

# Interwoven Fates

## 20th Century German History and the European Refugee Crisis

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Jenny Erpenbeck. *Visitation*. Trans.  
Susan Bernofsky. New Directions  
Publishing, 151pp., \$16 paper.

Jenny Erpenbeck. *Go, Went, Gone*. Trans.  
Susan Bernofsky. New Directions  
Publishing, 286pp., \$17 paper.

...with this typewriter she had typed all the words that were to transform the German barbarians back into human beings and her homeland back into a homeland.

— Jenny Erpenbeck, *Visitation*

This quotation captures the essence of two of Jenny Erpenbeck's recently translated novels, *Heimsuchung* (2008; *Visitation*, 2010) and *Geh, ging, gegangen* (2015; *Go, Went, Gone*, 2017). Both novels address questions of individual fates in relationship to key moments in German history from the 20th and 21st centuries. Translated by the award-winning Susan Bernofsky, these books are certain to interest non-German speaking readers because of Erpenbeck's ability to write highly entertaining novels

that engage with important contemporary political topics. *Visitation* presents the tales of twelve individuals whose lives and stories are linked only by a magical house in which they all at one time have lived. The characters' experiences trace major historical events in Germany, even documenting changes in the house's ownership because of the dispossession of the Jews during the Third Reich and the land reform in the former East Germany. In this way, the novel reflects many of the anxieties of post-unification Germans, who were forced to re-examine, re-confront, and even re-remember their pasts. *Go, Went, Gone* is an exceedingly timely novel, capturing the precarity of existence that immigrants experience. First published in 2015, the same year that unprecedented numbers of refugees entered Europe, the book thoughtfully portrays not just the plight of the refugees, but also shows the German perspective, albeit not always flatteringly.

Born in 1967 in East Berlin, Erpenbeck stems from a writing family. Her father, John Erpenbeck, is a scientist and writer, her mother an Arabic translator. Her grandparents were the writers and actors Fritz Erpenbeck and Hedda Zinner. Originally employed as a theatre director, she debuted as a writer in 1999, subsequently winning the Jury Prize at the Ingeborg Bachmann competition in 2001 for her short story "Siberia." She is commonly associated with the literary "girl wonder" wave of writers who emerged in the early 2000s.

*Visitation* is a somewhat unconventional novel, for it eschews traditional narrative form and characters. If one can speak of a central figure, it is the house that remains a constant fixture over time. An omniscient narrator relates 20th-century German history by transmitting the stories of twelve characters identified only by their status or profession (the wealthy farmer, the architect, the cloth manufacturer, the architect's wife, the girl, the Red Army officer, the writer,

the visitor, the subtenants, the childhood friend, the illegitimate owner). The twelfth character, the gardener, is the only constant figure. His story interjects, connects, and comments on the seemingly disjointed cast of characters. His job is to tend the garden, bringing order to the chaos caused by war, successive regimes, and the constant change of inhabitants. There is no dialogue in the book. Instead, readers become immersed in stream of consciousness internal monologues. Details are presented via the minds of the characters, and gaps are filled by associations from other figures over time. One of the most compelling stories is that of a little girl trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto, whose memory of the house sustains her through her fears and loneliness. Like the little girl, the characters' fates are mostly tragic, especially the gardener who as the house falls into disrepair becomes equally fragile and decrepit.

men's situation, who seek asylum, but who are frustrated in their quest for freedom and security by a complex bureaucracy rooted in obsolete asylum laws.

Richard befriends a group of the men, and interviews them in order to learn about their lives, their histories, their families. Eventually he becomes embroiled in their fates. Through his questions, Richard (and readers) learn about the political situations in the men's African homelands, the arduousness of their journey, and the physical and mental struggles they have endured in their quest for freedom. The men he befriends are trapped in the vagaries of immigration law: because they are living in Germany, Germany must feed and provide for their basic needs. However, because they first entered Europe via another country, they are not eligible for asylum in Germany. In other words, they are not really Germany's "problem."

