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Children of the Lebensborn: the Search for Identity in Selected Literary  
Texts of the Berlin Republic

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The History of the Lebensborn

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**T**he Lebensborn e.V. was founded by the SS on 12 December 1935 and stood under the direct command of SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. The organization was originally intended to provide pre- and antenatal care primarily for unwed mothers of Aryan origin and their children. It was hoped that this would increase the dwindling birth rate and give rise to a new racial elite. Mothers could leave their unwanted children at the organization, which cared for them in the Lebensborn homes or arranged adoption. Overall, there were more than twenty Lebensborn homes – nine in Germany, ten in Norway, and five in Austria, Luxembourg, Belgium and France – and it is estimated that around 7,000 to 8,000 children were born there.<sup>1</sup> During the war, the Lebensborn organization was also responsible for looking after Polish, Czech and Slovenian children who had been kidnapped in the course of the Eindeutschungsaktionen performed by the SS (Lilienthal 49-58; Schmitz-Köster 37-57).

Ever since the first home opened in 1936, there has been a morbid fascination with the Lebensborn experiment. Rumors about the “SS-Edelbordelle,” where the new master race was being produced, were already rife during the Nazi era and have stubbornly persisted until today. Undoubtedly, this can largely be attributed to the voyeuristic image of uniform-clad SS-officers seducing young, blonde girls “in the line of duty” so to speak (Schmitz-Köster 14). However, the main reason why the rumours have refused to fade can be found in the secrecy in which the organization was shrouded from the outset. Initially, this was vital to safeguard the names of unmarried mothers and, in particular, fathers, who were often married SS-officers. This also concealed the Eindeutschungsaktionen in the occupied territories. Later, this secrecy served to add to the mystery surrounding the organization and, of course, makes it much more difficult to uncover the truth today.<sup>2</sup> When it became clear that Germany’s defeat was inevitable, the SS burnt as many documents as they could in an attempt to cover their traces

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(Henry and Hillel 211). Thus, much of the official documentation is missing, and the small proportion that was salvaged is guarded by the bureaucracy of archives and administrative offices (Schmitz-Köster 261). Those Lebensborn children who have attempted to uncover their past have reportedly faced “a collective conspiracy of silence” (Rothschild 47), leading some to comment that, in a macabre way, the system in Germany is effectively perpetuating the legacy of silence established by the Nazis (Rothschild 47; Schmitz-Köster 262).

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### The Lebensborn Organization in Literature

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Perhaps partly because of the secrecy surrounding the organization, there has been little serious literature that might have set the record straight. In contrast to many other aspects of the Second World War, surprisingly little has been written about the Lebensborn experiment. Dorothee Schmitz-Köster, who has published on the topic, aptly refers to this as the “weißer Fleck” in the otherwise well-documented history of the Third Reich (Schmitz-Köster 24). Indeed, the fate of the Täterkinder in general, let alone the Lebensborn children in particular, was largely ignored in the decades after the war (Bar-on 9). When Peter Sichrovsky published his book *Schuldig geboren* in 1987, he lamented the profound lack of research, pointing out that, despite the “psychology boom” of the 1960s and 1970s, the children of perpetrators had been largely overlooked.<sup>3</sup> Erich Simenauer has suggested that this may be attributable to what he calls a latency period, which he claims was needed by analysts themselves in order to be able to deal with the horrors of the Third Reich (Siemenauer 8). This gap was addressed by Anita Eckstaedt, who published the findings of her pioneering study, *Nationalsozialismus in der “zweiten Generation.” Psychoanalyse von Hörigkeitsverhältnissen*, in 1989, and since then the children of perpetrators have increasingly been the subject of investigation.<sup>4</sup>

The first scientific piece of work specifically about the Lebensborn organization was Clarissa Henry and Marc Hillel’s *Children of the SS*. Unfortunately, their claims to have found evidence of “planned reproduction” in Lebensborn homes only served to increase the confusion surrounding the institution, and were later found to be unreliable (Henry and Hillel 76-98).<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Henry and Hillel can be credited with being the first to supply the public with original documentation and generally forcing the issue into the open. It took

