



Show Your Face, Oh Violence: Crime Fiction as Written by Austrian Women Writers

Beatrix Kramlovsky

Thirty years ago, the crime novel began a surprising revival in all the German-speaking countries of Europe. What started as the regional crime story in Germany and spread to Austria in recent years has heralded the rebirth of a sentimental local genre known as the *Heimatroman* (homeland novel). In Austria, nearly every second novel can be advertised as a crime novel. Yet the rules of the genre are often ambitiously broken, varied, or satirized. Austrian readers love the combination of crime, local color, and a detailed representation of the social situation. This synthesis of elements isn't new, but after the Second World War and ten years of occupation, Austria needed time to rediscover its own literary roots and to exploit the typical Austrian gift of treating death artistically.

Still, Austria's fascination with crime fiction has a long history. In Auguste Groner (1850–1929), Austria brought forth one of the first

internationally known women crime writers. Groner, the “mother” of all Austrian women crime writers, began to write crime stories around 1890 and invented the figure Josef Müller, the first serial police detective in German crime literature. Groner's novels were translated, and Josef Müller became internationally famous, but the First World War plunged the author into obscurity. Ironically, Groner's contributions to crime fiction have been much more widely acknowledged in the United States than in Europe. In 1992 the American Germanist Mary Tannert wrote a doctoral dissertation on Groner that remains the only in-depth study in any language of Groner's crime fiction.

Today, there is an organization for Austrian writers of crime fiction (www.krimiautoren.at), and, of the seventy-five member authors, forty-three are women! But since most reviews and literary supplements in many parts of Europe still ignore the mass of women writers, I have

decided to report on the most interesting and promising women crime writers in Austria—those who have already proved the quality of their work and are known in all three German-speaking countries.

In the 1970s, only one woman was able to succeed in the Austrian market. Helga Anderle has written more than six hundred short crime stories for German and Austrian newspapers and journals and served as a pathfinder for those just beginning to learn the rules of the genre. Anderle creates intelligent plots, her humor is jet-black, and her Viennese morbidity colors the scenery. Even when the reader laughs out loud, her message is often cruelly somber. She is a master of the short form and knows how to present a show-down in just a few words. As an expert networker, in the late 1990s she helped me and Maria Benedickt

found a group of women crime writers that became the Austrian cell of Sisters in Crime. Benedickt (b. 1958) had been discovered by the famous German publishing house Fischer Verlag for her outstanding novels about female outcasts, odd young women characterized by determination and special points of view who were either in danger themselves or interrupted a killer at work.

Even in its postwar reincarnation, there is a clear difference between the crime fiction of Germany and Austria. You don't find the typical trio of victim-culprit-detective in an Austrian story. The reader follows either the criminal and/or a witness, and interest in the deed is much deeper than a concern for arrest and punishment. For this reason, quite a lot of Austrian crime novels, especially those written by women, are not typical examples of the genre—which makes it hard to market them correctly, since Austrian literature in general is full of corpses and violence. Only during recent years have some of the younger writers attempted to write crime fiction "by the rules" in order to build up a real crime section.

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Suddenly, there were so many promising young women writing crime fiction that the 1990s bloomed like a well-prepared garden. With these authors, new heroines appeared, mostly reporters who served as amateur detectives or public officials / civil servants with an unexpected variety of qualities. From the very beginning,

these writers tried to produce more than a simple whodunit, combining psychology, social issues, and political contexts with black humor and the despair of unhappy love. As tightly woven as thick braids, these novels quickly succeeded not only in Austria but in Germany, too. In the early 1980s, emancipatory feminism turned some stories into texts more preachy than suspenseful, but soon Austrians developed a narrative variety that transcends the mere murder of villainous men by oppressed heroines. Viennese black humor in particular lends color to

Austrian crime fiction and helps avoid a black-and-white impression.

