

WOMEN
IN GERMAN
LITERATURE



Playing House

Motherhood, Intimacy, and Domestic Spaces
in Julia Franck's Fiction

Peter Lang

Alexandra Merley Hill

Julia Franck, winner of the 2007 German Book Prize for *Die Mittagsfrau* (*The Blind Side of the Heart*), puts the experience of women – and mothers – at the core of her novels and short stories. This study, the first book exclusively about Franck, addresses the various roles that women play in her oeuvre: lovers, daughters, mothers, and sisters. With an eye to the way these roles are influenced by and connected to domestic space, the author examines the desire for intimacy and connection that motivates Franck's characters. Drawing on theories of both performance and performativity, the author argues that Franck creates these identities as mutable and changeable, in effect opening up women's roles for resignification in an age of renewed feminist inquiry.

Alexandra Merley Hill is Assistant Professor of German at the University of Portland, where she teaches all levels of language, literature, and culture. Her research focuses on contemporary German-language literature by women, especially Julia Franck. She has published on literature and feminism in the *Women in German Yearbook* and in *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, and she co-edited *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century: An Introduction* (2011) with Florence Feiereisen.



Playing House

Women in German Literature

Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, University of Oxford
Series Editor

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PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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INTRODUCTION

The 'Fräuleinwunder' and Feminism

Although she has been writing since childhood, Julia Franck's career as an author began with winning the LiteraturWERKstatt third annual Open Mike award in 1995, an event that certainly helped to secure publication of her first novel *Der neue Koch* [The New Cook] in 1997.¹ This first publication earned Franck little attention, other than a few favourable reviews. It was with her next two publications, the novel *Liebediener* [Love Servant] in 1999 and the collection of short stories *Bauchlandung: Geschichten zum Anfassen* [Belly Flop: Stories to Touch] in 2000 that her writing gained widespread recognition.² The publication of these two books in close succession coincided with two simultaneous developments in German literature: a notably high number of books set in Berlin in the post-unification years, commonly referred to as Berlin literature, and a wave of publications by women authors, still referred to in scholarship as the *Fräuleinwunder* [miracle of the girls].

In many ways, these two literary trends – while distinct from each other – do overlap. Berlin literature, as the name suggests, is set in the new capital and often follows characters engaging in daily, normal activities around the city. Berlin is clearly identifiable in the text, and the specific location within the city can often be determined thanks to street names, landmarks and other clues. This literature captures Berlin at a time of transition, after the initial problems and discomforts of unification, and before it became the international hotspot for wealthy celebrities. In this Berlin the shifting landscape and the alternating sense of infinite possibilities or

1 Julia Franck, *Der neue Koch* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997).

2 Julia Franck, *Liebediener* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1999). Julia Franck, *Bauchlandung: Geschichten zum Anfassen* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2000).

sense of post-unification disappointment allow the characters to exist in a transitory state; at a point in their lives between leaving school and starting a career or family, the characters are neither teenagers nor adults, without obligations or responsibilities. They seem to organize their lives around encounters with others, yet these encounters can be described as chance, passing or superficial. Far from being just a backdrop of these encounters, Berlin is what makes them possible: with its party scene, its anonymity and its sense of transition and instability. Two examples of the texts frequently mentioned in this category include *Spielzone* by Tanja Dückers and *Sommerhaus, später* by Judith Hermann, although Inka Parei, Juli Zeh, Katrin Röggla and others are also linked to it.³ Unlike the *Fräuleinwunder*, this label is not defined exclusively by female authors. More broadly interpreted, Berlin literature can include works by the following authors, among others: Thomas Brussig, Wladimir Kaminer, Sven Lager, Monika Maron, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Ingo Schulze, Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre and Uwe Timm.⁴

The categories of *Fräuleinwunder* literature and Berlin literature overlap but are not identical. As Feiereisen points out, the *Fräuleinwunder* texts are not really about ‘Berlin an sich’ [Berlin itself], although the city impacts the lives of the protagonists and is a contributing factor to their alienation.⁵ Strictly speaking, the ‘literarisches Fräuleinwunder’ [literary miracle of the girls], a term coined by literary critic Volker Hage, is nothing more than a marketing label. Writing in the news magazine *Der*

3 Tanja Dückers, *Spielzone* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag 1999). Judith Hermann, *Sommerhaus, später* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1998).

4 Highlights of scholarship on Berlin literature are Katharina Gerstenberger, *Writing the New Berlin: The German Capital in Post-Wall Literature* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008) and Susanne Ledanff, *Hauptstadtphantasien: Berliner Stadtlektüren in der Gegenwartsliteratur 1989–2000* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2009).

