

1995

Phillip McKnight: Understanding Christoph Hein

Reinhard Andress
Saint Louis University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Andress, Reinhard (1995) "Phillip McKnight: Understanding Christoph Hein," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 22: Iss. 2.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v22i2.1185>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *GDR Bulletin* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

opera, at least in its original form. Instead, Wilhelm Pieck summoned Brecht and Dessau to a meeting on 24 March 1951 with himself and other leading political figures, as a result of which the two of them agreed to produce a modified version of the opera which would then be performed in the autumn and also be made available to theaters outside of the GDR. For their part, Brecht and Dessau were prepared to compromise by revising the opera in ways which would make it easier to understand and therefore more acceptable to the Party, including changing the title from *Das Verhör des Lukullus* to the more explicit *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* as well as inserting new arias "positiven Inhalts" (206) and a clearly optimistic ending. The first public performance of the revised version took place at the Staatsoper in October 1951, quickly followed by the West German premiere in Frankfurt a.M. in January 1952. If any of the creative artists involved were tempted to regard this as anything more than a temporary victory over what Arnold Zweig had termed "den amüsichen Bürokratiens" (306), however, they were soon to be disabused. Only two years later a similarly destructive controversy was to be ignited by Hanns Eisler's opera *Johann Faustus*.

IAN WALLACE
University of Bath, England

McKnight, Phillip. *Understanding Christoph Hein.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995. xvi + 199 pp. ISBN 1-570-03015-4. \$39.95.

This monograph comprises one volume in the series *Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature* under the general editorship of James Hardin. It is a series intended as a guide for undergraduate and graduate students and non-academic readers, and it emphasizes the sociological and historical background of a specific author's work. This is an approach that is particularly appropriate for a writer like Christoph Hein because of the strong influence exerted on his writing by Walter Benjamin's work in historical materialism. As McKnight clearly demonstrates, Hein frequently follows Benjamin's principles of *Montage* and often writes about how ordinary lives are touched by larger historical events. On several occasions, McKnight talks in terms of Hein writing "social biography."

What the author is ultimately attempting to achieve is to keep the past alive for the present, for, as McKnight concludes in reference to Hein's *Horns Ende*, "to extinguish memory is to extinguish humanity."

The book begins with a chronology of Hein's life; an introductory chapter then provides the reader with more biographical information and background material on writing in the GDR. The next four chapters individually treat Hein's longer prose works: *Der Fremde Freund* (1982), *Horns Ende* (1985), *Der Tangospieler* (1989), and *Das Napoleon-Spiel* (1993). Additional chapters deal separately with the author's dramatic works, short prose, and critical essays. There are some concluding remarks, followed by a bibliography which includes selected critical works.

McKnight's analysis is clearly written and avails itself of secondary sources but not excessively.

The study gains particularly through the author's personal conversations with Hein over a period of seven summers McKnight spent in the GDR. As universal as Hein's themes may be, McKnight is especially good at providing the GDR and/or general German context which ultimately served as the point of departure for Hein's writing. Examples of this are the role of *Öffentlichkeit* or the *Neues Ökonomisches System* in the GDR, or of the *Historikerstreit* in West Germany.

A very significant strength of McKnight's study is the 45-page and thus extensive treatment of *Horns Ende*, no doubt the most thorough analysis of this novel to date. This is all the more warranted as *Horns Ende* most closely reflects Hein's views on history as briefly discussed above. What is also fascinating is McKnight's presentation of the circumstances surrounding the publication and reception of the novel. According to a letter from Hein to McKnight, *Horns Ende* was the only belletristic work ever to appear in the GDR without being officially authorized. McKnight himself played a key role in the reception of the novel in the GDR since it was his review in *Sinn und Form* (March/April 1987) which broke the East German review ban on the novel, a point certainly worth incorporating into the main body of the study's text instead of modestly relegating it to a footnote.

A further strength of the study lies in the interpretation McKnight offers of *Das Napoleon-Spiel*, an interpretation that is as lucid as it can be of

Hein's most recent and very difficult post-*Wende* novel. McKnight sees the book within the context of the *Historikerstreit* and the Germans' attempt at relativizing the Nazi past. An important and interesting aspect that McKnight includes in his treatment of Hein's dramatic works is the varying stage receptions they received in East and West Germany.

This reviewer would like to offer two specific criticisms of *Understanding Christoph Hein*: In Chapter 1 the section on "Writing in East Germany" will no doubt leave particularly the non-academic reader, which this series purports to address, dissatisfied since it is somewhat sketchy, although additional background is provided in the same chapter in the section "Working in a 'Reader's Land'" after an excursion into Hein's biography. A more cogent picture of writing in the GDR would have resulted from organizing the material of these two sections into one and from perhaps including a mini-history of GDR literature of which Hein is so clearly a part. Chapter 7 on Hein's short prose is incomplete since it does not include his most recent volume of short stories, *Exekution eines Kalbes* (1994). McKnight alludes to it but does not analyze it, nor does he inform the reader as to the reason for this omission. Perhaps there were deadlines to meet: *Exekution eines Kalbes* may have been published at the time when McKnight's manuscript was due at the publisher so that it could appear in 1995. This omission is nonetheless noteworthy since, as McKnight himself states, Hein writes much of his best work in the genre of short prose.

This criticism is not to be understood as calling the whole study into question. In conclusion this reviewer would like to emphasize once more that McKnight has provided those interested in GDR literature with refreshingly accessible, non-convoluted scholarship on one of the GDR's and Germany's premier authors. It is a study that is a welcome addition to scholarship on Christoph Hein, especially since, to this reader's knowledge, it is the first one written in English. The editorial work on *Understanding Christoph Hein* is nearly impeccable; this reader discovered only one typographical error.

REINHARD ADDRESS
Saint Louis University

Mensching, Steffen. *Der Struwwelpeter neu erzählt*. Berlin: Rütten & Loening GmbH, 1994. 24 pp. ISBN 3-352-00514-1. DM 19,90.

Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter* is 150 years old this year and the Germans (and the world) have not lost their fascination for it. One of the most successful books in the German language and translated into many others, *Der Struwwelpeter*, like the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* and to some extent Busch's *Max und Moritz*, combined wit and entertainment with didacticism and was a means of socialization for the young readers. *Der Struwwelpeter neu erzählt* begins with: "Jeder kann aus alten Sachen,/ Wenn er will, sich neue machen./ . . . Kann zu altbekannten Bildern/Andere Geschichten schildern." Steffen Mensching has done just that. This is not the first time that *Struwwelpeter* has been reworked in some manner: e.g., *Der Struwwelpeter umgetopft* by F.W. Bernstein, *Die Struwwelpaula: struwwelige Geschichten und harrige Bilder* by Renate Alf, et al, and *Der Struwwelpeter: Lustige Geschichten von Dr. Heinrich Hoffmann und drollige Bilder von Manfred Bofinger*. These versions maintain the spirit of the original work by presenting "das sich nicht anpassende Kind," often contributing new pictures, neo-nazis and punks, for example, to the old text.

Steffen Mensching, one half of the well-known East German clown duo, Mensching and Wenzel, has taken the opposite approach. He has kept Dr. Hoffmann's classic pictures, but has added his own "lustige Geschichten." Mensching's stories turn the originals on their head. We may learn a few things, but primarily we are presented with the problems and realities of everyday life. The children in these stories are basically good; it is the environment, i.e. society or a parent, that brings about their problems or misfortunes. The children's actions, when not good, can be explained psychologically or medically. We learn that Hans is "nicht normal," but more than that, we are confronted with neglected children and psychopaths.

JUDITH COX
Birmingham-Southern College