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## Helga Novak (1935-)

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## Helga Novak (1935-)

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

Novelist; Poet.

Active 1963- in Germany; Iceland; Poland

Helga M. Novak was born 8 September 1935 in Berlin-Köpenick as Maria Karlsdottir. She was adopted and raised by parents who disapproved of her joining the FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend [Free German Youth]) of the new socialist German Democratic Republic. Novak attended boarding school and studied journalism and philosophy at the University of Leipzig. She held various assembly and technical jobs at that time and later in Iceland, where she moved in 1961 upon her marriage to an Icelander. Together they had two children and later divorced. Novak today remains a citizen of Iceland.

In 1965, she returned to the GDR to continue her studies at the Johannes R. Becher Literature Institute in Leipzig. In this year she also published her first volume of poetry in Germany, *Ballade von der reisenden Anna* [*Ballad of the Travelling Anna*]. Due to the politically critical nature of her verse, Novak was expatriated by the East German government in 1966 and compelled to find residence first in Iceland again, then in the Federal Republic of Germany. She lived in Frankfurt am Main for many years. She has also lived in Portugal and the former Yugoslavia. Currently she resides in Poland.

Another East German artist was exiled ten years later, Novak's compatriot, the singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann, whose expulsion from the East created an outrage amongst his fellow writers in the GDR. They signed a petition appealing to the state to reconsider its decision. (This was a very bold and risky move politically and professionally for those who signed: Christa Wolf, Sarah Kirsch, Volker Braun, Franz Fühmann, Stephan Hermlin, Stefan Heym, Günter Kunert, Heiner Müller, Rolf Schneider, Gerhard Wolf, Jurek Becker, Erich Arendt and Fritz Cremer.) It is intriguing to consider the reasons why Novak's banishment did not cause such a stir in the creative and intellectual community in East Germany during the 1960s. Perhaps the zeitgeist of the 1970s made the Biermann situation ripe for voicing disagreement with the regime. In the 1960s, Novak's exile may have been deemed less scandalous since it occurred at the beginning of her writing career, and as a result she was considerably less well-known. In any case, their parallel situations are a curious reminder of the peculiar and unique working conditions for writers in a divided country during those decades, and the risks run by those who chose to deviate from the approved doctrine and artistic requirements of the GDR.

Novak's recent years living in the forests of Poland may have precipitated for her a similar difficulty. Her request for a residency permit in the district of Leipzig was rejected in 2004, an apparently injudicious decision against one of Germany's best lyricists that has attracted the attention of critics and journalists in such prominent German and German-language newspapers as *Die Zeit*, *Die Welt*, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Now it

seems that Novak's plight is at last provoking the same outrage that greeted the news of Biermann's exile, and one can hope that soon the poet will again be able to reside in any area of her native Germany that she chooses. The title of Novak's latest collection of poetry, *wo ich jetzt bin* [*where I am now*], which appeared in March 2005 in honor of her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday on 8 September 2005, may well highlight the dilemma of the author's place of domicile.

A balladeer par excellence, Novak has published many poems in this form which often deal with the violent fate of society's outcasts and the downtrodden, both in Germany and abroad. Her most notable lyric pieces include "Ballade vom Legionär" ["Ballad of the Legionnaire"], "Ballade von der Türkin Nigar" ["Ballad of the Turkish Woman Nigar"], "Tragoballade vom Spitzel Winfried Schütze in platten Reimen" [Tragi-Ballad of the Snitch Winfried Schütze in Flat Rhymes], "Margarete mit dem Schrank" ["Margaret with the Cabinet"] and many others. This latter poem, emblematic of her personal situation as a displaced writer and citizen, comes from a collection of the same name of 1978:

ich bin Margarete mit dem Schrank  
den trage ich auf dem Kopf und gehe  
von Dorf zu Dorf auf meiner Wanderung  
...es ist auch gar keine Kunst  
einen Schrank auf dem Kopf zu balancieren  
...sie lachen mich mächtig aus  
aber niemand fragt—Margarete  
was ist eigentlich in dem Schrank

[I am Margaret with the cabinet  
that I carry on my head and wander  
from village to village on my journey  
...it is also no trick at all  
to balance a cabinet on my head  
...they laugh wholeheartedly at me  
but no one asks—Margaret  
what actually is in the cabinet]

The cabinet can be interpreted as the narrator's psychic alienation and nomadic existence as a wandering outsider. Alternately, it could stand for the title character's internalized *Beziehungskiste* ("relationship baggage") with the absent lover who may be imaginary or who may have abandoned her—maybe a metaphor for Novak's lost relationship with the GDR.

Novak's more recent work in the volume *Silvatica* (1997) focuses on nature imagery and love poems. In 1999, Novak's collected poetry appeared under the title *Solange noch Liebesbriefe eintreffen* [*As Long as Love Letters Still Arrive*], which contains many previously unpublished poems and is over 750 pages long. Her lyric output has been incredible in volume and insightful in vision.

Although primarily a poet, Novak has been most discussed and lauded as the author of two autobiographical novels, *Die Eisheiligen* [*The Icemen*, 1969] and *Vogel federlos* [*Featherless Bird*, 1972]. The books chronicle the childhood and adolescence of a girl during the Second World War and the early years of the German Democratic Republic. The problematic relationship of the child with her abusive mother, Kaltesophie, has attracted much attention among critics. Novak has published several other works of prose, including: *Geselliges Beisammensein* [*Festive Get-Together*, 1968]; *Wohnhaft in Westend* [*Resident of the West End*, 1970]; her collected stories in *Aufenthalt in einem irren Haus* [*Stay in a Crazy House*, 1971]; and *Die Landnahme von Torra Bela* [*Seizure of Land in Torra Bela*, 1976].

Helga M. Novak is a German writer of stature whose work has earned numerous literary prizes, yet her writing has not yet garnered the attention and recognition it deserves. Certainly her life is one of the most interesting of any German-speaking author today, as is her poetry.

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