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another ten years for Georg Lilienthal's comprehensive study, *Der "Lebensborn e.V." Ein Instrument nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik*, to be published, which is widely regarded as the most authoritative work on the institution to date. Fiction did not fare much better. Although there had been a handful of publications in the decades following the war, the number is insignificant when compared to the plethora of works dealing with the Third Reich in general. As authors generally worked from the unproven assumption that the Lebensborn homes had been "Zuchthäuser," the novels that did emerge merely served, again, to perpetuate the sensationalist myths surrounding the organization.<sup>6</sup> Probably the most well-known literary treatment of the theme in the 1950s, which followed a series in the (then still respectable) magazine *Revue*, was Will Berthold's *Lebensborn* (1958), which shamelessly exploits the image of an SS-brothel for its melodramatic and cliché-ridden love story of two blonde and blue-eyed Lebensborn "recruits."<sup>7</sup> None of these novels attempted a deeper exploration of the motives of the Lebensborn parents, or the complex psychological consequences for their children.

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#### A New Perspective: Lebensborn Texts Since the 1990s

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Since the early 1990s, there has been growing interest in the Lebensborn organization. Media interest has increased dramatically, and many Lebensborn children are for the first time breaking the silence and confronting their past.<sup>8</sup> In addition, several comprehensive studies have been published, notably Dorothee Schmitz-Köster's *"Deutsche Mutter, bist du bereit..." Alltag im Lebensborn* (2002, now in its fifth edition) and Kåre Olsen's *Schicksal Lebensborn. Die Kinder der Schande und ihre Mütter* (2004), which addresses the fate of the Norwegian Lebensborn children. The years since reunification have seen a number of literary responses, including the publication of autobiographies, such as Gisela Heidenreich's *Das endlose Jahr. Die langsame Entdeckung der eigenen Biographie – ein Lebensbornschicksal* (2002),<sup>9</sup> and biographies, such as *Kind L364. Eine Lebensborn-Familiengeschichte* (2007) by Schmitz-Köster. Fictional works thematizing the Lebensborn organization include Judith Kuckart's *Die schöne Frau* (1994), Jochen Missfeldt's *Gespiegelter Himmel* (2001), and Birgit Bauer's *Im Federhaus der Zeit* (2003).

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These texts primarily engage issues specific to the Lebensborn, but also address the larger questions at the center of the rising number of fictional and autobiographical works published since German unification which focus on National Socialism. In addition to discussing the issues specific to the Lebensborn texts, then, this article will also argue that these works are concrete examples of the overarching questions central to literature dealing with the Nazi past in the Berlin Republic. Furthermore, it will explore the growing significance of the role of literature in the larger context of Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as we move into what Aleida Assmann calls "reine Vergangenheit." In light of the foreseeable death of the war generation, other forms of representation – such as files, pictures, films, and literature – will need to take the place of first-hand witnesses (Assmann and Frevert 28).

The Lebensborn texts explore new territory in several ways. Firstly, they bring into focus a topic that has been largely ignored, or misrepresented, since the war. Secondly, these more recent publications focus much less on the institution itself, and more on the Lebensborn children, or even grandchildren, as well as their struggle to come to terms with their families' past. This emphasis on the long-term psychological consequences for the second and third post-war generations is a characteristic the Lebensborn texts share with many recent works dealing more generally with the Nazi past. Thirdly, the texts take up a unique position because of their gender aspect: these works focus almost exclusively on the female experience of the war and post-war generations, with daughters challenging their mothers about their past (with the exception of Jochen Missfeldt's *Gespiegelter Himmel*, where the protagonist is male).<sup>10</sup> This perspective marks a significant shift from the rather one-sided focus of the *Väterliteratur* of the 1970s, in which the second generation confronted its fathers in the wake of the student revolt of the late 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Even in more recent texts that have experimented with psychological constellations beyond the generational confrontations between father and son,<sup>12</sup> the emphasis has for the most part been on male perpetrators, for instance in the case of what has been described as a "new wave" of *Väterliteratur* that has emerged since unification (Leeder 255).

