concealed complexity: ‘Nichts, das mit Sprache zu tun hat, ist purer Zufall’.³ Her focus is often on the small, singular and marginal, yet singular observations become highly political because of how these seemingly small-scale acts and correlations reflect a much larger scale. This is evident in the delicate attention her work pays to certain spaces and places, such as the multi-layered *Russenwälder* which are relics of Soviet occupation, and the generic *Süden*, southern Europe or Australasia, or the Baltic coast of northern Germany. Peter Thompson addresses the challenge of bringing this latter, quintessentially German, landscape to life for Anglophone readers in his translation of the story ‘Gegen das Verschwinden’, published in English for the first time in this volume. It is also evident in her interest in travel and her sense of ‘deep time’, geological epochs and a projected dystopian future. Thus, her interest in the global, and her explorations of the position of the human within the global: broad concerns are, as Leeder puts it, planetary systems, ‘always mapped onto the local, the fractured individual in the “thick of it” [...] all.’⁴

Looking to the more recent past, we might also consider Sandig’s creative output as part of various post-war traditions spanning both East and West Germany, one example of the double voicing which Leeder discusses in her essay in this volume. Sandig – who was born in 1979 in Großenhain, Saxony, experienced the GDR as a child in the household of her Lutheran pastor father and her mother Allmut who took to teaching religious education to school children after the *Wende*. Sandig undertook her studies and first ventures as a poet in post-*Wende* Leipzig – sets many of her prose pieces in a contemporary German society where references to the GDR have long blended into twenty-first century German life, where *Russenwald* meets *Plattenbau* meets Lidl, and the chequered biographies of some older characters contain references to faded GDR offices and events. However, these GDR references, if they can even be thought of in such terms, are often overshadowed by larger trajectories and geographical contexts, as Tom Smith’s essay in this volume shows in its description of Sandig’s ‘postcritical poetics’.

Sandig’s writing is original and highly self-reflective, yet at the same time her oeuvre reflects influences from and engagements with various literary traditions and forms. Bartel and Boa show in their contributions on Sandig’s two prose collections that these *Geschichten* draw upon yet also move beyond nineteenth-century narrative forms, the fairy-tale, the fantastic or poetic realism. We read the legacies of great Modernist writers such as Kafka, and the influence of post-war traditions, of Grass and Aichinger. Nicola Thomas’s essay in this volume shows how Sandig’s poetry reworks textual sources including Grimm’s *Märchen* and the poetry of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Here, a broader fascination with the magical, the mysterious and the sensual, the afterlife of Romanticism is clearly discernible.

Sandig’s strong interest in music and performance – her works are composed with an equal view to both print and audiovisual performance – also locates her within certain

³ ‘Mein Löffel, mein Fluss, mein Pfefferminzsprech’, p. ??.

⁴ Karen Leeder, ‘Introduction’, in *Thick of It*, by Ulrike Almut Sandig, trans. by Karen Leeder (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull, 2018), p. xv.

contemporary schools of performance poetry.⁵ Although some critics have compared her work to that of ‘slam’ or spoken work artists such as Holly McNish, Kate Tempest or Julia Engelmann, her quite different way of engaging with politics and arguably more sophisticated formal arrangements set her apart from these performers. Moreover, where they belong to a scene with its roots in hip-hop, Sandig seems instead to inherit something of a 1980s punk-performance style, and she collaborates with sound-artists to create a fusion of sound and text. Embedded in her written work, too – her poems and short narratives – there are strong references to performance, to sounds and rhymes and the orality of her *Geschichten*. At the same time her performances are firmly connected with her writing, the extensive literary tradition upon which it reflects, as well as the different languages connected to Sandig’s work, be it through translations or collaborations.

Like many poets of the digital age, not only does Sandig publish traditional volumes, but she also produces exciting work beyond the parameters of the neatly-bound book format. Her interest in alternative modes of production and circulation can be traced back to her earliest work, most notably the two projects which made poetry publically visible (and audible) in her then-home city of Leipzig from 2001 to 2003: ‘Augenpost’, which involved posting poetry on street furniture: and live gigs in the ‘Ohrenpost’ series. These were followed by a first volume of poetry, *Zunder* (2005) in which, as Leeder has noted, her distinctive voice was immediately evident, in ‘poems that burn, crackle and sparkle, shedding light, and darting off in all directions’.⁶ The next full volume, *Streumen* (2007) appeared two years later; in the intervening year came a first album of poetry-songs, in collaboration with Marlen Pelly, *der tag, an dem alma kamillen kaufte*, 2006.

