

## Der Frauenkrimi: Women's Crime Writing in German

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### Abstract:

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the shelves of German bookstores began to fill up with a popular new subgenre of crime novel written by, about and for women: it was aptly dubbed the *Frauenkrimi* (women's crime novel). The robust male investigators and culprits of yore took feminine forms in stories that contest social inequality and celebrate new constructions of gender and sexuality. In contrast with the female characters who often occupy the more passive roles of victims and witnesses in earlier crime stories, the active women driving *Frauenkrimi* narratives lead investigations, solve murders, avenge injustices, and plot and commit gruesome crimes themselves. They sometimes work alone and sometimes in collaboration with male or female partners, and they engage in flirtations and relationships with men or women or occasionally both. At the time of their appearance, *Frauenkrimis* by writers such as Christine Grän, Doris Gercke, Edith Kneifl and Ingrid Noll challenged established notions about who could write successful crime stories, what female characters could do in mysteries and which social issues these novels could address. This subgenre, which has arguably become a genre in its own right, brings new perspectives to the representation of gender and sexuality in popular fiction.

**Keywords:** German | crime writers | feminist crime novels

### Article:

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the shelves of German bookstores began to fill up with a popular new subgenre of crime novel written by, about and for women: it was aptly dubbed the *Frauenkrimi* (women's crime novel).<sup>1</sup> The robust male investigators and culprits of yore took feminine forms in stories that contest social inequality and celebrate new constructions of gender

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<sup>1</sup> *Frauenkrimi* translates literally as 'women's crime novel', but is also often understood as 'feminist crime novel'. Definitions of the term lay greater or lesser emphasis on the gender identities of the writer, subject and intended audience, as well as on the texts' politics. See Nicola Barfoot, *Frauenkrimipolar fëminin: Generic Expectations and the Reception of Recent French and German Crime Novels by Women* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2007) and chapters by Sabine Deitmer ('Anna, Bella & Co.: Der Erfolg der deutschen Krimifrauen', pp. 239–53) and Sabine Wilke ('Wilde Weiber und dominante Damen: Der Frauenkrimi als Verhandlungsort von Weiblichkeitsmythen', pp. 255–71) in the anthology by Carmen Birkle, Sabina Matter-Seibe and Patricia Plummer (eds), *Frauen auf der Spur: Kriminalautorinnen aus Deutschland. Großbritannien und den USA* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2001).

and sexuality. In contrast with the female characters who often occupy the more passive roles of victims and witnesses in earlier crime stories, the active women driving *Frauenkrimi* narratives lead investigations, solve murders, avenge injustices, and plot and commit gruesome crimes themselves. They sometimes work alone and sometimes in collaboration with male or female partners, and they engage in flirtations and relationships with men or women or occasionally both. At the time of their appearance, *Frauenkrimis* by writers such as Christine Grän, Doris Gercke, Edith Kneifl and Ingrid Noll challenged established notions about who could write successful crime stories, what female characters could do in mysteries and which social issues these novels could address. This subgenre, which has arguably become a genre in its own right, brings new perspectives to the representation of gender and sexuality in popular fiction.

The birth and instantaneous popularity of feminist crime novels by women is evidence of a paradigm shift in the late twentieth century, both in Germany and beyond. This literary trend was inspired in part by Anglo-American feminist mystery writers - including Marcia Muller, Katherine V. Forrest, Sara Paretsky, Sarah Dreher, Marion Foster, Val McDermid and Sue Grafton – whose work was not only successful with English-speaking readers, but also quickly appeared in German translations that attracted devoted audiences. Though *Frauenkrimis* participate in such cross-cultural trends, they additionally document and respond to specific social conditions and changes in and around the German-speaking world, bearing witness to a postmodern scepticism towards accepted ideas of nation, culture and identity. Political shifts leftward since the 1960s, threats of terrorist violence in the 1970s and the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification in 1989 and 1990 brought about a growing mistrust of political ideologies and overarching claims to greater truths. The move away from a national individualism and towards European integration produced increasingly transnational notions of ethnicity, citizenship and language, together with a backlash in the form of racist and neo-fascist violence. The legacies of the anti-establishment 1968 generation gave rise to a flourishing left-leaning, do-it-yourself popular culture and the proliferation of politically engaged cultural studies methodologies, feminist theory and queer approaches in the academy. From the mid-1970s onward, the women's and gay rights movements shifted greater attention to social divisions and inequalities and the institutions that uphold and police them. This historical context created fecund conditions for the mainstream production and reception, beginning in the 1980s, of overtly political, female-centred narratives that broke with generic traditions and tried out new forms of expression.

