

Differently Drawn Boundaries of the Permissible in German and Australian Literary Journalism

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Australian author Anna Funder's Stasiland serves as a useful study for exploring the differences between German and Australian notions of literary journalism when it comes to claims of verifiability and authenticity.

Australian author Anna Funder's book *Stasiland*, which deals with life in the former East Germany, is based on a series of interviews. It has been described as "a fresh and highly original close-up of what happens to people in the corrosive atmosphere of a totalitarian state."¹ *Stasiland*, which came out in 2002, tells the story of ordinary citizens who got caught up in the web of East Germany's state security [*Staatssicherheit* or "Stasi"]. Yet, it is more than a history about the Stasi. It is a personal exploration of the reality of psychological terror that, as far as Anna Funder was concerned, had not yet been sufficiently told.²

Stasiland was shortlisted for numerous prizes in Australia and also "received rave notices"³ in Britain, where it won the BBC Four Samuel Johnson Prize in 2004, a substantial award which carries a prize money of £30,000. The prize is an award for nonfiction only, and *Stasiland* was commended for stretching the boundaries of nonfiction writing.⁴ *The Sunday Times*, to quote from the book's back cover, called it "a masterpiece of investigative analysis, written almost like a novel, with a perfect mix of compassion and distance."⁵ It was, then, book-length journalism with a literary ambition.

In Australia the manuscript had quickly found a publisher, whereas in Germany it accumulated twenty-three rejection slips before it was taken up.⁶

Why did this book, highly acclaimed in large parts of the English-speaking world, receive such a different reception in Germany? One might attribute it to xenophobia. Yet Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*⁷ was very well received in Germany, and it, too, was written by an *Ausländer*, or outsider, who happened to be Australian as well. Instead, the answer to this question can be sought in the difficult terrain of how literary journalism is received in both these countries. This article examines the differing traditions of literary journalism in both countries while exploring the legal and ethical framework that shaped these traditions.

LITERARY JOURNALISM—A CONTESTED FIELD

Journalism has marked literary roots as numerous European scholars have pointed out, most prominently the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his book, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*,⁸ which most English readers are familiar with as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.⁹ Journalism's closeness to literature lasted longer in countries like France and Germany, whereas the U.S. and England turned much earlier towards the briefer, event-driven style of news journalism,¹⁰ which led to the "objectivity norm in American journalism."¹¹ Not everyone was enamoured with this style, however, leading to descriptions of journalists as "the eunuchs of the craft"¹² whose ideal it was

to grind out a column of more or less well-balanced sentences, capable of grammatical construction, conflicting with no social conviviality or party prejudice, which fills so much space in the paper, and then utterly, swiftly, and forever vanishes from mortal mind.¹³

Ultimately, the rejection of this "castrated craft" provoked writers, especially in the U.S., to proclaim a New Journalism in the 1960s. Although the history of literary journalism in the U.S. has been reasonably well established, German scholars tend to use its most notable historical expression, the New Journalism, as a point of departure in comparing their tradition. Recent German studies of the genre like *Grenzgänger. Formen des New Journalism*¹⁴ use it as the yardstick for their research into American as well as German literary journalism. Elisabeth Klaus titles her contribution to the book "Jenseits der Grenzen—die problematische Unterscheidung zwischen Fakt und Fiktion" [Beyond boundaries—the problematic differentiation between fact and fiction] and focuses thus on one of the central problems of the genre.¹⁵ For literary journalism, which uses narrative elements we often associate with the fictional novel, credibility is one of the most contested fields. On the other hand, these elements help to achieve, as noted East German novelist Christa Wolf argues, "a truth beyond the important facts of the world" [*eine Wahrheit jenseits der wichtigen Fakten der Welt*] as the facts

in themselves do not necessarily provide understanding.¹⁶ Nance followed a similar line of reasoning when he said, referring to Truman Capote, “It is a fascinating ideal: to reach a point at which the inner reality coincides with the outer and the free use of the artists’ shaping power results not in distortion, but in heightened fidelity.”¹⁷

This establishing of wider contexts [*Kontextgebundenheit*] and enabling of an emotional connectivity [*emotionale Anschlussfähigkeit*]¹⁸ has brought a revival of literary journalism in countries outside the United States. Literary journalism—also under the name of creative nonfiction and narrative journalism—is now being taught in many journalism schools as well as in creative writing workshops. Creative writing schools are hardly worried about the implications of a “subjective, dramatized narrative style” [*subjektives dramaturgisiertes Erzählen*],¹⁹ whereas credibility is in the forefront of the discussion led from the journalism side.²⁰

The key issues, according to James Aucoin, are notions of accuracy, verifiability and authenticity.²¹ In his study of Polish author Ryszard Kapuściński he rejects the narrow confines drawn by Norman Sims and Mark Kramer, and their demand that any text carrying the co-name of journalism should have “no composite scenes, no misstated chronology, no falsification of the discernible drift or proportion of events, no invention of quotes, no attribution of thoughts to sources.”²² If the above mentioned rules were applied, then not only Ryszard Kapuściński or Australian author Helen Garner contravened them, but also Anna Funder.

