

**European Politics and European Fiction:
Novels recommended for optional reading**

Writers have their own way of reflecting on social and political reality, and often provide a refreshingly new and different perspective on the issues that social scientists analyze in their way. Europe and European fiction are a particularly interesting case in point: from the role of women in society to the continued presence of the past, from the attitudes and prejudices of different social groups towards one another to the complex relationship between religion and state, and from the legacies of war and destruction to the challenges of modern technology – there is a wealth of literary testimony that provides important insights in its own right into the complexities of contemporary Europe. In my lecture for the second session of the course (January 13), I will comment on the role of fiction and visual art in studying the affairs of Europe.

The following is a highly idiosyncratic list of contemporary European fiction that, over the years, I have found to be not only enjoyable reading, but also a fascinating commentary on some of the key issues that have shaped the Europe of today.

All of these books are available in English in the Stanford libraries, quite a few of them also commercially in paperback edition; if all else fails, you can borrow my copy. The list is rather heavily skewed towards German fiction, which reflects not only my predilections, but also a particularly rich choice of German books dealing with social and political issues. I will amend the list as we go along, and would appreciate your help and suggestions.

Julian Barnes, *England, England* (1998)

“A wonderfully nasty satire” (SF Chronicle) where a “virtual” England takes the place of, and outshines, the real article. In the process, nationality, tradition, and authenticity become the subject of delightfully incisive social critique.

Heinrich Böll, *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (1962)

The German Nobel laureate’s tale of inter-generational conflict over a family’s entanglement in Nazi Germany.

Heinrich Böll, *The Clown* (1965)

Intergenerational conflict again, this one set in the sterile bourgeois society of the 1950s in West Germany, with a particularly critical look at the role of the Catholic church.

Heinrich Böll, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1975)

The experience of terrorist threats tends to undermine respect for human rights in the Germany of the 1970s, and the problem is amplified by reckless media. Made into a disturbing movie.

Other books by Heinrich Böll: *Group Portrait with Lady* (1973); *The Safety Net* (1982)

Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (1962)

The book that (rightly) made Günter Grass famous. Oskar Matzerath grows up to remain a dwarf so as to observe the collapse of Hitler Germany from a proper perspective. Powerful movie by Volker Schlöndorff.

Günter Grass, *The Flounder* (1978)

Artfully woven through the millennia of humankind, the flounder's epic story recounts the mighty forces of gender, change, and prejudice.

Günter Grass, *The Meeting at Telgte* (1981)

"The thing that hath been tomorrow is that which shall be yesterday. Our stories of today need not have taken place in the present. This one began more than three hundred years ago. So did many other stories. Every story set in Germany goes back that far." Thus begins a delightful parable in which Grass draws telling parallels between the end of the Thirty Years War in the 17th century and the post-WW II era.

Günter Grass, *Too Far Afield* (2000)

Grass's literary attempt to cope with his own ambivalence about German reunification, captured in the cameo re-appearance of another great writer of the 19th century, Theodor Fontane.

Günter Grass, *Crabwalk* (2002)

It's hard to imagine anyone but Grass writing this novel which, around the story of the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustoff with 9000 German refugees on board by a Soviet submarine in 1945, masterfully deals with the claim that there must be room for remembering the suffering of German civilians in WW II as well. Reviewed by another Nobel Laureate, J.M. Coetzee, in the New York Review of Books of June 12, 2003.

Other books by Günter Grass: *Local Anaesthetic* (1970); *Cat and Mouse* (1963); *Headbirths or The Germans are Dying Out* (1982); *The Rat* (1987); *My Century* (1999).

Ursula Hegi, *Stones from the River* (1994)

Strictly speaking an American novel, by an author born in Düsseldorf in 1946 who emigrated to the U.S. at the age of eighteen. A poignant account of how nazism and anti-Semitism eroded the social fabric of a small German town.