### **Literary and publishing contexts**

When considering the large number of women crime writers who began to publish in the late twentieth century, one might be tempted to ask: how can we explain the previous dearth of female crime authors? Scholars cite a number of reasons. Feminist critics point out that not only is the crime genre largely a male-dominated literary tradition – both in terms of its authors' identities and in the gendered representations it projects – but that the search for truth and the desire to reestablish social order at the heart of the genre are inherently patriarchal endeavours.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For discussions of gender dynamics in the crime fiction genre, see the following critical texts: Gabriele Dietze, *Hardboiled Woman: Geschlechterkrieg im amerikanischen Kriminalroman* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1997); Teresa L. Ebert, 'Ermittlung des Phallus. Autorität, Ideologie und die Produktion patriarchaler Agenten im Kriminalroman', in Jochen Vogt (ed.), *Der Kriminalroman: Poetik – Theorie – Geschichte* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink,

It should therefore come as no surprise that the conventional portrayal of the detective is male-embodied, and also that the feminine is often aligned not with the solution but rather with the problem of the crime. A number of scholars examine the connections between gender and genre, pointing out that women authors, particularly those whose work offers strong female figures, have done more than simply change the gender of the traditional detective and rewrite the narratives with a focus on women: they have additionally emancipated their texts from male-centred language and logic in order to empower their feminine protagonists and antagonists.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, as chapter 2 of this volume demonstrates, women like Auguste Groner had already been publishing crime stories in German since the nineteenth century, although their contributions often went unrecognized or received less publicity than male-authored texts. Indeed, women's writing has traditionally been undervalued and, until recent decades, it has all too often been dismissed as either exclusively addressing women's concerns and therefore uninteresting to mainstream readers, or as merely autobiographical and not of wider social significance.

The connections between German crime fiction and female writers can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth-century literature of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. A landmark text, Droste-Hülshoff's novella *Die Judenbuche* (*The Jew's Beech*, 1842) can be regarded as an early German murder mystery, narrating the background, discovery and investigation of the unexplained killing of a Jewish merchant in a Westfalian village. The novella contains a study of the cultural milieu of a late eighteenth-century society with an unruly populace and ineffectual justice system around the time of the French Revolution. *Die Judenbuche* emphasizes the significance of gender and ethnic identities – particularly in its portrayals of bigotry, anti-Semitism, oppression and abuse – in the social context of violent crimes. However, Droste-Hülshoff's text remains unmentioned in some histories of the genre, perhaps because its author was female, or perhaps because the police detective plays a minor role and the mystery remains unsolved, therefore troubling a categorization of the text as crime fiction.

From the 1920s onwards, mystery fiction flourished in Britain and the United States with the emergence of the 'cosy' and 'hardboiled' crime subgenres, elements of which are later taken up by *Frauenkrimi* authors. The British cosy, popularized by Golden Age writers such as Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Josephine Tey, typically has an amateur sleuth, a limited number of characters and an insular social setting where the characters have shared histories and everyone is a suspect. The trailblazing Agatha Christie created a female series heroine, Miss Marple, a nosy spinster who solves mysteries confounding local police through her intellect and shrewd eye for detail. Following in Miss Marple's footsteps are amateur *Frauenkrimi* detectives who investigate murders in small communities, sometimes while vacationing in the countryside or travelling abroad. Like cosies, many German *Frauenkrimis* use humour and thematize guilt and complicity, but contain more sex and violence than their gentler British predecessors.

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1998), pp. 461-85; and Kathleen Gregory Klein, *Women Times Three: Writers, Detectives, Readers* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> See Anja Kemmerzell, 'Was ist ein Frauenkrimi?', *Ariadne Forum*, 4 (1996), 5-6, and 'Über die Rezeption von Frauenkrimis', *Ariadne Forum*, 5 (1997/8), 128-9; and also Sally R. Munt, *Murder By the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel* (London: Routledge, 1994).

In the United States, writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler popularized hardboiled or *noir* fiction, which usually features a private detective investigating a large number of characters in a gritty urban lower- or middle-class setting where masculinity, brutality and humanity's dark sides take centre stage. Like their hardboiled ancestors, *Frauenkrimis* often highlight violence and protagonists with marginal social status who confront – but are sometimes unable to eradicate – decadence and depravity. Their robust detectives are sexually active, drink heavily and can be volatile. Unlike the hardboiled novel, however, *Frauenkrimis* rewrite gender dynamics by redistributing narrative power positions and destabilizing sexualized notions of women as submissive, threatening or merely confounding. Thus, German women writers like Doris Gercke in *Weinschröter, du mußt hängen* (*How Many Miles to Babylon*, 1988) depict gruesome crimes in quaint, small towns or pastoral idylls reminiscent of the settings of British cosies, or, like Pieke Biermann in *Potsdamer Ableben* (*Potsdam Demise*, 1987), conjure violent urban environments navigated by tough and defiant detectives like those of American hardboiled classics. Gercke and Biermann became two of the first and best-known representatives of the feminist *Frauenkrimi* wave, but it is important to note that this wave was in fact preceded by several pioneering German women writers whose work prior to the 1980s showed greater continuity with male-centred traditions of crime writing.