This parallel attention to the written and spoken or performed word has remained a key facet of Sandig’s practice ever since, and indeed, her next volume of poems, *Dickicht* (2011), appeared in the same year as *Märzwald: Dichtung für die Freunde der Popmusik* (2011), a second musical collaboration with Pelly. *Dickicht* develops several of the key themes of both *Zunder* and *Streumen*: once again, language is playfully manipulated, places and landscapes form vital points of references, and the poems oscillate between the quotidian and the quasi-fantastical; this third volume, though, also begins to foreground an interest in the body and corporeality which remained latent in Sandig’s earlier work.

Her most recent volume *ich bin ein Feld voller Raps verstecke die Rehe und leuchte wie dreizehn Ölgemälde übereinandergelegt* (2016) takes this interest in the subject in new directions – linguistically, physically, poetically and, above all, politically. One extended sequence updates Grimm’s tales for the era of *Mobilfunk* and *Datentransfer*; elsewhere, themes of gender, conflict, and migration are more prominent than in her earlier work.

Since those early collaborations, Sandig has also continued to collaborate with other artists – most notably musicians – and the publication of *Feld voller Raps* was accompanied by the release of a mini-album with the same title in collaboration with Sebastian Reuter. This mediation between textuality and orality can be seen as yet another aspect of the double-voicing which Leeder, in an essay for this volume, highlights as a key feature of her work. Sandig work with New Zealand poet and singer-songwriter Hinemoana Baker has also proven fruitful, resulting in collaborative performances and multimedia work. Most recently, Sandig and the Ukrainian sound-artist Grigory Semenchuk have worked together on a score for the 1927 Walter Ruttmann film *Berlin: Symphonie einer Großstadt* and, under the name of

⁵ Examples of Sandig’s multimedia work can be found on her website <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de>.

⁶ Karen Leeder, *Thick of It* (Seagull, 2017), p. xii.

the ‘poetry-band’ LANDSCHAFT, on an album. In these latest projects, as Rebecca May Johnson’s contribution in this volume demonstrates, Sandig displays her continuing commitment to extending the reach of her work beyond the printed page, and engaging with other media, placing her firmly in the tradition of ‘media poetry’. At the same time, however, her printed volumes show a clear interest in the potential of the traditional print medium, especially insofar as they are carefully constructed around distinctive structures – divided into sections with programmatic titles and with sequences ordered in careful, often symmetrical patterns.

It is not only in formal terms that Sandig is a writer who reinvents tradition with a keen ear for the (late) modern world. The overarching thematic concerns of her poetic work intersect with those of her prose fiction, and are at once resolutely contemporary and somehow timeless: images of love and loss; of childhood play and of epistemological uncertainty; of environments and worlds. To date Sandig has published two highly acclaimed collections of prose, *Flamingos. Geschichten* (2010) und *Buch gegen das Verschwinden. Geschichten* (2015). The subtitles of both books emphasize the importance of story-telling in texts that play with the form and content of old and new stories, mixing echoes of 19th-century literary forms such as the fantastic and poetic realism with sci-fi adventures in Sandig’s unique narrative style. The earlier volume *Flamingos* promotes – with clear reference to Rilke’s poem ‘Die Flamingos’ – an open-endedness and deliberate indeterminacy that is echoed in the narrative *Fluchtpunkte* of the protagonists in eleven loosely connected stories, as Bartel outlines in her essay. Boa notes in her contribution, that like *Flamingos*, *Buch gegen das Verschwinden* is full of motivic resonances, but that the last of the six stories effectively turns the collection into a cycle full thematic echoes, that emerge on re-reading, to do with different kinds of disappearance, whether of individuals or of species, on different time scales, whether that of human life or geological deep time.

Sandig’s future output promises to stimulate further critical engagement building on the essays in this volume. Her language, too, promises to go on changing:

Die Zukunft meiner Sprache, ich stelle sie mir als geschliffenen Kiesel vor. Kein Wort zuviel, hohe Präzision mit wenigen Silben. Ein Pidgin-Deutsch, mit dem sich alle, die in meinem Land ihr Zuhause finden, verständigen könnten. Wortfolgen aus Syrien, Zärtlichkeiten aus Vietnam, Verkleinerungsformen aus Schlesien und der Schweiz, fehlende Präpositionen aus der Türkei, Verwandtschaftsbezeichnungen aus Afghanistan, Gedichte aus Saudi-Arabien und Kosakenlieder aus der Ukraine, geschlechtsneutrale Suffixe aus der Genderbewegung, weltenglische Flüche.⁷

There is no doubt that Sandig will continue to shape worlds in language with rich creative possibilities. It is clear, too, that her language itself will continue to be shaped by the hyperconnected, globalised world within which she writes.

⁷ *ibid.*