



German Literature: A Very Short Introduction

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German literature in all genres and from all historical periods has exerted an enormous influence on the history of western thought. From Martin Luther, Frederick Schiller, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Gunter Grass, Germany has produced an impressive number of great writers and great works. In German Literature: A Very Short Introduction, Nicholas Boyle illuminates the particular character and power of German literature and explores its impact on the larger cultural world. Boyle presents an engrossing tour of German literature from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, focussing especially on the last 250 years. He examines key themes like idealism, modernism, materialism, trauma and memory, showing how they have imbued the great German writers with such distinctive voices. Indeed, this brief introduction offers broad coverage of German literature, revealing the links between German literature and the German nation, examining the literary and philosophical responses of German writers to social, political, and economic change, and seeking out the connections between Germany's intellectual traditions and its often violent and tragic history.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

German Literature: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Michael Samerdyke says

Not really what I expected.

The author took such a judgmental tone at times that I wondered if he actually liked German literature at all. He seemed intent on pointing out how German literature had developed differently than English literature and thus was bad.

I have to agree with the other reviewer who said you came away from this book without a feeling that you had found other authors that you might want to read. Boyle made you feel that German literature was a thing best avoided.

Steven Walle says

This was a very concise introduction to German literature from the middle ages up to modern days. I enjoyed it very much.

Enjoy and Be Blessed.

Diamond

Lisa says

A good introduction into German literature - with the typical flaws!

Until the very last chapter, I was willing to give the introduction highest marks for doing what it is supposed to do: giving an overview of German literature from the Medieval beginnings over the classical age of Goethe, Schiller, Kant and Lessing to the modern classics from Theodor Fontane, Thomas Mann and Brecht to Böll, Grass and Wolf. For whoever is new to German literature, it may still be the best possible way to get a decent introduction, including the strange nation building process in the 19th century and the self-inflicted wound of 20th century history.

What spoiled the reading pleasure for me on the last pages was the author's quite late realisation that he needed to include a woman, and a judgement on East Germany, before closing the introduction. Used to the fact that literary scholars swipe past women with a word or two while analysing men's short stories in detail, I was not bothered until I read the following classic statement of literary sexism, describing Christa Wolf's transition "to the later standpoint, from which she tries to write". Call me over-sensitive, but after having read almost her entire works this year, I think I know Christa Wolf deserves better, and the author could give her credit for WRITING, like her male counterparts, not just TRYING to do it.

As this introduction was written two years before she published her major work on the Wende, Stadt der Engel oder The Overcoat of Dr. Freud, I will forgive him for the arrogant comment:

"Those, like Christa Wolf, who had already once rebuilt their lives on those hollow foundations could not be expected to reconstruct themselves after a second trauma. But for established Western writers and younger writers from the East a new degree of honesty became possible."

No, actually. I won't forgive a scholar for not doing his homework. In 2008, Christa Wolf had published a whole collection of honest reflections on the three consecutive Germanys she had lived in, and there is absolutely no need in the world to believe that "established Western writers" would be more honest in their novels.

Well, apart from the obvious bias and the tendency to judge literature as being either "Protestant" or "Catholic" (sometimes, it is just human, actually!), it was worth reading for the overview it gave and the insight into the choosing process of a specialist picking from the whole of his field.

Lisa says

I found this difficult to read, and not very helpful as an overview of German literature. To see my review please visit
<http://anzlitlovers.com/2017/03/12/ge...>

ErinBeth says

This book seemed a lot harder to read than I think it should have been. I've been reading a bunch of books from this "short introduction series", and most of them don't feel like an "introduction" to me. I would expect an "introduction" to mean that it is a fairly easy non-fiction read and easily understandable for someone who has no prior knowledge on the subject, and most of these do not seem to be that way. For this particular one, I was able to follow it for the most part, but it was a difficult read. Also, it seemed more like a historical/cultural lesson about Germany with literature thrown in as an afterthought, when the title makes it seem like the main subject should be German literature. I do understand that it helps to have a background on the politics and culture to understand the literature, but considering this is supposed to be a "short introduction to German lit", I guess I would expect the majority of the book to talk about German lit. But it felt like maybe 3 quarters of the book was about German history/culture. I did learn some things from the book, just wasn't what I would have expected.

