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Nancy Tillman Fetz

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CHRISTINE NÖSTLINGER  
CHILDREN'S ADVOCATE AND SOCIAL CRITIC

By

Nancy Tillman Fetz

B.A., University of Oregon, 1968

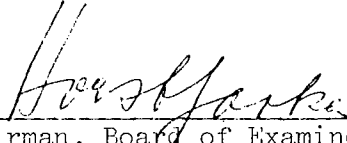
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for the degree of

Master of Arts

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1981

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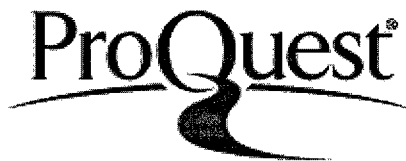
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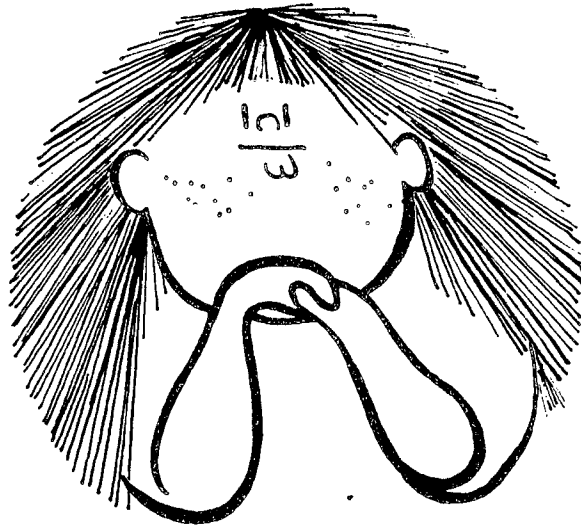
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Es war einmal ein kleines Mädchen. Es hieß Friederike. Es hatte sonderbare Haare. Ein paar Strähnen waren so rot wie Paradieser. Die Stirnfransen hatten die Farbe von Karotten. Die meisten Haare aber waren so rot wie dunkelroter Wein. Außerdem hatte es Sommersprossen und war ziemlich dick.


From Die feuerrote Friederike  
written and illustrated by Christine Nöstlinger

ABSTRACT

Fetz, Nancy Tillman, M.A., March 13, 1981

German

Christine Nöstlinger--Children's Advocate and Social Critic (153 pp.)

Director: Horst Jarka 

This thesis examines twelve works of the award-winning author, Christine Nöstlinger, who is without question the most successful, the most published and publicized author of children's books in Austria today.

The main focus of the thesis is on ideological content, rather than on aesthetic, structural or linguistic aspects of the works. This approach is well-suited to Nöstlinger's writing, for her intentions as well as the ideology underlying her works are foremost didactic ones.

Nöstlinger's intent is to destroy the myth of the "safe and sacred" world of children and to expose the oppressive behavior of those in whose hands the fate of children rest. Her works deal specifically with the problems children face growing up in Viennese society today. Throughout her works Christine Nöstlinger remains an ardent advocate for children and other minority groups whom she sees as being the victims of neglect and authoritarian abuses at home and in school.

The thesis analyzes Christine Nöstlinger's unique contribution to that body of literature for children which attempts to deal with contemporary social realities in a critical way but does so against the broader historical background of children's literature in the German speaking world, recognizing that Christine Nöstlinger's works clearly reflect certain contemporary trends in children's book writing in Germany and Austria.

The first chapter offers an historical overview of children's literature in Germany and Austria since 1945, giving special attention to the so-called "anti-authoritarian" and early Marxist imbued children's books. The current status of children's literature research and criticism in these two countries is also discussed.

The use of fantasy and imagination as a means to escape an unpleasant reality is the central theme of the first three books discussed. In Chapters IV through VIII the focus shifts toward resolution of the problems through a creative use of fantasy and collective problem solving. The last four works discussed belong together as realistic novels for teenage readers.

The thesis concludes that children's literature acts as a mirror to the society in which it thrives and is inextricably bound to social and economic factors which govern award-winning children's book publishing today.

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## PREFACE

Children's books in the German-speaking countries in the last two decades have inspired enormous and ever increasing attention, with the emphasis ever changing. West Germany is now the third largest producer of children's books in the world, behind the USSR and the United States. The body of literature itself has become more interesting and varied, with the result that established authors of adult books are taking up children's book writing as a serious endeavor. During the last few years the press has put more emphasis on children's book criticism, libraries have established youth divisions, and the book trade has become more involved than ever in the promoting and selling of children's books, as was evident at the 1978 Frankfurt Bookfair with its theme, "The child and the book."

There can be no doubt that children's books and children's literature research are "coming of age" and demand, and are now getting closer scrutiny from researchers, theoreticians, teachers and authors.

While it is true that the children's book is in the public eye more than ever before, it is safe to say that at this time literary criticism of all but the most famous German children's books is still in its infancy. There is to date no scholarly journal in the field, nor is there a thorough literary history of German children's and juvenile literature.<sup>1</sup> A student wishing to

pursue an intensive study of German children's literature has the choice of only one university in Germany, at Frankfurt.

According to Gerhard Haas, literary critics still shy away from children's literature, maintaining a somewhat bewildered distance from this complex discipline:

Da er {der Gegenstand Kinder- und Jugendliteratur} neben literarischen auch, und nicht zuletzt, psychologische, pädagogische und soziologische Aspekte enthielt, stellte sich Jugendliteraturforschung als gemischte, unreine und zudem pragmatisches Kalkül mitverlangende Disziplin dar; Nicht nur, weil man sich mit dem Gegenstand Kinderliteratur wissenschaftlich nicht beschäftigen wollte, sondern . . . weil man sich mit ihm nicht beschäftigen konnte.<sup>2</sup>

Slowly but surely children's books are winning a legitimate place within the German literary scene. But the critic who believes that authors of children's books are artists in their own right, whose works deserve as much attention as books for adults, is still in the minority. For such a view runs counter to the traditional critical approach to children's literature, which has been to see children's books merely as the raw materials from which moral lessons are hammered out. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to both a general and specific knowledge of the fascinating field of German children's literature.

In examining the works of Christine Nöstlinger, I attempt to show what the German children's book has become, as her works clearly reflect certain contemporary trends in children's book writing in the German-speaking countries.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, a close analysis will reveal her unique contribution to that body of literature for children which attempts to deal with contemporary social realities in

a critical way. It is the nature of the social criticism within her work which will be the specific focus of the treatment here.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Es gibt in der BRD keine wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift von einigen Rang und volumen, die als Plattform für eine kontinuierte Diskussion des Sach- und Problembereichs Kinder- und Jugendliteratur dienen könnte."

and:

Klaus Doderer, "Introduction to German Language Survey," Phaedrus 2:2 (Fall 1975): p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Gerhard Haas, ed., Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Zur Typologie und Funktion einer literarischen Gattung. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1974), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Switzerland is excluded from this overview, since it has a unique history of its own and is usually dealt with separately in historical studies of German children's literature.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE GERMAN CHILDREN'S BOOK SINCE 1945

Any attempt to sketch the history of children's literature following the Second World War presents a problem in that the breadth of historical events, together with all manners of changes affecting literature, is enormous. A thorough overview would have to take into account the international character of children's literature in West Germany and Austria: over one-third of all new titles published each year are translations, primarily from English, and over one-half of all the "Deutsche Jugendbuchpreise" have gone to books translated into German from other languages. For our purposes here, though, a limited overview of characteristic trends and developments of German language authors will suffice.

In viewing the trends of the past and present, the critic becomes aware of how closely children's literature is tied to societal conditions. Particularly children's fiction cannot be treated as an isolated phenomenon, for unmistakably certain developments in the body of literature for youth parallel political and social developments in West Germany since the War.

The economic stress of the first five post-war years made it impossible to create a new literature for Germany's young readers since many branches of industry, including graphic arts and printing,

had been destroyed. When book production in the Federal Republic finally began to develop, however, children's book authors were not ready to deal with the realities of the immediate past, and juvenile literature sought refuge in the literature of the Weimar era, in fairy tales and other fantasies, and in adventure stories. There were exceptions to this tendency to avoid past political realities; Lisa Tetzner (Die Kinder aus Nr. 67, 1945) and Erich Kästner (Die Konferenz der Tiere, 1949) wrote of the immediate past, but their works stood in complete isolation to the mass of literary production with a completely different content.<sup>1</sup>

This post-war phase of escapism in children's literature reached its height with the appearance of the American comic book. Comic books made the European scene in a big way in the 1950s, delighting young readers and appalling adults, who began to take a closer look at what children were reading. The general discontent of adults with the state of children's reading led to a number of preventative measures in the mid-50s. In 1953 the so-called "Schmutz und Schund Kampf" was launched with the passage of a law "über die Verbreitung jugendgefährdender Schriften." The law was aimed not only at the comic books, but at all literature deemed to have a "bad" influence on children.<sup>2</sup> In 1955 the state-supported "Arbeitskreis für Jugendschriftum," now called "Arbeitskreis für Jugendliteratur," was established, and one year later awarded the first of the yearly "Deutscher Jugendbuchpreise." The "Arbeitskreis" began shortly thereafter to publish the periodical, "Jugendliteratur."

In the 1960s children's literature became politicized.

The efforts at school reform had begun, and the make-up of the student bodies of the "Gymnasium" was changing. The early 1960s saw the emergence of the "Rechtsradikalen," an occurrence which awakened concern in those with opposing views. As a result, many Germans became acutely aware of the lack of political education in the schools. And for the first time since the War, the children's book market saw the production of scores of books dealing with Germany's involvement in the Second World War. There clearly emerged the need to work through the events of the past, a trend referred to as "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" ("coming to terms with the past").

Now children could read books which presented a positive picture of East Germany, for example,<sup>3</sup> or books which dealt with such themes as the persecution of the Jews, concentration camps,<sup>4</sup> and the seductive powers of the Third Reich. That these books were successes can be attributed in part to exterior causes: to the economic climate of prosperity and to attempts at a comprehensive education, but also to a new generation of readers who wanted to know what had happened. And thus the new era of the "realistic children's book" was ushered in and carried with fervor into all areas of communication. Juries awarded prizes to the authors of these books, teachers placed them on recommended reading lists, and they were discussed in countless teachers' seminars. To be sure, there were many who jumped on the bandwagon to exploit the new popularity of what became for many simply "war stories." There were many exaggerated, pathos-ridden memoirs of the "Hitler-jugend."<sup>5</sup> The more noteworthy contributions, however, dealt with the senseless dying, the inner as well as outer

destruction of the individual.<sup>6</sup>

Whether this attempt at "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" constituted true politicization was doubted by some. Malte Dahkendorf points out that the "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" was by nature removed from the present and the books dealing with the past were isolated in their content and in the values they espoused:

. . . Im übrigen blieb die Jugendliteratur der von der Entwicklungs-psychologie gelieferten Phasenlehre verhaftet und sah in besonders für das lesende Kind die Vermittlung eigenständig, vom Politischen völlig unberührter Werte.<sup>7</sup>

Children's literature research received new direction with the founding of the "Institut für Jugendbuchforschung" at the University of Frankfurt in 1963, and new political impetus from the growing, ideologically determined criticism coming basically from the Frankfurt School of "kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft" and the resulting emergence of new theories of socialization.

By the end of the 1960s methods of analyzing children's books, through incorporation of political and sociological inquiries, began to change. The appearance of the new left, the APO (Ausserparlamentarische Opposition), the anti-war and women's movements, together with the economic recession, all had some influence on children's literature. The so-called "antiautoritäre Kinderliteratur," with its emancipatory and Marxist revolutionary accents came into being. This new genre of the anti-authoritarian children's book deserves closer attention here, for without this trend the works of Christine Nöstlinger would be unthinkable.

On the one side of the anti-authoritarian literature stand



the Marxist authors. Rooted in Marxist theories of socialization, these writers attacked "bourgeois" literature for being apolitical, for presenting the world as basically good and sane, and the world of the child as self-contained and blissful, and of imparting the, to them, questionable values of the middle class. By being presented a world which is not in need of change, they argued, the reader is brought up resigned to existing circumstances. Specifically, critics like Klaus Doderer and Jack Zipes attacked the so-called "classics," which, they claimed, actually set up barriers to a child's intellectual development.<sup>8</sup> Grimms' Fairy Tales, for example, are criticized for showing children submitting unconditionally to the will of adults, and as showing poor children leading pious lives based on the principles of gratitude and sacrifice. Heidi, still popular among readers, they saw as being the kind of "Heimatroman" which shows a static world run by God, where being poor is equated with piety and beauty. Struwwelpeter, these critics argued, espouses Biedermeier, or early Victorian, behaviors and attitudes toward children, where obedience is elevated above curiosity and creativity. In Zipes' opinion the classics often reflect the attitude of "Kinderfeindlichkeit," or a hostility toward children.<sup>9</sup>

The first products of the Marxist involvement in children's literature came out of the "Kinderladen" movement in West Germany, whose organizers made up their own reading and learning materials for use with children. Eventually two small leftist publishing houses, "Basis Verlag" and "Weismann Verlag" were established to promote these works.

A list of a few representative examples of the anti-authoritarian book might include Als die Kinder die Macht ergriffen by Doktor Gormander, Zwei Korken für Schlienz by Johanna Merkel, Anti-Struwelper and Tischlein deck dich und Knüppel aus dem Sack by F. Karl Waechter, and Die Geschichte von der Verjagung und Ausstopfung des Königs by O. F. Gmelin.

All these books emphasize how collective skills can be put to use for the good of socialist society. The majority of characters are from the working class, and the concerns here are for the under-privileged. The language used is rigorous and blunt, the speech plain and colloquial. The capitalist world is shown as being self-contradictory and full of conflicts which can be resolved only through revolutionary change. In its entirety the anti-authoritarian book is meant to be a rejection of the world of the middle class, even the design, style and illustrations are an abnegation of aesthetic standards of that class. Children are included in as much of the production of the book as possible. These books, the majority of which were written for younger readers are meant to be discussed and used as tools toward a political education. At the same time, the books have been praised for the way they respect the readers' intelligence and ability to comprehend political issues, and in their attempt to deal with the readers' problems.<sup>10</sup>

As can be expected, opposition to this new literature has been vociferous. Criticism has come even from the Marxists themselves, who realize that the books appeal mainly to the children of the progressive intelligentsia, not to the children of the

proletariat. Jack Zipes questions how influential books can be at all, noting that books themselves are being used less and less as part of the socialization process, and he warns that leftist books will be useless if they are employed simply to compensate for a miseducation of the past.<sup>11</sup>

Other criticism takes aim at the literary quality of the Marxist books, at the anecdotal treatment of society's problems, at the lack of humor, at the undifferentiated language and dialogue. Like the old-fashioned books which these authors condemn, the new Marxist books allow simple labels, their critics claim. The evil wolf has merely turned into the evil landlord, the fairy-tale king into the exploiting capitalist. While the books may deal with valid themes, they argue, they do so in a scanty and stereotyped manner, and thus do not present a true picture of society. The danger, writes one critic, is that the readers are being educated for a society that they will not find, and are thereby being programmed for frustration.<sup>12</sup>

By the mid-70s, the anti-authoritarian children's book was "in" and, just as in the preceding decade, which saw a flood of war novels for children, it now appeared that the label "anti-authoritarian" was first of all and primarily a label for promoting sales. In addition to the leftist publishing houses already mentioned, several long-established publishers have in the meantime formed divisions for the promotion of socialist literature for children.<sup>13</sup>

By 1977 the anti-authoritarian trend had waned considerably according to publisher Richard Wertbrech, who points out that the

market is currently experiencing a renaissance in fairy tales, and a renewed popularity of fantasy:

Auch diese Zeit ist längst dahin. Der alles regulierende Markt, der den antiautoritären Trend vor fünf Jahren so gierig aufgenommen hatte, schluckt heute Progressives nur noch in kleinen Dosen und öffnet sich willig dem Tendenzwendegeist . . . Die Bücher sind optimistisch geworden. Die Nostalgiewelle schlägt auch beim Kinderbuch durch.<sup>14</sup>

As valid as many of the criticisms of the Marxist children's books may be, it cannot be denied that the movement provided existing children's literature with new impulses and stimuli. The ideas inherent in that literature have given rise to criticism and experimentation, to the setting up of new publishing houses, to the discovery of new authors and to the development of new theories. While the "hardcore" Marxist book has little audience now, a "softer-sell" anti-authoritarian, or--to give it its unofficial name--an "emancipatory" literature, is thriving. While portraying many of the same concerns as its predecessor, the "emancipatory" book tends to display a more realistic understanding of how society functions, is not bound to any particular political ideology, and seeks to give the child more leeway by leaving it up to the reader to reflect on possible solutions to the conflicts presented.

The tempestuous era of the anti-authoritarian children's book resulted in a heightened awareness among critics and authors of the social and political implications of children's books. The market is now more receptive to a realistic and critical portrayal of the immediate world. Many new authors, like Christine Nöstlinger, are drawing attention to social injustices inflicted upon minority

groups. The conflicts of, for example, the "Gastarbeiter" (immigrant workers) and of the young themselves with established society, are often the main theme.

In the thirty years since the War, German children's literature has undergone a number of abrupt changes. From the escapism of the early postwar years, to the country's acceptance of its involvement in the atrocities and resultant self-indictment, on to the sudden end to its preoccupation with the past and the emergence of the leftist-oriented politically imbued book, and up to the current popularity of both realism and fantasy--all these changes of emphasis make clear, as Walter Scherf states, that children's literature serves as a mirror to the society in which it thrives:

Die Ware Kinder- und Jugendliteratur ist . . . ein nur allzu genauer Spiegel unserer Gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung . . . Sie zeigt genau das krisenverschreckte, richtungslose, zukunftserschrockene Bundesbürgertum wie nie zuvor.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that current children's books reflect the society in which they are written to a degree not known since the seventeenth century, and that the contemporary works of fiction for children still carry on the traditional mission of children's books to inform and instruct the young. The outcome of this has been, as we have seen, that every sort of reform movement or persuasion regarding education or social criticism has availed itself of children's literature, the result being that the focus of attention of children's literature research has shifted accordingly.

In the development of children's literature, the role of critic and publisher has proved to be as crucial as that of the writers themselves. Theory and production of children's literature condition each other to such an extraordinary degree that a study of children's books would be incomplete without some knowledge of the nature of the criticism and the relationship between the book and the book market.

Traditionally children's literature criticism has been the private domain of the pedagogues who have tended to treat children's books as tools, whether for teaching reading or for educating the reader in political and social matters. Indeed children's literature in the German-speaking world owes its very existence to pedagogy, as Professor A. C. Baumgärtner points out: "Was wir spezifisch Jugendliteratur nennen . . . hat ihren Ursprung nicht in literarischen, sondern in pädagogischen Motiven."<sup>16</sup>

Consequently children's literature has never been a pure "literary art form." More than any other genre of literature, the children's book is a collective phenomenon reflecting the collective aims of those working with children: child psychologists, sociologists, reading specialists, teachers and librarians. The central concern of these professionals has been not the book but the child.

Paradoxically, though, children themselves hardly enter into the process of assessing and distributing their literature, and a children's book can go far on the road to success before a single child has seen it.

This processing of children's books with predominantly pedagogical goals in mind has had a profound influence on the book market, especially in Austria, where quality publishing for children is governed by a complex social-institutional-economic equation.

Although there are to date no scholarly journals for children's literature research in West Germany or Austria, there do exist a number of periodicals dealing with different aspects of the trade which serve mainly as review journals of new books. The role played by the reviewers, who are almost exclusively teachers and librarians, is an extremely important one in determining and influencing the production of children's books. Book criticism to date remains an internal occurrence; most reviews reach not the reading public but the professionals within the same teaching system.<sup>17</sup> Lists of recommended books have considerable economic consequences for the publishers, since those are the lists used by librarians for their book selection. A book will generally do well if the libraries take it, and not too well if they don't.

And the criteria for selection by some librarians may be spurious, according to Elizabeth Scherf of the International Youth Library in Munich, who has learned that literary fads in children's books can be a lucrative business.

In 1970 Walter Scherf, the director of the International Youth Library, and his wife Elizabeth set up a library exhibit of children's books in both the East and the West entitled "Antiautoritäre und gesellschaftskritische Kinder- und Jugendbücher," from which a list was compiled. The project was continued,

and by 1973 the one-page list had grown to six pages and 110 titles-- by 1974 to 176 titles which were then expanded into a book annotating works which the Scherfs considered to be representative of "emancipatory" tendencies in contemporary children's books.<sup>18</sup> The first list was not conceived as recommendations, but was intended to give a convenient overview to what the compilers assumed would be only a few specialists and students. They were overwhelmed at the response from librarians in outlying provinces who wished to purchase the entire list. Not only were these librarians mistaking these lists for recommendations and purchasing accordingly, but they were also responding to what they believed to be a fad they must not miss. In the introduction to their book, the Scherfs rightly conclude that the so-called anti-authoritarian children's book has become somewhat of a fashion and certainly a considerable business.

In Austria the relationship between the book market and the pedagogue is unusually close. The market there seems to be fairly well dominated by the "Österreichischer Buchklub der Jugend," founded in 1948. By 1972, ninety percent of all Austrian school children were members.<sup>19</sup> Subscriptions to the club are organized and administered by teachers; pupils are entitled to recommended books at discounts. The fifteen or so publishers in Austria depend heavily on recommendations of the club, which appear in two bookclub-affiliated journals, Jugend und Buch and the international journal printed in English, Bookbird, as well as in the yearly publication, 1000 und 1 Buch. The book club selections on the whole do not tend to be chosen primarily for literary value, but rather for the



contributions they may make to the children's reading progress and/or learning experience, and, on the younger levels especially, they tend to be didactic and moralistic, reflecting, according to Eva Lederer, the book club's general philosophy: that books are meant primarily for school and learning.<sup>20</sup>

It is a rather closed corporative family; non-Austrian publishers are excluded by selection committees of the Club, and Bookbird, 1000 und 1 Buch and other book club publications are all published by a leading Austrian publisher of children's books, "Verlag Jugend und Volk."

