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Amy Kepple Strawser

Otterbein University, [astrawser@otterbein.edu](mailto:astrawser@otterbein.edu)

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## Charlotte Elisabeth Grace Roche: *Feuchtgebiete* [Wetlands]

(2008)

- [Amy Kepple Strawser \(Otterbein University\)](#)

Genre: Erotic, Novel. Country: Germany.

*Feuchtgebiete* [Wetlands, 2008], the first novel by Charlotte Roche, chronicles the thoughts, memories, and experiences of the first-person narrator Helen Memel, hospitalized due to an infected anal lesion resulting from a shaving mishap. Helen, an 18-year-old secondary school student, expresses her musings over her sexually active youth and makes obvious her obsession with the human body in all manner of shapes and forms: she prefers natural secretions to hygiene and any sex—be it masturbation under her hospital bed, with a female prostitute, or any available young man—to no sex at all. Her story is told in a straightforward, colloquial style, very matter-of-factly, as if all of us ate our own scabs (or worse) without thinking twice about it. The tone of the narrative is frequently satiric when levelled at older adults yet non-reflective toward Helen's own thoughts and actions. She is bored while laid up in the hospital bed for an extended stay and occupies her time sprouting avocado pits and plotting to bring her divorced parents back together. The novel delivers an extended account of her pondering of the present as well as past events, of sexual encounters and bodily functions that fascinate and preoccupy Helen, who has very limited contact with the outside world in the hospital setting. The brief and infrequent visits by her immediate family—mother, father, and brother—contribute to their seeming less than life-like as characters, more like two-dimensional cardboard figures, a fact which becomes significant at the end of the novel. She takes a liking to one staff member there, a male nurse named Robin, who is kind to her and with whom she is open about her injury and her past. Her story is narrated as a stream of consciousness that makes her seem isolated and vulnerable, despite usually trying to appear brazen, fearless, and gleefully unhygienic.

According to research on the characteristics of bestselling books, two distinct types emerge: those that are controversial in content and/or experimental in form whose apogee spikes high and early, compared with those which remain on the charts for weeks, months, or perhaps even years, marked by a nearly universal appeal to the reading public and a staying power that attests to their popularity and marketability over the long term. Charlotte Roche's *Feuchtgebiete* will almost certainly take its place among the former. Quickly garnering bestseller status in Germany and then causing a subsequent stir in the UK and US with its English translation, this book clearly exploited the dictum that any press is good press in terms of its PR value, since the novel's merits are limited in literary and aesthetic terms. A feminist manifesto it is not. At first consideration, one is tempted to make a comparison to the sensation caused in the 1970s in the German-speaking realm by Verena Stefan's *Häutungen* [Shedding, 1975], as on the surface this publication also focuses primarily and heavily on a woman's thoughts about and experiences with the female body, its sexuality and the main character's coming-of-age (if not coming-out—both figures are bisexual) tale. But the protagonist of *Wetlands* is a child-like bawdy character compared to the somber young woman of *Shedding*. Indeed, Roche has made clear

in interviews that she intended her novel to contain humor, and plenty of it. The dark humor of German children's classics such as the *Struwwelpeter* and *Max and Moritz* blends here perversely with the scatological and broad physical comedy of Britain's Monty Python, and, more recently, the outrageous antics of Sacha Baron Cohen's menagerie of TV and film figures Borat, Ali G, and Brüno. Perhaps this is an apt pairing considering the author's British birth and German upbringing. Yet because the details of the story related by Helen are extremely revolting, the average reader will fail to be amused—or titillated, for that matter. Mostly, the gross-out factor is so far-fetched and the extremes of Helen's fanaticism with bodily excretions so absurd that any sardonic comedy is completely overstated. Such blatant displays miss their mark because they are consistently over the top and repeated ad nauseam (literally).

Easier to comprehend is the parody, and complete turning on its head, of the distinctly German predilection for bodily cleanliness and personal hygiene, which may explain at least in part what has given rise to young female German readers claiming that the text and its purported "message" have had a liberating effect on them in relation to their bodies, another echo of the reception of *Häutungen* in the 1970s, albeit with a decidedly different spin. The book's popularity and best-seller status also echo in the conception and reception of the blog, book (2006) and film version of Tucker Max's *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* (2009), another controversial autobiographical tale of promiscuous exploits and disturbingly bad behavior, which, like *Wetlands*, was prominently featured in a *New York Times* (fall 2009) article. Of course, Max is male, American, and a law school graduate rather than a British-German female MTV vee-jay. As the double standard goes, young males, at least on the US side of the ocean, are expected and allowed to engage in such wild antics, especially during their college years. Roche's fictional character Helen—ostensibly a semi-autobiographical figure—is barely of the legal age of consent, female, living in Germany, still in secondary school, who experiments with people and practices which give the reader pause. She is also more of a self-absorbed, insecure teen neurotic than a mature young person, who lacks any developed capacity for critical thinking that would allow her to consider the reasons for or possible consequences of her self-inflicted physical pain: while in the hospital, she intentionally worsens her previous injury in a ploy to bring her parents back together.

Helen's seems to be a tale of rebellion: against rules of hygiene, against her mother's controlling nature, and—above all—against her parents' divorce. The sub-themes involving her parents clearly suggest two points: this individual may be fixated on her body due to parental neglect, and repressed experiences from her youth are beginning to emerge and are begging to be dealt with. Even more pronounced than her personal neediness for sexual gratification and physical contact with multiple partners, Helen dreams about and plots, fixates and fantasizes on the reunion of her parents. The outlandish nature of her bodily exploits stands in stark contrast to her emotional infantilism and desperate adolescent longing for restored familial harmony. A couple of startling subtexts, even more disturbing than the shock-value body stuff, surface which describe real or imagined—the narrator is not sure which—events involving drastic parental violence and cruelty within the home that complicate the simplistic, body-obsessed daily narrative of scabs, smegma, and anal lesions into an attempt at greater psychological depth. Roche only partially succeeds at this, as the ending of a romantic pairing with Helen's male nurse seems a forced positive resolution at best, and Helen's effort to exact some non-violent emotional revenge on her parents fails to provide sufficient narrative force to make this subtext plausible by novel's end.

As to the book's anti-feminist proclivity, despite a number of reviewers' and readers' claims to the contrary, Jessica Jernigan articulates this well:

Appraisal of Helen's promiscuity prompts a reconsideration of [...] cleanliness-obsessed women destroying their bodies' own natural barriers. Helen invites indiscriminate access to her orifices because there is no real difference between her own self and the world outside her. She has no inner resources—no real sense of her own personhood—to protect from the objectifying effect of excrescence. Helen does not respect her body: she fetishizes it, and a woman who compares herself

favorably to a blow-up doll and a garbage disposal is not a woman to emulate. Indeed, she's not a woman at all: she's a receptacle. (Jernigan, 2009)

Jernigan's analysis sums up the most unsettling thoughts and feelings which arise during the reading of *Feuchtgebiete*: it is not Helen's indiscriminate openness toward her body and multiple partners, a throwback to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, or even the scatological baseness of her actions and musings—such was the stuff, albeit from a male perspective and in milder form, of Baroque parodies such as *Herr Peter Squenz* as far back as the seventeenth Century. It's the fact that the protagonist does not value herself as an individual and lacks the resources, the intellect and even the motivation to grow as a person, and the author's lack of interest in developing her further or more fully as a character, that remains the perturbing undercurrent of this contentious debut novel by Charlotte Roche.

### **Suggested further reading and texts cited:**

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