Alexandra says

I'm going to try it again with more focus but my eyes just slid over the page without taking in any of the words. I didn't learn anything about German Literature, but I won't let it defeat me.

Shelley Alongi says

The author starts with the reformation and brings us to the development of ideas to the present time. It would

be interesting to read an updated version of this book since it covered adequately the period ending in 2008 when the book was published. I found the book hard going and was happy that I was familiar with many of the names and the Basic philosophy is spending that time period. My strengths lie in the 20th century history though I was probably least familiar with the literary names of that time period. I found myself skimming through the book because the ideas are very abstract, at least in his presentation of them. I would understand the ideas more hopefully from reading the actual works and this was the main reason I picked up this book was to become more familiar with the work titles so that I could investigate them on my own. I have to admit I have read some of Thomas Mann and put the books down because I found them very dark. However, this was many years ago and I didn't read his most famous work so I can try again. I would recommend this book and hopefully out there someone has written a less dense treatment of the subject matter. It is my experience that most books that cover Germany, German history, philosophy and no literature tend to write a very dense and abstract ideas. I don't think I'm the one to change that. But maybe someday.

Dario Andrade says

Em geral esses livros da coleção "A very short introduction", da Oxford são bem interessantes e cumprem o seu papel de uma vista geral sobre um Uma boa introdução, apesar de breve, da literatura alemã desde Lutero.

Daniel Wright says

In this enthusiastic and detailed overview, Nicholas Boyle closely links Germany literary history to German social and political history, thus providing a fascinating analysis of the subject. I defy anyone to read this without at least wanting to dip into Goethe. On the other hand, the author does let his garrulity get the better of him at times leading to long stretches of somewhat dense and impenetrable prose (many paragraphs spanned multiple pages), but overall this is as low-level an introduction as one can hope for.

Stephen Wong says

The book gives an adequate scholarly survey of what has since taken place in German literature, properly speaking, up to the author W.G. Sebald (whose book *After Nature* (1988, English tr 2002) I read in 2013), whether comprised of reactions to literature elsewhere (English and French, say) or as original projects having distinct German roots (such as *Bildung*), or having unique German determinations (the works of remembrance and memory and the working of traumas). There are references to poetry, lyric, drama, plays, the novel, and letters, which all give rich texture to what has a very distinct philosophical treatment by the book of an already philosophical writing tradition. The word "tradition" itself, which arises from a restoration perspective from the Latin *traditio*, receives such treatment, for instance.

The book's exposition is formal and concise, following a structured prose that I am sure many readers will find much too dense, which however only strikes me as very German in grammar and layering. Not enough books in English are written in this way. The author will sometimes read to be jumping from writer to writer without giving the reader a clue that he is doing so until well into the exposition, which only makes a small demand in attention from the otherwise distracted or casual reader. It is a bargain which works to benefit the attentive reader, most assuredly.

The author succeeds in imparting to the reader the long-term themes of German society (the bourgeois Enlightenment and the bureaucratic or official Enlightenment, for instance) as well as keeping open those very themes to probing and interrogation. In spite of those themes, Bildung being of significance, as well as the invention of the idea of Art, there are some anecdotes and particular biographical details which attach to the writers and thinkers, poets and playwrights mentioned in the survey, enough to whet interest in the personality and lives of those specific individuals.

While the survey takes place over a quite tight period of what is today considered German (as idea, as geography, as people, as language), I could read no attempt to project or to propose what the future must or might hold for German literature in Europe or in the world or in translation. What indeed follows from the introversion to resolve the undisclosed traumas of the 20th century, or to re-enact a bourgeois Romanticism, or to embody materialism and revolution anew? Could something so ordinately originated not have for an end some promise beyond its very telling, its manner and its frame?

Rob says

There are many routes we can take when giving a brief description of a national literature. We can focus on highlights and personalities, on cultural curiosities and peculiarities or on specific effect of the "terroir" and homegrown mythology of that nation. Readers usually prefer approaches that place the writers and books they admire into a context, that can then serve to lead them to more great books to read. Nicholas Boyle, a Goethe expert and Professor of German at Cambridge University, here takes a rather tectonic A to B approach, looking at the shifts in German history chronologically and using them to enlighten us as to their effects on German literature, and viceversa. In doing so, he first makes clear that he is not talking about literature in German, so no Kafka (Czech), Musil, Zweig, Broch, Schnitzler (Austrians) or Walser (Swiss), to name but a few. The upside of this approach is that it gives you a true overview that the discussion of a handful of great writers would not. The downside is that it is unashamedly academic, opting for the dry and persuasive over the inspired and inspiring.