Another member of this nuclear family of children's literature in Austria is the "Internationales Institut für Jugendliteratur und Leseforschung," the one Austrian institute of children's literature research. The institute grew out of the existing department of theoretical work within the book club in 1965 and is responsible for putting out the journals Jugend und Buch and Bookbird.

Children's literature research in both Germany and Austria is still dominated by the teacher-training institutes, although this seems to be changing. Developments in the last years indicate a discernable backlash against the exclusive use of literature for didactic purposes. It is true that ever more researchers are focusing on the literary aspects of children's literature and on the various forms it takes,<sup>21</sup> and yet, if one can use the example of Christine Nöstlinger, it appears that individual authors within the field of children's literature receive much promotional attention, but little in the way of serious or thorough investigation. It seems

indicative of the present status of authors of children's books, for instance, that a writer of the stature of Christine Nöstlinger has been the subject of little more than individual journalistic attention and is not listed in a single German dictionary or encyclopedia of "belle lettres." Given the influential status granted a popular author like Nöstlinger and the increased awareness of the literary excellence of many children's authors, this is indeed a major oversight.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>A. C. Baumgärtner, "The Road to the Juvenile Book of the Present," in The German Book for Children and Juveniles, ed. by A. C. Baumgärtner (Velber: Friedrich Verlag, 1974): p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Malte Dahrendorf, "Jugendliteratur im gesellschaftlichen, literarischen und pädagogischen Bezugfeld," in Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, ed. by Gerhard Haas (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1974), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>A well-known example of positive portrayal of East Germany in West German children's books is Herbert Plate's Das soll der Mensch nicht scheiden, 1960.

<sup>4</sup>Examples here include: Hans Peter Richter, Friederick (1961) and Wir waren dabei (1962); Hans Erich Noack, Sterne über der Mauer (1962); Ascher-Pinkhof, Sternkinder (1966).

<sup>5</sup>Examples include: Fritz Steuben, Aus grosser Fahrt (1966); Hans Georg Buchholtz, Fremder bist du mein Bruder (1962).

<sup>6</sup>Reference is often made to Jan Prochazka's book, Es lebe die Republik (1968).

<sup>7</sup>Dahlendorf, "Jugendliteratur im gesellschaftlichen, literarischen und pädagogischen Bezugfeld," p. 26.

<sup>8</sup>Klaus Doderer, "German Children's Classics: Heirs and Pretenders to an Eclectic Heritage," Bookbird 8:1.

<sup>9</sup>Jack Zipes, "Educating, Miseducating, Reeducating children: A Report on Attempts to Desocialize the Capitalist Socialization Process in West Germany," New German Critic (Winter 1973): pp. 142-160.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Jack Zipes, "Down with Heidi, Down with Struvwelpeter, Three Cheers for the Revolution," Children's Literature 5 (1977), p. 177.

<sup>12</sup>W. J. M. Wippersberg, "The Innocent World of Happy Class Conflict," Bookbird 10 (April 1972), p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>"RoRoRotfuchs" and "dtv Junior" are divisions within large publishing houses which specialize in "leftist" children's literature. "Beltz Verlag" also devotes much energy to the promotion of this literature.

<sup>14</sup>Gunar Orlepp, "Kind im Brunnen," Der Spiegel, April 4, 1977, p. 230.

<sup>15</sup>Walter Scherf as quoted in "Kind im Brunnen," p. 230.

<sup>16</sup>Alfred C. Baumgärtner, "Realistische Literatur für Kinder: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen," in Modern Realistic Stories for Children and Young People, 16th IBBY Congress, (Munich: Karl Singer, 1978), p. 121.

<sup>17</sup>A public discussion of children's books appears in several newspapers. The "Frankfurter Allgemeine," "Frankfurter Rundschau," "Süddeutsche Zeitung," and "Die Zeit" are concerned with children's book criticism, but according to Malte Dahrendorf they do so with no regularity and their effect on book production is negligible.

<sup>18</sup>Walter Scherf, "Emanzipatorische und gesellschaftspolitische Tendenzen in der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur," in Bewältigung der Gegenwart, (Munich: Verlag Dokumentation, 1974), Introduction.

<sup>19</sup>Eva Lederer, "Children's Literature in Austria," in The Great Excluded 3 (1974), p. 45.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>General divisions in children's literature studies usually include: "Das Bilderbuch," "das Mädchenbuch," "das Sachbuch," "die phantastische Erzählung," "das realistische Buch," "Märchen, Sagen und Fabel," "Kinderlyrik," "Comics," "das Abenteuerbuch," "Detektivgeschichte," "Science Fiction," and "Kindertheater."

## CHRISTINE NÖSTLINGER

Christine Nöstlinger is without question the most successful, the most published and publicized author of children's books in Austria today. To date she has written over two dozen books for young readers, including picture books for preschoolers and works of fantasy and realism for readers from eight to eighteen years of age. In addition she has written for adults a collection of poems, Iba de gaunz oaman Kinda, and one novel, Die unteren Sieben Achtel des Eisbergs.

She now writes regularly for Austrian television and radio. Her works Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig, Herr Vranek sieht ganz harmlos aus, Ein Mann für Mama, and Stundenplan have all been filmed for television, and Nöstlinger was commissioned by Austrian radio (Österreich 3) to write 250 stories for 1979, the "Year of the Child." With a listenership of over one million, the broadcasts, entitled "Dchi-Dscheis Mutterwisch," are well under way to becoming the greatest radio hit in Austria in a long time.<sup>1</sup> These programs, heard every weekday morning by Austrian children and carried also on a trial basis in northern Germany by "Norddeutsche Rundfunk," have won the "UNDA Preis" from the Catholic Church, which cited the programs' attempts to bring children and adults together (" . . . dass Kinder und Erwachsene ermutigt werden, ihr Zusammenleben ethisch positiv zu gestalten."<sup>2</sup>)

Christine Nöstlinger's popularity is now so firmly established that none of her books appear in first editions of less than 10,000

copies, and her award-winning book, Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig has now exceeded 100,000 copies.

Her works have received international as well as national acclaim. In 1972 Nöstlinger received the "Frederick Bodecker Preis" awarded by the city of Hannover to an outstanding children's author, and the following year, Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig won the prestigious "Deutscher Jugendbuchpreis." Her novel Konrad was the 1977 recipient of the American "Mildred Batchelder Prize" for the best children's book in English translation and was chosen one of the books most highly recommended by American school children in 1978.<sup>3</sup> She has twice won the Austrian state prize for children's literature (Österreichische Kinderbuchpreis), most recently in 1979 for her latest work, Rosa Riedl, Schutzgespenst.

Many of her books are available in translation in Holland, France, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Japan, Yugoslavia, The Soviet Union, England and the United States. Eight of her novels have been translated into English: Konrad, Fly Away Home, and Girl Missing have been published in America and those three plus, We Don't Give a Hoot for the Cucumberking, Fiery Friederike, The Disappearing Cellar, Marrying off Mother, and Mr. Bat's Great Invention in England.

Nöstlinger writes about the things she knows, and her works are thoroughly Viennese in language and setting.<sup>4</sup> And while the milieu--the scenery, the jargon, the contemporary touches--are taken from her immediate surroundings, Nöstlinger maintains that the only model for her fictional characters is the child she once was:

"Die einzige Kinderperson, die mir als Modell- als LesermodeLL wie

als Buchfigur- zur Verfügung steht, ist das Kind, das ich einmal war."<sup>5</sup> This being the case, a short biography of Nöstlinger may shed some light on the substance of her work and give the reader some idea of what has led her to write what she does.

Christine Nöstlinger was born in 1936 of a working class family in Hernals, the seventeenth district in Vienna. Her father, too poor to attend the university, became a watchmaker. He was imprisoned briefly for socialist activities but later served in the War, where he was severely wounded. He deserted the army at the War's end. The story of this part of Nöstlinger's life, the years at the close of the Second World War, are told in her autobiographical children's novel, Maikäfer flieg! The lessons that the young protagonist in this story learns about human behavior and questions of justice, fairness and obedience to authority, are ones that unquestionably influenced Nöstlinger the writer. This work also makes evident that Nöstlinger's depictions in her stories of a home life where respect, humor and understanding abound are drawn from her own childhood.

The experiences growing up in the war years taught her that wars don't just happen, but are made. And the people who make war usually stand to profit from it: "Kriege werden gemacht, von Menschen. Und die, die sie machen, haben meistens Nutzen davon."<sup>6</sup> As a child she and her family knew what was happening to the Jews, and politics were discussed openly in her home.

Even as a child Nöstlinger sympathized with the outsider and had already learned a tolerance for human differences: the hero in Maikäfer flieg! is a Russian Jewish cook with whom the protagonist develops a profound friendship. In the epilogue to Maikäfer flieg! Nöstlinger writes of her sympathy for the underdog: "Ich habe immer Partei ergriffen; für den Vietgong, für die Proleten, für die Sozialisten, auch für die furchtsamen alten Männer."<sup>7</sup>

Her parents were of two different philosophies of life and politics, but it seems clear from her works, that Nöstlinger--now a Social Democrat whose two daughters are active Marxists--sympathizes more with her father, who died a disillusioned socialist, than with her overly optimistic mother.

Nöstlinger attended the art academy in Vienna, but gave up her studies to marry a fellow student. She worked for a while in the office of a newspaper publisher where she met a journalist, Ernst Nöstlinger, who became her second husband. After the birth of her first daughter she became a housewife, and, quite by chance, a writer of stories for children. A journalist friend had given her a copy of a children's book, which she felt challenged to improve upon, and the result was her first work, Die feuerrote Friederike (1970), which she also illustrated. She likewise illustrated her next work, Mr. Bats Meisterstück. Oder Die total verrückte Oma, but the publisher retained only the text, and Nöstlinger then dropped drawing altogether and took up writing full-time.



Nöstlinger's productivity since then is, in itself, amazing. But equally impressive is the breadth of her appeal. She has had equal success writing both for eight-year-olds and for teenagers. She uses the popular form of fantasy ("die phantastische Erzählung") when writing for a younger audience (ca. eight-eleven years) and realism ("das realistische Kinderbuch") when addressing older readers (ca. twelve-sixteen).

Since the works to be discussed all fall into the categories of fantasy or realism, it will be helpful to briefly define these two terms as they have come to be understood in the context of the German children's book.

The ever-increasing popularity of the children's book of fantasy since 1945 seems to run parallel to a decline in popularity of the traditional fairy tale, which, it has already been noted, has received much criticism for its conservative portrayal of society. C. A. Baumgärtner calls contemporary fantasy a "modern substitute for the fairy tale"<sup>8</sup> although the two forms are significantly different in both origins and intentions.

The term "phantastische Erzählung" has its origins in the "Fantasiestücke" of E. T. A. Hoffmann and is used to characterize stories in which the magical and irrational is brought into our world. Although there may appear to be fairy-tale-like features in these stories, they are not fairy tales.

The traditional fairy tale takes place in one (magical) world only. Persons and places are generally nameless and the

historical placement of the events is not important. In the modern tale of fantasy, by contrast, the events are played out in two interacting worlds, one of these worlds being a familiar world with realistically depicted characters from the present or from an identifiable past. This world may co-exist with the strange and foreign one, but the reader never loses touch with the familiar:

Die Grenzlinie zwischen phantastischer Erzählung und Wundermärchen . . . ist dadurch bezeichnet, dass das 'Märchen' nur in einer Welt spielt. Auch wenn es scheint, dass das Märchengeschehen in einer alltäglichen Welt abläuft, so handelt es sich doch um eine Welt, in der alles geschehen kann. In der phantastischen Erzählung handelt es sich dagegen um eine Welt, in der Keineswegs alles eintreffen kann, in der aber eine fremde Welt plötzlich und unerwartet eintritt.<sup>9</sup>

The fantasy tale is well suited to an author with didactic intentions when the fantasy world is established as a mirror or metaphor for our own, and when the playful turns on reality serve to mediate a working through of real conflicts.

The realistic children's book is essentially based upon a story involving the child's immediate surroundings: family, playmates, school. It is an immensely popular genre, both with readers--particularly ages twelve and older--and researchers. This literature of realism arose in part as a revolt against much of children's literature of the past, which often depicted a romantic, carefree world of the child. The contemporary realistic book for children typically "tells it like it is," although the scales seem to be tipped in favor of a pessimistic, problem-laden view of "reality." As C. A. Baumgärtner indicates, this new view of the child's world is a sober one:

Die früher ausgesparten Probleme kommen heute geradezu geballt auf die jungen Leser hernieder: Sozialfälle, Aussenseiter, Behinderte, Kriminelle, kaputte Ehen, zerfallende Familie, Kindermisshandlung, Elternhass, Vergewaltigung, Abtreibung, Homosexualität--esfehlt nichts in der Jugendliteratur.<sup>10</sup>

As can be imagined, this stark new realism in children's books has sparked much controversy among pedagogues, and finally even among literati, who debate the artistic merits of such directness.

Common to all Nöstlinger's works, whether realistic or fantastic, are elements of social criticism. For Christine Nöstlinger is an author with a stated cause: she attempts to formulate the fears, the feelings of alienation and discrimination which children and other "little people," i.e., outsiders and minorities, experience but are unable to articulate. Having exposed the wrongs, she hopes to arouse in her readers the desire for change.

The extent to which Nöstlinger is able to achieve this goal is determined as much by her ability as story-teller and her literary skills, as by the force of her social criticism.

The main focus of this thesis, however, will be on the ideological content rather than on aesthetic, structural or linguistic aspects of the works. This approach is only one among several that one might take in analyzing children's literature. But such an approach is well-suited to Nöstlinger's works. For Nöstlinger's intentions, as well as the emancipatory ideology underlying her intentions, are foremost and above all didactic. Her motives are predominantly social and educational, and it seems appropriate to stay within her

own frame of reference in analyzing the texts. This "emancipatory" children's literature admittedly results in literary as well as critical limitations. To view traditional fantasies and fairy tales, for instance, from only the ideological viewpoint, is to ignore other important aspects, such as the psychological, subconscious or artistic elements which have received much critical attention.

Nöstlinger herself would probably accept these limitations as being necessary to achieve her goal of projecting a certain image of children and society, and of suggesting means for change.

I have grouped the discussions of Nöstlinger's works according to a general thematic focus in them. This allows me to discuss the works for younger readers, both fantasy and non-fantasy, first, then to turn to the realistic novels for older readers last.

Having read nearly all of her published works--excluding the radio plays--I have chosen for discussion twelve works, or nearly half of her total book production, accurately reflecting the balance in her work between the world of fantasy and realism.

The first two works, Die feuerrote Friederike and Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, are fantasies concerned with children on the outside of society who deal with their problems by escaping into an imaginary world. The next work, Lollipop, while not a fantasy tale in the literary sense, is bound to the first two works by the way in which it questions the function that fantasy has for children. Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig and Konrad are strict fantasies in the most playful and inventive sense of the genre. Using all the

possibilities that fantasy offers to turn playful tricks on reality, to create nonsensical and absurd situations, these works nevertheless are firmly rooted in the realities of the contemporary family with contemporary children at the center. Sim-Sala-Bim is representative of the current trend to rewrite fairy tales into tales with strong political and social overtones. Achtung! Vranek sieht ganz harmlos aus!, a detective story with strong social overtones, is unique in its position among the chosen works. It has been selected because it attacks the problem of "Kinderfeindlichkeit" (hostility toward children) head on. Der kleine Herr greift ein again looks at the function of fantasy but also questions the role of adults and the limitations of programmed imagination. The last four works, Ein Mann für Mama, Ilse Janda, 14, Der Spatz in der Hand, and Luki-Live belong together as realistic novels for teenagers. As a group these four works depict the common problems that teenagers face in contemporary Austrian society.

My conclusion will attempt to draw together the many threads through Nöstlinger's works and reveal a pattern which will help to illuminate the present nature of social criticism in children's literature.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Sigrid Löffler, "Sehnsucht erwecken nach ganz anderen Zuständen," Profil, April 30, 1979, pp. 60-61

<sup>2</sup>News release in Volksstimme, May 20, 1979.

<sup>3</sup>The "International Reading Association" publishes a yearly list called "Classroom Choices."

<sup>4</sup>Several of her works include glossaries or footnotes explaining typically Viennese expressions or vocabulary used.

<sup>5</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, "Himmelblaue Maikäfer: über die Schwierigkeiten des Kinderbuchautors," Academia, August 1978, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Jurgen Serke, "Plädoyer für ein Kinderleichtes Leben," Stern, 14 December 1978, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>A. C. Baumgärtner, ed. The German Book for Children and Juveniles. (Velber: Friederick Verlag, 1974), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup>Göte Klingberg, "Die Phantastische Kinder- und Jugenderzählung," in Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, p. 227.

IMAGINATION AS ESCAPE

## CHAPTER I

### DIE FEUERROTE FRIEDERIKE (1970)

Es war einmal ein kelines Mädchen. Es hiess Friederike. Es hatte sonderbare Haare. Ein paar Strähnen waren so rot wie Paradeiser. Die Stirnfransen hatten die Farbe von Karotten. Die meisten Haare aber waren so rot wie dunkelroter Wein. Ausserdem hatte es Sommersprossen und war ziemlich dick.<sup>1</sup>

A brothers' Grimm version of Pippi Longstockings? Hardly, although comparison to both is inviting. The young reader, expecting to find either the fairy-tale world of dreams come true or the merry adventures of the likes of a Pippi Longstocking will be surprised, but not disappointed.

For although a tale of fantasy, with a talking cat, magic spells and flying people, Christine Nöstlinger's first book for children is firmly rooted in reality. The work deals with the problem of the prejudicial treatment of the outsider: in this case a young girl named Friederike, who is repeatedly victimized by her classmates because she has red hair.

Nöstlinger chooses the framework of the "phantastische Erzählung," a tale which by definition shows the real and unreal worlds co-existing and interacting. It is a genre well-suited to the author's purpose, for, as we will see, it is through the use of fantasy that the real world, with its very real problems, is illuminated.



Unlike Pippi, who has been called the prototype for many a fantasy hero in the contemporary German children's book,<sup>2</sup> Friederike is unable to ignore the criticisms of her classmates or find joy in her own eccentricities. Instead, she tries unsuccessfully to conform ("Friederike hatte schon oft versucht, ihre roten Haare los zu werden"), but to no avail since her hair always grows back just as thick and just as red. Her only friend is a color blind mailman, who of course doesn't even notice that Friederike has red hair. The mailman can't understand why people would laugh at Friederike's red hair:

'Ich weiss nicht,' sagte er,, 'ich höre dass/ die  
Kinder/ nur rote Kleider wollen,  
und/ nur rote Hüte und/ nur rote Zuckerl und/  
nur rote Luftballons und/ nur rote Schuhe.  
Warum, warum, um alles in der Welt, wollen sie dann  
keine rote Haare, wenn sie sonst alles rot haben wollen?'

The mailman and her aunt try to find solutions. Her aunt urges her to defend herself against the malicious children, but they outnumber her by too far for this to be successful. Then she tries to win acceptance by being extra good at everything, a solution which worked for Pippi, but one which Nöstlinger shows is dubious, since this simply incurs the jealous wrath of her classmates and leads to more persecution. The final solution is to withdraw entirely, and now Friederike leaves the house only to go shopping for her aunt, who never leaves the house.

As she retreats further and further from the outside world into the private world she shares with her once red-haired aunt and her now red-haired cat, the fantastic elements in the story increase and take on new proportions. Suddenly the cat, "Katze Kater,"

begins to speak ("Die Katze sprach nur selten; nur wenn es wirklich notwendig war.") When speaking the cat's hair appears red and his eyes sparkle like red rubies as he unleashes a barrage of accusations at the aunt, who like Friederike's teacher and school director, avoids confronting her plight:

'So, so, werthe Frau Annatante!  
 Du willst in Ruhe leben! Du bist alt! Du hast weisse  
 Haare. Du hast deine Ruhe!  
 Sagst du den Kindern, dass sie mit ihr spielen sollen?  
 Sagst du den Grossen, dass sie nicht lachen sollen?  
 Hilfst du irgendwie?? Nein!!!'

By now, one cannot avoid noticing how extensively and skillfully Nöstlinger uses repetition of sounds, words and phrases to create a lyrical text ideally suited to reading aloud. To the cat's "so, so werthe Frau Annatante," comes her retort, "Gut, gut Katze Kater, seufzte die Annatante." Alliteration and assonance are used generously throughout the text of the story; witness the names borne by the red-headed heroes: "die feuerrote Friederike," "die Annatante" and "die Katze Kater." The rhythmic qualities of the text are maintained with consistency, creating an effect not unlike that of a folk tale. A random selection of sentences proves the point: "Eines Nachmittags sassen Friederike und die Annatante und die Katze Kater beim grossen Tisch und tranken Schokoladenkakao," or "Sie sass meistens auf einem Sessel neben dem Katzensessel. Sie strickte, oder las, oder schlief oder sie dachte nach," and "Das Mädchen Friederike, die Tante Annatante, und die Katze Kater wohnten in einem sehr hohen Haus."

The aunt now agrees to show her niece the ultimate weapon of

self-defense, a magic spell possessed only by the members of this red-haired family. By repeating the words "rotarotaginginging, feiabrenntinottakring," their red hair will begin to glow and burn. When the chant, "feiabrenntinwahrung bis tagselchtaharing," the fire is extinguished. This mocking jeer, which in written German would read: "Roter, roter ging-ging-ging/ Feuer brennt in Ottakring/ Feuer brennt in Wahrung/ bist ein g'selchter Hering," is actually used by Viennese children against red-heads.<sup>3</sup> But here Nöstlinger turns the jeer into a charm in favor of the red-heads. In doing so she is fighting the prejudice by reversing the local tradition, and calls to mind another Viennese work which also deals with prejudice toward red-headed persons. In Johann Nestroy's Der Talisman, Titus Feuerfuchs fools society by using wigs to cover his red hair and is thereby able to expose the hypocrisy of such prejudice.