From the 1950s on, female authors participated increasingly in the production of German-language mysteries. Three successful early women writers of crime fiction were Alexandra Becker, Irene Rodrian and Ingeburg Siebenstädt, who published stories with male perpetrators and investigators, worked with male co-authors and published under male pseudonyms. Together with her husband Rolf, Becker authored two series of short crime plays adapted for radio, *Dickie Dick Dickens* (Fatty Dick Dickens) and *Gestatten, mein Name ist Cox* (Greetings, My Name is Cox), beginning in the 1950s. Set in 1920s Chicago and contemporary London, the Beckers' series evoke the conventions of Anglo-American crime fiction, particularly *noir* and the hardboiled, with their incisive, satirical depictions of gangsters, anarchy and the struggles of police and private detectives to stop violent crime and maintain order. Irene Rodrian's debut *Tod in St. Pauli* (*Death in St. Pauli*, 1967), a gritty vengeance story starring a freshly released convict, made her the first woman to be awarded the prestigious Edgar Wallace Prize. Rodrian was also the first female thriller writer to gain success and recognition in the mainstream literary market, and she went on to publish over twenty more crime novels, including several mysteries with pronounced feminist themes. Like Rodrian, East German author Ingeburg Siebenstädt was extremely prolific. Beginning with *Der Überfall* (*The Assault*, 1967), she published dozens of mysteries during and after German division under the pseudonym of Tom Wiltgen. With her cosy, insular social settings and interest in the lives of everyday working people, Siebenstädt gained a reputation as the 'Agatha Christie of the GDR' and, in 1994, was awarded the *Ehren-Glauser* (Honorary Glauser) by the German crime writers' association *Das Syndikat* (The Syndicate) for lifetime achievement. Many of the early novels by these trailblazing women did not, however, engage consistently with feminist themes.

The advent of the *Frauenkrimi* in the 1980s and 1990s was the culmination of other literary trends and developments both in and beyond German-speaking Europe. Particularly in West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a cultural tendency to portray crime not as an occasional deviation from social norms perpetrated by a few aberrant individuals, but rather as a fundamental societal problem engendered by institutionalized structural injustice, the roots of

which could be traced to imperialism, colonialism, fascism and their legacies. With its relentless critique of power relations in post-war German society, the left-wing *Soziokrimi* (social crime story) – also known as the *Politkrimi* (political crime story) or *Neuer Deutscher Krimi* (new German crime story) – can be viewed as a predecessor of the *Frauenkrimi*. Feminist crime also participates in the anti-fascist and liberation discourses of the post-1968 era, interrogating inequalities in connection with social hierarchies and social expectations. In the wake of these movements, the 1980s witnessed a major change in the visibility of women crime writers and the politics of the texts they were writing. The clever and sometimes sarcastic titles of early feminist mysteries by Lydia Tews, Helga Riedel, Susanne Thommes, Claudia Wessel and Rodrian communicate their authors' commitment to reexamining traditional gender roles and offering compelling female characters. Tews's first crime novels, *Sie sind ein schlechter Bulle, gnädige Frau* (You're a Bad Cop, Ma'am, 1982) and *Leichen brauchen kein Make-up* (Corpses Don't Need Makeup, 1984), appeared around the same time as Riedel's *Einer muss tot* (Someone Must Die, 1983), Thommes's *Altweibersommer* (Old Women's Summer, 1984) and the lesser-known Wessel's self-published *Es wird Zeit* (It's about Time, 1984). Rodrian increasingly addressed feminist concerns in her psychosocial mysteries, from *Külsschen für den Totengrüber* (Kiss for the Gravedigger, 1974; see chapter 1) to *Schlagschatten* (Sharp Relief, 1983) and *Das Mädchen mit dem Engels Gesicht* (The Girl with the Angel Face, 1986).

