

Das Book:

THE CONTEMPORARY GERMAN LITERATURE COLLECTION

AN UNUSUAL ARRANGEMENT

Spend an hour browsing among the stacks of Olin Library and you could easily miss the largest collection of contemporary German literature in North America. But there it is, tucked away between Islamic Studies and the quiet faculty carrels on Level A, as Brian Vetruba is more than happy to point out.

Vetruba is the catalog and subject librarian for Germanic Languages & Literatures. Among the many reasons why he likes his job, one of them is the steady stream of new books across his desk (between 800 and 1,000 every year) representing the latest fiction, poetry, and literary nonfiction being published in German-speaking Europe today—most of them provided to Washington University by the publishers free of charge.

“It’s an unusual arrangement,” says Vetruba, who holds master’s degrees in German, West European Studies, and Information Studies. “Most publishers don’t give away their books for free, especially to libraries.”

But the Contemporary German Literature Collection is part of a long-standing partnership among Washington University Libraries, the Department of Germanic Languages & Literatures, and more than 120 large and small publishers across Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Like many successful partnerships, it began with an idea.

MUTUAL INTERESTS

In 1980, Paul Michael Lützel, who is now the Rosa May Distinguished University Professor in the Humanities, was a young associate professor in charge of organizing the St. Louis Symposium on German Literature held every two years at Washington University. The theme that year was contemporary literature since 1965. It was a particularly exciting time in German-language literary publishing, and the response here at home was tremendous.

“It was the largest conference we’d ever had; there were over 200 participants,” says Lützel. However, in the course of searching for

BY AARON WELBORN

contemporary German holdings in libraries around the country, Lützel was stunned. “The collections available were lousy,” he says. “No one was collecting in this area.” Without access to the most recent books, scholars on this side of the Atlantic were severely limited.

Lützel approached administrators of the Washington University Libraries, but there was no room in the budget to significantly expand German collections. So he decided to write the leading publishers in Germany (Suhrkamp, Rowohlt, Piper, and Hanser), asking them to donate copies of their annual literary output to the German department.

“But to get something, you have to give something,” says Lützel. He proposed to compile an annotated bibliography of the books publishers sent him; Washington University would in turn publish the bibliography and distribute it to other universities and libraries across the



≈ Professor Paul Michael Lützel with visiting Max Kade Center writers and critics, Aaron Welborn

United States and Canada. By publicizing the collection and making it available through inter-library loan, Washington University would be doing a service to the academic profession, and the publishers would have a new way to reach serious readers in North America.

Most of the publishers signed on. One particularly liked the idea. Siegfried Unseld, head of the Suhrkamp Verlag publishing house, the most prestigious literary publisher in Germany, personally traveled to St. Louis to establish a separate collection-within-the-collection



≈ Far left: German poet Durs Grünbein at a weekend seminar on German lyric poetry held at WU. Left: Faculty and graduate students chat during a seminar break.

representing not only literature but also criticism, philosophy, and the social sciences. The Suhrkamp/Insel Collection was given its own shelf space in Olin Library, which it quickly started to outgrow.

“When I realized this was going to work, I started writing other publishers,” Lützel says. Over the next two years, with the help of his colleagues Egon Schwarz, Jim Poag, and James McLeod, Lützel contacted every large, medium, and small literary press across Europe publishing in German. Most agreed to the plan.

Within a few short years, the collection had grown into the largest of its kind, and the bibliography was a hit. “I want to assure you that we are making great use of the bibliography and appreciate your generosity in sharing it with us,” wrote one professor at the University of Toronto. Today, in lieu of a print edition, the annual bibliography is posted on the German department’s website, where it is freely available to all scholars, librarians, and students of German literature worldwide.

A FOUNDATIONAL COLLECTION

There are sizable collections of German literature at other universities, of course, but Washington University’s is unique for its emphasis on contemporary writers. “This is the collection of contemporary German literature,” Lützel says. “No other library in the United States or Canada—or Germany, for that matter—has anything like it.”

The collection serves as the research base of another initiative Lützel started: the Max Kade Center for Contemporary German Literature at Washington University. Every year since 1985, the Center has invited one prominent writer and one leading critic from a

BRIAN VETRUBA, CATALOG/SUBJECT LIBRARIAN FOR GERMAN, EUROPEAN STUDIES, AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Brian Vetruba has been with Washington University Libraries for six years. A native of Minnesota, he holds master’s degrees in German and West European Studies from

Indiana University, and a master’s degree in Information Studies from the University of Toronto. While a student, he studied and lived abroad in Austria and Germany and interned for a member of the German parliament.

As a catalog and subject librarian, Vetruba is responsible for selecting, acquiring, and processing library materials related to

Germanic Languages and Literatures, European Studies, and Comparative Literature. Cataloging (in short, describing books and resources so that library users can find them) is a big part of his job. But he also serves as a liaison to German and Comparative Literature faculty and students, provides reference services and bibliographic instruction, and edits the Library

German-speaking country to teach a graduate seminar on contemporary German literature. The visitors are supported by a grant from the Max Kade Foundation in New York.

As the Center and the collection have grown, other organizations have lent their support, including the Volkswagen and Thyssen foundations and the German Academic Exchange Service.

The Center also publishes a scholarly yearbook, *Gegenwartsliteratur*, and awards annual fellowships for junior faculty and Ph.D. candidates from around the country to come to Washington University to use the collection. Lützel himself has received many awards for his research and teaching, including Guggenheim and Fulbright grants, a Distinguished Faculty Mentor Award, the German Cross of Merit First Class, the Goethe Medal, and the Austrian Great Medal of Merit.

Of course, in the increasingly consolidated world of international publishing, executives who know him come and go, so Lützel makes a point of staying in frequent touch. Every three years, he travels to Germany for the Frankfurt Book Fair, the world’s largest book publishing expo. There he meets and greets publishers’ representatives, recruiting new partners and reminding old ones of how much they are appreciated. “When they see me coming, they say, ‘Oh, great. Here comes that guy who wants it all for free,’” Lützel jokes. But despite the rising cost of international shipping, participation in the program remains high. Even many small publishers, who have limited resources, remain committed.

“They realize that what we’re doing is important,” Lützel says. “We’re training the next generation of scholars.”



≈ Professor Lützel talks with a seminar participant.

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≈ Brian Vetruba



working on a survey of academic librarians to get a better sense of what languages they know, how those language skills contribute to their work, and whether it would help to know other languages.

Vetruba may add another language to his own repertoire soon. He is currently trying to read *Harry Potter* in Swedish.