Friederike learns the spell but is reluctant to use her new weapon, to fight fire with fire so to speak, and calls out the spell only when her life is in danger. The other children have armed themselves and turn on her: "Sie hatten Steinschleudern und Steine. Sie hatten Stoppelrevolver und Stoppel. Sie hatten Gummiringe und U-Hakerln. Eines hatte einen Bogen und spitze Pfeile."

It is interesting to note here, that all characters outside the family are nameless. The children are referred to as "die Kinder" or "die Anführer." The adults are simply "die Erwachsenen" or "die Frau Lehrer" or "der Herr Direktor," "der Briefträger," and so forth. By being nameless, these individuals, like fairy tale characters, are free to stand for something larger, more general

or universal. At the same time, the namelessness creates distance between the named characters, with whom the reader will identify, and the elusive enemy, with whom doing battle has proved frustrating.

Friederike's friend, the mailman, meanwhile is fired from his job because it has been discovered that he is color blind. Like Friederike, he becomes the victim of discrimination because of a physical oddity, and now he too is an outsider, which, in the scheme of the book, entitles him to a name. He is henceforth called Bruno.

The magic spell and flaming hair have limited effect on the aggressors, it turns out, and Friederike is forced to use even more fantastic means to escape persecution. Once again, the increase in fantastic elements of the story parallels the greater need to flee reality. Friederike discovers a letter addressed to her from her long-departed (dead?) father. He writes:

'Wenn Du diesen Brief lesen kannst, dann bist Du schon so gross, dass Du genau weisst, ob Du glücklich bist. Wenn Du nicht sehr glücklich bist, dann komm zu mir. Nimm die Annatante und die Katze mit. In dem roten Buch steht genau geschrieben, wie ihr zu mir kommt. Komm bitte bald.'

The red book in question is written in code, which, when deciphered with the help of their red-haired cousin, professor Profi, informs them that they, the red-heads, can fly. But first they must practice, and in the case of the cat and the aunt, lose some weight. In addition, the red book describes how to get to the land beyond, which sounds very much like a socialist's Utopia.

'Es gibt ein Land, dort sind alle Menschen glücklich.  
Kein Kind wird ausgelacht.  
Keiner wird reicher werden als die anderen . . .

Für Arbeit, die Keiner machen will, haben sie  
 Maschinen erfunden . . .  
 Die einzigen Menschen, die ganz einfach in dieses  
 Land kommen, sind die, die rote, rosa oder Lila  
 Zauberhaare haben . . . Sie müssen gar nichts tun,  
 als hoch in die Luft fliegen.  
 Die Reise dauert eine Stunde. Wer einmal über den  
 Kirchturm ist, der kommt sicher an.'

Preparations for the journey begin immediately. Bruno and his wife have decided to join them in flight, but will have to be carried. With the help of a special red hair cream, those with red hair increase their hair's strength and growth enabling them to carry their fellow outsiders.

The journey takes place at night, in front of the church. A crowd has gathered to watch the take-off. The mayor becomes concerned: "Das ist nicht gut für die Leute, wenn sie so etwas sehen," since he recognizes, as does the critical reader, that this flight of fantasy, attractive though it appears, is a poor solution to the problems at hand. And so he stages a circus spectacle, successfully diverting the crowd's attention away from the magical flight, and possibly avoiding what he fears might be a rash of suicides by those who would be tempted to follow suit.

But the work ends in a bit of confusion and ambiguity. We don't know if the flight is successful, we know only that by the time the circus is over the crowd has forgotten all about it. And so the problem the author wishes to discuss becomes obscured, as Malte Dahrendorf also points out:

The author has not been able to forego fantastic elements in this book, and they occasionally gain the upperhand to the degree that the problem under discussion in fact

suffers . . . the resolution of the conflict in its conclusion is not only unreal, but bears manifest traits of sudden departure into a utopian juster world ordered with greater social reason.<sup>4</sup>

Although the story ends with the dream of journeying to a utopian land coming true, it is not a fairy-tale ending. Nöstlinger has not used the fairy-tale format of staying in one world, but moves her characters freely about from one world into the next. The unhappier Friederike becomes in the real world, the more time she spends in the unreal realm of fantasy. Through excessive fantasizing, Friederike's "handicap" becomes tolerable. The world beyond is understandably more attractive to her than the everyday life where she must deal with malice and loneliness. But the reader is left with the feeling that the heroine has "copped out," has committed a sort of "social suicide," which the author perhaps feels is as tragic as real suicide.

By adding a "Nachschrift" in which she responds to the comments of one fictitious (?) reader, Nöstlinger hopes to eliminate any lingering ambiguity. The "reader" writes:

Eigentlich muss diese Friederike den anderen Kindern dankbar sein. Wenn die Kinder nicht so gemein gewesen wären, wäre sie ja nie in dieses herrliche Land gekommen.

The author responds:

Falls irgeneiner meiner Leser auf ähnlich hübsche Gedanken kommen sollte, möchte ich ihm zweierlei zu bedenken geben:

- 1) Unter einer Millionen Menschen, gibt es höchstens einen, der rote Zauberhaare hat, aber Tausende, denen es so ergeht wie Friederike.
- 2) Selbst wenn die Gemeinheit der Kinder Friederike in das herrliche Land verholfen hat; ich jedenfalls

würde mich zu einer solchen Hilfe nicht hergeben.

That this "Nachschrift" is necessary, one might argue, is proof that the author has failed to achieve the desired result within the framework of her story. More significantly, it seems to me, the "Nachschrift" reveals the author's concern for her reader's response and her desire to provoke thought. We have here a first strong indication of this author's social involvement and her need to communicate a socially critical message, even if that means intruding into the epilogue. The didacticism of engaged children's literature steps right out of the pages here in the person of the author. But in this work Nöstlinger also brings something new to children's fantasy. The particular way in which she intertwines fantasy and reality--in this first work with the aid of a "Nachschrift"--encourages the reader to view critically the presented reality and to examine very carefully the role fantasy plays in the child's life.

In this story and in the next novel to be considered, fantasy is the avenue of escape from a reality with which the child can no longer cope.

In this work and others, Nöstlinger calls into question the traditional image of the child, whose rightful lot is to dream and believe in wonders. Here she shows that the world of the child is not always a "heile Welt," self-contained, happy, and free from adult concerns. Nor does she draw a clear line between childhood and adulthood as is done in Pippi Longstockings, for instance, or in Peter Pan, where only the children can fly, because they alone are still

innocent and pure. In Peter Pan flight and fantasy are things to be envied. In Die feuerrote Friederike, the negative side of fantasy and the dangers of flight are meant to be shown.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Die feuerrote Friederike (Wien: Jugend und Volk, 1970). The pages of this work are unnumbered. Hereafter the quotes won't be footnoted.

<sup>2</sup>Göte Klingberg, "Die phantastische Kinder- und Jugend-  
erzählung," in Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup>Special thanks to Professor Horst Jarka for the explanation and transcription of this "cat-call" into written German.

<sup>4</sup>Malte Dahrendorf, "Aspects of the Children's Book in the FRG," in The German Book for Children and Juveniles, p. 93.

## CHAPTER II

### DIE KINDER AUS DEM KINDERKELLER (1971)

Any ambivalent feelings about Nöstlinger's view of fantasy as escape that may linger with the reader after Die feuerrote Friederike will surely find clarification in her next work. In Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, Nöstlinger deals with the same central theme as in her first work: the use of fantasy to escape unhappiness. And once again, the structure of the text and the interplay between the real and fantasy worlds deserve close attention, for this interplay is purposeful and illuminating. But in this work, the function of the "unreal" is even more obvious to the discerning reader. At the same time, the resolution is clearer and more satisfying, and the characters are treated with more humor.

The narrator of this story is the sixty-three-year-old Pia Maria Tiralla, who lives in a Viennese "Vorstadt." Pia Maria has two passions: eating "Schaumrollen" and looking out of her window, from where she regularly observes a group of "Gassenkinder" disappear into a courtyard. Investigating the matter more closely, she discovers their destination. It seems that every Wednesday afternoon these eight children pay a visit to the cellar of Ferri Fontana, an old childhood friend of Pia Maria's, who drowned forty years earlier. Thus, very early in the story, the reader is introduced

to an unreal figure. When questioned by Pia Maria about his presence there with the children, Ferri answers, "Wir spielen mit einander. Wir spielen glücklich sein . . . Die Kinder brauchen das."<sup>1</sup>

The next scene is important, for against the walls of the cellar stand small blue "Badekabinen." Each child enters one of them, as Ferri sits on his throne. The narrator describes the scene:

Aus Ferri Fontana's veilchenblauen Augen lösten sich veilchenblaue Rauchringe und schwebten durch die Luft . . . Bald waren alle Kabinen voll veilchenblauem Rauch. Und die Kabinen wurden davon heller und grösser und veränderten sich.<sup>2</sup>

The smoke then settles to the ground and becomes a violet rug. The blue smoke has the effect of transforming each child's reality into its opposite: Pia Maria observes Siedler Ulli, a street urchin who lives in one room with his eight brothers and sisters, in a department store buying what in reality he could never afford; Regine Hubersack, the ugliest girl in town, is surrounded by reporters and is seen giving out autographed photos of herself; Peter Fixl, who has had to repeat every class in school, suddenly knows the answers to the teachers' questions; and the stutterer, Schurli Bednar, is heard effortlessly reciting a ballad.

Ferri Fontana, whom the children address as "Meister," is playing here the traditional fairy godmother who makes wishes come true. But once again, Nöstlinger has not created a fairy tale, and Ferri, although a very appealing figure, is not to be seen as inhabiting the same world as the children, who are very real people. It is clear from the transformations of the children's worlds into fulfilled wishes, that the magic of Ferri Fontana is nothing but the

power of imagination, become incarnate, to escape the unpleasant realities of their own lives.

What is taking place here is the compensation for a miserable reality by means of imaginary experience. The unreal nature of such attempts at compensation is made clear by the very unreal nature of the procedure. This is clearly shown when one of the children rolls a ball which Pia Maria picks up: "Da war der rote Ball verschwunden. Um meinen Zeigefinger war ein kleines, blaues Rauchringerl."<sup>3</sup> In the face of reality, the world of wishes goes up in "veilchenblauen" smoke, and the repeated word "veilchenblau" becomes a leitmotif for this flight from reality, and "blau," the color of the Romantics, becomes Ferri's trademark.

Important too in this scene is that each child is isolated in his cabinet. In this imaginary world, there is no communication; each child is caught up in his or her own dream world. There is another indication that something is not quite right with this cellar set-up: Pia Maria recognizes the cabinets as the same ones stolen from a public swimming pool the previous summer and here we have another example of reality intruding on fantasy.

That evening, Ferri comes to Pia Maria with a request. In the neighborhood lives a boy, Anderl Swetar, who would like very much to join the children in Ferri's cellar. But he is too weak to climb over the courtyard wall, and is never allowed to leave home alone. Ferri's plan is for Pia Maria to become "Kindermädchen" at the Swetars and see to it that Anderl makes it "über die Mauer," a journey which reminds us of Friederike's flight "über den Kirchturm."

Pia Maria can hardly refuse Ferri, who "lächelte blitzblau" and who appeals to Pia Maria's childhood adoration of him: "Mir wurde tiefblau ums Herz. Ich flüsterte zurück: ich tue es wirklich gerne!"<sup>4</sup>

The color motif has now been passed over to Pia Maria. She buys herself a nanny's uniform which is, as we might expect, "blauweiss gestreift" and which she adorns with a "dunkelblaue Pelerine." The transference of the color blue indicates Pia Maria's new function in the story, which is to take over gradually the role of Ferri and to free the children from their isolation. This she manages to do, but through quite different means than those Ferri uses.

The process of winning the children back begins with Anderl (i.e., "the other"--the outsider) a timid and overly protected son of a well-meaning but very misguided (and very fat) couple who own a butcher shop. Nöstlinger has fun with her caricature of the Swetars, whom she gently pokes fun at while at the same time allowing them a very important and positive function in helping the children.

Pia describes her first meeting the Swetars:

Der ungeheuer dicke, rosarot glänzende Fleischhauer betrachtete mich mit offenem Mund. Dann begannen seine schmalzlackierten Schnurrbartspitzen zu zittern, und er schlug mit der Faust auf die Teller, dass die Würste zu tanzen begannen, und brüllte: "Endlich ein fleischiges Stück Weib mit einer ordentlichen Schicht Kernspeck! Nicht so eine verhungerte Joghurtzwergerin wie die letzte!"<sup>5</sup>

This passage is, I think, a fine example of Nöstlinger's command of style and humor. The repeated sounds of "m," "sp," "sch," and "z" fly from the mouth of the gluttonous butcher so vividly that

the reader can almost feel the spray of food morsels. The powerful rhythm--like the blow with the fist--seems to set the sausages to hopping, and the invention of "Joghurtzwergerin" and the phrase "ordentlicher Schicht Kernspeck," referring to former and present nannies, are reminiscent of the linguistic playfulness of the nineteenth century Viennese writer Johann Nestroy.

It doesn't take Pia Maria long to see that the Swetars, though well-meaning, don't possess the right parental touch with their son, who spends most of his time cowering under the table to avoid having sausages stuffed into his mouth. Pia Maria teaches them to allow their son to grow and develop at his own rate, a principal right of all children, according to Nöstlinger in this and other works. Pia's initial action toward this end is rather blunt, but effective. She simply stuffs "Würste" into their mouths, and when they recover long enough to get angry she reminds them: "Den Anderl füttert ihr jeden Tag so!"<sup>6</sup> The point is well taken: "Ihre purpurroten Gesichter wurden zuerst rosarot und dann schneeweiss, und sie sanken erschöpft auf die grüne Polsterbank zurück."<sup>7</sup>

Allowed a bit of self-regulation, Anderl does the predictable: for one week he eats nothing, then only sweets, and finally his appetite turns to sausages.

With Pia Maria's guidance, Anderl emerges slowly from his shell. She introduces him to Dedwig Smetacek, known to all as "Mutter Anna," who runs an unusual music school. From her, students learn "Kammblasen," "Deckelschlagen," "Fausttrompete," all musical skills for the imaginative and, it might be observed, for the poor.

Mutter Anna is the embodiment of fantasy at work for the good. Through her Anderl meets her prize pupil, Zuhei Walter, who in turn teaches Anderl "Kammbblasen" and becomes his friend, and it is at Mutter Anna's where he gains the loyal companionship of the wayward dog, "Herr Franz," who serves as the mediator between the shy Anderl and the other children.

Gradually the "Gassenkinder" are pulled out of their isolation by the attractions of cooperative play. Eventually all the children from the "Kinderkeller" make their way to the Swetar house, where they are welcomed by Anderl's parents, who feed them and provide them with a play area. The children bring their problems with them, but instead of imaginary compensation, they receive practical help. The stutterer Schurli learns "Kammbblasen" ("Beim Kammbblasen stotterte er nie."<sup>8</sup>) and Peter Fixl, the boy who repeats every class, gets help with his homework from Pia Maria.

Meanwhile, Anderl has become strong enough, through play and nourishment, to climb "über die Mauer." But by now he no longer needs the imaginary world of Ferri. Nor do the others. Their real world becomes more tolerable as they play together and support one another. Ferri is gradually forgotten until at the end the children have completely obliterated the memory of him. The "keller," which symbolized the sublevel, subconscious realm of wishes and dreams, is replaced by a "Spielplatz" which the children have built from the rubble of an old "Kegelbahn" in the back of the meat market. The butcher Swetar donates the ward to all the children ("und nicht nur ihrem Anderl, sondern allen Kindern."<sup>9</sup>), and together they collect

and recycle materials from every possible source to create their own imaginative world where collective and creative play is possible. They paint the walls bright colors and hang a sign over the door which reads "Kinderladen." The new playground is inaugurated with a festival and a circus, in which each child participates. Through their performances, we see each child beginning to overcome previous handicaps, and it is clear that for the first time they are truly playing "glücklich sein." The circus finale symbolizes the collective spirit of the grand effort: a "Musiknummer für alle." While dancing a tango with Herr Swetar, Pia Maria is suddenly reminded of Ferri Fontana:

Die dicke, heisse, rote Nasenspitze des Fleischhauers  
 erinnerte mich plötzlich an eine anderer Nasenspitze,  
 an eine zarte, kühle, veilchenblaue Nasenspitze . . .  
 Mir war schwindlig. Vor meinen Augen tanzten lauter  
 blaue Ringe.<sup>10</sup>

The butcher, like Pia, has become Ferri's counterpart and yet opposite in the real world. The "Kinderladen" in his home has replaced Ferri's "Kinderkeller." The delicate blue, associated with Ferri, has been overpowered by red, a color which throughout the story has symbolized activity, collectivism, and all earthly things which contribute to Ferri's overthrow: the dog, Herr Franz ("Seine Augen waren purpurrot, seine Schauze rosarot."), Mutter Anna ("Ihre Haustur war rot gestrichen."), and of course the red-faced Herr Swetar. Interestingly, the only non-blue item in the "Kinderkeller" is the red ball, an object of play, which is out of place in the cellar and evaporates into blue smoke.



Pia Maria recovers from the shock of realizing that Ferri no longer exists for the others, and she too puts him out of her mind: "Langsam verschwanden auch die tanzenden blauen Ringe vor meinen Augen."<sup>11</sup> She remains at the Swetars but has less to do since Anderl spends most of his time at the "Spielplatz" with the children, whose number has grown.

As she did earlier in Die feuerrote Friederike, Nöstlinger uses the fanciful scenes in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller to make clear the illusory dreams of compensation. But she goes beyond her first work by demonstrating how the children can be brought out of their isolation. Through communal action and creative play comes communication between children. They begin to rid themselves of aggressions and confront reality instead of taking flight. At the end, Ferri Fontana goes up in smoke because he no longer serves a purpose. The children don't arrive at this end alone, but through loving guidance of adults who are willing to intercede for them (Pia Maria), to allow them autonomy and provide a free atmosphere (the Swetars), or to be positive examples of imaginative living (Mutter Anna).

Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller was written at a time when the children's collectives, the "Kinderladen," were enjoying great popularity in West Germany and Austria and the story reflects many of the theories of the movement. Central to the beliefs of the movement's founders is the concept of play as an important learning device. When it is free and non-repressive, play leads not only to contact with other children, but also to a positive encounter with

the environment.

These and other ideas were laid out in a book which appeared in West Germany only months after Nöstlinger's book. Eltern spielen, Kinder lernen, which might be termed the theoretical complement to Nöstlinger's book, is a handbook for "Spielaktionen," containing plans and strategies for promoting and realizing action-oriented programs for children within an urban community.<sup>12</sup> Traditional playground areas are criticized by the authors as restricting consciousness and imagination. It is important, they write, to see the ordinary, day-to-day objects as play objects or subject matter for experimentation. Instead of manufactured toys, the authors recommend using odds and ends. By learning to see that these objects can be transformed and utilized according to their needs, children come to think and act in terms of change and transformation. Play areas should not be artificial, they say, but should be real sections of society: open fields, old homes and abandoned lots. The goal of all this is emancipation of the child, which will result in children and parents coming closer together.

In a recent interview Nöstlinger illuminated the loss of freedom of today's children by comparing her style of play as a child with that of her own children:

Ich zog mit anderen Kindern durch Garten und Hinterhöfe der Gegend. Ich konnte meine Freundschaften und Feindschaften zu anderen Kindern allein durchstehen. Ich konnte in fremde Wohnungen zu fremden Familien vorstossen . . . Meine Kinder wurden von Müttern oder Grossmutterhand zu Spielplätzen mit Beton und Eisenmonstren gefährdet . . . sogar ihre kleinen Kämpfe um Sandschaufeln wurden von ringsum sitzenden Müttern im Keime erstickt.<sup>13</sup>

Creative play is still possible, Nöstlinger suggests with this work, when adults and children work together. Here the attention on social grievances and the children that suffer from them is brought into even sharper focus than in Die feuerrote Friederike. In this later work Nöstlinger depicts the child in a collective situation without losing touch of the special fate of each individual, and without sacrificing humor.

This work is an example of "emancipatory" children's literature at its best, and certainly lives up to one critic's expectations of the genre:

Die . . . Möglichkeit, den fiktiven Character des kindlichen Spiels innovatorisch und kritisch zu wenden, gewinnt erst dann wirklich emanzipatorische Züge, wenn sie berechnete, unmittelbar nicht realisierbare Kinderwünsche als principiell realisierbar zeigt.<sup>14</sup>

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller (Weinheim: Beltz und Gelberg, 1971), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>12</sup>Wolfram Frommlet, Hans Mayhofer and Wolfgang Zacharias, Eltern spielen, Kinder lernen (Munich: Weisman Verlag, 1972).

<sup>13</sup>Nöstlinger, "Himmelblaue Maikäfer," p. 27.

### CHAPTER III

#### LOLLIPOP (1977)

In the two previous works discussed, Die feuerrote Friederike and Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, Nöstlinger is concerned with the child as outsider and with the dubious use of fantasy to escape one's unhappiness. In Lollipop, a later work which like the other two is written for eight-eleven year olds, she returns to the theme of imaginary play as a means of coping with reality, but offers a new situation and a different focus and arrives at a different conclusion.

The story of Lollipop, the name that Viktor Emanuel Meier has given himself, is told through a series of episodes, in which Lollipop experiences the inevitable and very normal "crisis" of growing up. Like all children, Lollipop feels the need to assert himself and to become an individual, as witnessed by his name change and insistence that others honor it. Other episodes center around his acquiring a best friend, his first love with the ensuing complication, his feelings of rejection and jealousy when his devoted grandmother takes a job, and finally his encounter with prejudice and the resulting feelings of shame. He is able to pass through each "crisis" successfully, with the help of alert and understanding adults, and with the aid of a lively imagination and sense of humor.

