

David Sornig: *Spiel*. UWA Publishing, 2009. 245 pp. ISBN 978 1 921401 25 1. **By Adèle Garnier,** Universität Leipzig/Macquarie University.

Two decades after the Fall of the Wall, the city of Berlin and its East German past continues to intrigue Australians. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's German feature film *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Life of Others, 2006) and Anna Funder's Australian non-fiction *Stasiland - True Stories Behind the Berlin Wall* (2002) have met with critical acclaim and commercial success in Australia. (The film made more than US \$2,4 millions at the Australian box office as of 2007. See webreference. The book also won the 2004 British Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction). Like *Das Leben der Anderen*, David Sornig's *Spiel* is a Berlin-based fiction in which the activities of the East German secret police inspire a reflection on fact and fancy, authorship and agency. Like *Stasiland*, *Spiel* is narrated in the first person by an outsider, an Australian confronted with the ghosts of the German past. Yet, more explicitly than both *Das Leben der Anderen* and *Stasiland*, *Spiel* explores the personal journey of its narrator, and, to an extent, of its author. The narrator's inner life as well as his Australian upbringing feature prominently in the novel. Moreover, Berlin's imperial and national-socialist legacy resonates throughout a story that emphasises the Cold War years of the German capital.

Spiel is David Sornig's first novel. Born 1969 in Melbourne, Sornig is an academic and writer of German and Austrian descent. In 2008, he was awarded the Charles Pick Fellowship at the University of East Anglia; currently he lectures at Adelaide's Flinders University. Sornig has visited Berlin several times since the early nineties and evokes his Berlin visits on his blog, see <http://davidsornig.wordpress.com>. *Spiel's* narrator is a Melbournian architect of German origin in his late thirties who travels to Berlin after the death of his German-born uncle Hans. The narrator is not attending his uncle's funeral; Hans died in New South Wales. Rather, the news of his uncle's death urges the architect's escape from a carefree life gone awry. In Berlin, the newcomer is confronted with fantastic, dangerous and

multi-layered tales and places. The novel's structure is non-linear. Written entirely in the present form, *Spiel* intertwines the narrator's sojourn in the German capital, his Australian biography, and a recollection of *Staatssicherheit* reports that gradually relates to the two other narrative threads.

Spiel's Australian sequences portray the narrator's life in suburban Melbourne. We follow his tormented relationship with architecture. Triggered by his uncle Hans, his schoolboy's revelation to the art of building evolves into nihilism as a career student, as his smug fascination for Nazi architect Albert Speer wins him a following amongst outcast undergraduates. Yet the main focus of the Australian scenes is on women: Annie Rivers, the narrator's provocative school friend and occasional lover, Veronika, his hard-working wife who appears increasingly disappointed with her underachieving, manipulative husband, and an East German childhood pen pal named Rosa Stumm. Rosa Stumm never answers the letters of the young narrator. The Australian episodes gradually contextualise the narrator's quest for a blind woman in Berlin. The architect meets the woman as he arrives at Bahnhof Friedrichstraße on New Year's Eve. She talks him into agreeing to play a game without knowing what is at stake. She then takes him to a performance of Mozart's *Magic Flute* at the Komische Oper, yet insists on leaving the theatre after the first Act. As they leave, the building is destroyed by a bomb blast. Later, the narrator awakes in the blind woman's flat. She is gone. Before she disappears, the woman asks him to tell her who she is. He names her Rosa Stumm, after his never answering East German pen pal. The narrator's intercepted, partly censored, letters to Rosa fill up *Spiel's* 'Stasi files' chapters. In his letters, the young narrator names himself Karl. 'Karl' wonders what it is like to live on the other side of the wall, confesses his fear of a new world war, describes his awkwardness with his German heritage, which he fantasises as Nazi. Like 'Karl', 'Rosa Stumm' is a surrogate identity. As reported in the Stasi files, Rosa Stumm is the name given to a Berlin girl who has lost her memory and sight after having almost drowned in the Spree in the early 1980s. The Stasi files give an account of Rosa's increasing rebellion against the dominant East German ideology as she grows older. Throughout his sleep-deprived wandering in Berlin-Mitte on New Year's Day, 'Karl' is as much confronted with the possible non-

existence of Rosa Stumm as with the apocalyptic history of Berlin, the palimpsest city.

Spiel's sinuosity mostly benefits from Sornig's singular writing style. At its best, the novelist effortlessly combines a dreamlike symbolism with a details-focused narration replete with names, places, colours and sounds – *Spiel's* 'soundtrack' is further explored on the above mentioned blog of the author. This sensual style allows for evocative renderings of both a sweaty, sunburnt Australian suburbia and a cold, dark and magical Berlin. One of the strongest chapters of the novel deals with the ultimate revelation of Rosa Stumm's identity. Almost entirely recounted through dialogues, the sequence masterly entangles individual and collective memories while giving the Stasi reports a cathartic, disturbing significance. At times though, *Spiel's* name-dropping rather proves redundant and weighs on the already complex plot lines. The reviewer, more familiar with the German capital than with Melbourne, found it more irritating in the case of the Berlin chapters than of the Australian episodes. Yet frequent dialogues as well as the 'Stasi files' chapters cleverly interrupt the narrative rhythm.

Spiel is a gripping read and Sornig's distinct literary voice obvious. The novel enriches contemporary Australian literature encountering the European past, such as, besides Anna Funder's *Stasiland*, Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005) and Steven Conte's *The Zookeeper's War* (2007). *Spiel* can also be read as an Antipodean homage to Jorge Luis Borges and Franz Kafka. As such, the book might especially appeal to readers who enjoy tortuous and introspective mysteries blurring the line between fiction and reality.

References

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