The focus on women (or, arguably, female perpetrators) in the Lebensborn texts opens up a wholly new perspective, changing the way the reader perceives the war. Suddenly, the war has been extended from the front into the home. By casting these mothers as active participants of Nazi ideology, rather than passive bystanders, the texts challenge the

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notion of the innocent female – a notion largely upheld by literature and film since the war. *Die schöne Frau* further extends the perspective by including not only the second, but also the third post-war generation, thereby drawing attention both to the longevity of the legacy of the Third Reich, and the way memory and perceptions of guilt change over time and generations.<sup>13</sup>

The Lebensborn texts engage issues which also address larger questions at the center of the rising number of fictional and autobiographical works published since German unification focusing on National Socialism. Thus, this article will also argue that these works are concrete examples of the overarching questions central to literature dealing with the Nazi past in the Berlin Republic. Furthermore, it will explore the growing significance of the role of literature in the larger context of Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* as we move into what Aleida Assmann calls "reine Vergangenheit." In light of the foreseeable death of the war generation, other forms of representation – such as files, pictures, films, and literature – will need to take the place of first-hand witnesses (Assmann and Frevert 28).

The recent texts dealing with the Lebensborn organization differ in style, genre and contextual framework, but they exhibit striking similarities in terms of content. As none of the authors have first-hand experience of the war, or even the immediate post-war period, the often startling parallels between the Lebensborn texts point to the use of published secondary sources for their research. Indeed, Heidenreich cites a comprehensive bibliography at the end of her narrative. The texts are thus usefully read against the backdrop of research into Täterkinder and Lebensborn children, as this casts many parallels into relief on several levels.<sup>14</sup> Thus, all Lebensborn texts thematize, to varying degrees, the burden of the Lebensborn heritage, the shame of being connected by means of birth to a Nazi institution,<sup>15</sup> and the children's search for identity. Due to matters of space, this article will examine in detail only one text, Kuckart's *Die schöne Frau*, and refer more briefly to Heidenreich's autobiographical text *Das endlose Jahr*.<sup>16</sup>

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### The Lebensborn Legacy in Fiction: *Die schöne Frau*

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Judith Kuckart's three-part novel *Die schöne Frau* follows the daughter of a Lebensborn child as she struggles with her legacy. Set almost entirely in the 1990s, the text focuses on Berta Baumgart, who learns

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about her mother's previously unknown past through letters from her mother. Born in a Lebensborn home, her mother was adopted by an English family. Still in England after the war, she gave birth to Berta, an illegitimate child. Berta, the protagonist, is deeply disturbed by her mother's revelations. Although she is one generation removed from the Lebensborn children, she is haunted by the stigma of being arisch like her mother and grandmother. Her blonde hair is her most defining feature and the mark of her inherited guilt. The principle difficulties which emerge as Berta confronts her heritage are her fraught relationship with her mother, the feelings of shame about her origin, her lack of roots and subsequent weak sense of identity.

In the narrative, the boundaries between the past and present are fluid. In contrast to the widespread *Schlußstrich*-mentality in post-war Germany, Berta is unable to draw a clear line between that past and the present. Her origin and heritage have clear implications for the present, and the narrative explicitly emphasizes continuity across time and generations. It is for this reason that her mother's letters have such a profound effect on her. She is tortured by her Lebensborn past, particularly by the stigma attached to the word "arisch", describing it as "ein Fluch" (DF 222). Even though her rational side accepts that "ein Wort macht keinen Fleck" (DF 33), she nonetheless perceives it as an insult: "Mit dem Wort hatte es angefangen. Als hätte ihr jemand ins Gesicht gespuckt" (DF 265).<sup>17</sup> She begins to detest the way she looks, examining herself in the mirror for traces of her past: "Sieht man es mir an?" (DF 262), and reassuring herself that, despite her "inheritance", she is still the same person she was before the letters arrived: "Lange noch kümmerte sie sich um das Bild im Spiegel. Sie sähe aus wie sie selbst, nicht wie Gerda Müller oder Eva Braun" (DF 114).