At first this imagination appears to take the form of a

magic wand, which makes wishes come true. For Lollipop has discovered that when licked paper-thin, his favorite American-made green suckers, or lollipops, serve as a kind of "rose-colored glasses," enabling him to change according to his wishes the actions, words and behavior of whomever he views through them. In this way he is able to magically control how others treat him. He is able to make friends, for example, and to cause people to come and go at his silent command--in other words, to make not too overly ambitious dreams come true.

At first glance this seems to be the same sort of magic the reader has seen in Friederike's spell, or in the transforming power of Ferri Fontana's blue smoke in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, but there are some significant underlying differences. In both Die feuerrote Friederike and Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, Nöstlinger used the magical scenes to expose the illusory nature of these wish-dreams. But the seemingly magical transformations in this work are not illusory. The changes brought about by Lollipop's "wishing-glasses" are not imagined, but real. His will does indeed bring about the desired results. We come to see that the changes taking place are not the result of magic, but that every transformation through the ritual with the green suckers can be rationally explained. The story is not magical in itself but deals with a child's imaginary games.

Lollipop first employs his lollipop magic to become friends with the neighbor boy, Tommi. The "magic" is performed on the father, however, who through it invites Lollipop into their home.

By overcoming his shyness and uncertainty long enough to approach Tommi, Lollipop demonstrates that he holds the reigns of his own destiny firmly in hand. In another instance he tries the magic on his sister and grandmother, who, Lollipop feels, have been neglecting him. He wishes for his grandmother to give up her new job, and for his sister to turn her attention to him once again. But this time the magic fails. Lollipop is momentarily despondent and angry with the lollipops, but his faith in them prevails. When he holds the lollipop to a mirror and commands angrily, "Sei doch nicht so verdammt widerlich und tu etwas,"<sup>1</sup> he believes that he has accidentally reversed the magic and has himself become the victim of the careless utterance meant for the lollipop. In fact, he is the "victim" of his own powerful imagination.

Lollipop, whose hurt feelings have been manifested in obstinance and rebellion, becomes again the cheerful and cooperative boy he once was, when he was the center of attention in his female-dominated home. Returned to his pre-lollipop self, Lollipop finds that his wishes come true of their own accord. Mother, grandmother and sister give Lollipop the praise and attention he was trying to illicit through other "unreal" means. The spell worked on himself, however, because of his belief in it. The lollipop's magic is no greater than his own imagination, and no more powerful than the power of positive thinking. Nevertheless the lollipops prove to be useful and desirable aids, as is imagination itself, in weathering the minor storms of childhood.

By the end of the story Lollipop has become skeptical of "lollipop-power" and sees that it can't help him solve problems requiring long-term solutions. It can't turn a lie into truth, for example, or help him overcome his fear of dogs. He eventually learns that many of his fears and insecurities can be dealt with realistically and that direct confrontation and truth-telling often lead to the most effective solutions. In one episode of the story, he becomes entangled in a complicated cover-up of a lie he felt compelled to tell. After overhearing a friend's wealthy parents make a derogatory generalization about cleaning women, he fabricates a story to conceal the fact that his grandmother works in this capacity. When the truth comes out, all have a good laugh and learn something about the unfairness of prejudice.

The last episode in the book centers around an impromptu celebration of Lollipop's birthday, which he reschedules from his original birthday of December 25 to a more desirable one, April 1. The party is the result of the collective efforts of adults and children. Everyone contributes in turning the drab courtyard into an outdoor ballroom, and the scene is reminiscent of the playground celebration of the characters in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller. In the course of the day Lollipop realizes that he no longer needs his lollipops to make things happen for him, and he turns his reserve supply over to the acutely shy Tommi, who is able to make good use of them.

Lollipop's brand of fantasy serves him well, and is, in Nöstlinger's presentation, as healthy and desirable as his supportive



environment. He has no need to escape reality in the way, and to the degree, that Friederike does, for example, because the adults around him are fair and flexible in dealing with him and because he is a "good" kid at heart, and free of those characteristics which would brand him as an outsider. For a time Lollipop needs to believe in the powers of the lollipops to transform reality and by believing he wishes them into being. He no longer needs these aids when he sees that he can arrive at the same result on his own.

This work, written for the same audience as the two works previously discussed, lacks the emotional appeal and structural soundness of the other two stories. There the children were victims of injustices from without, coming from parents, teachers, or narrow-minded citizens. The reader became emotionally involved and angered at the victimization of innocents. Here the main character--not really an outsider--copes rather successfully with childhood's inevitable growing pains. Although described with humor, the episodes lack a unity and easy transition. In a number of them the lollipops play no role at all; in others their function is not always the same. The carefully developed story line of Lollipop's early efforts to gain a friend is abruptly dropped, and we do not see the new friend again until the last pages. Finally, the tempo of the story is uneven and, one can imagine, too slow for the average eight-ten year old.

The party at the end of the book lacks the significance of the final celebration in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, where the reader shared in the mood of a victorious climax to the events. In

Lollipop the celebration holds no such meaning and is actually rather uneventful. And yet this party, like the protagonist's name change earlier, demonstrates that "set" things--such as birthday dates--need not be accepted. Even though this work may not measure up to the earlier ones, it is linked to them through the common framework and environment, as well as through Nöstlinger's special, critical use of fantasy and the power of imagination to transform unpleasant reality.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Lollipop (Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Verlag, 1977), p. 44.

IMAGINATION AS LIBERATION

## CHAPTER IV

### WIR PFEIFEN AUF DEN GURKENKÖNIG (1972)

Several components of Nöstlinger's style are fused in her award-winning book, Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig,<sup>1</sup> in which outrageous fantasy is called upon to illuminate and solve a real, everyday conflict. Fantasy serves in this work a function similar to that of Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, where two levels of action, one taking place in the real world, the other in an unreal realm, run parallel to and mirror each other. The fantastic narrative elements in this story have the added function, though, of making political information accessible to the reader in a way which allows comparisons between two authoritarian systems. Crisis of authority is the theme standing at the center of this work, which is an excellent example of "anti-authoritarian" literature for children.

The story takes place in the home of the Hogelman family and is narrated by the twelve-year-old son, Wolfgang. The family is comprised of a younger brother, Nik; an older sister, Martina; a very sympathetic "Opa," who possesses a fine sense of humor and reads liberal newspapers; the mother, who can be pushed too far in her efforts to maintain balance in the family; and the authority figure of the family, the father, who prefers conservative newspapers and is in every way the inflexible tyrant.

Into this household appears one day a remarkable visitor, "König Kumi-Ori der Zweite, aus das Geschlecht die Treppeliden," a race of unusual, cucumber-like creatures who inhabit the Hogelman's cellar. A revolution by the Kumi-Ori proletariat has succeeded in ousting the king, who now seeks asylum upstairs with the Hogelmans. The half-meter high king, with his golden, red-stone-studded crown, white gloves and red toenail polish, cuts a grotesque figure. Still very much the despot, he demands obedience and servitude from all the family members, who, with the exception of the father and youngest son, react in disgust. His language is not easily understood, nor is his expectation that his royal hand be kissed: "Wir sind gewohnt, dass uns jedliches Küssen den Hand."<sup>2</sup> To his outstretched hand, the mother responds by thinking he has hurt himself, and the Opa replies that he only kisses the hands of pretty ladies. Herr Hogelman, however, is impressed by this regal presence in his house, and when asked by his daughter why the king uses the plural form of the personal pronoun when referring only to himself, answers, "Ein König ist eben mehr als gewöhnliche Leute." Opa, frequently the sensible antidote to the father, has a different explanation: "Er redet so, weil er blöd ist."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it is evident that the king's manner of speech is not a means to communication, but rather an expression of his stature and his right to rule. It seems too that Nöstlinger carries the absurdity of this royal "we" to its ridiculous extreme by making the rest of what the king says stupidly fumbled.

Herr Hogelman photographs the king with the intention of giving the story to the newspapers, but is astonished when, after

repeated attempts, no image of the king appears on the negatives. The reader is being told here that the king--within the framework of the story--does not exist in a rational, scientific sense, and that we must search for another meaning of his existence. We don't have to look long for an explanation. It soon becomes obvious that the unreal cucumberking is the mirror image of the all-too-real father, the personification of an authority which Nöstlinger calls in question.

The cucumberking's authority is inherited, not earned, and he relies on mere symbols to command authority; without his crown he feels naked: "Weil er ohne Krone ganz nackt ist und nicht denken kann, und leben auch nicht."<sup>4</sup>

Like the cucumberking, Herr Hogelman continually violates his position as family head. He dictates nearly every aspect of his children's lives: what they wear, what they eat, where and when they play, and even what emotions are appropriate: "Pape sagt, ein Junge in meinem Alter darf keine Angst mehr haben."<sup>5</sup> The daughter sums it up thus: "Papa kann nicht begreifen, dass Kinder normale Menschen sind, die eigene Ansichten bekommen und selbständig sein wollen."<sup>6</sup>

The king doesn't expect to stay long, he explains, since his subjects, dumb creatures who need someone to tell them what to do, will be retrieving him soon. Opa is outraged at this display of arrogance:

'So, so', hat der Opa gesagt, 'dumm sind sie! Und warum sind sie denn dumm?' . . .  
'Dann werde ich euch, liebe, durchlauchtigste Majestät, einmal erläutern, warum ihre Untertanen dumm sind!'<sup>7</sup>

The reader is spared Opa's political lecture and is left to guess at the answer now or to wait until later when the answer becomes obvious.

Political lessons are prevalent throughout, however, whether through implied action or by direct clarification. The king explains how many a "Putsch" has recently been staged among other

"Gurkenkürbismenschen:"

Der Opa hat gesagt, das heisst nicht Putsch, sondern Revolution.

'Nein', hat der Kumi-Ori gesagt, 'nein! Sie machen Putsch! Putsch! Putsch!'

'Revolution', hat der Opa gebrüllt. Und 'Putsch! Putsch! Putsch!' hat der Kumi-Ori geschrien.

'Verdammt noch mal', hat der Papa gesagt, 'das ist doch das gleich.'<sup>8</sup>

Martina then must explain the difference and the political implications of each, as she has learned it in school:

Wenn einer mit Soldaten kommt und das Parlament zusperrt und die Leute, die ihn nicht mögen, einsperrt und die Zeitungen nicht schreiben dürfen, was sie wollen, dann ist das ein Putsch. Wenn aber die Untertanen den König hinausschmeissen und das Parlament aufsperrn und Wahlen ausschreiben und Zeitungen machen, wo jeder schreiben kann, was er will, dann ist das eine Revolution!<sup>9</sup>

Her political astuteness unsettles the father, who, like the Kumi-Ori king regards his subjects as dumb, and prefers that they stay that way: "Der Papa hat gesagt, er wird bei Gelegenheit dem neuen Geschichtslehrer die Meinung sagen."<sup>10</sup>

Kumi-Ori's presence in the family creates tension and dissension, until one by one the family members rebel. In refusing to allow the king to sit on their laps as the family prepares to go out for their traditional Easter excursion they go against the father:



"Das war das erste Mal überhaupt, dass keiner von uns Papas Befehl gehorcht hat." The Easter plans are foiled, and for the first time the Hogelmans have broken with tradition--another sign that the foundation of his authority is beginning to crumble.

The mother, who will tolerate the king no longer, is the first to force Herr Hogelman into a compromise. He agrees to keep the king in his room and out of sight, and to be solely responsible for him. Herr Hogelman and the king, who share the same antiquated values of authority, now share the same bed, thus becoming bedfellows in both the literal and figurative sense.

The alliance between the father and the king is now firmed. The king begins to conspire against the other family members in order to supply the father with evidence of their disobedience, and in return, Herr Hogelman forms plans to help restore the king to his former position, as it has become clear that his subjects can indeed get along without him. By helping the king, the father is trying to regain the full authority in his home which he sees slipping away.

When family relations are at a nadir, mother Hogelman blames it all on the king. But Opa, often the sober voice of wisdom, sees it differently: "Der Kumi-Ori ist zwar ein fürchterlicher Gnom, aber in einer normalen Familie, in einer, wie eine Familie sein sollte, da hätte der Kumi-Ori nicht so fürchterlich wirken können."<sup>12</sup> The mother protests that they are "doch eine normale, sehr ordentliche Familie," but the reader is prepared by now to see the truth in Martina's outburst: "Nein, nein, wir sind keine! Fernseh'n darf man nur, was der Papa will, zu essen bekommt man nur, was der Papa

will! Anziehen darf man nur, was der Papa will! Lachen darf man nur, wenn der Papa will!"<sup>13</sup> A tyrant does not reign in a "normal family," nor does such anachronistic abuse of power need be tolerated, as shown by the overthrow of the king.

Wolfgang decides to investigate the potato cellar to see if the king is telling the truth about his "Untertanen." He discovers that the "Gurkenvolk" is a hard-working, well-meaning and endearing race. It is not hard for the children to find immediate affinity and sympathy for the Kumi-Ori people, who, like themselves, are used to obeying. The Kumi-Ori are different from their king in color and stature; instead of emerald green, their skin is potato brown; instead of thin delicate hands, they have thick broad workers' hands. Wolfgang learns of the events leading to the revolution: only the privileged were allowed to go to school, and the workers could plant only as many potatoes as necessary to keep them from starvation. They had no rights to self-determination, and many generations were wasted working on a "Riesenpalast" for the ruling class. On their own now, they are attempting to build a democracy with equal rights for all, where even monuments to heroes are outlawed.

Resolved to help them in their efforts to become self-sufficient in a democratic society denied them under the king's rule, Wolfgang and his sister embark on a campaign to collect equipment and tools for this tiny folk. Now father and children have joined opposing forces.

When it is discovered that the father, whom the king has bribed with false promises of position and riches ("einen amerikanischen

Wagen, eine Zentralheizung, ein Schwimmbad"), is plotting with the king to exterminate the entire Kumi-Ori race, the whole family turns against Herr Hogelman. As one united front, they attack the father with a barrage of criticisms and expose the king as a liar and exploiter. Shamed and shocked, the father comes to see the truth, although he never openly admits to his mistakes, and he claims that he would have personally seen to the king's eviction, had not the younger son, Nik, removed the cucumberking from the house and thus already taken care of his extradition.

Alongside the story within the home, Wolfgang offers the reader another instance of misused authority with his tales of life at school. Wolfgang's teacher is the autocrat here, whose tactics of intimidation and fear keep Wolfgang from working up to his potential. The teacher, the pedagogical equivalent to Herr Hogelman and the cucumberking, relies on punishment ("Strafarbeiten") to deal with any problems that arise in the classroom. The circle linking the father and the teacher is a vicious one, since Wolfgang's fear of his father prevents him from asking his father to sign his "Strafarbeiten" as witness, and his fear of the teacher results in more "Strafarbeit."

The parallel between the teacher and the father extends to the resolution of conflict. As with the father, violent overthrow is not necessary in order for this miserable situation at school to change. The teacher returns to his classroom after a sick leave to find his supposedly worst student, who has in the meantime responded to the more progressive and democratic methods of the substitute

teacher, now at the head of his class. He begins to reflect on his teaching methods, and the resultant change in his attitude causes Wolfgang to view school differently: "Die Schule ist gar nicht so blöd, wie man manchmal glaubt."<sup>14</sup>

There has been some confusion among critics about the aim of Nöstlinger's story. One critic, Hans Bemann, states that Nöstlinger's clear intention is to communicate an understanding of a political message.<sup>15</sup> She presents the reader with the model political situation--the confrontation between the ruling class and the ruled--and shows the desired outcome. But since this theme is one which may exceed the average eleven or twelve-year-old's level of understanding, he says, it is necessary to integrate the political realm into the personal family sphere of experience. Out of the parallel action and the insight into the inner structure and workings of the family arises an understanding of the political situation:"

Die primäre soziale Gruppe (Familie), die dem Kind vertraut ist, dient als Modell für die Grossgruppe (Staat), die auf solche Weise in den Verständnishorizont des Lesers hereingeholt wird.<sup>16</sup>

But it is quite unlikely that Nöstlinger wants merely to instruct her readers on nineteenth century struggles between the proletariat and ruling class, unless this lesson had relevance for her present-day readers. It seems to me that Nöstlinger is not seeking to expose a political truth through the family relations, but rather uses the political action among the cucumber people to shed light on the politics of the family. The analogy of the political and family realms serves to show how the authoritarian models of the

political past have survived in the family today. The father, like the last of the cucumber kings and like the teacher, who has not kept pace with new methods of teaching, represents attitudes and authoritarian behavior which are no longer valid in this day and age.

The exaggerated, black and white portrayal of the problems within the "Gurkenreich" are easily grasped by young readers. The complex dynamics within the contemporary family are, however, less readily understood and cannot be learned quite as easily as Martina learns her history lesson. It is to the author's credit that she manages to make her point clear without oversimplifying the reactions of the family members, or the solutions to the problems.

The children don't win freedom by overthrowing the father; this would be impossible and undesirable from Nöstlinger's standpoint, for the family unit is an important institution for the child and an understanding adult a necessary ally in the battle to grow up. But by exposing the cucumberking, the children expose, for the father to see, the inherent dangers and the abuses of power. Nor is the father portrayed as total villain, as is the cucumberking. He has a faithful advocate in the younger son Nik, as well as in his wife, who tries to counter the children's complaints with pleas for compassion and understanding of the hard life their father leads: "Er hat nicht zu wenig Familiensinn, sondern höchstens zu viel."<sup>17</sup>

Frau Hogelman, while remaining in the background, is an important figure of balance in the family. At first her role of mother is somewhat ambiguous; she must show allegiance to both parties of the conflict. Her education occurs alongside that of her

children. Like them, she is tyrannized by her husband and is forced to lie to him about household budget matters. Her immediate objection to the king is an emotional one: she is frightened and disgusted. Later she too seems ready to get rid of him, displaying solidarity with her children and eventually showing signs of rebellion and begins to resist. She is irritated that her signature as Wolfgang's mother is less valid than that of her husband, where school authorities are concerned: "Wieso will er Vaterunterschriften? Wir leben doch in einem Land, wo Gleichberechtigung ist!"<sup>18</sup> But she should not be confused with a feminist. Secure and content in her family role, she is the passive, eternal optimist rather than an advocate for change.

Frau Hogelman's behavior throughout the story is in stark contrast to that of her husband. Her children can turn to her with their problems, but also have the right to keep secrets from her: "Wir haben gesagt, dass sie wirklich eine gute Mutter ist, aber das ist kein Grund, ihr alles zu sagen. Und weil die Mama eine gute Mutter ist, hat sie das auch verstanden."<sup>19</sup> The difference in parental attitudes comes through in their reactions to Martina's boy-friend: "Papa schreit dagegen, weil der Berger Alex lange Haare hat. Mama sagt, das macht nichts, weil die Martina trotzdem Klassenbeste ist und man die erste Liebe sowieso nicht heiratet."<sup>20</sup>

Although at the end of the story she voices her opposition to the father's authoritarian hold on the family, Frau Hogelman nevertheless remains his staunchest supporter. She wants the king out of her house but is not willing to do what's necessary to bring

this about: "Die Mama hat zwar erklärt, der Kumi-Ori muss unbedingt weg, aber sie hat auch erklärt, sie kann keiner Fliege was zuleide tun, und dem Gurkenkürbusi auch nicht . . . man muss tolerant und gütig sein, hat sie gesagt."<sup>21</sup> The mother acts as a reminder that compromise and compassion are necessary ingredients for change, but that they alone will not bring it about.

Interestingly, only the youngest son, Nik is able to carry out the eviction of the king through non-violent means. Because of his age, he is too young to understand the political implications involved throughout: "Der Nik ist nämlich lieb. Dass er von der Sache nichts versteht, ist bei seinem Alter kein Wunder."<sup>22</sup> Instead of seeing the unfairness and exploitation of a despotic ruler, he sees instead that the king ("Er ist doch ein gutes Spielzeug")<sup>23</sup> is being treated unfairly: "Die Untertanen sind wirklich gemein, gelt?"<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Nik is not able to see in his father the oppressor that his siblings see, since he is the only one in the family who gets along with him: "Mit kleinen Kindern ist der Papa sehr lieb."<sup>25</sup>

The father is able to enjoy small children, perhaps because they make better subjects." And, Wolfgang notices, it requires considerable effort and self-awareness to refrain from abusing one's position as the older family member. He catches himself treating Nik as his father treats him: "Das ist mir plötzlich cingefallen, wie gemein ich mich benehme, und wie scheusslich ich mit Nik rede. Genauso wie ein Erwachsener . . . ich habe gemerkt, wie leicht es einem fällt, gemein zu sein."<sup>26</sup>

Nöstlinger is realistic enough to know that children do not arrive at these insights alone. Conditions change in this story, as in the others already discussed, because there are adults in positions of influence who intercede for the children: in the school it was the substitute teacher; in the home it is the mother and the grandfather. Nik's role in the story seems to suggest that compassion, along with a simple and basic sense of fairness are also important ingredients for change.

Relinquishing one's power is not an easy thing to do. For the father to agree to the banishment of the king he must first be willing to relinquish at least some of his control over his family. Arriving at this change of attitude has required a group effort on the part of the other family members.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig won the coveted "Deutsche Jugendbuchpreis," in 1973.

<sup>2</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-23. Nöstlinger obviously refers to the Dollfuss coup in 1933. Considering her family background and her father's political involvement, we can assume she wants her readers to get a lesson in history.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>15</sup>Hans Bemann, "Die Funktion irrealer Erzählmuster im Kinderbuch," Deutschunterricht 26 (October 1974), pp. 31-41.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>Nöstlinger, Gurkenkönig, p. 119.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

## CHAPTER V

### SIM-SALA-BIM (1973)

The need for collective action and sharing in attaining freedom and happiness has been a message of the last three works discussed and is also an important theme in Sim-Sala-Bim, a work written shortly after Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig.