Aucoin rejects the strict demands placed on literary journalism by critics like Kramer on the much established evidence that journalism, too, “constructs a truth that is based on culturally accepted conventions.”²³ By the same token this article contends that literary journalism, like its component parts of literature and journalism, is a construct based on different culturally and socially accepted conventions. German and Australian views of literary journalism are shaped by different histories and expectations, as the reaction to Anna Funder’s book *Stasiland* in Germany demonstrates. This reception will show the notion of authenticity as the most contested one.

GERMAN LITERARY JOURNALISM CONFRONTING THE EAST GERMAN PAST

In early nineteenth century Germany a new kind of writing emerged, which was no longer primarily concerned with adhering to established literary forms but aimed at a political and social public impact. One such writer *cum* journalist was Karl Marx. This brought about a change not only in the style of writing but also publishing.²⁴ Well-known writers and poets, such as Georg

Büchner, Ferdinand Freilingrath and Heinrich Heine, wrote for newspapers in a social and political context. Yet in the second, far more conservative, half of the nineteenth century few writers sought the public arena to discuss political and social issues.²⁵ That said, the connection between German literary journalism and political and social concerns never quite ceased to exist.

In the first half of the twentieth century one of the most prominent exponents of literary journalism, writing in the tradition of political and social concern, was Egon Erwin Kisch, who is lauded for having developed the literary reportage.²⁶ In the second half of the twentieth century it is the still-living author Günther Wallraff who assumed false identities to be able to report first hand on various social injustices, be they against workers in certain jobs or against migrants.²⁷ Apart from highlighting social injustices, what Kisch and Wallraff also have in common is the fact that they report on what they experienced personally. They restrict themselves to eyewitness reports, and this, to this day, is the major criterion for literary journalism in Germany. This attitude confines the writer to the role of “authoritative interpreter of a reality subjectively experienced by him.”²⁸

This point of view, namely that only those who have had the experience themselves are permitted to speak or write about it, can also be found in the literature about the former German Democratic Republic, or GDR, and its state security. The books which have been published in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall are either pure fiction, such as Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Stories* (1999) and Thomas Brussig’s *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* [*At the Shorter End of the Sonnenallee*] (1999), or they are nonfiction books presenting detailed research in a scholarly manner, such as Joachim Walther’s *Staatssicherheit und Schriftsteller* [*State Security and Authors*] (1996).

The only book to which the label literary journalism is applicable in the widest sense is *Aktenkundig* [*Knowing the Files*], edited by Hans-Joachim Schädlich and published in 1992.²⁹ Schädlich’s book “describes the perpetrators and talks about the resistance of the victims and their right to the truth.”³⁰ Fourteen dissidents of the former GDR wrote about their encounters with state security, in particular their experience of reading through the files accumulated on them. In these files they were confronted with the facts of their lives as reported by those who spied on them for the former East German state security.

In order to understand the impact of Schädlich’s collection, one has to be aware that there was a heated debate in political circles about whether or not to open the Stasi files, and who should have access to the information. At the time *Aktenkundig* was published in 1993, many people in Germany as well as abroad were of the opinion that disclosing the information held in these files

would do more harm than good.³¹ Today, once again, the same question is being discussed about closing the archives and moving the files to the Federal Archive, where they can be used for historic and other research, but will be no longer available to those individuals who want to see and read their own file, and know the truth about who spied on them.³²

As far as the legal situation is concerned, it is also becoming more and more difficult for the media in Germany to report about alleged Stasi contacts with politicians and other individuals in the public eye. Almost all individuals confronted with the accusation of ties to the Stasi are suing the press, TV stations, and publishing houses. They are fighting on the basis of privacy rights that there should be no disclosures about them. In recent years German courts have increasingly ruled against the media, such as daily newspapers, news magazines and political programs on TV, and prohibited them to publish such material.³³

The rulings give the clear message that German courts place privacy and personal rights [*Persönlichkeitsrechte*] above the right to free speech. In the case of presumed Stasi connections, the onus of proof is on the media, and only signed commitments of individuals who worked for the Stasi are permitted as evidence. Corroborating evidence is not seen as proof. The problem that arises is that high-profile people in the GDR, such as artists, scientists, sports people or prominent lawyers were not required to give in writing this undertaking of cooperation with the Stasi because “the Ministry for State Security did not want to scare intellectuals away.”³⁴ Given this legal framework, it is difficult to write about Stasi activities today.