Hair in general, and Berta's blonde hair in particular, develops into a powerful motif in Kuckart's narrative. Barely a page passes without a reference to it, whether this takes the form of physical descriptions (DF 41, 183), peoples' comments (DF 121, 210), or seemingly redundant background information (DF 49, 239). The frequency with which the blonde motif crops up effectively reflects Berta's obsession with her Aryan looks and has the simultaneous effect of making the reader similarly sensitive to it. Berta agonizes over the implications of her so very visible connection to the Nazi past, and, despite her innocence, is ridden with guilt. She asks herself: "Gibt es das, [...] schuldig zu sein, ohne etwas getan zu haben?" (DF 265). Although she clearly bears no responsibility for her grandmother's actions and has no influence over her family's past, she cannot help but feel that her

inextricable link with the Nazi past weighs heavier than her actions in the present: “die Verstrickung macht [...] schuldig, nicht die Tat” (DF 213).<sup>18</sup> Berta even goes so far to wish she was the daughter of Jewish victims, displaying envy of the Jews’ absolute innocence: “Bin ich denn die einzige die lieber ein Kind aus Theresienstadt wäre, mit schattenhaften, aber jüdischen Familienverhältnissen?” (DF 228).<sup>19</sup> While such victim envy may appear understandable, it is also highly problematic, as it could be seen to imply that a Jewish past is easier to deal with than a perpetrator’s (grandchild’s) past in the sense that it is less burdened.

What is interesting about Kuckart’s narrative is the fact that the generational gap has not lessened Berta’s acute anxiety about her heritage. In part this can be attributed to the fact that the issue has not been dealt with by her mother: tellingly, in one of her letters, her mother refers to her past as a “Tabu” (DF 193). By thematizing her mother’s, and grandmother’s, reluctance to speak about their past, the author simultaneously addresses the well-documented mechanisms of silence and repression, or collective silence, after the war.<sup>20</sup> This lack of communication was characteristic of the relationship of parents to the post-war generation and is a result of the reluctance on the part of the perpetrator generation to work through their immediate Nazi past. As their experiences are not properly dealt with, this task is then transferred to the second and even the third post-war generations, resulting in a “Wiederkehr des Verdrängten” (Moser, Politik 9, 65-86). In Berta’s case, the confrontation with her past leads to severe distress, manifesting itself physically in the form of acute hearing loss (DF 246-7).

Emotionally, Berta is not well equipped to deal with the implications of her mother’s letters. Berta has developed a profound feeling of rootlessness and a weak sense of identity as a result of many destabilizing factors in her life. She spent several years in a children’s home, doesn’t know her father at all and has an ambiguous relationship with her mother. She has no clear sense of who she is or where she belongs. When asked by her boyfriend: “Wer bist du eigentlich?” she admits: “Weiß ich doch nicht” (DF 237). Her choice of career as an actress is also symptomatic of this, giving her an opportunity to escape her own insecure identity: “Ja, Schauspielerin sein, und nicht mehr Berta” (DF 21). Indeed, the narrative contains several references to the protagonist’s problematic sense of self. She describes always having felt as though she were standing next to herself (DF 264), as though her whole life had taken place behind her back (DF 175). Her experience

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closely resembles the phenomenon of “Ich-Verfremdung” which Westernhagen sees in the children of the perpetrators (119).

Berta’s disorientation in life can be attributed to her profound lack of history. The distinct absence of any historical dimension in Berta’s life is highlighted by her CV at the beginning of the narrative:

Berta Baumgart. Geboren in Wuppertal. Waisenhaus St Maria in Neviges. 1972 Aufnahme in die Familie. Ausbildung Arzthelferin, nebenbei beim Film, in Indien, nach Bochum. Schauspielschule. Hörerpost beantworten, Kabelhilfe, Serviererin, Gesellschafterin bei einer behinderten Gräfin in Kettwig. Keine Erbschaft. 1986 Abgang Schauspielschule. Aufenthalt in Rom. 1987 Kauf eines Walkmans. Gastspielverträge in Dortmund, Gießen, Bruchsal, Heidelberg. (DF 12-13)

This CV, which is noticeably disjointed, random and incoherent, very much reflects Berta’s unstable identity. The impression that Berta is lost and appears to have no concept of her personal history is emphasized again just a few pages further on, when she explicitly refers to her lack of past: “Die und der und ich sind solche, solche, die eine Anzahl von Jahren haben und keine Geschichte” (DF 16).