The feminist *Frauenkrimi* was thus born in West Germany and Austria in the mid- to late 1980s, with the near-simultaneous appearance of several novels that not only offered female heroines who fought against sexism, but also celebrated left-leaning political strategies that aimed for social justice and espoused antiestablishment, anti-racist and anti-imperialist perspectives. The *Frauenkrimi* wave began around 1986, a year that saw the publication of Austrian author Christine Gran's debut *Weißer sterben selten in Samyana* (Whites Seldom Die in Samyana) and West German activist Corinna Kawaters's second mystery, *Zora Zobel zieht um* (Zora Zobel Moves In). Gran's journalist heroine Anna Marx has her first crime-solving adventure in Samyana, a fictitious country in southern Africa, where she investigates colonial legacies of white Eurocentrism and racism against black Africans (see also chapter 5). The overweight gossip columnist Anna Marx went on to become a cult figure, starring in several more volumes, including *Marx ist tot* (Marx is Dead, 1993), which won the esteemed Marlowe Prize awarded by the German Raymond Chandler Society. Appearing in the same year as Gran's debut was the second instalment in Kawaters's left-wing series featuring the autonomous rebel Zora Zobel, named in honour of the militant feminist group *Rote Zora* (Red Zora), in which author Kawaters was active, and which took credit for multiple terrorist attacks against sex shops, pharmaceutical companies and state institutions from the 1970s to the 1990s. *Zora Zobel zieht um* is the sequel to the feminist-inflected crime novel *Zora Zobel findet die Leiche* (Zora Zobel Finds the Body, 1984), but the second book is noteworthy because it bears the subtitle *Frauenkrimi*, has an almost exclusively female cast (with the exception of a male murder victim) and heralds feminist collaboration. Biermann's 1987 *Potsdamer Ableben* was also the first in a series and, like Gercke's 1988 debut *Weinschröter, du mußt hängen*, depicts female police officers as positive role models working in law enforcement to protect female and child victims of abuse and sexual violence. Biermann's *Potsdamer Ableben* features a diverse squad of Berlin homicide officers under the leadership of Chief Inspector Karin Lietze: her police team includes male, female, heterosexual and homosexual officers, as well as a Jewish secretary, who cooperate to defend the weakest members of society. While Biermann's novels, with their rotating narrative perspective,

consistently heroicize the police force as a model of coalitional justice, Gercke's first book concludes with detective Bella Block's resignation from the police department, which she rejects due to the rampant sexism she perceives among her colleagues, as shown in the extract at the end of this chapter. Later instalments in Gercke's 'Block' series depict the protagonist working as a private detective.<sup>4</sup>

Another trend in this feminist mystery wave was the psychological crime thriller, which women writers adapted by narrating the background and commission of crime from the point of view of a female perpetrator. The *Frauenkrimi* thus takes up an existing trend in German crime literature, the casting of the main character in a career outside law enforcement or detective work, and combines it with an investigation of the social and psychological conditions that produce scenarios of violence and vengeance. Early examples of this variant include Sabine Deitmer's short story collections *Bye-bye, Bruno* (1988) and *Auch brave Mädchen tun's* (Even Good Girls Do It, 1990), Ingrid Noll's *Der Hahn ist tot* (*Hell Hath No Fury*, 1991), and works by Austrian writers such as Edith Kneifl's *Zwischen zwei Nächten* (Between Two Nights, 1991) and Elfriede Czurda's *Die Giftmörderinnen* (The Poison Murderesses, 1991). These authors share an interest in exploring women's motives for committing murder and other transgressions, often against male victims. At the same time, they investigate the social contexts in which criminality unfolds, stressing the institutionalization of bigotry and misogyny and thereby suggestively hinting that their fictional women's wrongdoings are logical – if not justifiable or defensible – reactions to the oppression and abuse they have suffered in late twentieth-century society. For instance, Deitmer's *Bye-bye, Bruno*, which bears the evocative subtitle *Wie Frauen morden* (How Women Murder), is a collection of fifteen stories about murderesses who creatively and often gruesomely do away with the men in their lives. These male victims are quite unsympathetic: because they pose obstacles to the women's independence and freedom, they seem entirely deserving of the bloody ends they meet, and the reader can easily imagine that the world would be better off without them. Healthy doses of humour and satire permeate these texts. A number of perpetrator crime novels, like Kneifl's *Zwischen zwei Nächten*, also stress the experiences of women who love other women or are coming out as bisexual or lesbian. These queer crime stories link representations of such characters with broader critiques of patriarchal order, domestic violence and the limitations of the law in defending the vulnerable citizens who most need its protection.

Scholars and critics note that, with the advent of women's crime writing as a mainstream phenomenon in the late twentieth century, visible changes rapidly took place in the literary scene. In her book on German and French crime novels by women, Nicola Barfoot identifies a clear shift during this era: 'The late 1980s saw a major change in the quantity and type of attention being paid to women writers in Germany, with gender suddenly becoming a significant issue in the publication and reception of the crime novel.'<sup>5</sup> Barfoot sees this trend as both international in scope and having distinctly German dynamics: as her comparative analysis suggests by placing German feminist crime novels of the 1990s side by side with contemporary French works, there were shared and diverging currents between the two literary traditions. A 1989 article called 'Marlowes Töchter' (Marlowe's Daughters) in the news magazine *Der Spiegel*

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<sup>4</sup> The 'Bella Block' novels were also adapted into a successful, long-running crime television series that aired on ZDF, but there are significant differences between Gercke's Block and the television character: the latter returns to the police force.

