



Sibylle Berg: A Vehement Voice

By Romy Fursland

It is always illuminating to see ourselves as others see us. And for an outside perspective that pulls no punches, we need look no further than Sibylle Berg's *GRM/Brainfuck*, which will be published by Kiepenheuer & Witsch in April this year. Set in Rochdale, UK, *GRM/Brainfuck* is a furious indictment of contemporary English society and a manifesto for individual revolt.

Anger at the state of the world and a concern for individual freedom are hallmarks of Berg's work. Born in East Germany in 1962, she left in 1984 to live in West Germany and is now based in Switzerland and Israel. Berg is a prolific writer, with fifteen novels, twenty-three plays and countless essays to her name. Her work has been translated into thirty-four languages, and she has been nominated for both the German and Swiss Book Prizes. Acerbic, provocative and darkly satirical, her writing has been compared to that of Kurt Vonnegut, Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq, Elfriede Jelinek and Will Self; yet her voice and style are completely unique. She is not afraid to push the boundaries of genre or content, and her work routinely challenges the status quo – be it capitalism, heteronormativity or the clichés traditionally associated with love and marriage.

Berg's 2009 novel *Der Mann schläft* ('The Man is Asleep', Hanser Verlag) combines a cynical attack on the modern world with a poignant love story. The novel rejects kitsch sentimentality but not, ultimately, the possibility of finding real happiness and contentment with a partner. And in *Der Tag, als meine Frau einen Mann fand* ('The Day my

Wife Found a Husband'), published by Hanser in 2015, Berg again turns her sardonic eye on the dynamics of romantic relationships. The book charts the disintegration of a seemingly stable bourgeois marriage and the wife's addiction to sex with a man she meets in a massage parlour.

One of Berg's most arresting characters is Toto, the protagonist of her 2012 novel *Vielen Dank für das Leben* ('Thank You For This Life'). Toto is born in East Germany in 1966 with no obvious gender, but the midwife decides to label him a boy. Toto's lack of a clear-cut identity inspires cruelty in almost everyone he encounters. After a miserable childhood in the GDR he escapes to the West, where he experiences at first hand the ruthless nature of capitalism and its destructive effects. Later, living as a woman, Toto finds happiness with her lover Kasimir, but Kasimir eventually abandons her and leaves her homeless. Toto dies in 2030, in a Europe envisioned by Berg as a grim wasteland. The novel paints a bleak picture of the world we live in and a moving portrait of Toto, the quintessential outsider.

This vision of a dystopian future is echoed in Berg's new novel *GRM/Brainfuck*. Having spent time in the UK on a residency programme in 2006, Berg says she decided to set her latest book here 'because England has become Europe's model neoliberal country. You might say the UK is the inventor of turbo capitalism. The book explores how the privatisation of almost all areas of social life, in combination with the surveillance dictatorship that will be perfected in the future, affects that part of the population that has

neither IT programming expertise nor a stake in the state.' The book is set in the near future and follows four neglected teenagers from the council estates of Rochdale who are united by their love of grime music, or GRM (which Berg calls 'the greatest British musical revolution since punk'), and anger towards the people responsible for their misery.

Despite her seemingly pessimistic world view, Berg is full of empathy for her characters. Ben Knight, who has translated *Vielen Dank für das Leben* and four of Berg's plays, feels that this is 'what sets her apart from many other modern satirical writers – her capacity for empathy in the middle of all the pessimism.' He says her work 'reflects how bewildering and exhausting it is just trying to live nowadays – the relentless bombardment of horror and banality and luxury that invades your brain via a hundred different media all day. And she manages to make it funny.' Of the play *Und jetzt: Die Welt!* (*And Now: The World!*), which he translated for a UK production in 2015, he adds: 'something about it hit a nerve, because everyone who saw the show (especially the teenagers who saw it in schools) appeared to identify with that angry and desolate voice really hard.'

Offbeat, brutally honest and blackly comic, Sibylle Berg's huge body of work is a *tour de force*. It gives a voice to the disenfranchised and the marginalised. It opens our eyes to the flaws in our social and political systems. And it resonates with anyone who has ever worried about where our civilisation is headed.



Berg's outstanding novel *Vielen Dank für das Leben* has been translated into English by Ben Knight and the publishing rights are available: enquiries to Friederike Barakat at Hanser Verlag, Friederike.Barakat@hanser.de.

Her latest novel *GRM/Brainfuck* is published by Kiepenheuer & Witsch: enquiries to Iris Brandt, ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de.