However, when her mother’s letters slowly begin to fill the gaps, Berta is overwhelmed. The issues associated with her problematic past merely exacerbate Berta’s feelings of disorientation and confusion. She is desperate for clarity: “Nummer 2222, in der zweiten Generation, will wissen, woher gekommen! Wenn schon nicht wissen, wohin gehören!” (DF 219). The feelings of disjointedness and uncertainty are also reflected in the stylistic elements of the novel, which lend a degree of vagueness to the narrative. The open structure of the text and the third-person perspective keep the reader at arm’s length, unsure of the protagonist’s motives. Moreover, Kuckart intersperses the text with seemingly banal comments: “Sie aß ein Käsebrod, und weil es zu regnen anfang, aß sie ein zweites” (DF 19), evoking a powerful image of Berta’s loneliness and aimlessness.

A further important component is the erotic element that Kuckart incorporates into her narrative. Berta’s grandmother is revealed to have joined the Lebensborn organization not so much out of ideological conviction, but to live out her fantasy of sex with strangers. Berta has inherited her grandmother’s predilection for anonymous partners. The author uses these passages describing her encounters – in



itself fitting for someone with no ties – to break up the narrative and reinforce the sense of discontinuity and disjointedness. Although the erotic twist does not add much value to the narrative, it does serve to illustrate the continuation across the generations (albeit tenuous) and reinforces once more the impression of Berta's loneliness and weak sense of identity.

By choosing an erotic angle, Kuckart appears at first to be playing to exactly those voyeuristic instincts that have beleaguered the representation of the Lebensborn experiment from its inception. The Lebensborn homes are portrayed once again as places where children were "produced", conjuring up crude images such as "rosa Ferkelfleisch in der Massenabfertigung" (DF 228). However, while this would seem to perpetuate the existing myths, the author relativizes these passages by transferring them into the protagonist's dreams (cf. Mörchen, "Spurensuche" 171). This fluid movement between dream and reality, fact and fiction, is characteristic of much of Kuckart's narrative, underlining once more the feeling of uncertainty. On one occasion, Berta asks her friend Kata whether she got her information on the Lebensborn organization from a proper encyclopedia, to which her friend replies: "Nein, aus einem richtigen Roman" (DF 127). The ending, in which Berta disappears without a trace, picks up the theme of her unstable identity once more. The inconclusive nature of the end is characteristic of the narrative as a whole, mirroring Berta's sense of disorientation.

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### The Autobiographical Perspective in *Das endlose Jahr*

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Many of the issues addressed in *Die schöne Frau* are also central to the autobiographical text by Heidenreich. In *Das endlose Jahr*, Heidenreich suffers from the uncertainty surrounding her origin, reflected in her weak sense of identity and search for stability. She is haunted by her past, yet unable to draw a line between this past and the present. As in *Die schöne Frau*, these issues are not dealt with, but inadvertently transferred on to the following generation.

In fact, the similarities between Kuckart's and Heidenreich's texts are particularly striking. Both include frequent references to blonde hair and blue eyes and, in an astonishing parallelism, the acute hearing loss suffered when the confrontation with their respective mothers reaches its peak (DJ 209; DF 246-7). Moreover, Heidenreich also feels

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guilty for her association with a Nazi institution by birth, asking herself: “Bin ich [...] nicht zugleich auch schuldig geworden durch diese Geburt?” (DJ 22). That there should exist such parallels between a fictional and non-fictional text is remarkable, and raises questions regarding the reliability of memory, the effect of hindsight and the use of sources. Yet it is precisely the difference in genre that most clearly separates the two texts. While Kuckart enjoys artistic freedom in her exploration of the Lebensborn organization, Heidenreich is led primarily by her emotions and painful memories. *Das endlose Jahr* clearly represents, first and foremost, a very personal coming-to-terms with the past. As a result, the text can at times be less sophisticated stylistically. The author’s frustration and exasperation are often articulated with the heavy use of exclamation marks, italics or rhetorical questions, and the text features several overly emotional or clichéd expressions to capture Heidenreich’s feelings: “[wie ich] um die Wahrheit flehe, die ich brauche wie die Luft zum Atmen” (DJ 110). Although at times unpolished, the intensely personal style can be seen as one of the narrative’s strengths, providing the text with a strong feeling of authenticity.