<sup>5</sup> Barfoot, *Frauenkrimipolar féminin*, p. 72.

also notes this change in the domestic market, brought about by 'a host of female detectives who are competing with the conventional, punchy and acerbic-masculine professional sleuths in crime novels of late'.<sup>6</sup> The *Spiegel* article treats English- and German-language texts as part of the same phenomenon, discussing the American Sara Paretsky alongside the German Gercke and the Austrian Grän, though it does suggest that the former preceded and probably influenced the development of the latter.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the successful feminist crime novels of Anglo-American women like Paretsky and her contemporaries, including Sue Grafton, Katherine V. Forrest and Barbara Sjöholm Wilson, played a critical role in inspiring the German-language *Frauenkrimi*.<sup>7</sup> Translations of mysteries by these popular English-speaking authors appeared with German publishers like Rowohlt and Argument, found a rapidly growing European readership and stimulated the development of home-grown variants of the genre. In addition to introducing English writers to German readers, Rowohlt and Argument – together with mainstream publishers like Fischer and women's publishers like Orlanda and Frauenoffensive – also participated in the evolution of the *Frauenkrimi* from a trend into a genre of its own with the dissemination of feminist, lesbian and socially critical texts. Rowohlt was an early promoter of crime novels by successful authors like Rodrian, Gran and their contemporaries Susanne Billig, Uta-Maria Heim and Christine Lehmann. Rowohlt also brought out Biermann's feminist short story crime collection, *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode: oder: Die Aufklärung ist weiblich!* (With Wrath, Charm and Method: or: Enlightenment is Feminine!, 1992), which features feminist crime stories by authors from East and West Germany as well as Austria and Switzerland.<sup>8</sup> Argument contributed to the development and popularization of the genre with the 1988 creation of *Ariadne*, a series dedicated exclusively to feminist crime novels by female authors. Although *Ariadne*'s first volumes were primarily translations from English, today the series emphasizes German-language novels by contemporary authors such as Merle Kröger, Monika Geier and Anne Goldmann, in addition to the aforementioned Lehmann, whose first three feminist mysteries originally appeared with Rowohlt in the late 1990s and were republished by *Ariadne* in the 2000s.

In addition to these developments in the publishing industry, the establishment of professional organizations also helped to nurture and promote the work of female mystery authors. The model for this was 'Sisters in Crime', founded in 1987 in the United States by Paretsky and other Anglo-American writers to combat sexism in the crime genre and in the profession through networking, publicity, collaboration and mutual support. *Mörderische Schwestern* (Murderous Sisters), originally founded in 1996 as the German branch of 'Sisters in Crime', has been an independent

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<sup>6</sup> 'einer Schar weiblicher Detektive, die in Kriminalromanen neuerdings den hergebrachten, schlagkräftigen und herbmännlichen Profischnüfflern Konkurrenz machen'. 'Marlowe, Töchter', *Der Spiegel*, 1 (1989), 148–50 (148).

<sup>7</sup> Many scholars date Anglo-American feminist crime as an identifiable trend to the early 1980s, with the detective series debuts of Sue Grafton (*A' is for Alibi*, 1982) and Sara Paretsky (*Indemnity Only*, 1982). Two of the earliest lesbian sleuths were born in the writing of Barbara Sjöholm Wilson (*Murder in the Collective*, 1984) and Katherine V. Forrest (*Amateur City*, 1984). Other popular feminist and lesbian crime fiction authors of the era whose work appeared in German translation include Marian Foster, Sarah Schulman and Val McDermid.

<sup>8</sup> Biermann's anthology includes prominent authors such as the (West) German Sabine Deitmer and the Austrian Edith Kneifl, in addition to the Austrian Helga Anderle; the Swiss Milena Moser; and Germans from the West, such as Birgit Rabisch and Elke zur Neiden; as well as from the East, such as Bärbel Balke, Barbara Neuhaus and Gudrun Kusel.

group based in German-speaking and European nations since 2007. The group, which promotes women's mysteries by organizing writing workshops and facilitating exposure to professional investigations, has regional branches in Germany, Austria and Switzerland; sister organizations in France, Spain and Great Britain; and alliances with non-gender-specific groups for German-language crime writers, like *Das Syndikat*, founded in 1986. Due in large part to the work of the *Mörderische Schwestern* and their allies, the twenty-first century has seen the creation of a hotly debated *Frauenkrimipreis* (Women's Crime Prize) and yearly *Frauenkrimifestivals* (women's crime festivals), which have contributed to the unprecedented availability and recognition of women's mystery fiction.

