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Book Review

***Generation und Strategie: Barbara Honigmann im literarischen Feld der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur 1986-2015***

**by Yannick Gnipep-oo Pembouong, V&R Unipress, 2020. 474 pp. \$ 64**

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How does a Jewish writer become one of the most recognized contemporary authors in Germany, the “land of the perpetrators” (Pembouong 23; my trans.)? In *Generation und Strategie: Barbara Honigmann im literarischen Feld der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur 1986-2015*, Yannick Gnipep-oo Pembouong explores how the formal strategies of Barbara Honigmann’s writing have contributed to her rise as an authoritative voice on Holocaust memory and the contemporary German-Jewish experience. His survey of Honigmann’s literary career highlights how the pioneering writer of the Second Generation addresses themes of German history and Jewish identity in works that ushered in a new era of German-Jewish postwar literature.

As indicated by the title of his study, Pembouong tracks the textual strategies of Honigmann’s prose to demonstrate how they diverge from those of the survivor generation. With themes of Jewish life at the center of her oeuvre, Honigmann is presented as the breakthrough voice of a new generation, representing a different relationship to the past, to Judaism, and to Germany after the Holocaust. Pembouong is not only concerned with how Honigmann’s narrative techniques and themes represent a generational turning point in postwar literary history, but also how her writing’s formal qualities operate as instances of self-conscious authorial staging. He argues that it is through the literary strategies she uses that Honigmann establishes herself as a prominent voice in both contemporary German literature and the German-Jewish discourse and substantiates this broad claim with analyses of all of Honigmann’s published works from 1986 to 2015.

Pembouong reads the formal strategies of Honigmann's autofictional writing as indicative of the position of the author herself. To legitimize an approach to literary analysis that blends the perspectives of the real-life author and fictionalized narrator(s), he draws on the sociology of literature. Most prominently, he discusses Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and Alain Viala's theory of sociopoetics to explain that neither an author's reception nor the aesthetic qualities of their work can be properly considered outside of its sociohistorical environment. To underscore these claims, Pembouong devotes the introduction and first chapter to an exhaustive outline of Bourdieu and Viala's theoretical frameworks and to accounts of various historical and political topics related to Honigmann's work, such as Holocaust memory since 1945, Jewish identity construction in postwar Germany, and German literary history from the 80s to the present. While these opening sections are demonstrably well researched, it is difficult to place them in constellation with an argument about Honigmann's texts, as she is rarely mentioned in these chapters.

Each subsequent chapter focuses on one of Honigmann's works and highlights how its formal or thematic attributes function as a means of authorial self-fashioning. Throughout the study, Pembouong portrays Honigmann as a literary figure beyond the category of German-Jewish, while simultaneously maintaining her Jewish identity. Chapter two begins by examining the use of literary and cultural paratext in *Roman von einem Kind* (1986). In chapter three, Pembouong continues with a discussion of narrative strategy in *Eine Liebe aus nichts* (1991), arguing that while Honigmann depicts contemporary Germany as an inhospitable place for Jews, the novel offers a chance to rethink classifications such as *Väterliteratur* and New Subjectivity. In chapter four, Pembouong explains how Honigmann transmits Jewish knowledge to her readers in her novella *Soharas Reise* (1998), in which she not only foregrounds the diversity of the Jewish world, but also her own profile as a Jewish woman and writer through her

protagonist Sohara's story of emancipation. In chapter five, Pembouong considers Honigmann's story collection *Damals, dann und danach* (1999) as the author's contribution to the contemporary cultural discourse on memory. He argues that by using themes and contexts in her fiction that intersect with her personal identity, Honigmann is able to bolster her image as an author. In chapter six, Pembouong's focus turns to the epistolary novel *Alles, alles liebe!* (2000), arguing that its cast of characters offers the reader a multitude of Jewish perspectives that represent a dialogue among East German Jews. Chapter seven focuses on *Ein Kapitel aus meinem Leben* (2004), a fictionalized biography of Honigmann's mother. Here Pembouong argues that Honigmann's genre-bending novel gives Second Generation writers license to fictionalize facts and places Honigmann's autofiction in dialogue with established genres such as *Väterliteratur* and the *Familienroman*. The eighth chapter sees Honigmann enter into a conversation with another well-established genre, the *Reisebericht*. Pembouong's reading of *Das Überirdische Licht: Rückkehr nach New York* (2008) focuses on how place operates as a means to access personal and historical memory. He reads this textual strategy as Honigmann's comment on a failed German-Jewish symbiosis; this time informed by a city rich with Jewish history, yet one with a vastly different contemporary Jewish culture from Germany's. Finally, in chapter nine, Pembouong looks at *Chronik meiner Straße* (2015) and considers how Honigmann's reflection on her chosen home of Strasbourg and her permanent exile from Germany informs her perspective on German-Jewish relations.

Pembouong engages with each of Honigmann's literary texts through both original interpretations and those of other critics. He excels at the former when giving himself space to develop his own voice. For example, in his discussion of *Alles, alles Liebe!* he successfully integrates historical background, theories of narrative, and epistolary form to frame his reading of the text. In this cohesive section, Pembouong

shows how Honigmann creates a ‘poetology’ of letter writing informed by her stance on Jewish life in Germany. Despite several insightful close readings, the book’s organization is fragmented, consisting of multiple subsections that treat relevant historical and theoretical contexts separately from discussions of Honigmann’s formal literary strategies. Chapters tend to feel disjointed as a result, making it difficult to follow Pembouong’s main argument. While the monograph’s organization highlights Pembouong’s capacity for thorough research, it comes at the expense of a more convincing case for how Honigmann’s textual strategies transform her public positioning.

An additional effect of the book’s chronological structure is that several of its most intriguing inquiries are scattered throughout different chapters and consequently get lost in the background. For instance, Pembouong explores Honigmann’s use of intertext in chapters two, six, and eight. He indicates that it is Honigmann’s command of the German literary canon that allows her to establish herself not only as a key figure in the genres of memory literature and German-Jewish literature, but also as an author in touch with Germany’s rich literary history. Yet, considering each work’s use of intertext in isolation obstructs a discussion of how these uses converge or diverge. Similarly, Pembouong frequently turns to Honigmann’s use of the epistolary form and other questions of genre construction as instances that shape her literary status. However, these explorations on their own give little sense of the development of Honigmann’s authorial persona over the arc of her career. Despite relying on sociological theory to account for the inclusion of historical and contextual material, Pembouong’s approach seems to collapse the positions of author and narrator(s) rather than draw on Bourdieu and Viala to explain and explore the dynamic between them. Ultimately, while Pembouong successfully explains that Honigmann’s textual strategies

are informed by the world in which she lives, the question of *how* these strategies allow us to understand the author as a literary figure remains open.

Prodigiously researched, *Generation und Strategie* is an ambitious book with a broad scope. Thoroughly examining each of Barbara Honigmann's literary texts in various sociohistorical contexts, Pembouong argues that the author establishes herself as a key figure in contemporary German literature. He shows how Honigmann's formal writing strategies and unapologetically Jewish perspective helped bring about a turning point in postwar literature and demonstrated that "[d]as Judentum ist aber noch anderes als Auschwitz, gelber Stern und Ghetto. Es ist eine reiche, geistige Welt...genauso wie die klassische deutsche Literatur" (380). As Pembouong elucidates in his study, the variety of textual and narrative strategies Honigmann uses to play with fact, fiction, and the space in between allows her work to converse with other genre traditions, characterizes her unique brand of autofiction, and secures for her a distinctive place in German literature.