*Das endlose Jahr* portrays the dilemma of perpetrator empathy with particular clarity. Torn between the natural, unconditional love for her mother and condemnation of her actions during the war, the author constantly sways between her personal feelings and the larger historical context. Heidenreich repeatedly challenges her mother about her past, accusing her of either complicity with or unquestioning acceptance of the Lebensborn’s practices. Regarding the Eindeutschungsaktionen, she asks her mother: “Wo kamen sie denn sonst noch her, eure ‘bindungslosen Kinder’ [...]? Hast du nie nachgefragt?” (DJ 105). Unwilling to accept her mother’s supposed innocence, or ignorance, she challenges her again: “Es kann doch nicht wahr sein, dass du dir nie Gedanken gemacht hast, warum polnische Kinder in Deutschland adoptiert werden sollten!” (DJ 106). However, her complex emotional entanglement with her mother and the urge to understand her mother’s motives prevent her from adopting a wholly detached view, weakening her critical stance. Reminiscent of the protagonist in Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* (1995), who struggles to “zugleich verstehen und verurteilen” his former lover and SS-guard Hanna (151), Heidenreich’s text powerfully reflects the inner conflict that the author experiences. Eventually she softens, allowing a more understanding, empathetic attitude to take hold, concluding: “Ich bin ihre Tochter, nicht ihre Richterin” (DJ 300). By addressing the dilemma of perpetrator empathy *Das endlose Jahr* tests the boundaries between empathy with those

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caught up in the Nazi regime and the desire to confront them about their past. This dilemma has been at the centre of several other recent narratives dealing with the Third Reich,<sup>21</sup> though it could be argued that the circumstances of Heidenreich's birth throw it into particularly sharp relief. Moreover, this instance involves the protagonist's mother, not father or brother, drawing attention to female complicity with the Nazi regime. Heidenreich's text, then, along with the other Lebensborn texts, work against the reluctance to see women as historical actors by addressing the notion of female wartime perpetration. Until now, women have largely been portrayed as innocent victims or, at most, passive Mitläufer, or fellow travelers, of the Nazi regime, and are again being seen in this way in the recent wave of texts dealing with the Third Reich and its aftermath, notably in works portraying German wartime suffering.<sup>22</sup> Thus, with their stories spanning generations and gender divisions, the Lebensborn texts introduce a perspective that has been missing in the literary fiction of the Berlin Republic so far. Unlike the one-sided accusations that marked much of the Väterliteratur of the 1970s, the Lebensborn texts include a degree of self-reflection and a willingness to contextualize. This more differentiated and less judgmental approach is characteristic of much of the post-unification literature looking back at the Third Reich more generally.

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### Conclusion

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Both texts chart the psychological problems of coming to terms with one's Lebensborn past, conveying a powerful impression of the wide range of problems that these children face: silent mothers, the dilemma of perpetrator empathy, feelings of guilt and shame and the search for identity. The overwhelming dilemma post-war generations face in integrating the past into the present emerges as the central problem in the texts of Heidenreich and Kuckart, reflecting the dichotomy between private memory and collective or public memory.<sup>23</sup> Assmann aptly speaks of "die Unvereinbarkeit, die Nichtintegrierbarkeit von Vergangenheit und Gegenwart" (Assmann and Frevert 27). In addition, on a broader scale, the texts work against the illusion that the legacy of the Third Reich has come to an end, negating the finality of such notions as the "Schlußstrich" or "Stunde Null." They do this by illustrating the significant burden that continues to torment the post-war generations, partly because the National Socialist past has not been