Sim-Sala-Bim is important for the discussion here, not only because of the characteristic Nöstlinger touches, but also because it reflects a trend among German children's authors during the last fifteen years to radically rewrite eighteenth and nineteenth century fairy tales into innovative, emancipatory tales.

The attack on the conservatism of the "classical" fairy tales was mounted in the sixties when many writers started parodying and revising the older fairy tales, which, these writers believed, only contributed to the creation of a false consciousness and reinforced an authoritarian socialization process. When a "classical" fairy tale has been revised in this manner it is said to be "reutilized" ("umfunktioniert"):<sup>1</sup> the function of the tales has been turned around so as to expose contradictions in capitalist society and awaken readers to other alternatives which, it is hoped, will lead to a different, more emancipatory society.

Sim-Sala-Bim takes its motif from the Grimm's tale, "How Six Travelled through the World."<sup>2</sup> It is the story of one who is actually three. (" . . . die Geschichte von einem, der eigentlich drei war.")<sup>3</sup> Sim has strong arms but is flatfooted. Sala can run as fast as the wind but is weak everywhere else, including in the head. Bim is smart as a whip but has no muscles at all. Singularly they are worth little; together they are mighty. They become one in body and wander through the world "setting things right," preaching the need for collectivism, fairness and self-determination for workers and children. They inevitably incur the hatred of those in authority.

Sim-Sala-Bim takes a job in a factory where he is able to accomplish much more than the average worker, but, like the average worker, is exploited. When he demands more pay he is told: "Sie haben für mich gearbeitet! Und darum kann ich bestimmen, wieviele Silberstücke Sie bekommen!"<sup>4</sup> Sim-Sala-Bim responds with this provocative retort: "Aber nein, wo denken Sie denn hin! Ich habe doch nicht für Sie gearbeitet! Ich habe für mich gearbeitet! Für meinen Hunger und meinen Durst und meine Kleider!"<sup>5</sup> As he is leaving the factory Sim instructs his fellow workers that they are being unfairly treated and that they deserve part of the profits.

Sim-Sala-Bim stops next at a school, where he joins a class, eager to learn. He tries to pay attention but soon becomes bored, and realizing that the children are also bored, Sim-Sala-Bim leads them off to play. When the mayor and teacher try to retrieve the children, yelling that they have played long enough, Sim-Sala-Bim yells back with this Summerhillian plea for self-determination:

"Verdammt noch einmal . . . Die Kinder werden doch selbst wissen, wann sie genug haben! Vom Aufpassen und vom Schaukeln!"<sup>6</sup> Sim-Sala-Bim then uses the threat of force to persuade the major to donate his own personal swing to the city park for the children to use.

Eventually Sim is apprehended by the police who have received complaints about his subversive activities. The police order Sim-Sala-Bim to separate when he (they) can give no uniform answer to simple questions of name, age, and birthplace. They refuse to be separated and run away over the mountains. Everywhere Sim-Sala-Bim goes the reader is told, there are people who don't like him, and there are people who do like him and who help him, but there is no one like him, and this is what he now sets out to find.

Unlike Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig or Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, this story has no resolution. This open ending is an obvious break from the traditional fairy tale ending, and is intended, I think, to force the reader to see "socialization," as a never ending process. And like other "reutilized" tales it intends to show the reader that personal happiness is dependent on the welfare of a community or collective of people.

This concern for outsiders, together with a plea for collective action and more autonomy for children will continue to be a trademark of Nöstlinger's works.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jack Zipes, "Who's afraid of the Brothers Grimm? Socialization and politization through Fairy Tales," The Lion and the Unicorn, Winter 1979-1980, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Another popular "reutilized" fairy tale by Johannes Merkel, Zwei Korken für Schlienz, published one year earlier, is also based on this Grimm's fairy tale.

<sup>3</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Sim-Sala-Bim, (Wien, München: Jugend und Volk, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

## CHAPTER VI

### KONRAD, ODER DAS KIND AUS DER KONSERVENBÜCHSE (1975)<sup>1</sup>

Konrad, certainly one of Nöstlinger's most successful works, may be called a sort of Frankenstein creation fantasy in reverse. For Konrad is no monster. He is the perfect child--perfect by adult standards, that is--and has been sent in error to his startled "mother," Berti Bartolotti, an eccentric fifty-five year old. Manufactured in a child-making factory to meet specifications, Konrad arrives in a large can and his "mother" need only apply the nutrient solution supplied by the factory to reconstitute this seven-year-old wonder. When the company seeks to repossess Konrad, it becomes necessary to re-educate him to be so ill-behaved that the factory concludes he cannot be their product after all, and he is able to stay with Berti, who has grown to love him as her own child.

The concept of a manufactured child captures the reader's imagination and affords many humorous episodes, and one can well understand why the English translation of the work was chosen by American school children to be included in "Classroom Choices," a select bibliography of trade books compiled annually by the International Reading Association. The work also won the 1973 "Mildred L. Batchelder Award" for the outstanding foreign children's book in English translation.

The success of the book, however, is due largely to the skillful satire on the relations between children and their parents and teachers, a theme which Nöstlinger deals with in all her works. The reader is confronted with the apparent contradiction between the true nature of children and adult expectations of them. Nöstlinger presents the reader with the "perfect" child, and shows the absurd consequences. Along the way she takes many a well-aimed potshot at notions of propriety.

The conflict of the story begins when the perfect child lands in the custody of Berti Bartolotti, who is the antithesis of everything that Konrad has learned is proper and acceptable. Unlike most adults, who are overly concerned with what is expected of them, the fifty-five-year-old Berti refuses to follow protocol for its own sake, and is unorthodox and unconventional in every way. So she plays tennis in black pants, for instance, smokes cigars and keeps goldfish in the bathtub: "If you keep wondering what other people would do, and you always do the same, you'll end up being just like them, and then you won't be able to stand your own company," she tells Konrad.<sup>2</sup> She has a lively imagination, and is not afraid to try new things, including raising a prefabricated child with notions of behavior squarely in conflict with her own.

Like Mutter Anna in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, Berti is the embodiment of imagination. As with Mutter Anna, her trademark is bright colors, particularly red. Berti changes her attire and makeup to fit her mood, and is able to be whatever she wants to be. Her colorful nature also serves as a contrast to the rigid, monotone



men from the child-making factory, outfitted from head to toe in sky-blue, who represent a uniform mode of behavior.

Since Berti has no idea of children's needs she goes by what comes naturally to her, and the results are often confusing to Konrad, who has been programmed to be unnaturally good. His proclamations and admonitions shock and even annoy Berti:

Boys of seven shouldn't look in the mirror except when they're washing their ears and brushing their teeth, in case they get vain and conceited.

I thought people weren't allowed to eat ice cream if they hadn't finished up all their meat and vegetables first.<sup>3</sup>

When Berti asks Konrad why he persists in asking what people are allowed to do, and what they're supposed to do, he answers:

"That's how a boy of seven ought to behave."<sup>4</sup> He has been programmed to believe that children are to obey and keep out of parents' way:

"Which is my play corner? . . . Where could I be the least nuisance?" he asks.<sup>5</sup> He can't bring himself to play with dolls because he was

told in the factory that dolls are only for girls. He has even been taught how to watch television--even this, the author implies is an unnatural act--but doesn't like the violent children's shows he sees.

His makers did not neglect a vital lesson which keeps the well-behaved child on course. They taught him to become upset at doing things

not allowed: "It's called guilt feelings," Konrad says, "and

instant children who haven't learned it properly aren't allowed to

leave the factory."<sup>6</sup> Konrad spends much of the first weeks with

Berti feeling guilty and confused. He had been trained not to listen

to naughty songs and yet had been taught always to listen to his

parents. So he finds himself in a quandry when hearing his mother's colorful language and irreverent songs. Berti has the opposite problem. She hates the word "good," which she says is as bad as "steady," "neat" or "well-behaved." Other words she has no use for are "necessary," "sensible," "everyday," "proper," "usual," "housewife" and "correct."

Berti's male friend, Mr. Thomas is most impressed with Konrad: "This is the best boy I've ever met . . . It's a real joy to find such a well-mannered, good, polite little boy! And only seven too!"<sup>7</sup> He decides to become Konrad's "father." Berti is less than thrilled at the uninvited interference of her friend who admonishes her to change her ways radically if she hopes to be a "good" mother. And moreover she doesn't believe that it is absolutely essential for a boy of seven to have a father. Herr Thomas immediately takes over Konrad's education in preparation for school. Konrad learns quickly, and--unlike the author--doesn't question what is being taught. He summarizes what his "father" has told him about Christmas:

Rich children get lots of presents, poor children don't get so many, and very poor children don't get any. But Santa is giving things to the ones who do get presents because it's baby Jesus' birthday. Did I get it right?

Berti's reaction is vehement:

None of that is true. There isn't any Santa Claus! There aren't any fairies either. . . . they're all stories parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles make up to tell children. . . . Why? . . . I suppose because adults like to think they can trick children into believing things. It makes them feel good and clever . . . What they're really doing is saying, just look at

us, aren't we strong and clever and wonderful and good . . .<sup>8</sup>

Konrad goes to school, where he is, not surprisingly, the best pupil. But he gains the enmity of the other children, who don't want the perfect child anymore than Berti, when he refuses to fight or cheat, zooms to the top of the class and takes his job as class monitor seriously. He is not prepared to be teased: "They didn't tell us about that in the factory,"<sup>9</sup> and although he tries to follow Berti's advice to learn to talk like ordinary children, he finds it difficult to distinguish between what is talking like an ordinary child, and what is being rude: "It's all a lot of garbage, what they learn! And I didn't get a crummy 'A' because I haven't finished a dumb assignment yet . . . I can almost do it now," he says of his attempts to speak like an ordinary kid.<sup>10</sup>

Konrad becomes friends with Kitty, the girl who lives below Berti, and she becomes his protector at school. "Is it right for a girl to protect a boy? Shouldn't it be the other way around?" asks Konrad. Berti answers, "The important thing's for the person who needs protection to get it."

When it is discovered that Konrad was ordered for another couple, and is being recalled to the factory, the child-like imaginations of Berti and Kitty produce an emergency plan. Kitty undertakes an intensive deprogramming schedule with Konrad, meant to change him into a "normal," i.e., imperfect, child, so that the intended parents will refuse him.

The plan works. Through a reversal of the reward and punishment scheme usually employed by adults to train their children

to be good, Konrad learns to become a brat, so that when the men from the factory bring Konrad's intended parents, these react as hoped: "What a frightful child! . . . We'll get a dog instead."<sup>12</sup> The final moments of the story culminate in raucous slapstick when Konrad emerges from his training throwing food and writing on the wall.

Neither Konrad nor the others are, however, wholly satisfied with the "new" Konrad:

'Do I have to be like that all the time now?' asked Konrad.  
 'Heaven forbid!' cried Mr. Thomas.  
 'Do I have to be the way I was before now?'  
 'Heaven forbid!' cried Mrs. Bartolotti.  
 'Don't worry,' said Kitty. 'We'll get along somehow.'<sup>13</sup>

The final message that the book imparts is that certain adjustments and compromises need to be made by both sides if family life is to work.

By reversing the roles of the parent and the child--Konrad is really the projection of adult's idealized self-image imposed on childhood, while Berti is an adult more childlike than Konrad--Nöstlinger succeeds in getting the young reader to question not only what parents unrealistically expect of children, but to question those same codes of behavior when applied to adults. Berti is a much more appealing character than the other adults in the story, yet she violates nearly every behavioral code which the factory, i.e., society, prescribes. Kitty's parents on the other hand are models of proper behavior, yet they are dull and unimaginative and overly restrictive with their daughter.

In Konrad, Nöstlinger successfully uses a technique called "mundus inversus," or "turning the world upside down."<sup>14</sup> This "nonsense literature," as it is also called, relies on playful turns of reality, reversal of roles and the like. When used by a socially engaged writer, such as Nöstlinger, the satirical possibilities are many. For by turning the world around, the author not only amuses, but enlightens, and awakens a new sense of reality in her readers. This "turning the world upside down" is related to Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt," which is designed to get the reader to see ordinary things in a new light, and to question normally held views.

The social value of fantasy is evident in the works of Nöstlinger, who, as we have seen, uses the genre of fantasy as a force which can be mobilized for social change. The strength of her fantasy novels is in the organic intertwining of the realism of children's every day life with the fantasy of children's--and Nöstlinger's--minds. Fantasy is not posing as an independent realm so perfect that reality by comparison appears pale. Rather, fantasy and reality complement each other in her works in an effective, imaginative way, so that fantasy can act as a mirror to the real world. When the social milieu is painted in such strong detailed strokes, as it is in her works, the appearance of fantastical elements, whether a half-meter high cucumber king or a factory-made seven-year-old, jars the reader into a critical frame of mind, and prepares him to search for significance in these elements.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The English translation of the work is used in this discussion due to the inaccessibility of the original. Konrad, (N.Y.: Franklin-Watts, 1977) is translated by Anthea Bell.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Göte Klingberg, "Die phantastische Kinder und Jugenderzählung," in Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, p. 235.

## CHAPTER VII

### ACHTUNG! VRANEK SIEHT GANZ HARMLOS AUS (1974)

Unfair expectations and demands placed on children by adults often result in antagonism toward children, an attitude known as "Kinderfeindlichkeit." It is a widely held view that Viennese society is guilty of such an attitude and it is one which Nöstlinger exposes and criticizes in her works. In Konrad she humorously portrays adults whose show of "Kinderfeindlichkeit" accompanies another common Viennese trait, that of "Hundefreundlichkeit." In this next work, the social evil of "Kinderfeindlichkeit" again receives critical attention.

Achtung! Vranek sieht ganz harmlos aus is a "detective" story for readers ten to twelve years of age. The story is told by eleven-year-old Lele Binder who wants to warn all the children of the world to be on their guard against those adults who are not working in their, i.e., children's, best interests.

The Binder family has rented a room in their apartment house to a retired math teacher, Herr Vranek, who now lists his occupation as "inventor." When he tells an enthusiastic Frau Binder that he is presently working on a project which will solve the "Kinderproblem," Lele and her friends become suspicious. After careful investigation, they find out that Herr Vranek's new invention is intended to be

used by parents and teachers to turn children into helpless, obedient puppets: "Mit ihm kann unsere verrohte, entmenschte, aller Werte entblösste Jugend auch von weniger Verwandten und nicht so beliebten Lehrern in gewünschter Weise programmiert werden."<sup>1</sup>

Herr Vranek intends to sell the machine to the minister of education or to anyone else wishing "decent," i.e., passive, industrious and obedient children. If he were to have his way, the world would be populated with Konrad act-alikes. Lele and the other children who make up the "Kinderkollektiv" see the machine as a threat not only to themselves, but to all children, and they resolve to prevent Herr Vranek from selling his invention.

Herr Vranek would pose little threat, were there not a market for his invention. But as long as there are those like Lele's mother, for instance, who want to program children into obedience, the danger is real. Lele's mother and Herr Vranek represent an attitude toward children which Nöstlinger both exposes and opposes. It is an attitude which is all too prevalent in Viennese society, where the gap between children and adults is perhaps even greater than in other societies because of the large percentage of older people living in that city.

The children cannot rely on adults for help in their fight with Herr Vranek. Lele doesn't tell her mother about their discovery of the child-taming machine: "Denn die Mama ist nie auf der Kinder Seite, und sie hätte sicher gesagt, dass die Maschine ist eine Erfindung, auf die sie schon lange wartet."<sup>2</sup>



Frau Binder is not malicious, but is insensitive and misguided in her dealings with children. She is motivated by what she thinks is expected of her, and not by what she herself wants: "Die Mama tut nie, was sie wirklich möchte, sondern immer das, was man tun soll. Man, wer das eigentlich ist, das weiss ich nicht."<sup>3</sup> Like other Nöstlinger mothers we will meet, she is nagging and unfriendly, and is afraid of what might happen when children are given more freedom: "Mama behauptet . . . ich tue in letzter Zeit nur mehr, was ich will, und nicht was sie will, und das wird sie mir abgewöhnen, bevor ich es mir zu stark angewöhnt habe."<sup>4</sup> Lele has no house key, an indication of the mistrust shown by her mother. That Frau Binder is a fanatic for cleanliness and is fond of Herr Vranek are indications of the distance separating her from children in general. It is not surprising that she is racist besides; she won't allow the foreign children in her home, especially those with skin as dark as Lele's friends, Christos and Takis.

Herr Binder, on the other hand, is a sympathetic and understanding father, and is, in the eyes of his daughter, a good father: "Er ist genau so wie ein Papa sein soll. Mit Mitgefühl und Gemütlichkeit und voll Spass . . . Mein Papa sagt immer, Leute die man gern hat, soll man nicht ärgern."<sup>5</sup> Moreover he can't tolerate Herr Vranek, a sign of his solidarity with his daughter. Herr Binder criticizes his wife for certain child-rearing practices, and yet when she challenges him to raise his daughter by himself, he answers that he has no time. As good natured as her father is, he always seems to back down, and like many adults he is too involved in

his own affairs to take an active part in his daughter's life.

When she confides in him about Herr Vranek and his dangerous machine, this conversation ensues:

'Wollt ihr alle Kinder glücklich machen?' fragt der Papa.  
 'Nein,' rief ich, 'Wir wollen nur, dass es ihnen nicht nur noch mieser geht!'  
 'Geht's dir mies?' Der Papa tat erstaunt.  
 'Ja,' sagte ich.  
 'Mir geht's noch mieser,' sagte der Papa.  
 'Aber der Unterschied ist,' erklärte ich, 'dass ich gegen dein Miessein nichts tun kann, aber du könntest gegen meines sehr viel tun.'<sup>6</sup>

This explanation summarizes an important lesson which Nöstlinger has conveyed throughout these works: children are able to help themselves only in certain areas and to a certain point. Beyond this point they have little control. They cannot be expected to solve their own problems in an adult manner yet, much less solve the problems of adults themselves. On the other hand, adults can and must be concerned with the well-being of children.

Children have less say over their lives than one imagines, the author implies, and adults shouldn't be afraid to grant them control over the small amount of free time they do have. Seen from Lele's perspective, life is often one hectic endurance contest with little time for oneself:

Vor der Schule sollen die Kinder Zeitung und Brot holen, nach der Schule müssen sie sofort nach Hause und Mittagessen und Aufgaben machen, und am Abend müssen sie zeitig ins Bett und geschwind einschlafen, um die gleiche Tortur nächsten Tag gut zu überstehen.<sup>7</sup>

Included in the group of children who have banded together in the common cause of thwarting Herr Vranek are two children of Greek "Gastarbeiter," Takis and Christos. Their fate in a society which is

antagonistic toward both children and foreign workers is given special attention in this work, and is, indeed, one of the thematic focal points of the story.<sup>8</sup>

Children in Nöstlinger's works are often portrayed as victims of societal or familial injustices which force them into the role of the outsider. As outsiders the children of foreign workers have an added disadvantage. Whereas the German-speaking child has the ability to integrate into society on his own or with the help of adults, the foreign child is not only helpless, but speechless, in the truest sense of the word, in the struggle to integrate and be accepted.

Nöstlinger shows the dreary existence of these children, whose ordinary problems are compounded by prejudice, and whose fate it is to be both despised and neglected. That the odds against them are doubly high is pointed out in the conversation about the intended use of Herr Vranek's machine. Christos and Takis want to know if the machine is meant to be used on the children of foreign workers. No, one of the children answers, because no one cares about these children anyway: "Weil um die schert sich ohnehin niemand."<sup>9</sup> Yes, comes a counter answer, the machine's users will most likely choose the foreign children as the first victims, because it is precisely these children who are the furthest from what adults want children to be like: "Dass die Gastarbeiter die ersten sein würden, die darankämen, weil die Gastarbeiterkinder ja am wenigsten so sind, wie Erwachsenen sie wollen."<sup>10</sup>

As she has done before, Nöstlinger again places the burden of guilt on the adults. It is they, not the children, who are biased toward these foreigners. Takis and Christos are readily accepted by the other children into their club, and the acceptance is mutual, for the parents of Christos and Takis are generous and affectionate with all the children. The author makes it easy for the reader to identify with and accept these foreigners, for they are battling the same enemy. Yet she makes it clear that their struggle is of a different nature and complexity.

Upon visiting the home of the Greek family, Lele's first response is one of envy, for the mood of intimacy and friendliness is one she is unaccustomed to. But she quickly understands the misery brought on by the overcrowded conditions in the one-room apartment with appliances that don't work, and an unresponsive landlord. When the Greek couple ask the landlord to fix the toilet Lele witnesses the disgust and condescension with which they are treated:

Das sind ja alle Deppen! Die kernen sich ja in einem zivilisierten Land nicht aus, machen alles kaput, alles hin, die unterentwickelten Tschuschen, die.

Lele delivers a lecture to him on culture and economics:

Was Sie da sagen, stimmt nicht! Die Griechen, die haben schon eine Kultur gehabt, wie die Leute bei uns noch gar keine gehabt haben. Fragen Sie einmal meine Geschichtslehrerin, die wird Ihnen sagen, wo die Wiege der abendländischen Kultur gestanden ist.

The landlord replies:

Was verscheissen's dann die Klos, wenn sie solche Kulturmenschen sind?

And Lele retorts:

Weil Sie nämlich soviel Miete für eine Zimmer-Küche Wohnung verlangen, dass mindestens acht Leute darin wohnen müssen. Und für fünf Wohnungen haben sie nur ein Klo!<sup>11</sup>

Her lecture is to no avail since the toilet never gets fixed, and it will clearly require more than the harsh words of one eleven-year-old to effect change in this matter.

Through collective action the children are able to stop Herr Vranek from succeeding in his mission. This is done through a series of enjoyable, fast-moving episodes with elements befitting a detective story. There are the mistaken identities, the mysterious man in a Loden coat, and the final fast-paced chase and resolution. When Herr Binder has been locked up by Herr Vranek, who falsely believes he has stolen the invention to sell to the East, the children come to the rescue in the nick of time. But Herr Vranek escapes and Lele must go to the superintendent and explain that he should be on the watch for a man selling such an invention. The children return home where they receive a hero's welcome from their parents.