These decisions of giving greater weight to the protection of privacy than to freedom of the press are in keeping with aspects of the German Press Council regulations. The German press codex, in article eight, erects a far higher protective wall around privacy than is the case in Australia and more broadly the Anglo-American world.³⁵ The result is that when combining the tradition of “participant observer” with a legal framework that puts a premium on privacy, a far tighter space for literary journalism emerges in Germany. As *Aktenkundig* demonstrates, this leaves only those who can write and publish to tell the tale. Those who cannot most likely will never have their stories told.

AUSTRALIAN LITERARY JOURNALISM IN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN TRADITION

In Australia, journalism and literature have always been closely intertwined. Ken Stewart (1988) has argued that from 1855 to 1955 “literary Australia was largely a journalists’ Australia.”³⁶ David Conley, with his 1998 article on Robert Drewe, offered as an appendix the list of 174 names of “Australian

novelists/journalists”³⁷ to illustrate the large number of authors who also wrote journalism and journalists who published fiction and book-length nonfiction. Understandably, not all of these would be labelled prominent writers and not all brought their journalism to bear on their books. But among those who are stars on the Australian literary firmament and who used journalistic technique in their creative work are Marcus Clarke, Katherine Susannah Pritchard, George Johnston, Robert Drewe, and Helen Garner.³⁸ Currently one of the best-known Australian journalists writing fiction is Geraldine Brooks, a widely experienced former foreign correspondent, who won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her historical novel, *March*.

Australia did not have the wave of “New Journalism” the United States had, where Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson were some of the major driving forces behind the movement. As Conley’s long list shows, there was a more easy association between journalism and literature, which resulted in a fairly low profile for literary journalism. But ever since Helen Garner published her controversial account of a sexual harassment scandal at Melbourne University’s respectable Ormond College, *The First Stone* (1995), the genre of literary journalism has been brought to wide public attention in Australia.

Today, Anna Funder’s book *Stasiland* is one of the best known of this genre in Australia next to Garner’s *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* (2004). In contrast to Garner’s *The First Stone*, which took a divisive Australian case as its subject matter, Funder’s book about the dark deeds of a state security apparatus in a distant land evoked the admiration usually given to a good novel because, as far as the Australians were concerned, it was a reality with which they had no personal experience with. No one in Australia questioned, to cite Aucoin again, “the accuracy, verifiability and authenticity” of Funder’s account. To be sure, the former GDR was a long way away and that cannot be discounted. But, in addition, the genre as such caused no concern. The heat of discussion caused by Garner’s volume, after all, did not focus on the genre of the book but on Garner’s lenient attitude towards the Master of the College, which brought her many attacks from feminist critics.³⁹

Even though Funder structured her research like a traditional fictional narrative, this was seen in Australia neither as a falsification of events nor as an intrusion into the private sphere of others which, in the German tradition, would have been frowned upon. Such disapproval is a sign of the different ethical and legal frameworks of the two countries with regard to privacy. In accordance with its Press Council rules in Germany, for example, those killed as soldiers in Afghanistan, in terror attacks, or accidents cannot be named unless they are public figures. The exposure given to their grieving relatives

in Australia or the United States is rarely found in Germany. With regard to the deceased, Australia follows British law (as do the Americans) which determines that the dead cannot be defamed. One can thus write ever so much more freely about the dead, and their relatives, than would be permissible in Germany.⁴⁰ This freedom, which also includes writing about matters that have not been experienced firsthand, is reflected in such books as Garner's *The First Stone* or Funder's *Stasiland*. As a consequence, authors in Australia have access to a far wider range of topics, and they can give their books a "dramatized" [*dramaturgisierte*] narrative that attracts readers far more than a mere recounting of facts.

STASILAND

Charting the reception of *Stasiland* in Germany neatly illustrates these diverging traditions. The citation of the BBC Four Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, which at present carries the highest prize money for nonfiction in the world, sums up the reaction of the English-speaking world:

The winner, Anna Funder's *Stasiland*, is a fresh and highly original close-up of what happens to people in the corrosive atmosphere of a totalitarian state. An intimate portrait—both touching and funny—of survivors caught between their desire to forget and the need to remember. A beautifully executed first book . . . *Stasiland* . . . gives a voice to the ordinary people of the former German Democratic Republic. The reader follows Funder as she unearths stories of astonishing cruelty inflicted on its citizens by the state. Despite the sobering subject matter, it contains wonderful flashes of humour and has been described as "a brilliant and necessary book" which "both devastates and lifts the heart."⁴¹

Germany, on the other hand, gave the book a mixed reaction. Of the twenty-three rejection slips Funder received, only one publisher bothered to tell her why. "This is the best book by a foreigner on this issue. But, unfortunately, in the current political climate, we cannot see our way to publishing it."⁴²