5 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Florence Feiereisen, ‘Liebe als Utopie? Von der Unmöglichkeit menschlicher NÄheräume in den Kurzgeschichten von Tanja Dückers, Julia Franck und Judith Hermann’, in Lea Müller-Dannhausen, Ilse Nageschmidt and Sandy Feldbacher, *Zwischen Inszenierung und Botschaft: Zur Literatur deutschsprachiger Autorinnen ab Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Literaturwissenschaft (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2006), 179–96; here, 184.

Spiegel in 1999, Hage grouped together young female authors who write '[ü]ber Erotik und Liebe, die Grundmelodie dieser Bücher, ... nüchtern und ohne Illusionen' [about eroticism and love, the basic melody of these books, ... soberly and without illusions].⁶ Hage's statement that the authors write predominantly about sex and relationships implies a lack of political engagement or social commentary by the authors (despite evidence to the contrary). As opposed to a movement based on stylistic or thematic concerns, the *Fräuleinwunder* was based purely on the authors' gender, age, attractiveness and marketability.

The label was met with a strong response. Feminists debated the origins of the term as coming from either the German women who slept with American GIs for silk stockings or from the squeaky-clean German media darlings of the Cold War era, such as Romy Schneider and Steffi Graf – in both cases, the term was considered offensive.⁷ Scholars universally reject the appropriateness of the term (despite continuing to use it), but the media and publishing companies picked up on this catchphrase and used it to market books by women in the late 1990s.⁸ In addition to Franck, a number

6 Volker Hage, 'Ganz schön abgedreht', *Der Spiegel* 12 (1999), 244–6; here, 246.

7 Tanja Rauch, 'Das Fräuleinwunder', *Emma* (September/October 1999), 104–9; here, 105. Julia Franck, 'The Wonder (of) Woman', tr. Alexandra Merley Hill, *Women in German Yearbook* 24 (2008), 235–40; here, 236.

8 For critiques of the *Fräuleinwunder*, see Feiereisen, 'Liebe als Utopie?' and the following: Hester Baer, 'Frauenliteratur "After Feminism": Rereading Contemporary Women's Writing', in Mark W. Rectanus, ed., *Über Gegenwartsliteratur: Interpretationen – Kritiken – Interventionen: Festschrift für Paul Michael Lützeler zum 65. Geburtstag* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2008), 69–85; Anke S. Biendarra, 'Gen(d)eration Next: Prose by Julia Franck and Judith Hermann', *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* 28/1 (2004), 211–39; Peter J. Graves, 'Karen Duve, Kathrin Schmidt, Judith Hermann: "Ein literarisches Fräuleinwunder"?', *German Life and Letters* 55/2 (2002), 196–207; and Christine Frisch, 'Powerfrauen und Frauenpower: Zur deutschsprachigen Frauenliteratur der Neunziger', in Thomas Jung, ed., *Alles nur Pop? Anmerkungen zur populären und Pop-Literatur seit 1990*, Ostoeer Beiträge zur Germanistik (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 103–16. Scholars are also guilty of perpetuating use of the term, even in attempts to dismantle it. See the following: Christiane Cammerer, Walter Delabar and Helga Meise, eds, *Fräuleinwunder literarisch: Literatur von Frauen zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*,

of authors came to be associated with the *Fräuleinwunder*, including Tanja Dückers, Karen Duve, Alexa Hennig von Lange, Judith Hermann, Felicitas Hoppe, Zoë Jenny, Tanja Langer and Terézia Mora. While each author had her own relationship to the label, there is no question that the marketing strategy and its surrounding hype drew attention to these authors, many of whom had just published their debuts.

Part of the problem with the *Fräuleinwunder* label was its implication that because these authors did not write about politics, their literature was trivial (in the sense of *Trivialliteratur*), as were the authors themselves. All of the *Fräuleinwunder* authors have continued to publish, and many, including Franck, turned to topics from the German past. The publication of *Lagerfeuer* [Camp Fire] in 2003 marked a turn in Franck's writing away from novels situated in the present day.⁹ Set in the West Berlin refugee camp Marienfelde in the late 1970s, *Lagerfeuer* is narrated by four characters whose lives meet in the camp. Significant for Franck's oeuvre, the novel established a pattern for her subsequent books: important moments in German history serve as the backdrop for the characters' exploration of self and search for intimacy and meaning. Although Franck fled East Germany with her mother and sisters and spent time in the camp in 1978, the novel is by no means autobiographical. Instead, it and the subsequent novels use a moment from her family's history as the jumping-off point for the story. The first novel about German-German refugees, *Lagerfeuer* points to a wound from the German past. It also firmly established her as an important, rising author.