At the end the villain is still at large and must be considered a threat as long as there are people who regard obedience as the highest virtue in children. Although Frau Binder sees in the end why children might have reservations about such a machine, she still thinks it is a great invention.

The book ends with an important warning to all the children of the world:

Falls ihr einen Unterrichtsminister habt, der nicht so einer ist wie unserer, dann seht euch vor! Gebt acht!

Lasst euch nicht hinter's Licht führen! Friedemann  
 Vranek könnte auftauchen und . . . er sieht ganz harmlos  
 aus!  
 P.S. Aber nicht jeder, der vor euch zittert, muss schon  
 der Vranek sein.<sup>12</sup>

Nöstlinger's story calls to mind a well-known children's novel which is referred to as the first German detective story for children, Emil und die Detektive.<sup>13</sup> Written by Erich Kästner in 1929, Emil und die Detektive was one of the first works for children which showed solidarity among children as one way of achieving integration into society.<sup>14</sup> In Kästner's work, a group of young Berliners take in the newcomer Emil, and make his problem, of retrieving his stolen money, the concern of the whole group. In finding the stolen money, the children are able to bring adults into the chase, something the children in Nöstlinger's work don't do. But both works pit city children against an adult villain and both require collective action in solving the respective crises.

Nöstlinger's work is less idealistic and less optimistic than Kästner's book, however. The author shows that these Viennese children are capable of wronging one another. About one club member Lele says, "Ich glaub, die lassen ihn überhaupt nur als Gastmitglied in den Club, damit sie einen zum Ausspotten haben."<sup>15</sup> And of course the culprit is still loose at the end of Nöstlinger's story.

But the intention of the work is clear; to alert the reader to the ways in which adults wish to control children, and to suggest that the problems of racial prejudice and child-hatred can only be met through collective action. It is to Nöstlinger's credit that this message is integrated into a lively and fast-moving and entertaining story.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Achtung! Vranek sieht ganz harmlos aus, (Wien, München: Jugend und Volk, 1974), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>8</sup>The theme of the "Gastarbeiter" as outsider has been treated in other contemporary children's books, notably: Bammel, Abenteuer eines Angsthasen by Hans Hempel and Martin Ripkens, 1973.

Niki aus dem 10. Stock by Irma Korschunow, 1973.

Antonella, Terror Kampf by Friederik Hetman, 1973.

Ulku, das Fremde Mädchen by Renate Welch, 1973.

Benevenuto heisst Willkommen by Hans Georg Noack, 1973.

Hauptfarbe, Nebensache, Hans Georg Noack, 1969.

<sup>9</sup>Nöstlinger, Achtung! Vranek sieht ganz harmlos aus, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>13</sup>Dietrich Fischer, "Detektivgeschichte und Science Fiction als Jugendliteratur," in Kinder- und Jugendliteratur, p. 290.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Nöstlinger, p. 47.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DER KLEINE HERR GREIFT EIN (1973)

One often hears the arguments put forth that children in Western society are better off today than in the past. The proponents of this argument point to what they see as the numerous improvements: more and better food, better medical care, a better chance to be educated, less corporal punishment, and generally more freedom and opportunities than ever before.

Christine Nöstlinger questions whether the prosperity which accounts for many material additions to life actually constitutes "progress." While others proudly point to these modern advantages, Nöstlinger is quick to point out other conditions which she observes: the high number of obese children, children whose fear of school is so great as to cause psychosomatic illness, and the increase in child suicides.

Children growing up on the "Insel der Glückseligkeit," as the now prosperous Austria has been called, face many complex problems, Nöstlinger tries to show, and the little bit of prosperity that children enjoy today may mean little for their emotional development. It is not enough that children are loved--although it is essential that they are--for many a child is loved but not understood: "Kinder werden häufig geliebt, aber Kinder werden kaum



verstanden."<sup>1</sup> Certainly there is an abundance of good people who profess concern for children. Good intentions are not enough, however, in our complex world, and those well-meaning adults are often confused or inexperienced when it comes to children's needs. Ferri Fontana in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller is of this type. His way of making children happy was to lead them into a utopian fantasy world. Also from that mold are the Swetar parents in the same story, whose love for their son was as great as their misunderstanding of his needs.

In Der kleine Herr greift ein it is again an adult who becomes aware of the plight of the children around him and tries to intercede on their behalf. But he fails, at least for the time being, because he misunderstands not only the needs of children but also the nature of his society which is only too eager to turn one man's honest endeavor into a money-making venture.

"Der kleine Herr," the nameless hero of the story, is a retired bookkeeper whose passion is reading. He discovers the world of children's literature when his failing eyesight worsens to the point that he can only read the large print found in children's books. He acquires a bright blue library card, and with the color blue we know that the door to fantasy has been opened. He is delighted with the magic and fantasy he finds in these works, which he falsely believes reflect the real world of children. He tells his new friend, Elsie:

'Ihr Kinder habt es doch so gut und herrlich und schön!  
Als ich klein war, da war es furchtbar langweilig. Ich  
hatte zwar ein Meerschweinchen. Aber das konnte nicht  
reden. . . . nie habe ich ein Stück Schokolade bekommen.'<sup>2</sup>

Like many adults he has a false view of the world of children and has to be shown by Elsie that their real world is quite prosaic and full of grievances.

With raised consciousness, he now walks through the park, noticing all the signs which restrict the actions of children: "Betreten verboten!" "Ballspielen verboten!" "Rollfahren verboten!" "Lärmen verboten!" "Eintritt und Durchgang verboten!" He hears someone say, "Kinder gehören auf den Spielplatz" and notes to himself that the playground looks more like a monkey cage than a place to play. At home he and his wife reflect on the differences between their childhood experiences and those of children today:

Damals war doch da, wo jetzt die Hochhäuser stehen, die grosse Wiese und die Schottegrube von Grundwasser und die alte Mühle . . . Wir hatten im Keller ein Versteck . . . Die Kinder heute, die haben das nicht . . . weil alles verboten ist.<sup>3</sup>

The implication here is that modern playgrounds found in big cities today lack the possibilities for imaginative play, and that in the case of playgrounds, nothing is better than something. It is an observation which Nöstlinger pointedly made in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller.

The "kleine Herr" is right in recognizing that simple pleasures, enjoyed on make-shift premises, are often the richest. And he rightly recognizes the need of a children's advocate, someone to hear children's problems and work in their behalf. His mistake is in personally attempting to convert fantasy into reality through embodiment of the consummate children's book hero.

By fashioning his new personality after chosen traits of various fantasy figures, he becomes a "Kinderbuch Kinderman." The outcome is bizarre but entertaining. He procures a mongrel dog, Heinrich, which he dyes blue--again the color of fantasy--and adorns with bells, balloons, propellers and rollerskates. The "kleine Herr" is a fitting master for Heinrich. On his hat are fixed colored light bulbs, regulated by battery-powered buttons which also set in motion the golden wings and swan feathers on his jacket.

It is not surprising that he soon gathers a following of children who are at first bewildered by his offer to them: "Kinder, ich bin für euch da! Jederzeit und für alle! Ab jetzt habt ihr mich. Ich helfe euch! . . . Ihr habt eine Menge Schwierigkeiten oder Kummer. Die werden ich beheben!"<sup>4</sup> He invites them to write out their problems and send him a card. The response is overwhelming. He receives cards telling of children who are abused, beaten and neglected. He hears from children who have no friends, or are having trouble in school. In other words, he learns of all the problems which Nöstlinger sees children in her society facing.

In the beginning he has mixed success in his self-appointed mission to help all. But the story takes off when he answers a card which reads simply "hässlich-dick-gefrässig." The card leads him to the home of Rosi, where he finds a very unhappy child of very wealthy parents. It appears that Rosi has everything but happiness. He decides to help her lose weight on a trip to the mountains ("Abmagerkur"). They are joined by his wife, the dog Heinrich, the boy Kurt and Freddy, a rock star. This unlikely group, reminiscent

of the outcast children from Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, encounter one misadventure after another.

With the help of the wife, who poses as a Pennsylvanian Dutch American, they sneak into an elegant resort hotel. Nöstlinger uses this episode to make fun of the wealthy and snobby vacationers and to play with mixing languages: "Tu rums mit tu Betten, for Betten ju Anderschdend? . . . No, ei bin not e Amerikanerin. Ei bin e deutsche Person. Aber ei leben in Amerika. Wos ei sprech is Pennsilvanis datch!"<sup>7</sup>

They are evicted from the hotel and head up the mountain. But the real trouble begins when they realize that Kurt had neglected to tell his parents where he was going, and that the two adults, the "kleine Herr" and his wife, could be liable for child abduction.

By the time they come off the mountain, the "kleine Herr" has lost nearly all his equipment, his batteries have run out, and Heinrich's color has washed off. In addition the dog decides to stay on the mountain and the rock singer Freddy leaves for Italy. The "kleine Herr" is totally despondent and is certain that without his equipment and his costume he will be ineffectual as "Kinderman." What he fails to see at the moment, though, is that his mission of making Rose happy enough to want to lose weight is succeeding. Rosi is having more fun than she has ever known and the pounds are dropping off.

When they read in the newspaper that they are being sought by the police for kidnapping, their spirits hit rock bottom: "Die Kindermann-Sach war schief gegangen. Niemand hatte er geholfen.

. . . ganz im Gegenteil! Alles hatte er noch schlimmer gemacht!"<sup>8</sup>

The children, Kurt and Rosi, are returned home safely but the "kleine Herr" must prove his innocence before a court. Meanwhile he has become somewhat of a national hero and the same newspapers that had called him a child-molester were now making a "cause celebre" out of the event. Headlines read: "Mutige Einzelaktion eines Kinderfreundes," "Kleiner Herr mit grossem Herz," "Wegen Kinderliebe verhaftet," "Eine Stadt soll sich schämen." One paper prints a full page of children's complaints and solicits ideas to help children. The best idea will be rewarded with a prize: "Siebenzimmer-Küche-zwei-Bäder-Wochenendhaus."<sup>9</sup> The largest newspaper starts a campaign to collect contributions for a playground. The editor appeals to large businesses to contribute, promising recognition in the newspaper, and reminding them how lucrative the business of charity can be. Still another newspaper announces a series of "kleine Herren-Stories in Augenzeugenberichten," in which anyone who had ever come into contact with the "kleine Herr" is interviewed.

The "kleine Herr" becomes the victim of not only the press, but of all those wishing to make personal profit from this sensation. He receives an offer from a manufacturer wanting him to endorse a long-life battery. Department stores want him for autograph-signing parties. Record companies wish to record him telling stories, and several women propose marriage.

The "kleine Herr" does not want the attention he is getting, and spends the weeks before his trial in bed. He is the only one, however, who wants to avoid attention. His attorney, Rosi's father,

sees the trial as a chance to attract national attention for himself: "Ist das nicht auch eine gute Reclame für dich?" asks his wife.<sup>10</sup> He tries to coach the "kleine Herr" to be overly dramatic in court and to act in such a manner as to arouse sympathy.

By the time the trial occurs the original intentions and concerns of the "kleine Herr" have been nearly obliterated by the crass and self-serving causes of others.

He enters the courtroom, drugged and exhausted, apparently unaware that he has been dressed in a uniform made from his original "Kindermann" attire but with business logos and emblems embroidered on the jacket. He is no longer the creator of the "Kindermann" but is its victim. His loudspeaker contains a tape which plays, "Ich bin der Kindermann. Ich bringe den Kindern Glück." And when he wishes to address the court to express gratitude for his acquittal and to say that he now sees that his method of helping the children was the wrong one, the tape instead booms out an advertisement: "Puppen-Meier Sachen-Kinder glücklich machen!" and "Kauft Roller bei Minder- eine Freude für Kinder!" or "Kinder in seelischer Not, beglückt durch ein Zehetner Brot."<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately the selling of the "kleine Herr" is not over with the trial. His wife cajoles him into signing contracts which buy up all rights to the name and personality of the "Kindermann." He first realizes what this means when he sees "Kindermann" look-alikes promoting merchandise in nearly every department store in the city.

There seems to be no limit to the commercial exploitation of his name. He would like to buy back the rights and put an end to the disgusting events, but is told by his wife that the five-year contract is binding. She comforts him by pointing out the short-lived nature of such fashions: "Der Rummel hört sicher früher auf. Fünf Jahre lang bist du nicht werbewirksam."<sup>12</sup> Her prediction proves correct and the "Kindermann craze leaves as quickly as it had arrived.

But the final word belongs to the "kleine Herr," or more accurately to the author, who steps forward to emphasize her message through this greeting from her protagonist:

Der kleine Herr lässt all Kinder schön grüssen . . . Es geht ihm . . . viel besser als früher. Aber er hat trotzdem nicht vergessen, dass es den Kindern noch immer nicht besser geht. . . . Er denkt auch viel über Kinder nach, und wie denen zu helfen ist. Er ist sich ganz sicher, dass ihm die Lösung des Problems noch einfallen wird. Und dann, wenn er die gefunden hat, dann wird er sich melden. Damit . . . können die Kinder rechnen.<sup>13</sup>

The story ends with the attention being refocused on children, who have been paradoxically forgotten in the zeal to promote causes. Nearly everyone proclaims a concern for children: the teachers, the courts, the toy manufacturers. But their interest is a travesty of the genuine concern shown by the "kleine Herr," who has come to understand that his flamboyant exhibitions surely aroused attentions, but did not solve the children's problems. He has made the same mistake as do the image makers in believing that the brighter the wrapping, the more appealing will be the contents of the package. In the course of his journey, the "kleine Herr" progresses from a

fantasy figure to an imaginative, yet real adult.

There is hardly an institution in modern society which is untouched by Nöstlinger's criticism in this work. Her target is clearly the profit seekers: the journalists who sensationalize stories to sell their paper, lawyers who represent clients with their own public exposure foremost in mind, advertisers and manufacturers who are guilty of the worst kind of mind manipulation, and a society in general which has given in to a crass materialism which obscures other more worthy values. The author indirectly and repeatedly poses the question of who stands to gain in her prosperous society, and her answer continues to be--not the children, they are the powerless victims.

The other question implicit in this and all other works by Christine Nöstlinger, "How are children best served?" remains open. The "kleine Herr" has learned what approach not to use, but still he has succeeded in affecting the lives of at least two children. Whether it is possible to reach larger numbers of children at once is unknown. But it is clear that the author encourages the truly concerned, those like the "kleine Herr," to persevere and try to stay one step ahead of those who would corrupt the best of intentions.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, "Himmelblaue Maikäfer," p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Nöstlinger, Der kleine Herr greift ein (Hamburg: Verlag Friedrich Oetinger, 1973), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

REALISM FOR TEENAGERS

## CHAPTER IX

### EIN MANN FÜR MAMA (1972)

The last four works by Nöstlinger to be discussed here belong to what is surely the biggest growth area in children's literature: works dealing with adolescent problems and problem adolescents. This body of literature is usually referred to as "young adult literature" in English and "Jugendliteratur" or "die realistische Jugendliteratur" in German. The books themselves are often called "problem novels" because of the way in which they treat the problems that belong specifically to young adults in today's world, be these in the area of parent/child relationships, sex and sex roles, or self and society.

The topical and "trendy" nature of many young adult books makes them fairly short-lived, at least in comparison to children's books. But while many do not survive the first printing,<sup>1</sup> the books can also be characterized by their mass appeal, as evidenced by the many television adaptations of these works.<sup>2</sup>

As with her previous works, Nöstlinger's main concern is with the effect of contemporary problems on her protagonists. And again, while the child is the main concern of these works, parents also play a central role. Indeed, the first three novels, Ein Mann für Mama, Ilse Janda, 14, and Der Spatz in der Hand, it is one or

both parents that is the problem.

These novels are successful when they give the reader insights into society or individuals, or both. But too often, it seems, young adult novels succumb to a pessimism from which there is no escape. The once accepted motto, "Kindsein ist süß" is replaced with another motto, "Kindsein ist mies."<sup>3</sup> When the books in discussion fail, it is in part because the second cliché is just as false as the first.

In Ein Mann für Mama, the two Kratoschwil sisters, Su, who is twelve, and I (the name of the narrator), fifteen, attempt to find a new husband for their mother, who has just left their father. The elaborate scheming of Su to match her mother with first her teacher, then the next-door neighbor, affords some light and humorous moments, to be sure, but the predictable happy ending, where father and mother are reunited, is unconvincing in light of the preceding characterizations. The ending appears to reflect the feelings of the aunt:

"Das wichtigste im Leben eines Kindes ist ein ordentliches Familienleben mit einem Vater und einer Mutter,"<sup>4</sup> and underscores the belief that the function of the family is to offer protection and security to the children, whose lives are severely disrupted by the shaken marriage. The lost security prompts Su to initiate an all-out effort at restoring order to the nuclear family.

Although the sisters would like to be reunited with their father, a passive but sympathetic and loving man, the initial motive for finding a new marriage partner for their mother stems from the need to get out from under the overbearing rule of the grandmother and

great aunt, with whom they now live: "Alles kommt davon, weil soviele Frauen auf eine Haufen sind."<sup>5</sup>

The "Haufen" here refers to the six women living under one roof: grandmother, great-aunt, aunt, mother and two daughters. Not one of the adult females is portrayed in a way that invites emulation, least of all the two elderly spinsters, who are characterizations of bourgeois narrow-mindedness. The grandmother is inconsiderate and brutally insensitive to her grandchildren:

Die Grossmutter erklärt, für die heutige Jugend müsste wieder ein Krieg kommen, dann würden die heutige Jugend die guten Torten zu schätzen wissen.<sup>6</sup>

She doesn't show the slightest inclination toward them and is aptly referred to as "Frau Feldwebelin" by the father. Her home is a child's nightmare, where any sign of youthful vitality is discouraged.

The great-aunt is also a strange one. Her unnatural speech reminds the reader of the cucumber king, who was unable to communicate with those "below" him. From the great-aunt flows a never-ending stream of clichés, proverbs and biblical quotes. In this regard she is the antithesis of Su, with her spontaneous and original poetic spirit.

At the story's end, the aunt completely snaps under the confusion caused by all the matchmaking intrigues so that her slogans and proverbs come unprompted and uncontrollably:

'Übermut tut selten gut'  
 'Man soll nicht nach den Sternen greifen'  
 'Wie der Vater, so der Sohn'  
 'Ordnung lerne, übe sie, Ordnung spart die Zeit und Müh'  
 'Jugend kennt keine Tugend'  
 'Was Hänschen nicht lernt, lernt Hans nimmermehr'  
 'Lerne Leiden ohne zu klagen'

Her "Sprichwortanfall" adds to the slapstick of the final pages and she, like the grandmother, is meant for comic relief, which is much welcomed in an otherwise uneventful plot. But the character of the aunt with her grotesque reliance on "Sprichwörter" also serves as a criticism of the bourgeois mentality. The proverbs and sayings reflect a resignation to the status quo, a belief in moderation and an inability to treat persons or situations individually.

Far from being a comical character, Karoline Kratoschwil, mother of Su and I, is a rather pathetic figure. At thirty-five she is still a child, "ewig dick, ewig heulend, ewig beleidigt."<sup>7</sup> She tends toward melodrama and exaggerations and is incapable of distinguishing what is significant from what is not. She makes her husband nervous with her constant nagging and endless consumerism. Financially independent because of her own career, she could be an emancipated woman, were she not "mother fixated." As a child her defense against the other children was the threat: "Das sage ich meiner Mutter."<sup>8</sup> As an adult her defense during marital conflicts is to run home to her mother. She is not evil, as is the mother in Ilse Janda, 14, but she is practically suffocated by self-pity and is totally ineffectual as a parent: "Ja, ja, ich bin feig. Ich kann nichts dafür, dass ich so bin wie ich bin."<sup>9</sup>

She is shocked out of her lethargy by the suspicion that her daughter has suffered psychologically from the disruptions of the family, but the suspicion is based merely on a ploy by Su to bring her mother and teacher together. Finally the mother gathers the courage to make a decision--which for her is monumental--to spend

Christmas alone with her children at a mountain resort. But the execution of these plans is again too much for her, and her eleven-year-old daughter takes over, which she does willingly since it gives her the opportunity to arrange a simultaneous meeting at the resort with the newest candidate for husband. When the mother's plans for a peaceful Christmas have been spoiled by the confusing intrigues at hand and by her hysterical mother and aunt who have decided to come along, the mother breaks down. The roles are reversed and it is necessary for the daughter to "mother" her mother:

Mit einer ganz rauhen Stimme klagt sie. Niemand liebt sie, keiner mag sie, Alle hassen sie. Und das ist auch kein Wunder. Weil sie zu nichts taucht und nichts wert ist. Weil sie hässlich und dick ist. Weil sie dumm ist. Weil sie feig ist.<sup>10</sup>

This childish outburst prompts I to call their father who comes to the rescue. As soon as he appears, all the problems dissolve in goodwill and I, assuming that the reconciliation is accomplished, rationalizes: "Ausserdem kann man auch zusammenleben wenn man sich nicht liebt, sondern achtet, menschlich. Das habe ich in der Zeitung gelesen, in der Trost-und-Rat Spalte."<sup>11</sup>

But the reflective reader cannot imagine that after this last hour of euphoria a new life is really beginning. All the participants are too strongly tied to their roles. And the notion that a marriage based only on respect can work is made questionable by the fact that the idea came from an advice column, which by nature offers shallow solutions, and by the character of Karoline herself, who in no way inspires respect.

The story at the end has taken a turn toward slapstick. The elaborate plans to bring the mother and neighbor together have ended in disaster and the innkeepers can only shake their heads at the quizzical behavior of the "Stadtsleut" who pack their bags and frayed nerves and head back to the city. The farcical nature of the drama at this point, however, is not enough to let us forget the underlying gravity of the problem. There are too few of their humorous intrigues and collisions of subplots to sustain the story on the level of a comedy and unfortunately the comedy is as unconvincing as the predictable outcome.

