Literarisierung einer gespaltenen Stadt

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REFERENCES

Stephanie SCHWERTER, *Literarisierung einer gespaltenen Stadt. Belfast in der nordirischen "Troubles Fiction" vom Realismus zur Karnevalisierung*, Trier, WVT 2007, 285 p., ISBN 978-3-884769-53-9

- 1 Stephanie Schwerter's book on the representation of Belfast as a divided space and segregated territory as described within northern Irish "Troubles fiction" is a valuable study. It is valuable for a range of reasons: Schwerter provides her readers with a thorough synopsis of the historical and socio-cultural background of the Northern Ireland conflict as well as with an introduction to the literary genre of Troubles fiction and its diverse sub-genres, which form an integral part of modern Irish literature. Furthermore, the author analyses and puts into context a number of recent literary publications which so far had not been discussed, and she dedicates an entire chapter to the specific female experience of the conflict as reflected within women's writing about the "Troubles". In her thesis, Schwerter focuses on and convincingly outlines a more recent development in the literary representation of Belfast from the realistic to the carnivalistic which she links in with the northern Irish peace process.
- 2 As the main urban centre of the bloody conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the North of Ireland, Belfast has become the focus of many publications on "the Troubles", and has fascinated many writers. In particular during the 1980s and '90s, many novels got published which describe the impact of the conflict on people's everyday life. Most of these narratives take place in and around Belfast as the epicentre of the violence. In her analyses Schwerter observes that the narrative representation of Belfast shifts from a sombre and realistic display of Belfast as a "noir city" in the 1970s and '80s to a somewhat grotesque, ironic and "carnivalistic" (Bakhtin, 1984) representation of the city which, according to Schwerter, goes hand in hand with the

northern Irish politics of détente that eventually led to the “Good Friday Agreement” of 1998.

- 3 The book’s structure is six clearly divided sections that refer to relevant theories, methods and research from which Schwerter develops her arguments: The first section explores “Troubles fiction” as a sub-genre of northern Irish prose. It introduces authors and text from a total of 13 representatively selected novels, gives an update of the contemporary academic research on the subject, explains theoretical issues in the representation of urban space – the city – in sociology and modern literature (with particular regard to Burton Pike’s concept of “real city versus world city”; p. 25), and the view of the city as a social complex.
- 4 The second section of the study deals primarily with the matter of ethnic and cultural identity as perceived by the different communities in Belfast and Northern Ireland. Clear definitions of the political camps (Unionists and Loyalists; Nationalists and Republicans), a brief introduction to the origins of northern Irish paramilitary organizations, a description of Belfast’s topography as “a town of divisions and borders” (p. 62), and a careful “interpretation” of linguistic peculiarities help the reader to find his/her way through the maze of a (post-) conflicted northern Irish society.
- 5 A detailed analysis of the narrative representation of Belfast within the various sub-genres of Troubles fiction forms the principal subject of the third section and the centre of this book: Schwerter identifies the Troubles thriller as the dominant sub-type, “composed to entertain rather than enlighten” (p. 78), with its display of violence as the prominent element in city-representation. The problems regarding the development of an emancipated female gender-identity within an ideologically indoctrinated patriarchal society is the key aspect of a thorough examination of the female experience of the conflict. Here, Schwerter looks at the often different kind of experiences of women with a working class or middle class background, of the (working) mother or the female teenager (in particular with the “love-across-the-barricades-novel” as a hybrid sub-type of women’s writing of the Troubles, p. 142-45).
- 6 The development of a positive image of Belfast is the common characteristic of the “carnivalistic” novels (thrillers) written by “Troubles writers” since the 1990s. This positive view on Belfast and Northern Ireland is closely linked to progressive developments within the peace process and a reduction in violent attacks. New formats and styles for an innovative approach regarding the representation of cityscapes in Troubles fiction developed and represent the most significant feature of contemporary northern Irish fiction. The humorous display of “the Troubles” – which does not mean ridiculing its violence or the victims but rather aims at (stereo-) typical descriptions of the two main communities and their representatives – undermines the local society and authorities. The authors of these narratives break with the “traditional” mono-perspective discourse of the conflict by adopting stylistic tools such as polyvalence and multi-perspectives. With this and their use of humour and irony, the writers succeed in a demystification of the conflict and its ideologically motivated causes.
- 7 The book’s final sections provide a synopsis of the developmental stages in Troubles fiction (including Belfast’s image as a segmented urban complex) from “realism to carnivalism”, and a discussion of possible modes of development for this type of literature in a post-conflict context. With regard to the end of the “armed struggle” in the North of Ireland (as referred to by the IRA in its declaration of 26 September 2005),

Schwerter wonders whether the genre of Troubles fiction has become obsolete or will it start focusing on ways to come to terms with the violent past and its traumas? What seems to be clear though is that in the “post-ceasefire-novels” too, Belfast and its citizens are at the thematic heart of many of these texts and will most likely continue to fascinate visitors and writers alike.

- 8 To conclude, Schwerter’s book on the literary representation of Belfast as a divided city is a most interesting and thematically broad study which is aimed at academics and students in the fields of Irish Studies, Conflict Studies, Modern Irish Literature, and Cultural Studies as well as of interest for the general educated reader. The text is very “readable”, well-researched and original. However because it is written in German (and not translated into English as yet) it might not reach the wide audience it deserves – a pity!