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appropriately addressed. Moreover, all advocate dialogue and the confrontation with the past as a way forward.<sup>24</sup> By addressing a previously under-represented topic, and by simultaneously casting women as active participants in Nazis racial policy, the Lebensborn texts reflect the tendency of the recent discourse to broaden the spectrum and engage with parts of German history and experiences that had previously been taboo, or restricted to private memory. This is notably the case with German wartime suffering, of which the psychological trauma of Täterkinder is arguably also part. This development reflects the more inclusive and open attitude towards the Nazi past in post-unification Germany and what Bill Niven has referred to as an “ongoing process of understanding” (Niven 5).

While the Lebensborn texts portray individual, and arguably exceptional stories, many of the questions they raise are also representative of the larger issues that are being addressed in contemporary German literature dealing more generally with the Third Reich. Indeed, the sleeve of *Das endlose Jahr* refers to Heidenreich’s story as “zwar äußerst ungewöhnlich [...], andererseits aber beispielhaft für viele Fragen der Nachkriegsgeneration an die Generation der Eltern und deren Verhalten zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus.” Notably, these include the issues of inherited guilt, the dilemma of perpetrator empathy, the difficulty of reconciling conflicting images of one’s parents, German wartime suffering and the second and third generation’s struggle to integrate the “non-integratable history” into their own past and identity (Schmitz 15). Thus, while valuable in their own right for publicizing a previously neglected subject, *Die schöne Frau* and *Das endlose Jahr* can also be viewed as one component of Germany’s push towards a more open confrontation with its past. With the war generation slowly dying out, the representation of the past in pictures, films, and literature will take on an increasingly important role in the future. Arguably, literature can be seen to occupy a particular space among these representations: it is simultaneously private and public, medium and individual communication. Its unique quality is that it can engage the reader on an intensely personal level; more so, for example, than the visual media, and infinitely more than factual history books. Critic Helmut Mörchen notes in his analysis of *Die schöne Frau*:

So wichtig die Klärung historischer Tatbestände und mit ihr die retrospektive Zuordnung von Verantwortung und Schuld sind, so wenig kann die historische Arbeit allein die Frage beantworten, die vor allem bei den

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Tausenden jugendlicher [...] Leser im Vordergrund zu stehen scheint: Was haben die Taten der Eltern und Großeltern mit mir zu tun? Mir scheint, daß wir uns der Denkanstöße, die poetische Texte geben können, zu wenig bewußt sind. [...] Kurz: Fakten sind Basis der Fiktion, und umgekehrt: Geschichten erhellen Geschichte (Mörchen 172).

It is precisely by concentrating on the private and personal aspects that literature can inch its way towards some of the major themes. Although approaching the topic of the Nazi past from a personal and psychological angle means that any conclusion is likely to be ambiguous, this is the inherent strength of this form of literary representation, as it allows a more differentiated and nuanced portrayal of the past. Berta disappears without a trace, and the final lines of Heidenreich's narrative suggest that she did not get to the bottom of her own, or her mother's, past. The search for origins and the legacy of the Lebensborn continue, and none of the texts above offer a resolution. Instead, they challenge the reader and present an opportunity for individual interpretation and reflection. In a sense, it is a move away from Vergangenheitsbewältigung and a step towards the perhaps more useful Vergangenheitsverarbeitung or Vergangenheitsbewahrung of the German past (Assmann and Frevert 140-147). In fact, it is the personal aspect that appears to achieve particular resonance with the third post-war generation, which elevates the significance and possibilities of literature in the future.<sup>25</sup> By its ability to elicit the question "what would I have done?", and by focusing on individual stories that have wider relevance, literature can take up an important function in Germany's ongoing coming-to-terms with its past by filling the gaps of the history books.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This figure excludes Norway. Testimonies from the Nuremberg trials suggest that another 6,000 children were born in Norway, but the reliability of this figure is disputed.

<sup>2</sup> See also the section on "Geheimhaltung" in Lilienthal 79-89.