The author attempts to show how the children are the real victims of broken marriages. When parents separate the children often become extra baggage. Says I: "Ich bin doch keine Küchenkredenz, die man beim Umzug nimmt und in die Küche stellt."<sup>12</sup> At the same time it is the children who are the true heroes, in the sense that they are able to retain that element of the human spirit which perseveres in times of crises.

But children need parents, and deserve adults who are willing advocates of their rights. This principle recurs throughout Nöstlinger's works. Here the nuclear family is projected as a sacred institution when it fulfills its function and responsibilities to the children. This is all that really matters, Nöstlinger seems to be saying in this work; how the parents relate to each other is secondary. The family unit must be salvaged. By reconciling the parents at the end, she implies that they have been disrupting the children's lives for invalid reasons and that the marital problems,



the blame for which falls heaviest upon the mother, are not so serious. But Nöstlinger has succeeded in portraying Karoline as a weak and ineffectual mother and wife so credibly that the reconciliation becomes incredible.

In Ein Mann für Mama, it is the broken marriage, per se, which deals the children an unfair blow. In Ilse Janda,<sup>14</sup> the author shows more clearly how children are victimized by insensitive and uncaring adults, regardless of marital status.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Of Nöstlinger's works, Studendenplan, Ein Mann für Mama and Ilse Janda, <sup>14</sup> have been adapted to TV.

<sup>2</sup>Alfred Clemens Baumgärtner, "Realistische Literatur für Kinder, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen," in Modern Realistic Stories for Children and Young People, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Ein Mann für Mama, (Hamburg: Verlag Friedrich Oetinger, 1972), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

## CHAPTER X

### ILSE JANDA, 14 (1974)

The basic situation in Ilse Janda, 14 bears a striking resemblance to that in Ein Mann für Mama, although the two novels are quite different in tone, atmosphere and outcome.

In this novel too, it is two sisters, Erika and Ilse, who are the victims of family problems, which here become so great as to cause Ilse to run away from home. Like Su in Ein Mann für Mama, Erika, the younger sister, acts as the go-between for her older sister. Although she helps her sister run away, Erika spends the rest of the story tracking Ilse down. Like Su, Erika tries to make the best of the situation in her dreary home, but unlike Su, who is comically depicted, Erika is a sad figure whose worries are more lasting and serious. Su's efforts at finding a husband for her mother were often no more than a happy game. Erika's story has no happy end. Although Ilse is found and returned home, no one is the wiser nor more compassionate for the experience. Instead, the mother contemplates sending Ilse to a "home," and the reader is left with the feeling that Erika will follow her sister's example of running away from her unhappiness. The story ends with a harsh downbeat, with her words: "I'm afraid not just for Ilse. I'm afraid for all of us."<sup>1</sup>

The mother of the family, Lotte Schratt, is an evil variation of Karoline Kratoschwil. Indeed, she is the most evil of all Nöstlinger mothers, a fitting target for the author's massive "Eltern-Kritik" and her most bitter attack on maternal misbehavior.

Lotte Schratt is not interested in any of her four children from two marriages. Apart from the youngest daughter, the children are simply a cross she must bear; a distraction from her favorite pastime of reading magazines and doing crossword puzzles. She is uncommonly egocentric and makes no attempts at understanding the problems of her growing children, even when the signs of Ilse's unhappiness, her threatened suicide and failures at school, are glaring.

After the divorce from her first husband, the two sisters were well taken care of by the grandmother, Oma Janda. Without being asked, they were suddenly retrieved by their mother who had remarried. Life in the new home is unbearable. The girls must put up with tactless remarks about their favorite grandmother, and must endure increasing nagging and ridicule from their mother. Disobedience is punished by beatings and withdrawal of allowance. The teenage daughters are not even allowed keys to their own home, a sign of the distrust shown them by their mother.

The stepfather is well-meaning enough but powerless against his wife. In addition, he has to put up with the impertinences of his oldest stepdaughter who resembles her mother in detail. Erika's observation, "I had never noticed it before, but mama was an older version of Ilse,"<sup>2</sup> applies to character as well as to appearance. Like her mother Ilse is stubborn and unwilling to compromise. The

manner in which she speaks to her young stepbrother is a verbatim imitation of how her mother speaks to her. The author is clearly showing how a parent serves as a role model for children, and here she harshly criticizes this mother for being responsible for what happens to Ilse.

Lotte's reaction to her daughter's running away is characteristically egocentric; she sees it as a personal affront and is more concerned with the embarrassment of having to appear at the police station than with her daughter's disappearance. She is passive throughout the ordeal of finding Ilse and leaves all the dealings to her husband, to whom she feels shackled. Her view of the parental role is best summarized by: parents know best, children are to obey or be punished. She is a mother without one positive quality, to whom maternal responsibility is foreign. As soon as the daughter is returned her only wish is to get her into a home as quickly as possible: "Even if she does come back, they say she'll have to go into a home because they can't be responsible anymore,"<sup>3</sup> says I.

The children are surrounded by villainous adults. Erika and Ilse's maternal grandmother is cut from the same literary mold as the "Grossmutter Feldwebelin" in the previous work. Here the grandmother is nicknamed "die Amtsrätin" because of her exaggerated concern with propriety and obedience. She attributes Ilse's running away, for example, to lack of proper discipline, and like "die Feldwebelin" she lacks compassion or understanding of the problems at hand. Erika doesn't find needed sympathy or support from her

teacher either, who is as insensitive and overly authoritarian as the grandmother. Erika begins to trust her stepfather, who could be a source of support and help, if his wife Lotte would not stand in the way of his relating to his stepchildren. He is somewhat understanding of the right of children to autonomy. During a quarrel with his wife he says: "Your children, my children . . . it's not a matter of your children or my children. They're not the property of either of us!"<sup>4</sup> Lotte misses the point altogether: "Oh, let's not quarrel over a word!"

The only figure who shows compassion and love for the sisters is Oma Janda, their "first" grandmother. Oma Janda is proof that blood ties don't guarantee affection, for she prefers the stepfather Kurt to her own son, and she herself is more of a family to the girls than is their present one. Oma Janda understands Ilse's problems because she observes; she observes because she loves Ilse. She observes that Ilse lies, although she interprets it more as wishful thinking than lying. And she is critical of her daughter-in-law, who doesn't care enough to notice. Oma Janda is most forceful as the children's advocate in the confrontation of grandmothers which takes place when Erika has revealed the whereabouts of her sister. The "civil servant" asks Oma Janda how she views this "unfortunate case:"

This is not a case! This is Ilse. My grandchild . . . A good dinner every day doesn't mean you have a mother who cares for you! Six or seven rooms to live in don't mean you have a good home . . . no one asked how they were coping with all this.

The "civil servant" replies:

Yes, very well . . . the children are always a problem in divorces and so on, everyone knows . . .

It's the children who have the problems.<sup>5</sup>

comes the reply from Oma Janda.

The two children have different ways of trying to cope with the problems. Ilse seeks escape first in a fantasy world, and then in actual flight. For the time being, Erika copes by taking refuge in psychosomatic illness, but the reader is told in the opening paragraphs that the chances are good that she might follow in her sister's footsteps: "Anything would be better than this!" Ilse said before she left. That was right, too. At least it was right for her. When I'm fourteen . . . perhaps it will be right for me too."<sup>6</sup>

Although Nöstlinger deals frankly with timely problems in this work, she is unable to make a successful story out of material. Even though the narrative is told in first person by Erika, the reader is never able to identify with this rather elusive and flat character, and the depressing subject matter is not compensated for by the main action of the story, the tracing down of the missing Ilse, which is dull enough and is made all too easy by Erika's discovery of a boy at school who just happens to know Ilse's every movement.

The main failing of the work is the lack of real flesh and blood people who are made to feel, think and cope in a credible fashion. A generally accepted "raison d'être" for most young adult literature is in the ability to make characters and situations immediately accessible to the readers, who must be able to identify

with little effort:

Daher ist der Realitätsbezug nicht abhängig von den Attributen einer modernen Umwelt, sondern allein von der Überzeugungskraft der fiktiven Person. Nur sie ermöglicht jene Transformation in die eigene Lebenssphäre, die das Kind und der Jugendliche leisten wollen und leisten können.<sup>7</sup>

Identification in this work is made very difficult by the one-dimensional characterization and the implausibility of the situation. One critic recognizes this but rationalizes:

Da Eltern Kritik "in" ist, wird die teilweise starke Überzeichnung der Erziehungsberechtigten von jungen Lesern vermutlich entweder nicht bemerkt, oder mit Zustimmung aufgenommen. Empfindlich geworden gegen autoritäres Verhalten der Eltern, wird die junge Leserin an dem Schicksal der unter Druck gesetzten Mädchen anteilnehmen.<sup>8</sup>

It is doubtful, however, that the young readers in question will respond to the abstract idea unless the idea is accompanied by action and characterization which captivates them.

Criticism of authoritarian and abusive adults, a central theme in both Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig and Ein Mann für Mama, reaches its climax in Ilse Janda, 14. The generation gap is never so wide as between the Janda sisters and the adults who are charged with the responsibilities of raising and educating them, nor the consequences so damaging as in this work. But every problem confronting children, and every form of rebellion has its causes, and, Nöstlinger seems to imply, it is the responsibility of the older generation to reflect on the causes and to alter the situation. The immediate family has the greatest potential to both harm and help the children, who need support from adults in other positions of authority as well.



#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Ilse Janda, 14, (Hamburg: Verlag Friedrich Oetinger, 1974). The English translation was read and will be footnoted: Girl Missing, (New York: Franklin Watts, 1976), p. 139.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Paul L. Sauer, "Die neue Welt der Klugen Kinder" in Phantasie und Realität in der Jugendliteratur. 3. Jahrbuch der Arbeiterkreises für Jugendliteratur, ed. K. E. Maier, (Julius Klinkhardt, 1976), p. 158.

<sup>8</sup>Gerda Neuman, Die Porträt der Frau inder zeitgenössischen Jugendliteratur, (Munich: Verlag Dokumentation, 1977), p. 327.

## CHAPTER XI

### DER SPATZ IN DER HAND (1974)

In this third work of realistic fiction for children, Nöstlinger takes up the same concerns of troubled adolescents which she showed in Ilse Janda, 14. Der Spatz in der Hand is, like Ilse Janda, 14, a sober and pessimistic portrayal of one viciously unhappy girl, whose personality and behavior reflect the hostile environment in which she lives. But in this work Nöstlinger writes about the complexities of the situation in a more credible and immediate way than she did in Ilse Janda, 14, and consequently the reader is better able to identify with the main figure, Lotte Prihoda. At the same time, the reader will gain a better understanding of the origins of such unhappiness--clearly the author's intent.

In this work Nöstlinger looks at the not-so-innocent nature of children--Lotte is devious, sadistic and untrustworthy--and directs the reader to reflect on how and why Lotte, or any other child, becomes this way. For the reader who has met Ilse Janda's mother, Lotte Schratt, another speculation is invited: Will Lotte Prihoda become another Lotte Schratt?

Lotte's family life is dreary, at best. An only child, she is all but ignored by her parents, who give her little freedom and not much of their time. Her mother beats Lotte unjustly, without

allowing her the chance to defend herself. Lotte's father, like the fathers in the last two works, is more passive than oppressive. When she seeks comfort in her father's arms after a beating by her mother, his response reveals his general detachment: "Er zog sie auf den Schoss, klopfte ihr beruhigend auf den Rucken, murmelte, aber-aber-aber und drückte ihren Kopf gegen seinen Schulter, damit ihm ihr Kopf die Sicht auf das Fernsehbild nicht verstellte."<sup>1</sup>

Lotte finds her overweight parents repulsive and undignified: "Ich will nie so werden, wie sie sind."<sup>2</sup> she thinks when watching them undress. But throughout the story it is clear that character formation begins at home, and that Lotte already involuntarily imitates her parents. Life at home is full of tension for Lotte, who cannot turn to her mother for understanding: "Ihre Mutter wusste nichts. Ihre Mutter wusste nur, was man tun sollte, und nicht warum man es tun sollte. Ihre Mutter wurde böse, wenn man Sachen fragte, die die Mutter nicht wusste."<sup>3</sup>

Lotte's disgust with her parents is carried over to the world at large: "Da wo ich wohne, da gibt es überhaupt nur zwei Sorten, die Dicken und die Dünnen. Alle sind hässlich."<sup>4</sup> For Lotte the enemy is ubiquitous: at home, in the apartment building, at school. She looks at the banister leading to her home, for instance, and the thought that comes to mind is indicative of her "friend or foe" frame of mind. Someone designed this banister in such a way, she reasons, to prevent children from sliding down. In her world children and adults are at war with one another, and she counters the antagonism directed at her in kind. Together with her only friend,

Mundi, Lotte engineers pranks meant to get even with the "enemy."

Lotte is occasionally able to escape the hostile world of her parents by retreat into fantasy. We know by now though that Nöstlinger sees this as an effective yet risky avenue of escape. For Lotte the private world of fantasy is a small bathroom, a "Klo," which has been given to her after a renovation of the building left the small room vacant. This "Klo," the function of which is indicated by its blue color, is similar in appearance and purpose to the blue bath cabinets in Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, and like the children in that work, Lotte deals with her problems by taking flights into fantasy. While in her private room, she thinks out and often writes letters of anger to her mother, teacher, or other enemies, which she then destroys. From the bathroom window she watches the activities of the house, or stares at the ceiling with its peeling plaster and imagines, at will, the changing shapes of various figures. Why their daughter wants to spend so much time alone in a bathroom is a mystery to her parents and a relief to her father in particular: "Dann muss ich wenigstens die verdammte Negermusik nicht anhören."<sup>5</sup>

Lotte's only friend is the boy Mundi, whose devotion and attentiveness to Lotte should be a source of comfort. But the friendship is one-sided, for Lotte takes out her anger at the world in a maliciously aggressive way on Mundi, a rather simple-minded boy who tolerates being exploited and tyrannized by his only friend. Like Lotte, he is the only child of working parents who, although much kinder than the Prihodas, don't have much time for him. When

the child-hater, Frau Meier, unfairly dumps a bucket of water onto Mundi, his mother refuses to side with him: "Ausserdem ist die Meier eine gute Kundschaft."<sup>6</sup> Lotte learns the saying, "Besser der Spatz in der Hand als die Taube auf dem Dach" in Mundi's home. It is a pragmatic philosophy which typifies the sober, conservative adults of this story. But when applied to youth, as it is in this work, it is a pessimistic philosophy, one which excludes dreams and ambitions. "Don't reach for what you won't get, lest you lose what you have" means for Lotte to be condemned to an environment which offers little hope. At the end of the story she realizes that she can expect no more from life than what she now has, and her bitterness and anger grow.

When the newcomer Schurli comes to stay with his great aunt, Frau Meier, after his parents have separated, Lotte turns her back on Mundi, denying his friendship completely. Schurli now commands her entire attention; she forgets about all else, and for a while she comes within reach of the "Taube auf dem Dach." Schurli is much like Lotte, alone and unhappy, and for this reason he is unable to help her. He sympathizes but is confused himself, so when she attempts to confide in him about her problems in school, he avoids the conversation. Lotte has an inkling that this "bird in the bush" is elusive, and that future attempts to communicate with another will be equally abortive: "Sie war sich ganz sicher, dass es im Leben immer sein sollte, wie es jetzt gerade war, und dass es in ihrem Leben ab jetzt oft so sein würde."<sup>7</sup>

When Schurli leaves to return to his mother, Lotte returns to Mundi, who, although deeply hurt by her rejection, is again the willing victim of Lotte's exploitations. Her feelings of loss and hopelessness take the form of blatant cruelty toward Mundi, whom she taunts and teases as she runs off with his new bicycle: "Ich mag dich nicht mehr . . . ich habe dich nie mögen, nie-nie-nie."<sup>8</sup> Her thoughts as she rides off are confused and frantic: "Das wird er mir büßen . . . was der Mundi büßen würde und warum er büßen würde, war ihr nicht klar, aber sie spürte genau; wenn ich darüber nachdenke, dann fange ich zu weinen an; und weinen wollte sie nicht."<sup>9</sup>

Lotte is seen at the end of the work riding in circles with nowhere to go; still plaguing, still tormenting Mundi, yet feeling tormented herself. She has no answers, nor insights, she is only able to act out of raw anger. It is a pessimistic ending. Her situation looks hopeless even to her. She has nothing left but frustration, confusion and hostility. Not even her fantasy world serves her now, since she seems to understand that this type of flight from her problems is inadequate, and has been merely an ersatz for something better:

Das Klo . . . war zu nichts gut . . . den Schlüssel hätte sie genausogut wegwerfen können, wie sie ihn in der Hosentasche trug. Sie brauchte das alles nicht. Die roten Ecken der gelben Fliesen konnte man durch die Luft schweben lassen, zum Fenster hinauswerfen lassen aber selber blieb man sitzen, selber flog man nicht zum Fenster hinaus.<sup>10</sup>

For Ilse Janda the intolerable home situation was dealt with by flights into fantasy, and then in actual flight from home.

Lotte too resorts to temporary flights into an imagined world, but this unreal world is always a reflection of the world which she cannot escape. Lotte's imagination is destructive rather than creative, and in the end it is unsatisfactory.

This work is, in its entirety, as was Ilse Janda, 14, an indictment of parents who are remiss in their responsibilities to care for their children's psychological as well as material well-being. As in Ilse Janda, 14, the burden of guilt lies with adults. The breeding ground for Lotte's unhappy life is the home. The tricks she plays on the tenants in her building are the same ones her father once played as a child. When Mundi is rescued from an old truck where he had gotten stuck after a fight with Schurli, Lotte's father shrugs off the incident and sees only that history has repeated itself: "Alle zwanzig Jahr . . . einmal sitzt einer im alten Spritzwagen und kann nicht heraus."<sup>11</sup> That history repeats itself is not inevitable, but is likely, Nöstlinger has shown, when the adults are unaware of their own mistakes. Lotte is, simply, the unhappy product of unhappy parents, who are responsible for the hostile, suffocating environment in which Lotte grows up.

Nöstlinger leads the reader toward an understanding of the complex nature of human behavior by exposing the covert meanings of children's language. When Lotte rejects Mundi, for instance, it is because only by rejecting him can she show Schurli how she feels, so she thinks:

Der Mundi ist ein Trottel, sollte heissen: Du bist gescheit!  
 Der Mundi is hässlich: Du bist schön.  
 Ich mag den Mundi nicht: Ich mag dich!<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, her cruelty toward Mundi cannot be taken at face value. Her rejection of Mundi is a suppressed plea for love, and her hard shell is a protection for a vulnerability which not even she understands yet. For Lotte, and for other mistreated children, the world is seen as a hostile, even inhumane place which can be dealt with either by flight or by fight.

Works such as Ilse Janda,<sup>14</sup> and Der Spatz in der Hand are good examples of the pessimism so prevalent in much of young adult literature today. These works are meant to be an antidote to the overprotectiveness of many children's books of the past. But like most such medicines they leave a bitter taste in the mouth. By giving the reader an often brutal picture of reality, Nöstlinger hopes to heighten independent and critical thinking. At the same time she reveals a respect for her readers' intelligence and a belief in their ability to respond maturely to certain harsh facts of life.

But do authors like Nöstlinger overestimate the capability of the reader to respond critically and maturely to the situation portrayed? Do we know how critical thinking is taught? How does a work help the reader to come to terms with the inhumanity it exposes when, as in Der Spatz in der Hand, there are no characters worthy of emulation? Authors of contemporary children's literature must take care to captivate as well as instruct the reader, warns Malte Dahlendorf, and the "issue" must never overpower the story to the exclusion of the novelty and the marvelous.<sup>13</sup>

In Der Spatz in der Hand, Nöstlinger succeeds in presenting a psychologically realistic view of what life is like for one



mistreated and defeated child, yet the work lacks an interesting plot needed to enrapture the young reader. The value of a book like this, it seems, is to offer a basis for discussion, for the story itself appears to be of secondary importance.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Der Spatz in der Hand, (Weimheim u. Basel: Beltz Verlag, 1974), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>13</sup>Malte Dahendorf, "Zeitgeschichte im Jugendbuch," Jugendliteratur 9 (1963): p. 387.

## CHAPTER XII

### LUKI-LIVE (1978)

This more recent novel for young adults seems to serve as a counterpoint to the bleak and pessimistic stories just discussed. The unrelenting, unresolved conflicts of the two previous works make way here for a less strident portrayal of contemporary realities facing children.

Luki-Live is the story of the fifteen-year-old Lukas Dostal whose emergence into young adulthood is witnessed and recorded by his best friend and neighbor, fourteen-year-old Ariane Ammerling.

Like Nöstlinger's other works of fiction for young adults, this work reflects the Viennese society in which the characters are raised and deals with the same themes of adult-child relations in the family and at school and of children's needs and rights in both these areas. But the author adds breadth as well as depth to topics which concern not only adolescents, but society in general. Women's rights and the effects of the women's movement on the family is shown from both sides and is handled sensitively. The changes which modern urban life inflict upon family and marriage, alternative ways of dealing with the problems that arise and the need for cooperative and even collective living are considered. A brief look into family finance and children's rights concerning money is another topic

which the author integrates into the plot, which successfully balances the light-hearted with the serious moments.

Ariane and Luki have grown up together in the same apartment building in Vienna, and have been inseparable since birth. "Luki-Live" is the name his friends gave him when, at ten, Luki began peppering his speech with English phrases such as "take it easy," "let it be," and "you should have seen it 'live.'"