## **Portraying the refugees as men “who have fallen out of time,” she underscores their plight by showing how they must “become foreign” in order to start a new life.**

*Go, Went, Gone* tells the story of Richard, a retired East German classics professor, in search of meaning in a post-retirement world. After encountering protestors staging a hunger strike at Alexanderplatz, he takes interest in the plight of African refugees in Germany. These men, who initially left their homelands in search of work in Libya and were subsequently forced to flee for their lives, have ended up in Germany, where their fates are held hostage by the ambiguities of German and international immigration laws. Erpenbeck thematizes the idea of “home” and being “grounded” or “rooted,” which for these men is an impossibility because of their temporary status. The novel meticulously depicts the precarity of the

The novel delves into the refugees' perspective, focusing on the men's desire to work, a symbol for their desire to contribute meaningfully to society. Because of their ambiguous immigration status, however, they are not permitted to work, a circumstance that robs them of a piece of their identities: “What they want is to be allowed to look for work, to organize their lives like any other person of sound body and mind.” It seems the men are doomed to lie around their assigned refugee housing all day.

Richard's social and economic stability is a crass counterpart to the precarity of the refugees' existence, and some have criticized the novel for its reliance on Richard's perspective which is necessarily one of

privilege. Such critiques gloss over a key piece of Richard's biography, his own forced migration from Silesia as a young boy. Thus, Richard's empathy for the African refugees draws from his own history of displacement. Richard uses his status to try to assist them in their plight by regularly visiting them, and even inviting one to his home to play the piano. As the elderly white man slowly undergoes a transformation through his bond with the dark-skinned refugees, the story evolves into a scathing indictment of policies in the European refugee crisis. Moreover, Erpenbeck points to Europe's historic role as colonizer, citing a continental complicity that has allowed colonial ideologies of race and ethnicity to continue to determine economic and political status. Ultimately, Erpenbeck's novel is about visibility. Portraying the refugees as men "who have fallen out of time," she underscores their plight by showing how they must "become foreign" in order to start a new life. One aspect of becoming foreign is language, which the title *Go, Went, Gone*, the principal parts of the German verb *gehen* (to go) highlights. One of the refugees has hung a list of irregular verbs on the wall near his bed. Erpenbeck criticizes the bureaucracy of the system by exposing the inanity of the asylum laws. For instance, "refugees" are issued a "certificate of fiction," a document that confirms that a person exists without granting the person the right to call him/herself a refugee. Thus, Erpenbeck advocates for making the men visible: "At the border between a person's life and the other life lived by that same person, the transition has

to be visible—a transition that, if you look closely enough, is nothing at all." Thus, the idea of borders comes into play. Richard, like the author Erpenbeck, is a product of the former East Germany, and thus well-versed in the power of borders as he wonders: "Have people forgotten in Berlin of all places that a border isn't just measured by an opponent's stature but in fact creates him?" Erpenbeck's language is measured and restrained, devoid of preachiness; she writes primarily in the present tense, leading her readers to comprehend the complexities of history and fate, without succumbing to emotion. Like her main character in *Go Went Gone*, Erpenbeck conducted extensive interviews with refugees and accompanied them to government offices in order to capture their perspective as authentically as possible.

Bernofsky's translations of *Visitation* and *Go, Went, Gone* capture the flavor of Erpenbeck's German, making the texts as pleasing to read in English as they are in the original. At a time when talk of "borders" and "walls" fill the pages of newspapers and the airwaves of media outlets, *Go Went Gone* is an insightful portrayal of the human cost of displacement, a measured voice of reason amongst the cacophony. Likewise, *Visitation* reminds us how sweeping political decisions can have tremendous impact on the fates of individuals. At a time when sensationalism, populism, and nationalism grab media headlines, Erpenbeck's novels remind us of the often-high price that individuals must pay because of national and international policies and politics. a