The fault line under German literature, according to Boyle, is the antagonism between the nobility (and its staunchly supportive bureaucracy) and the bourgeoisie. On the one hand tradition and rectitude, on the other pluralistic disruption, with or without self-interest attached. This divide drove the creation of Art as the defining mark of literature, essentially what we all file it under, keeping the written word under the control of the guardians of divine right and innate superiority.

Boyle neatly and scrupulously (albeit rather dryly and donnishly, as mentioned above, which will surely lose him many readers at an early stage) follows this strand through the different movements throughout history, alighting on the major figures of Goethe and Schiller (co-opted by the nobility for their own "classical" purposes) and then the attempts to break free of the strictures of the bureaucracy's stranglehold on the German take on Art.

He does pick up on a number of main figures, often illuminating how their personal circumstances affected their place in this pantheon. (Kleist, for example, apparently committed suicide in his infamous pact because he was unable to see how he could devote his life to literature.) Boyle looks at the important works by Thomas Mann and how they delineated the German dichotomy, in particular the return to the legend of Dr. Faust, which bestrides German literary history like a colossus indeed. He also finds plenty of time in the middle section for the 19th century philosophers, led by Immanuel Kant, and their influence. He ends, just after having dismissed Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass with a combination of backhanded praise for early

works and a forehanded haymaker aimed at their work as a whole, with the sadly departed W. G. Sebald. At this point the aftermath of WW2 (and the exaggerated fist of officialdom in the form of the Nazis having rather overplayed their hand) still hangs like a pall over German letters and their response to Germany's place in the cultural world. Unfortunately, ending his arc here, while more or less neatly closing his argument, ignores the works of younger writers who we might term to be outside of that war-tainted generation, such as Daniel Kehlmann. Pointing towards the (or at least "a") future beyond the war might at least serve to give a clearer-headed view of where German literature is at today.

One quibble of mine is over his use of translations into English of some German terms that have already gone into the language. Thus we get "Storm and Stress" for "Sturm und drang", which, while conventionally acceptable, doesn't work for me at all. Indeed, I believe this translation tends to get passed over in most usage (at least in layman's usage). There has to be some kind of criterion applied, though. After all, can we imagine anyone seriously trying to translate the word "Blitzkrieg" into English? Or "schadenfreude"? Or "doppelgänger"?

To summarise, this is a cogently argued piece that serves to give some real shape to the field, which is essentially what we ask of these introductions. Boyle allows the bigger picture to prevail without sacrificing the smaller details, completing a deceptively solid introduction for such a short book, which nevertheless takes longer to read than one might expect.

Ben Craik says

Boyle is clearly a man very much in command of his subject, a fact that shows itself in his ability to unite such a broad theme in a single compelling narrative. Perhaps appropriately, this takes the form of a dialectic, here between the two expressions of middle class life in Germany: officialdom and the bourgeoisie. The official class and the ethos of 'Bildung' that united it is fairly unique to German intellectual life, and it is really its contributions to the struggle that mark German writing and thinking out from the rest. Nevertheless, the conflict (or wavering between) the two makes for some interesting readings of the German Enlightenment or the Sturm und Drang, which produced Goethe's 'Ur-Faust' and Schiller's Robbers. The same goes for a number of individual works, including what Boyle argues is (an attempt at) the syntheses of official and bourgeois thought in Kant's Critique. This is probably the best Very Short Introduction I've read.

Keeko says

Great book. I learned a lot about German literature, and I had no idea that I knew so little.

Ken says

Serviceable overview. It was a good idea to include Wagner, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer.. But where are Musil and Broch? Also - and this is rare for me in reading a book about books - I am not inspired to read any of the books he mentions. Overviews should be more inspiring/motivating

Simon says

Chaotic, and, from what I know, quite incorrect.