When the book was eventually published by the Europäische Verlagsanstalt in Hamburg and Funder went on a reading tour in Germany, the reviews showed up the old divisions between east and west. Interestingly, it was not always a case of where the paper was published so much as where the reviewer had grown up. Whereas the *Ostsee-Zeitung* very politely invited its readers to the event⁴³ in Rostock's university bookshop, the *Sächsische Zeitung* in Dresden was far more aggressive and even hostile in its headline and article. Titled "Collapsing houses and confused people—Today Australian author Anna Funder presents her book *Stasiland* in Dresden," the article is clearly

based on an interview with the writer.⁴⁴ The questions are kept in the text, and they aim time and again at the issue of why a foreigner had to write about the former GDR:

Why does an Australian have to tell us what it was like? . . . How does she arrive at her judgement? What interest does an Australian have in the GDR? . . . A picture of the GDR that only shows victims and perpetrators? . . . Does she ever wonder how she herself would have behaved had she lived here?⁴⁵

The reviewer for the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, who had also grown up in the former GDR, had similar difficulties. While admiring her book, it makes him angry that in the interview **he cannot make her see that his experiences of life in the GDR were not entirely negative**. In this view, the GDR was not only

a grey Stasi prison, an unloved, and often hated state, which limited and humiliated us, which watched and surveyed us, but [it was also a place] in which we did not feel persecuted 24 hours a day, and from which we managed to wrest a fulfilling life.⁴⁶

After the fall of the wall, the reviewer accessed his Stasi file and found that his best friend had spied on him. However, he still asks himself, did he really “live in Anna Funder’s *Stasiland*”?⁴⁷ His disapproval, therefore, is mostly directed against the position Funder takes towards the former GDR. At the core of this criticism is the fact that Funder had never experienced life in the GDR with all its bad, but also good, moments.

None of these reviews ever accuse Funder of having “invented” things. But in emphasising the fact that she herself had never lived under the gaze of the Stasi, the critiques by former residents of the east consciously or unconsciously—take on the wider German attitude that literary journalism has to be an eyewitness report.

From the western German perspective, on the other hand, it is in particular “the foreign gaze, this looking in from the outside, which makes her book so excellent.”⁴⁸ Reviewers are also intrigued by the narrative Funder uses:

Anna Funder wanted to write a nonfiction book that reads like a novel. For example, how it feels to want to scale the wall at 16. Or how it felt being interrogated by the Stasi. “I wanted to make it as dramatic as I could. Though everything is true.”⁴⁹

For the unnamed reviewer “Funder’s literary reportage is as engaging as a journey into a long lost country.”⁵⁰ Another reviewer reacts similarly:

Interviews and observations are the basis of Anna Funder’s *Stasiland*, a gripping and journalistically precise book in the best Anglo-Saxon tradition. That means: Funder does not even pretend to be fiercely objective, so as to

wrap up thoroughly researched facts into a text bundle and stamp them with the seal 'historical truth'. Instead she interweaves her curiosity and observations of everyday life so skilfully into her reporting that in the end the book has something of a narrative line, almost like a novel.⁵¹

The critic, Eva Behrendt, sees Funder's book as more valuable than the existing reports "on the lives and fates of individuals either on the side of the victims or perpetrators."⁵² Even works by such eminent historians as Timothy Garton Ash did not succeed to put together "the human pieces of the puzzle to an analytical overall picture"⁵³ whereas Funder succeeds in doing so.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, such an examination is not entirely equal because we do not know how Australians might react to an *Ausländer*, or outsider, writing about an equally controversial subject in Australia. Until that happens we may not be able to fully appreciate some of the negative German responses. But what we do know is that Australia has a different tradition regarding privacy and free press that even the Garner controversy over *The First Stone* could not silence. And any number of "outsider" literary journalists have written critically about the U.S., Jonathan Raban for one in his *Hunting Mr. Heartbreak*,⁵⁴ without a resulting outcry.

That said, the reception of *Stasiland* in Germany and Australia provides one opportunity for understanding different cultural responses to the genre. What the western German reviews show is that Funder's book fills a gap for Germans in the literature about the former GDR. In using the genre of literary journalism the book not only increases the reader's knowledge about the former GDR but also provides for an emotional engagement with the subject matter. The eastern German reviews, however, pose exactly those questions about authenticity and credibility that have troubled literary journalism in Germany all along. The German notion of what can be written about in a literary reportage is relatively narrower than in Australia and more broadly in the Anglosphere. In the context of literature about the former GDR, this means that only those who can provide eyewitness reports, i.e., those who can write for themselves—and get published—will be heard. This was the very point Funder picked on when she emphasised time and again that she wanted to show to a wider public "the extraordinary courage in so-called ordinary people."⁵⁵ She used the possibilities provided by the Australian—and Anglophone—concept of literary journalism to write a gripping and forceful book which helps to keep alive the memory of the wrongs of the GDR.



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