### **Social and political contexts**

The *Frauenkrimi* engages intertwined cross-cultural discourses and flows, locating feminist concerns in distinctively Germanic contexts. It comments on the gendering of power and violence in the law, the state and the media, and it imagines ways in which social transformation and political change can be brought about through coalitional activism and feminist-lesbian-queer solidarity. Embedded within the *Frauenkrimi*'s negotiation of misogyny and heteronormativity, one also finds an analysis of the histories, geographies and cultural traditions of contemporary German-speaking nations.

German-language women's crime writing provides literary evidence of the wide-ranging changes in both Germany and Austria that have transformed perceptions and representations of women, gender roles and sexual minorities in the last half century. As one might assume from the name, *Frauenkrimis* spotlight gender and sexuality, but they also cast a critical eye on other facets of modern life by analysing identity constructions within larger contexts. The genre thus performs literary interventions into contemporary discourses and debates. *Frauenkrimis* develop feminist critiques of local and national politics, capitalism and socialism, globalization, mass media and the arts, and ideas about identity and belonging. The genre's focus on women is visible in the crimes it typically features, which highlight violence and injustices inflected by gender and sexuality, such as rape, domestic abuse, hate crimes and institutionalized sexism. But beyond its interests in challenging gender discrimination and empowering women, the *Frauenkrimi* is also centrally concerned with exploring the rights of and protection for children, minorities and other marginalized groups. Many of its authors have a history of political engagement and activism: for instance, Kawaters was indicted for her involvement in terrorist attacks with the feminist group *Rote Zora*, Biermann served as a mouthpiece for the prostitute rights movement and Kneifl worked with an inter-ministerial task force on women's affairs. The protagonists in their works come from a range of sociocultural backgrounds – they are unemployed rebels and radical feminists, police officers and prostitutes, small-town housewives and globetrotting students, wealthy architects and bohemian artists – and build coalitional alliances in order to address the injustices they witness. They offer insights into social problems and visions of social transformation, developing theories of effective individual and political action.

Although German-language crime fiction is often described as a Western phenomenon – that is, it did not come about as a well-defined genre in the GDR for a variety of reasons – the political atmosphere in its socialist counterpart certainly affected social developments and cultural forms in West Germany. East German women were theoretically equals in the socialist state, where



they were encouraged to be active in the workforce and had access to abortions and childcare. However, in reality, women still largely did 'women's work' both in public and in private. Their career options were typically limited to traditionally feminine professions like teaching and secretarial work; it was possible, but uncommon, to find a female police officer or inspector (the GDR television series *Polizeiruf 110* (Police: Dial 110) was groundbreaking in featuring a female police detective in the 1970s, Lieutenant Vera Arndt – see chapter 8). And, while women were increasingly working outside the home, they were still performing the majority of domestic duties, a phenomenon often referred to as the *Doppelbelastung* (double burdening) of women. Although, perhaps due to censorship, East German authors made fewer significant contributions than Western writers to the early development of women's mystery writing and the feminist *Frauenkrimi*, their political situation appears in both East and West German narratives critiquing sexism in the socialist state. For example, in the short story 'Frantiček' (1992), GDR author Barbara Neuhaus reflects on the gender discrimination that a female East German police officer tolerates in order to succeed and advance her career. Neuhaus follows in the footsteps of the socialist feminist Christa Wolf who, in stories like 'Selbstversuch' (Self-Experiment, 1973), examined the obstacles facing women who attempted to gain equal footing to men in the socialist state and its workforce. Another feminist crime writer from the GDR is Dagmar Scharsich, whose debut *Die gefrorene Charlotte* (The Frozen Charlotte Doll, 1993) spins a tale of border-crossing and conspiracy in divided Berlin, highlighting the experiences of and limitations faced by straight and gay East German women during the collapse of the Iron Curtain. In West German texts such as Biermann's *Potsdamer Ableben* and its sequels *Violetta* (*Violetta*, 1990) and *Herzrasen* (Racing Heart, 1993), readers also find representations of women in the Eastern Bloc before and after the fall of the Wall: Biermann's series follows activists in a West Berlin prostitute rights group, who declare solidarity and work together with their counterparts in Eastern Europe to gain recognition, protection, respect and independence.

On the other side of the divided German-speaking world, the left-wing 1968 student movement and the sexual revolution of the 1970s encouraged women to pursue college educations, careers and financial independence. This was slower to happen in socially conservative Austria than in West Germany, where sexism and misogyny were longer lived, as we see in Kneifl's representation of the specifically Austrian dynamics of gender-based oppression in *Zwischen zwei Nächten* and many of her later novels. Kneifl's works are reminiscent of the writing of Austrian feminists Ingeborg Bachmann and Elfriede Jelinek, who criticize the subtle manifestations of everyday gendered violence in late twentieth-century Austria (see chapter 3). Two other successful Austrian crime writers, Lisa Lercher and Angelika Aliti, also position strong women as investigators of social injustice in places as different as inner-city Vienna and the Styrian countryside. In West Germany, the left-wing squatter scene of the 1980s lured rebellious and disenchanted young people with protests against the growing middle class. Finding inspiration in role models such as Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof, two of the first RAF (Red Army Faction) terrorists, these movements encouraged the participation of women in political activism and leadership. These political shifts and constellations find expression in the voices of the squatters, anarchists, militant feminists, ex-convicts and unemployed rebels who populate Kawaters's 'Zora Zobel' novels. At the same time, the increasing appeal of left-wing and egalitarian ideas, embodied by the Green Party, helped to change the popular conception of politics – and professional work – as a white man's world. A number of mysteries by West German authors before and after unification imagine women effecting political change by

