

Jerry Glenn

**Slim Pickings:
Recent German-American Literature**

Ingeborg Carsten-Miller at The US Postal Service's Celebration of the Month of the Woman.

By Ingeborg Carsten-Miller. Silver Spring: Carmill, 1997. 32 pages. \$7.50.

Poetry Reading by Ingeborg Carsten-Miller at the Beltsville Library on September 22, 1997.

By Ingeborg Carsten-Miller. Silver Spring: Carmill, 1997. 37 pages. \$7.50.

Poetry Reading. St. Elmo's Coffee Pub, Alexandria, Virginia, September 7, 1999.

By Ingeborg Carsten-Miller. Silver Spring: Carmill, 1999. 31 pages. \$7.50

Bittersweet Along the Expressway: Poems of Long Island.

By Norbert Krapf. Hardwick: Waterline, 2000. 135 pages. \$15.00

Goethe's Gardener and Other Poems.

By Christiane Seiler. Translated by Suzanne Shipley. Max Kade Occasional Papers in German-American Studies, 2. Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati German-American Studies Program, 1999. 22 pages.

Too-Late, Too-Early: Selected Poems.

By Alfred Gong. Translated by Jerry Glenn and Jennifer Kelley-Thierman. Max Kade Occasional Papers in German-American Studies, 3. Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati German-American Studies Program, 2000. 22 pages.

The Calf Who Fell in Love With a Wolf and Other Calf Stories from Round Top, Texas.

By Lisa Kahn. Translated by Helga von Schweinitz. Illustrations by Brian Alexander. Austin: Eakin, 1999. 65 pages. \$14.95.

My subtitle does not refer to the quality of the books under review, but to other

factors. As the page totals given above reveal, five of them are indeed slim booklets. Two are somewhat older; they only recently came to my attention. Three are translations from the German. One (the longest book) has only a tangential relationship to German-Americana. And all are written in English.

Many readers of the *Yearbook* will be familiar with the poetry of Carsten-Miller and Krapf; both have read from their work at several of the society's annual symposia. The first two of the books by **Ingeborg Carsten-Miller** are quite similar to her previous work. The poems are almost without exception short and are written in a colloquial free verse. She centers each line, thereby giving her poems a distinctive appearance. Many of them are literary vignettes, a scene from nature, such as "Blueberries," which begins: "Dark blue pearls / hiding / among green leaves / in late summer" (*Beltsville*, 19); others address basic aspects of the human condition, such as "Love Me Now," the conclusion of which reads: "Tears / guilt / pain / never / change / what / once / was, // Love / does" (*Beltsville*, 32). With few exceptions the poems are optimistic, a distinct rarity today, although the themes of aging and death are becoming increasingly important in her work. The German or German-American element does appear occasionally, most prominently toward the beginning of the *Postal Service* volume.

St. Elmo's Coffee Pub seems to me to represent a subtle new direction. In several of these poems a depth is present that was not found in the earlier verse. Surely the outstanding poem in the collection, and the best example to illustrate my statement, is "Hillhaven on July 14, 1999" (18-21), an account of a poetry reading written in two-line stanzas. The setting is established by a photograph of the author standing in front of a sign that reads "Hillhaven Nursing Center" (18). The first two lines effectively establish the tone: "They sit on straight chairs / with faces closed." Some of the audience are German-American: "Ich lese Ihnen ein Gedicht / auf Deutsch— // I'll give you the translation right away—." Stanzas in German alternate with stanzas in English, and the topics flit hither and yon, as the thoughts of a senile person ("die alte, senile Patentante") might wander. This vignette is not a pretty one. The people are old, physically and mentally weak, and neglected by their loved ones. But it is a very effective poem.

Three poems are in German, accompanied (at least partially) by an English version. "Hillhaven" consists of an equal mixture of English and German. In my opinion the German poems are among the strongest. I would welcome more from Carsten-Miller in her native language.