At fourteen, however, he is failing English and is sent to a summer camp in England in hopes of improving his grades. The problems for Luki and for his friends and family begin when he returns from England with a new "look." Wearing his hair tied in back with a ribbon, a waiter's jacket and short jeans, eye-glasses on the end of his nose and a rucksack on his back, Luki cuts an eccentric figure. In addition, he has taken up knitting, which he finds calming, and has adopted an honest, direct, uninhibited friendliness with all. Luki hopes that his new appearance will facilitate the acquiring of a new personality which, he reasons, will eventually adapt itself to his new exterior. This has all become necessary, he explains to Ariane, with the discovery in England that he didn't know who he was or what he wanted, and the realization that his life to date had been sheltered and dependent on others:

Un dann ist er draufgekommen, dass er nie viel gewollt hat und nie darüber nachgedacht hat, wie er ist . . . dass er nie gegen seinen Alten hätte kämpfen müssen, weil die immer alles eingesehen haben, und Persönlichkeit, die baut sich erst richtig durch siegreiches Bezwingen von Konflikten auf.<sup>1</sup>

The initial reaction for his classmates is enthusiastic: "Luki-Live, du bist Spitze!"<sup>2</sup> He becomes the star of his class, and his classmates become his adoring fans: "Wie die Rose in einem Biedermeier Sträusschen wirkte er, und wir rundherum waren die kleinen Vergissmeinnichte."<sup>3</sup> Ariane is less enthusiastic than the others, but hopes that it all might be a passing fancy: "Vielleicht, habe ich mir gedacht, war so ein Anzug im englischen Camp üblich. Die Engländer sind ja oft sehr verwegen und sonderbar."<sup>4</sup> Luki's teacher, threatened by any deviation from the norm, is even less enthusiastic. She finds his attire as well as his honesty offensive, and waits for the chance to send him to the director. She gets the chance when Luki produces a stack of blank late-slips which his parents have signed for Luki to use at his own discretion. Unaccustomed to such trust between parent and child, the teacher sends him to the director who suspects, as do Luki's classmates, that the problem at hand is his attire, not the allegedly forged late-slips. The entire school backs Luki, who has become a symbol of the rebellion of the individual against the institution. But as Luki becomes a hero, his efforts at finding a personality of his own are sabotaged, for he now becomes the property of the possessive collective: "Alle taten beinahe, als hätten sie den Luki erfunden."<sup>5</sup>

Ariane, meanwhile, has become increasingly resentful of her role as merely one of Luki's fans and she finally releases her anger:

Ich sagte, dass er mir in letzter Zeit überhaupt auf die Nerven fällt mit seiner komischen Persönlichkeitssuche und dass ich sowieso eine Persönlichkeit bin, dass ich gar nicht suchen brauche. . . . und dass die, die hinter ihm herrennen . . . überhaupt nicht an seinem Innersten

interessiert sind, sondern nur an seinem Äusseren.<sup>6</sup>

The split between Ariane and Luki widens when they disagree as to whether their relationship should take an erotic turn. Luki then turns his amorous attention to an older female, who exploits Luki's willingness to spend extravagantly on her, which he is only able to do by borrowing money from friends. Before he realizes that he is being used by her, he has become indebted to all his friends. He now becomes melancholic and uncommunicative, begins staying out late, and has trouble in school. Finally he disappears. Everyone in the building joins in the search, but it is Ariane who is able to find him and set things right. She remembers where he used to go as a child whenever he was upset and she seeks him out there, offering to pay off his debts with the money she has asked her parents to withdraw from her future inheritance. Luki confides in Ariane his confusion:

Der Luki erzählt mir, dass ihm das ständige Luki-Live Geschrei in der Schule zum Hals heraushängt. Er will gar nicht immer Mittelpunkt sein. Und es ist lästig, den Lehrer ärgern zu müssen . . . Die Art von Ehrlichkeit, sagt er mir, die er gemeint habe, die sei zu dieser Welt nicht durchzuhalten. Und die Art von Freundlichkeit auch nicht.<sup>7</sup>

Luki returns to his anxious family and friends who are greatly relieved to find him safe.

The collective spirit and concern of all at the story's end reflects the atmosphere in which both Luki and Ariane have been raised. Six of the families in the building have an arrangement whereby family responsibilities are shared in a semi-communal way. The children of working parents all eat their midday meals at Luki's home,

and homework and tutoring needs are met by the group.

The parents of both Luki and Ariane are models of "good" parents by Nöstlinger's standards. Liberal in their child rearing practices--Luki's younger sister has been brought up by the Summerhill method--both the Dostal and Ammerling parents are loving and flexible, treat their children with respect, and, perhaps more important, are willing to intercede for their children whenever necessary.

Intercession became necessary, for instance, when Luki and Ariane were younger and had an old-fashioned teacher who believed in strict separation of the sexes. They refused to be separated and were punished. The parents sided with their children, and took action against the teacher. Ariane's father studied the school laws ("Obwohl das sehr langweilig war")<sup>8</sup> and discovered that it was illegal to separate the sexes in school. Her mother's comforting words to Ariane summarize the belief that adults should be responsible to the needs of children, and not the other way around: "Meine Mama hat gesagt . . . es ist grundfalsch immer die Kinder umzuändern . . . ich soll bleiben wie ich bin . . . sie wird versuchen, die Zustände zu behandeln."

Luki's parents, too, are examples of how parents can best fulfill the difficult obligations to their children. The atmosphere in their home is one of love and acceptance and offers other children a place of warmth while their own parents are at work: "Die Küche von der Luki-Mutter ist für mich fast so etwas wie ein Mutterbauch; warm und nahrhaft und freundlich."<sup>10</sup>

Luki's parents are willing to give him great freedom in his search for a personality, even though it means adjustments for them, because they understand that it is not only necessary but natural, and that if not allowed this freedom, he may turn out like one morosely unhappy woman in the building: "Dann ist er über dreissig, und hat noch immer keine Persönlichkeit und verfällt in Schwermut und steht nicht mehr aus dem Bett auf und wird dick und weint."<sup>11</sup>

They stand by him when his new personality creates problems at school. Luki's father, for example, is irate when the teacher suggests that Luki be moved to a new school where his appearance might be less "disruptive:"

Main Sohn bleibt an der Schule, werte Dame! Was ist das denn für eine Schule, die einen guten Schüler gleich hinauswerfen will, nur weil er beschlossen hat, alte Kleider aufzutragen . . . Sie haben Ihren Beruf verfehlt! Wenn Lehrer nur dazu gut sind, vor gut geölten und geschmierten Schülern den Lehrstoff herunterzurasseln, dann sind sie zu nichts gut! . . . und wenn Sie kein bisschen Humor haben, Frau Parasol, dann sind Sie für Kinder überhaupt nicht geeignet.<sup>12</sup>

This teacher eventually quits under the stress brought on by the rebellion of the whole class and is replaced by another more capable and popular teacher.

As she has done in other works, Nöstlinger shows here how children can be victimized by teachers. But teachers like this one pose less of a threat to children who are aware of how they are being mistreated, especially when parents are there to back the children up. That teachers should be able to work well with children would seem to be a professional necessity, but is not always a given, and the children here are not unrealistic in their expectations of their



teachers:

Wieviele Schüler aufmerksam den Lehrern lauschen, hängt ziemlich sicher und hauptsächlich davon ab, was ein Lehrer erzählt und wie er es erzählt. Man ist ja ohnehin bescheiden! Keine erwartet einen Donovan, der den Absolutismus in Bayern vorsingt. Und niemand besteht auf Peter Handke als Deutschlehrer!<sup>13</sup>

Although both Luki and Ariane come from unusually supportive families, Nöstlinger avoids idealizing their lives. She resists portraying their existence as trouble-free and easy, nor does she underestimate the pain accompanying growing up in the society she portrays. She does show, though, why it is important to have help where and when needed, for without parental intercession, the already difficult business of growing up becomes even harder.

Nor does the author idealize the marriage of Ariane's parents, but tries to show the problems in a realistic and sympathetic light. Ariane's parents are both professionals: he is an architect, she a psychologist. Mr. Ammerling would like to "move up" to a more comfortable life, but his wife is ideologically tied to the intimate large family atmosphere of the families in the building, which she sees as being healthy for them all. In addition she is very attached to several other women there with whom she has formed a type of "feminist rap group." When Ariane hears a colleague of her father's talk of her parents' rocky marriage, saying that Mr. Ammerling suffers from the emancipation of his wife, a startled Ariane begins to pay attention to the discussions of the women's rights, and realizes to what extent her father feels threatened by these discussions.

Nöstlinger handles this delicate subject fairly, showing how

both men and women react to the questions brought out by the women's movement. The women consider themselves oppressed by men, not in large matters but in smaller ones. ("Aber die Kleinigkeiten sind wichtig! Die machen das Leben aus!")<sup>14</sup> Through their discussions they have become overly sensitized to male transgressions, and are ready to pounce when the men exhibit signs of patriarchal behavior. This in turn makes the men jumpy and defensive.

The women are upset, for instance, when Ariane's father excuses Luki's strange behavior by saying that this age is especially hard on boys. The men and women take opposite sides in the discussion of one woman in the building who is overweight and suffers from depression. The men sympathize with her husband who had left her three years before. The women come to her defense, saying that her present condition is the fault of her marriage, and that she was once an attractive woman: "Die Mama meint, das ist typisch männlich. Zuerst machen sie aus einer flotten Motte eine Mottenkugel, und dann geht ihnen die Mottenkugel auf die Nerven und dann ziehen sie aus und lassen Frau und Kind in der Scheisse stecken."<sup>15</sup>

Ariane notices that these discussions, once playful arguments, are becoming bitter and more serious. The men are becoming resentful of the women, she notices, and complain that they have bent over backwards so that their wives, who "don't have it as tough as working class women" won't feel oppressed. They tell Ariane that the women are not helping their cause by alienating the men:

Jede Klasse, die sich befreien will . . . braucht Verbündete! . . . Wenn sich die Frauen nicht mit den Männern verbünden, können sie sich nie von den Männern befreien!<sup>16</sup>

Ariane asks how it is possible to form an alliance with the oppressor. She receives no answer but draws her own conclusions:

So einfach wie der Papa das sagt, ist das nun wirklich nicht. . . . Die Frauen nämlich, sie sind zweimal unterdrückt, [von der herrschenden Gesellschaft und von Männern] und die Männer nur einmal.<sup>17</sup>

The women try to make the children aware of how women are made to feel like "second-class citizens." When Ariane refers to the car that her mother is considering buying as the "Zweitwagen," Luki's mother reprimands her, and explains how the expression "Zweitwagen" shows clearly the hierarchy of the Viennese family:

Schäm dich Ariane! Frauen steht eben immer das Zweite zu. Das Zweitrangige. Das Zweitklassige. Und weil sie als Menschen zweiter Klasse gelten. Oder hast du schon einmal einen Mann gesehen, der den zweiten Wagen fährt?<sup>18</sup>

As her relationship with Luki becomes less stable, Ariane becomes more upset with her parents' quarrels and is less willing to accept differences of opinion between them. She accuses them of being no better than other couples whom they criticize. When they quarrel over money matters, she acts as mediator and forces them to resolve their conflict.

The action in the story moves through one conflict after another, but all are resolved in time. The confusing problems of adolescence: the tensions, the sexual yearnings, the resentment against being made to fit into an educational straight-jacket, the disturbing discovery of hypocrisy in one's parents, are all part of Luki and Ariane's story. But these conflicts are not so much imposed from without as they are the results of natural, inevitable confrontations of growing youth. And in this regard the work reflects

a change in general mood of the late seventies from an earlier preoccupation with social injustices to a present preoccupation with personal growth and human communications. The main characters here are not underprivileged, they are not minority members, nor are they outsiders. They come, rather, from the ranks of professional, affluent families with involved, concerned and liberal parents. These parents are, to be sure, "better" parents than the Kratoschwils, the Schratts or the Prihodas, precisely because they are aware of children's changing needs. But they, too, occasionally lose sight of the truth that children grow at different rates and that, as much as possible, they must be dealt with as individuals.

Applying the jargon of popular psychology to a child's situation is not necessarily better than resorting to time-worn cliches. Ariane's mother is so eager to show that she understands her child that she sometimes misses the obvious, as when Ariane tells her she doesn't want to see her best friend Luki again. Ariane is really trying to show her mother her confusion: "Ich habe das nicht so richtig ehrlich gemeint. Ich wollte meiner Mutter nur beibringen, wie verzweifelt ich bin."<sup>19</sup> But her mother offers this clinical response: "Sie sagt . . . dass ich in ein Stadium eingetreten bin, wo ich meine Kinderfreundschaften ablege und mich neu orientiere."<sup>20</sup>

Luki himself is evidence of what happens when one takes the language of popular psychology too seriously. He becomes so convinced of the need to "find" himself and be assertive, that he must stage a confrontation in order that he might experience conflict. After provoking a fight with his parents, Luki proudly reports to Ariane:

"Na, siehst du Ariane, es funktioniert ja schon. Die Persönlichkeit drängt bereits von Aussen nach Innen. Ich streite schon mit meinen Eltern! Ich kann mich schon an ihnen ausarbeiten. Ich kann Konflikte durchstehen!"<sup>21</sup> Phrases such as "sich auseinanderleben," and "sich abarbeiten" are often used by the characters in a thoughtless yet fashionable way to explain relationships, but are made to appear a bit ludicrous here.

Once again Nöstlinger brings the emotional needs of children into center view for her reader to consider. The need for security, the need to love and be loved, the need to achieve and be recognized, the need to belong, to change and to understand oneself, to gain independence and to become aware of one's sex role are needs which are acutely felt by adolescents. Conflicts during this stage of growth are inevitable and necessary, but it is important that children weather them successfully if they are to be sure of the permanence of family and group ties. Nöstlinger uses the "crises" of adolescence to create humorous episodes, but she also sees in these crises the possibility of carrying out the necessary resolutions together, communally. This message has remained a constant throughout these works, even when the mood and themes of the stories appear to sway with the changing tenor of the times.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Luki-Live, (Hamburg: Verlag Friedrich Oetinger, 1978), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

## CONCLUSION

Die Welt der Kinderbücher gibt sich bunt, lustig, abenteuerlich, und heil. Dennoch ist sie nicht von der gesellschaftlichen Welt entrückt, in der Kinder und Erwachsene leben. Kinderbücher verrichten ihr Werk als heimliche Erzieher. Sie beeinflussen die Vorstellungswelt der Kinder, sie tragen zur Entwicklung (oder Unterdrückung) von Fragen, Ängsten, Bedürfnissen und Hoffnungen bei . . . an der sich die künftigen Möglichkeiten individueller und politischer Emanzipation mit entscheiden. Sie vermitteln ihren Lesern Einstellungen, Werte und Verhaltensweisen, die allemal die einer bestimmten Gesellschaft sind.<sup>1</sup>

Christine Nöstlinger began writing for children when she became aware that many children's books--these "heimliche Erzieher"--transmit false values and distorted pictures of reality to children. The body of her work can be viewed as an ideological weapon, intended to combat much of this past literature. Through her books she hopes to help prepare her readers for the confrontations with inhumane tendencies in their society, and to help develop critical thinking, be it in a personal or social realm.

Her works have grown out of the recent tradition of leftist literature for children and reflect many of the attributes of other socially aware and liberal children's authors. The discovery of the political implications of children's literature, the critique of society and its abuses, a demand for more freedom and less obedience, and the concern for the problems of minorities are all present in her works, and reflect the changes seen in German children's books today.

Throughout her works, Nöstlinger calls for solidarity in the struggle against authoritarian abuses. She advocates increased independence of children, while making clear the need for interdependence. She is openly didactic in her attempt to jar the received forms of security and norms passed on by her society and to arouse a mistrust of set patterns.

Nöstlinger's works are firmly rooted in the recent tradition of an anti-authoritarian and emancipatory children's literature, but they are also strongly individualistic. The tone and setting of her stories are thoroughly Viennese, and her characters are tied to this environment, for good as well as bad. She portrays what living in the so-called Welfare-State of Austria, with its high standard of living, is like for children and other "oppressed" people. And she concludes, in the words of the grandfather in one of her stories, "Ihr kapiert's doch alle miteinander net, was Besser-haben ist."<sup>2</sup>

In her criticism of contemporary society, of the consumerism, the materialism, the hectic race toward "progress," she focuses on children, whom she sees as all too often the victims of neglect and injustices. Her works show how it is possible for an entire generation of children to become alienated from a society which discriminates against them while falsely believing that it is improving their lot.

The image of the contemporary child, as projected by Nöstlinger and others, reflects a shift from past views. In literature of the past we have been told that the innocence of childhood somehow embodies a greater wisdom and virtue than the sagacity of adults, and that this wisdom needs to be preserved. Many books of the past



show a romantic longing after childhood, and betray the belief that the fantasy world of the child is of much greater worth than the world of adults.

Nöstlinger values the use of creative imagination and fantasy when it leads to emancipation, as it does in the works, Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller, Lollipop, Rosa Riedl, Schutzgespenst, and Luki-Live. But she also looks at the psychological implications of fantasy for children who use it to escape an often brutal reality, as is the case in Die feuerrote Friedrike, Die Kinder aus dem Kinderkeller and Der Spatz in der Hand. Fantasy is an integral and important element for social change throughout her works. Where there is no access to the realm of fantasy, as in Ilse Janda, 14 and Der Spatz in der Hand, there remains only pessimism. And the lack of imagination makes the collision with reality even more jarring for both her characters and readers alike.

In theory at least, imagination as seen by Nöstlinger appears to be limited to its usefulness in "problem solving." The basic concept here and in other "emancipatory" fantasies is that imagination is linked to a certain function. This rationalistic, utilitarian approach is characteristic of current socially critical children's literature and is based on didactic tenets.

Nöstlinger's view of childhood is sober and often discomfoting. The world of children today is neither safe nor sacred, she implies, but is full of the evils inherent in their society. And so it is not surprising that Nöstlinger sees the task of describing how children live as a less than joyful one:

Kinderalltag ist heute kein Stoff mehr für heitere und spannende Geschichten . . . Vom Standpunkt des Kinderbuchautors gesehen, ist es aber keine Freude, heutige Kinderleben zu beschreiben.<sup>3</sup>

Nöstlinger's intent is not only to destroy the myth of the "safe and sacred" world of the child, but also to show that the evils she exposes have definite causes. An "evil" child in her stories is the victim of a false upbringing, and the oppression of children is symptomatic of the unsound values of the society at large.

Nöstlinger's works reflect the theme of the first anti-authoritarian books: "übermächtiger Erwachsener-öhhmächtiges Kind." While she shows that there are substantial differences between growing up in poverty or growing up in affluence, she points to the common condition shared by all children: a child's position in society is still a subordinate one and children are still dependents and continue to be the pawns, the playthings and the burdens of their parents, teachers and of society itself.

Cooperation and collectivism are two important means of emancipation from this bondage. She attempts to bring children out of their isolation by aligning them with a community of people with whom they can identify. This means that there are no towering heroes as can be found in earlier children's books. More often it is a group of children, or a community of oppressed people, who form a group of protagonists.

It is not age that separates people from one another in these works; there is no "generation gap" as that term has come to be understood. It is rather prejudice and misunderstanding which isolate

and oppress. Nöstlinger enables her readers to identify with not only a collective of children but with other minority groups who might share common problems. Children are often aligned with older people, for instance. In several works, the reader sees that the so-called "wohlverdienter Ruhestand" has at least as many problems as the equally euphemistic "goldene Kinderzeit." In other works children show solidarity with workers and with "Gastarbeiter," whose lot in society is not unlike theirs.

This abstract concept of "society" is merged in her works with the experiences of a child's world in the two most important institutions of socialization--family and school. In using the familiar and trusted environment of the family, Nöstlinger is able to chip away at traditionally accepted views of authority, and to offer alternatives to conventional parent-child relationships.

Nöstlinger's approach to the ideal parent-child relationship is anti-authoritarian, but not laissez-faire. The most admirable adults in her works are those who actively intervene for children, who both respect and are respected by them, whose role it is to guide but not prescribe. Nöstlinger does not oppose authority per se, but is against abuses by those in power when it leads to the repression and frustration of others, making people unhappy and powerless. But she realizes that emancipation and self-determination for children and other minorities are possible only with the help, experience and love of those in positions of authority.

Through her writing Nöstlinger hopes to offer such guidance. In this self-appointed mission as children's advocate Christine

Nöstlinger is not unlike one of her protagonists--the "kleine Herr"--whose story, I think, can be seen as both an allegory and early prognosis of the development of Nöstlinger's career as children's author.

The "kleine Herr's" intentions of helping to unburden children of their problems, we recall, became distorted when in the manipulating hands of promoters. The quick rise to fame of the leftist, anti-authoritarian books--of which Nöstlinger's stand out as particularly successful--has meant big business for authors and publishers, but has also resulted in many a distortion of original intent. A work of fiction which intended to provoke and even shock has often been rendered commonplace, and the ideas hackneyed, through over-sell.

Like the "kleine Herr," Nöstlinger has been catapulted to the top of popularity and exposure through her award-winning efforts. Her works have been carried by all media formats: radio, television, newspaper, film. The radio station broadcasting her stories recently sponsored a drawing contest for its listeners, and one cannot help but recall, somewhat cynically, the situation in her story where the "kleine Herr's" message to his audiences became obscured by similar contests.

We are reminded, finally, that children's literature itself is governed by the economic laws of the society in which it is produced. Texts are written with a certain group of readers in mind and the reception of the works is a process of the social interaction between authors, publishers, reviewers and pedagogues.

Christine Nöstlinger is not only a social critic, she is also a social phenomenon: one without rival in the world of Austrian children's literature.

Like the "kleine Herr," Christine Nöstlinger has failed in some of her attempts. But also like the "kleine Herr" Nöstlinger has not changed in her original concern of helping children by offering them a literature in which their problems are presented realistically yet entertainingly.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dieter Richter and Jochen Vogt, eds. Die heimlichen Erzieher. Kinderbuch und politisches Lernen. (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1974): pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>Christine Nöstlinger, Die unteren sieben Achtel des Eisbergs. (Weinheim: Beltz und Gelberg, 1979): p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>Nöstlinger, "Himmelblaue Maikäfer. Über die Schwierigkeiten des Kinderbuchautors." Academia (August 1978): p. 27.

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