Christoph Hein, *Willenbrock* (2000)

A revealing look into the social and psychological fault lines of post-unification Germany, by one of East Germany's most respected and incisive critical writers. "In cool, detached prose, abundant with subtle ironies, Christoph Hein's portrait of a newly minted man of the West reveals a disturbing and all-too-familiar world where affluence comes at the price of lurking aggression, freedom is pervaded by insecurity, and contentment is undermined by mistrust." (Publisher's announcement)

Stefan Heym, *Five Days in June* (1977)

The great and controversial East German writer's (and erstwhile American G.I.'s) fictional account of the workers' uprising in East Germany on June 17, 1953.

Stefan Heym, *The King David Report* (1973)

The thoroughly entertaining, and yet profound, story of the relationship between knowledge and power, as the honest historian Ethan is trying to cope with the commission of writing the “official” history of King David’s reign. (Available at Stanford only in German; reprint (1997) of English original available in paperback).

Michel *Houellebecq*, *The Elementary Particles* (2000)

A bit of a cult book in France, which the T.L.S. calls “a novel on the grand scale. It is almost Balzacian in its attention to detail, and dauntingly ambitious in its determination to tackle 'big themes': the descent of the West into an orgy of consumerism, the decline of Christianity, the potential of human cloning and the destructive nature of the liberal values and sexual permissiveness of the 1960's, which have, in the author's view, atomized society.”

Imre Kertész, *Fateless* (1992)

By the Hungarian winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize, an autobiographical account of the complex ways in which Hungarian (and, especially, Budapest) Jews fell victim to the Holocaust. Reviewed by István Deák in the *New York Review of Books*, September 25, 2003.

Siegfried Lenz, *The German Lesson* (1968)

A class assignment on “the joys of duty” serves as the foil for dealing with the son’s conflict with his policeman father’s dutiful persecution of a “degenerate” artist in Nazi Germany.

Siegfried Lenz, *An Exemplary Life* (1976)

The search for values, role models, and consensus is at the core of three German educators’ efforts to write the chapter on “an exemplary life” for an official school textbook. Public and private biographies and conflicts intersect, and the fissures of a pluralistic society become palpable.

Other books by Siegfried Lenz: *The Heritage* (1981); *The Training Ground* (1991)

Antoni Libera, *Madame* (2000)

The infatuation of a highly talented seventeen-year old with his French teacher, who represents “the West” in the gray and suffocating intellectual climate of the 1960s in Warsaw.

Klaus Mann, *Mephisto* (1977)

Thomas Mann’s younger brother fictionalizes both the stellar artistic career and the political opportunism of one of the greatest German actors and directors. Made into a brilliant movie by István Szabó, with Klaus Maria Brandauer in the title role (Academy Award 1982 for best foreign film).

Peter Schneider, *Eduard’s Homecoming* (2000)

Eduard Hoffmann, a (West) German geneticist working at Stanford, unexpectedly inherits property in East Berlin after unification and is cast thereby not only into personal difficulties, but also into the cultural and political upheaval that is Berlin in the early 1990s. A story that is both funny and remarkably perceptive.

Andrzej Szczypiorski, *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenmann* (1990)

Set in occupied Warsaw in 1943, but ranging over both the pre-war and the post-war history of Poland, this is both an insightful and a poetic view of the relationship between occupiers and their victims.

Christa Wolf, *Divided Heaven* (1979)

One of the most distinguished East German writers captures the human dimension of the division of Germany not just into two countries, but into two cultures. Worth re-reading to understand some of the contemporary tensions between the country’s Eastern and Western parts.

Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (1984)

One of the more eloquent statements on the role of men and women in bringing about, and suffering the consequences of, war. Fascinating: The four lectures on the genesis of the book (included in the 1984 Farrar, Straus, Giroux edition).

Christa Wolf, *Accident: a Day’s News* (1989)

A literary account of the Chernobyl disaster, from the waning days of the socialist order.

Also by Christa Wolf: *No Place on Earth* (1982); *A Model Childhood* (1980); *The Quest for Christa T.* (1970); *Parting from Phantoms: Selected Writings, 1990-1994* (1997)