Norbert Krapf is an important poet, with a strong and distinctive voice, who writes exclusively in English. As the text on the back cover points out, following "*Somewhere in Southern Indiana* and *Blue-Eyed Grass: Poems of Germany, Bittersweet Along the Expressway* completes a trilogy about places that have moved Norbert Krapf to write poetry." The title of his most recent collection suggests no German connection—a very important element in the two earlier collections—but his heritage is often in the background and occasionally in the foreground in these poems. It is fascinating to see how this heritage merges with those of his wife (Cajun) and two adopted children (Colombian). In "Snow Breakfast," preparations for Christmas (trimming the tree,

listening as "a German choir's *Stille Nacht* flows from / walnut speakers") take place along side of normal activities, like the one suggested in the title. "After we finish our snow breakfast, / we gather before the tall Tannenbaum. / Reflected light falls on our faces" (124-25).

Turning to translations, I must begin by pointing out that for obvious reasons it would not be appropriate for me to review books in a series of which I serve as co-editor, one of which I co-translated. Accordingly I asked a colleague to write the reviews of the Seiler and Gong translations. His text follows.

These two poetry booklets, numbers two and three in the series Max Kade Occasional Papers in German-American Studies issued by the University of Cincinnati, provide English translations of selected works by two significant poets in the field of German-American literature.

Given the brevity of these booklets, the forewords play an important role, especially to readers unfamiliar with the poetry of Gong and Seiler. Lisa Kahn's forward to *Goethe's Gardener* by **Christiane Seiler**, ably translated by Michael Shaughnessy, is written in the voice of a friend, colleague, and fellow German-American poet. The personal nature of Kahn's introductory remarks complements the personal side to the poems collected here. Moreover, Kahn's foreword provides meaningful context, informing the reader that the death of Seiler's only sister is at the heart of the poems "Refuting Reality," "Liberated," "Thank You," and "Your Voice." For Kahn, Seiler's "The Ohio River" is the most important poem in the collection. An ambitious poem, the traditional lyric persona becomes a collective we, "my mirror image and I" (9), contemplating a chronicle of both the river and self. Moreover, this poem—as noted parenthetically following the title—was written during the Gulf War, and thus follows in the tradition of contemporary German poetry written against the political backdrop of American military action in a foreign land.

Jerry Glenn's foreword to the poems by **Alfred Gong** is both biographical and bibliographical, and the sixteen selections included in *Too-Late, Too Early* provide a "biographical chronology" of Gong's life and career. Following the prelude-like "These Songs," the poems "Nativity," "Bukowina," "Topography," and "My Father" take the reader back to Gong's early years in Czernowitz, while "Bucharest, July '44," "Vienna, New Year's Eve, '46," and "New York 1970" trace the path of his emigration. Not without accident, the selections here highlight, indeed bracket, Gong's ties to the literary world of Czernowitz, in particular to Paul Celan. Just as "Topography" gives the reader a picture of the young Celan "with Trakl under his arm" (4), "New York 1970," a continent removed and decades later, sardonically notes "The fact that Celan's corpse was fished out of a polluted river / is of course not worth reporting" (13).

In conclusion, the translations in both booklets are first rate. The English is smooth, images clear, and idiomatic expressions authentic. Even the occasional rhyme, as in Gong's "Sounds of the City, On Tape" or his parody of Schiller's "The Glove," rings true.

The German original of the book by **Lisa Kahn**, an utterly charming piece of children's literature, was reviewed in volume 33 of the *Yearbook*. The translation is scarcely less satisfying than the original. A few names do not work well, e.g., "Der Drache Krache" turns into "Der Drache Lache" in the original, certainly more appealing than the "Dragon Wild West Wagon" who becomes "Dragon Smiley" (43-55) in translation, and—the only true lapse I noticed—"Dummkopf" first appears as "Dummhead" (16), only to turn up later much more effectively as "Duncehead" (35). As the first line of the front cover says, these are "Tales to Read Aloud," and I can hear a talented reader with the line "When he [the big bad wolf] finds you alone, my dear little Ball, he'll make ragout of you, moo, moo!" (44). The illustrations, interestingly enough, have been entirely redone for the translation, by Brian Alexander. The combination of photographs and rather abstract drawings of the original has been replaced by consistently whimsical drawings, characterized by a mixture of realism and good-natured caricature.

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