playing active roles in local and state institutions like law enforcement and social work. Sexism and corruption in politics, the police force and related professions are critiqued in feminist crime series by Biermann, Gercke, Alexandra von Grote and Maria Gronau. Access to a safe and egalitarian education is another common concern for feminist mystery writers, who explore institutionalized sexism and sexual abuse in schools and universities in works such as Thea Dom's *Berliner Aufklärung* (Berlin Enlightenment, 1994) and Lehmann's 'Lisa Nerz' series, particularly *Harte Schule* (School of Hard Knocks, 2005).

The second-wave women's movement and the gay rights movement in West Germany and Austria gained support and momentum in the 1970s and 1980s by organizing around the issues of abortion, prostitution, pornography and homosexuality. In early *Frauenkrimis*, these matters surface in the work of Biermann, who not only argues for prostitute rights and promotes sexual diversity in her series featuring Karin Lietze and the Berlin homicide division, but also deals with AIDS in the short story '3'21 "' (1992) in her edited collection *Mit Zorn, Charme, und Methode*. AIDS also comes up as a motive for killing in Manuela Kay's short story 'Scheißbullen' (Crap Cops), published in the anthology *Queer Crime: Lesbischschwule Krimigeschichten* (Queer Crime: Lesbian-gay Crime Stories, 2002). Edited by Lisa Kuppler, *Queer Crime* includes four other mysteries by German-speaking women writers as well as intrigues involving bisexuals and transsexuals. With half of its collection featuring female characters who love other women, *Ariadne* is noteworthy for including lesbian texts under the broader category of feminist crime fiction, thereby promoting the mutual interests of feminist and lesbian cultures and politics. Two *Ariadne* publications from the early 1990s were among the first lesbian mysteries in German: in Kim Engels's *Zur falschen Zeit am falschen Ort* (In the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time, 1991), four gay and straight women go on vacation together and become embroiled in an international intrigue, and in Gabriele Gelien's *Eine Lesbe macht noch keinen Sommer* (One Lesbian Does Not Make a Summer, 1993), a young lesbian solves the mystery of her disappearing mail, which ultimately involves her in the investigation of a child pornography trafficking ring. *Ariadne* further supports the diversification of women's crime writing by publishing books featuring bisexual detectives like the macho Lisa Nerz in Lehmann's series, child protagonists like the girl sleuth in Ann Camones's *Verbrechen lohnt sich doch!* (Crime Does Pay!, 1994) and bicultural investigators like Katrin Kremmler's German-Hungarian adventurer, Gabriella Müller. As these examples indicate, the 1990s and early 2000s have seen the increased representation of sexual and other minorities in the crime genre.

Another pivotal political development of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the foundation and expansion of the European Union. A number of German feminist crime novels address this transnational transformation by featuring German protagonists who travel to or live in other European countries, thus introducing cultural variations and differing political situations to a German-language readership. In *Die Häupter meiner Lieben* (*Head Count*, 1993), Ingrid Noll examines relationships between Germans and Italians at the moment when the structure of the European Union was crystallizing. Maria Gronau's *Weibersommer* (Women's Summer, 1998) explores the differences between German, French and Corsican politics, while *Weiberschläue* (Women's Shrewdness, 2003) depicts the ways in which the fall of the Berlin Wall has facilitated international crime, such as organ trafficking between Eastern and Western Europe. Karin Rick's *Furien in Ferien* (Furies on Vacation, 2003) suggests that women in Greece have a long way to go before they can attain the gender equality they have in Austria. In

two mysteries set in Budapest, *Blaubarts Handy* (Bluebeard's Cell Phone, 2001) and *Pannonias Gral* (Pannonia's Grail, 2004), Katrin Krenmler analyses the differences between German and Hungarian cultures and especially the social limitations still faced by women and lesbians in post-socialist Europe.

