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Written by Maureen Younger

ARTS

My Top Literature Tips

It's National Storytelling Week, so *Maureen Younger's* got some suggestions for you.

Posted on 04/02/2015

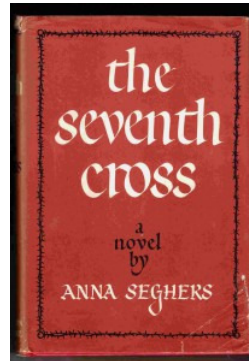


I'm an inveterate reader of German literature, I've even written a nine-page critical essay on an obscure Austrian novel from the 1970s – *Die Große Hitze oder Die Errettung Österreichs durch den Legationsrat Dr Tuzzi*. Read it? To be honest, neither have most Austrians. However, if you fancy settling down to rather less esoteric German literary fare, here are just a few of the most enjoyable and best novels by German and Austrian writers I've come across.

The Seventh Cross (Das Siebte Kreuz – Anna Seghers)

Written in exile in France in 1938, *The Seventh Cross* tells the story of the communist, Georg Heisler, who along with six other inmates manages to escape from Westhofen Concentration Camp. The camp commandant, Fahrenberg, has seven crosses built where he intends to place each of the escapees as punishment once they have been recaptured. As long as Georg evades capture the seventh will remain empty, thereby standing as a sign both to the prisoners and their Nazi jailors that at least one victim of the Nazis has managed to escape their clutches.

A communist herself, Seghers' novel is no polemic, but imbued with a great understanding of the human condition and human frailty. The book depicts, with keen insight, why people collaborate with such regimes, whether from rapacious motives, such as seeking political power, to more prosaic ones, such as just wanting an easy life. One of the best books I have ever read, I was blown away by how well Seghers writes and how she manages to make you care so much about the lives of the characters she is depicting.

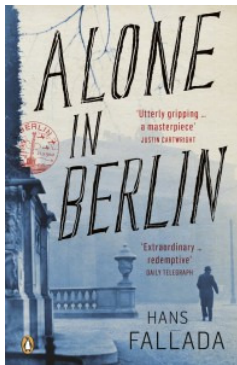


Fabian (Erich Kästner)

As its author insisted, this is the story of a moralist living in immoral times. The book depicts Berlin teetering on the political, economic and social abyss, just before Hitler and the Nazis came to power. *Fabian* is a great introduction to modern German literature. It's fast paced, written with a great deal of humour and in the then-fashionable style of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (hard to translate but the nearest English equivalent would probably be *New Matter-of-Factness*).

An artistic movement popular in Germany in the 1920s and '30s, its detached style was used to satirize contemporary German society. So if you'd like an idea of what Berlin might have been like in the dying days of the Weimer Republic, then *Fabian* gives you a wonderful insight into this crazy, hedonistic period of that great city's history. It's also an immensely enjoyable read and crushes the adage that Germans don't have a sense of humour!

Alone in Berlin (Jeder Stirbt für sich Allein – Hans Fallada)



Alone in Berlin is, to quote the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel*, "the literary rediscovery of the century". Written in the autumn of 1946 and based on a real life story, the novel gives a chilling insight into life under the Nazi regime while providing a testament to the endurance of the human spirit. It is also an entrancing read, as much of a page-turner as any well-written crime novel. Since its rediscovery, it has sold millions of copies around the world and deservedly so.

Following the death of their only son at the front, an ordinary working-class couple, the Quangels, decide to resist the Nazi regime by leaving anti-Nazi postcards around the city. This isn't as innocuous as it might at first sound – if they are caught, their punishment will be certain death.

If you want an idea of what life was like in the Third Reich, this book gives you incredible insight into the cauterising effects which fear of the Nazi police state engendered among the populace. Unlike many of his literary colleagues who fled Germany in the early 30s, Fallada remained and experienced life under the Nazis at first hand. *Alone in Berlin* is enthralling not only because it tells a great story, the hunt for the "criminals" i.e. the Quangels by the Gestapo, but also in Fallada's vivid depiction of what life must have been like for the average German under Hitler.

The Royal Game (Schachnovelle – Stefan Zweig)

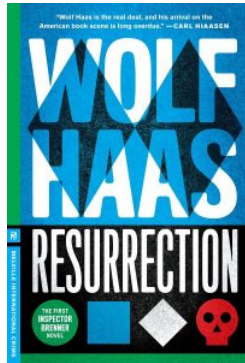
One of my favourite authors, this is Zweig's last and probably his most well-known work – at least in German-speaking Europe. *Schachnovelle* tells the story of a chess game on board a liner from New York to Argentina between Czentovic, the current world chess champion, and the mysterious Dr B, who claims not to have played chess since school, but who nonetheless proves more than a match for Czentovic. It later transpires that chess stopped Dr B from going completely mad whilst undergoing psychological torture during his imprisonment by the Gestapo.



Though ostensibly about a chess game, fortunately you don't need to know anything about chess to enjoy the book. Rather Zweig uses the story as a construct to pitch old Europe – the Europe of Zweig, cultured and educated, in the form of the aristocratic Dr B – against the brutal cultural barbarism of the new Europe, as represented by Czentovic, who can barely read or write. This fight between old and new Europe is made even more poignant given this is Zweig's last work before he and his wife committed suicide while in exile from the Nazis, despairing at the destruction of their cultured, European world. *Schachnovelle* is a good story told well and simply. If you have never read Zweig before, it's an ideal place to start.



Brenner Novels (Wolf Haas)



Resurrection (Auferstehung der Toten), The Bone Man (Der Knochenmann), Come, Sweet Death (Komm, süßer Tod), Silentium!, Wie die Tiere, Das ewige Leben (Eternal Life), Der Brenner und der liebe Gott (Brenner and God)

A series of seven crime fiction novels featuring Detective Simon Brenner, they are written in a very colloquial style and come across as if you are being regaled with a slightly fanciful story by some witty Austrian friend (and who hasn't got one of those?). These novels are, in fact, very Austrian in that they are infused with a great deal of humour, a keen sense of the absurd and are rather macabre in places. As a result, they are a hugely enjoyable read – the type of book you read with a constant, wry smile on your face.

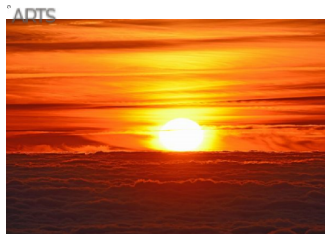
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WRITTEN BY MAUREEN YOUNGER

A London-Scottish, multi-lingual, much-travelled stand up comic working on the mainstream, urban and gay comedy circuits, actor and writer. www.maureenyounger.com @MaureenYounger

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