The books of Elfriede Semrau (1922–2004) deliver a wonderful mixture of splendid ideas, feminist discourses, social minefields, local humor, and real suspense. Her detectives are coffeehouse waiter Leopold and his wife, Gretel Huber, a self-confident local gossip and produce seller. Semrau, who was a teacher of religion, knew just how to present the hypocrisy of Austrian morality, and understood how awful questions of conscience can be solved. Her style is cruelly funny and painfully vicious.

More elegant but similar in her aims, Christine Grän (b. 1952) develops her plots around serial figure Anna Marx, invented in 1986 and immediately made into a television series. As a reporter, Anna is confronted with a wide variety of socially critical topics. She also has a lot of personal problems and bears no resemblance to most people's idea of a heroine. Grän is talented enough to avoid clichés, and her style has developed into a very elegant and subtle instrument.

Even when Eva Rossmann (b. 1962) chooses the well-known constellation of detective and

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helper, her interpretation of the Holmes/Watson constellation is original: Bosnian cleaning lady Vesna Krajner is canny, courageous, and more practical than her employer, Mira Valensky, a lifestyle journalist. Although she is a refugee with no money, Vesna's pride demands a certain formality with her boss. Rossmann develops conventional plots, but her handling of the question of guilt is highly differentiated—no surprise for those who know that Rossmann was a constitutional jurist and a voice for social reform before becoming an excellent professional cook.

Lisa Lercher debuted in the late 1990s with her civil servant Anna Posch, whose best friend Mona Sommer is—surprise—a journalist and single mother (which makes her unique in the circle of Austrian crime fiction). The novels shine because of Lercher's very individual tone. Her voice is always that of a first-person narrator speaking in the present, which can be a dangerous combination, but she skirts all the cliffs impressively. The mystery is solved in all her stories and novels (one was just made into an impressively sensitive film), but a certain emotional flatness and an echo of real horror stay with the reader. [Editorial note: To read her story in this issue, see page 00.]

In 1992 Edith Kneifl (b. 1954), who works as a psychoanalyst in Vienna, became the first woman to win the Friedrich Glauser Prize for best German crime novel of the year. Her perpetrators are average people who, under pressure, cross moral borders. Some figures display very morbid qualities and are a pleasure to follow. Her heroine, Joe Bellini, who occasionally discovers crimes and/or helps the police, is a feminist analyst with a weakness for the wrong guys. In a classical Austrian manner, Kneifl mixes tenses, moving from past to present in a unique voice that the reader immediately becomes fond of.

In Austrian crime fiction written by women, there is only one police officer representing the classic crime novel, the work that follows all the "rules" of the genre—Maria Kouba, the protagonist of five books by Sabina Naber (b. 1965). Naber develops a hot mixture of sex and crime

and takes the reader for a wild ride through the Viennese mentality. Her black humor lightens some of the hard-boiled scenes. Fast dialogue leads directly into swamps of corruption, lost history, and dirty money.

Something that unifies all Austrian women crime novelists is their joy in playing with



Christine Grän



Edith Kneifl



Susanne Ayoub

language, using all the shades of ambiguity it offers. Some of them also write and publish poetry, like Susanne Ayoub, who sets her crime novels in the early twentieth century; some write theater plays or are actresses, like Nora Miedler, whose first crime novel won the Viennese Leo Perutz Prize, and whose crime settings call to mind an intimate theater set. Another writer working in theater and film is Amaryllis Sommerer, who wrote a frightening novel about a stalker and his victim.

Austrian humor colors all these crime stories in a special way, turning the characters into eccentrics, but never caricatures. They feature a typically Viennese humor in the face of death and a feminist understanding without a didactic tone. Although this little country has a small publishing market and Austrian writers depend on the more sizable German market, local differences are still taken seriously and cultivated. We Viennese cannot deny our classical roots: Schnitzler, Kafka, Horvath, Bernhard, and Handke, even the dramas of Nobel Prize-winner Elfriede Jelinek. The powerful depictions of violence, killing, and betrayal influence the crime writing of our best authors. The classic crime novel is not as well known or as strong in Austria by international standards, but Austria could definitely be the breeding ground for an outstanding woman crime novelist to come.

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