In the midst of these wide-reaching transformations, the ongoing success story of the German-language *Frauenkrimi* is evidence of the intimate relationships among social changes, national contexts, publishing industries and popular literary tastes. Although pioneering female authors like Groner, Droste-Hülshoff, Rodrian and Siebenstädt published crime fiction prior to the 1980s, the work of Gran, Kawaters, Biermann, Gercke, Deitmer and others represents a new era of crime writing, one that continues to this day. German feminist crime fiction plays an important social role in questioning existing forms of order and promoting democratic ideals, suggesting the significance of gender and sexual equality to the overall health of contemporary society. It imagines a social order in which every citizen's actions count, in which it does not take a police officer or a professional detective to right transgressions. In many *Frauenkrimis*, like the popular works of Kneifl and Noll, female figures address social problems by perpetrating crimes. These texts definitively assert that women are not always passive or victims, nor does feminist culture require them to be positive role models, but that they can and do commit violent, gruesome – and often gratifying – acts. With nuanced, entertaining and politically charged narratives that offer intriguing visions of social justice, women writers continue to make a mark on German-language culture.

Established writers of the feminist *Frauenkrimi* like Gercke, Kneifl and Noll still garner fans with their novels, several of which have been adapted into television and film series. Twenty-first-century feminist crime authors are likely to work in both literary and visual media: Merle Kroger, the prize-winning author of *Grenzfall* (Borderline Case, 2012), is a distinguished documentary filmmaker, while Thea Dorn and Astrid Paprotta, who became famous as crime novelists, have since written screenplays for the popular television series *Tatort* (Crime Scene; see chapter 8).<sup>9</sup> This is also true of the prolific Petra Hammesfahr, whose numerous acclaimed novels and screenplays make her one of the best-known contemporary mystery writers. Popular crime authors like Christine Lehmann, Charlotte Link and Nele Neuhaus have been recognized for their work in other genres as well, including radio plays, romance and young adult books, psychological novels and non-fiction. These successful women are promoting, updating and expanding the growing genre of crime fiction, and they are in good company with the likes of Monika Geier, Uta-Maria Heim and Eva Rossmann, among many others writing and gaining widespread recognition today.

Extract from Doris Gercke, *How Many Miles to Babylon*

*Hamburg police detective Bella Block has been asked to investigate an anonymous report alleging that two recent suicides in the village of Roosbach were in fact murders. She accepts the assignment because she has a summer house in Roosbach and can enjoy the*

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<sup>9</sup> Paprotta's *Die ungeschminkte Wahrheit* (The Unvarnished Truth, 2004) and Dom's *Die Hirnkönigin* (The Brain Queen, 1999) both won the *Deutscher Krimi Preis*. Paprotta has also written for the television crime series *SOKO Wismar*.

*idyllic countryside from the comfort of her blooming garden. Bella is eager for a break from the city, from her daily routine, and especially from her colleagues, among whom she is the only female detective.*

She pondered the evening and realized that the investigation wasn't going to be as easy as she'd hoped. After twenty years in police service, she'd learned to pay attention to her gut feelings whenever she took over a new case. She had always been affected by the lives of the people she persecuted.<sup>10</sup> She knew there was a causal relationship between the structure of this society and its steadily increasing crime rate. None of her coworkers suspected what she herself was barely aware of: that her exceptional commitment stemmed from a hidden feeling of complicity, as if she were responsible for the kind of social conditions which drove parents to physically abuse their children. Whenever she started on a new case she imagined that, on solving it, she would find a way out for delinquents. This rarely happened: Apart from the fact that the system was complacent and virtually static, eventually she always had to hand her cases over to a judge or public prosecutor. Yet during the period of investigation, of identity checks and speculation, she was driven by the belief that this time she would make a difference. Gradually, though, her perspective changed and it grew increasingly difficult for her to work. Bella traced this change in attitude back to the time when she and her team had visited the Museum of Criminology. An exhibit of sodomy-rape had aroused collective disgust and indignation – or so she thought. Shortly afterward, she had overheard her male coworkers talking about it. She'd never had any illusions about the moral integrity of cops; because they continually dealt with society's margins and with brutality they, too, were on the extreme edge of the social spectrum – one in which violence was gratuitous. She had learned to live with the fact that they were a bunch of misanthropes. But when she heard them revelling in the gory details of that exhibit Bella simply couldn't accept it as everyday professional cynicism. At that point she had started to view her fellow officers in a different light. They continued to be polite when they had to deal with Bella, but from that point on an uneasy tension altered the previously friendly work atmosphere. Now she understood why regulations demanded that detectives not be left alone with women during the course of an interrogation. And she realized that the high divorce rate among detectives – twice the national average – wasn't just the result of irregular working hours.

Doris Gercke, *How Many Miles to Babylon*, trans. Anna Hamilton (Seattle: Women in Translation, 1991), pp. 27-9.

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<sup>10</sup> Author's note: the original German text uses the term 'verfolgte', which the published translation renders as 'persecuted'. In this context, however, 'pursued' or 'prosecuted' would be a more accurate translation.

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