<sup>3</sup> Sichrovsky 22-23. Notable exceptions are the articles by Rosenkötter and Simenauer.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Bar-On, 'The Legacy of Silence, or Moser, Politik und seelischer Untergrund.

<sup>5</sup> For Lilienthal's response, see Der "Lebensborn e.V." 11.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Benno Voelkner's *Die Schande* (1965) and Hans Hellmut Kirst's *Die Nächte der langen Messer* (1975).

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- <sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the author claims to rely heavily on documentation from the Nuremberg trials.
- <sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive overview of recent media interest, see Schmitz-Köster 15-23, or the postscript of the 2003 edition of Lilienthal 249-263.
- <sup>9</sup> The book was recently turned into the film *Sie ist meine Mutter* and shown on German television in February 2007 (ARD).
- <sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this article, Missfeldt's novel, which only mentions Lebensborn in passing, is of lesser interest and will be excluded from the analysis.
- <sup>11</sup> Examples of Väterliteratur include Bernhard Vesper's *Die Reise* (1977), Ruth Rehmann's *Der Mann auf der Kanzel* (1979), Christoph Mecke's *Suchbild* (1980), Peter Schneider's *Vati* (1987), Peter Härtling's *Nachgetragene Liebe* (1980) and Brigitte Schwaiger's *Lange Abwesenheit* (1980).
- <sup>12</sup> See Gerstenberger 236-237. Gerstenberger names, among others, Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* (1995) and Hans Ulrich Treichel's *Der Verlorene* (1998).
- <sup>13</sup> This is also a general development in recent literature focusing on the Third Reich: Marcel Beyer's *Spione* (2000), Tanja Dücker's *Himmelskörper* (2003), Stephan Wackwitz's *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2003), and Thomas Medicus's *In den Augen meines Großvaters* (2004) all deal with the transmission of wartime experiences across three generations.
- <sup>14</sup> Much of the literature features case studies, which would most likely be of particular interest to the authors. See for example Bar-On, Schmitz-Köster, Henry and Hillel, and Clay and Leapman.
- <sup>15</sup> Children born in Lebensborn homes were "christened" by the SS, thus automatically becoming members, and stood under the official legal guardianship of the SS. See for example Schmitz-Köster 208-209.
- <sup>16</sup> Hereafter page references will be given in the text preceded by the letters DF and DJ respectively.
- <sup>17</sup> This reference to the history of creation in the bible, 'Am Anfang war das Wort', can be seen as an intimation of paradisiacal times, which were spoilt through sin, thus drawing a parallel between the fall of man and Berta's mother's action, or the Nazi era in general.
- <sup>18</sup> The feeling of guilt by association is common among the children of perpetrators and frequently comes up in case studies. See for example Sichrovsky 50; Bar-On 62; Eckstaedt 86; or Jaspers 70-71. It has been suggested that, in a macabre continuation of National Socialist ideology, this could be seen to mirror the Nazi practice of "Sippenhaftung." See von Westernhagen 138.
- <sup>19</sup> The experience of "victim envy" is not uncommon among Täterkinder. See for example Moser 43-44; or Hardtmann 241-242. For a discussion of this phenomenon in literature, see Taberner 159-177.
- <sup>20</sup> See for example the Mitscherlich study or, for a more differentiated approach, Assmann and Frevert 19-150.
- <sup>21</sup> Examples include Ulla Hahn's *Unscharfe Bilder* (2003), Uwe Timm's *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003), or Thomas Medicus's *In den Augen meines Großvaters* (2004).
- <sup>22</sup> Examples here would include Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Der Verlorene* (1998) or Walter Kempowski's *Alles umsonst* (2006).
- <sup>23</sup> See for example Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall, *Opa war kein Nazi*.
- <sup>24</sup> Psychologists agree that open dialogue and the concomitant "working-through process" are necessary for second and third generations to be able to productively approach their parents' or grandparents' past, handle the conflicting emotions, integrate these into their own "moral self" and stop the transmission of trauma. See for example Rothschild 53.
- <sup>25</sup> This was evident, for example, in the third generation's reaction to the "Crimes of the Wehrmacht" exhibition in 1995. See Niven 159-160.
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