In 2007, Franck published *Die Mittagsfrau* (published in English as *The Blind Side of the Heart* in 2009) and just weeks later won the *Deutscher*

Inter-Lit (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Ilse Nageschmidt, Lea Müller-Dannhausen and Sandy Feldbacher, eds, *Zwischen Inszenierung und Botschaft: Zur Literatur deutschsprachiger Autorinnen ab Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2006); and Heike Bartel and Elizabeth Boa, eds, *Pushing at Boundaries: Approaches to Contemporary German Women Writers from Karen Duve to Jenny Erpenbeck* (New York: Rodopi, 2006).

9 Julia Franck, *Lagerfeuer* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2003).

Buchpreis for the novel.¹⁰ The announcement of the prize and the subsequent book and interview tours catapulted Franck into prominence in the German-language literature scene. *Die Mittagsfrau* was translated into thirty-three languages and published in thirty-five different countries, and Franck enjoyed financial stability as a writer for the first time in her life. Represented since 2007 by the famous publishing house S. Fischer (which publishes books by other distinguished contemporary authors, such as Clemens Meyer, Günter de Bruyn, Monika Maron, W. G. Sebald, Ilse Aichinger, Wolfgang Hilbig, Judith Hermann and Marlene Streeruwitz), her status as a prominent German-language author is firmly established.

It is likely both this prominence and her interest in working through German history that made Franck an obvious choice to be keynote speaker at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*.¹¹ *Die Mittagsfrau* considers the limited opportunities for women, the chaos of Weimar Berlin and the tragedies of Nazi Germany. Yet unlike novelists of previous generations, such as Grass, Franck makes few explicit connections between German history and the everyday lives of her characters in a moralizing way, instead foregrounding subjectivity and individual experience. Inspired by the story of her paternal grandmother, this novel is more concerned with the protagonist's highly individual experience than with the specifically German history that determines it.

Continuing her exploration of the German past, although in a different vein, Franck edited a collection of pieces reflecting on German division, *Grenzübergänge* [Border Crossings], to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.¹² In the introduction to the collection,

10 Julia Franck, *Die Mittagsfrau* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2007). English translation: Julia Franck, *The Blind Side of the Heart*, tr. Anthea Bell (London: Harvill Secker, 2009). The same translation was published under a slightly different name in the United States: Julia Franck, *The Blindness of the Heart*, tr. Anthea Bell (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2009).

11 Armgard Seegers, 'Julia Franck: "Dieses Buch prägte Deutschland"' *Hamburger Abendblatt* (14 September 2009).

12 Julia Franck, *Grenzübergänge: Autoren aus Ost und West erinnern sich* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2009).

Franck writes: ‘es geht mir in dieser Anthologie nicht um das Typische, sondern um das Individuelle, das Subjektive’ [in this anthology, I am not concerned with the typical, but instead with the individual, the subjective] (21). Similar themes emerge again in *Rücken an Rücken* [Back to Back], Franck’s most recent publication.¹³ The family at the centre of this novel is by no means ‘normal’ for East Germany, and Franck does not use them to explore the typical East German experience. Instead, she begins with details about her maternal grandmother and uncle and creates a literary study of complex family relationships that at once transcend national identification and at the same time are inextricably shaped by the country in which they unfold.

Franck once referred to her ‘archetypisches Thema – verlassen und verlassen werden von Orten und auch von Menschen’ [archetypal theme – to abandon and to be abandoned by places and also by people].¹⁴ Certainly the motif of abandonment surfaces repeatedly throughout her oeuvre, as I discuss at length in this study: fathers walk out on their daughters, mothers reject their children, lovers give up on each other and friends disregard any sense of allegiance. Critics and scholars have expressed dismay with this unflinching negative representation of relationships, but Franck refrains from making moral judgements and sweeping statements.¹⁵ Instead she says simply that she prefers characters who ‘scheitern’, or fail.¹⁶ A number of themes run like red threads throughout Franck’s work, but at the core her fiction is about intimacy – coupled with the anxiety of attaining it and the fear of losing it – predominantly in the lives of women.

13 Julia Franck, *Rücken an Rücken* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2011).

14 Kristina Pezzei and Philipp Sawallisch, “Die Grenze hat sich verändert”, *taz.de* [online newspaper] (16 March 2009). <<http://www.taz.de/regional/berlin/aktuell/artikel/1/die-grenze-hat-sich-veraendert-in-20-jahren/?type=98>> accessed 1 April 2009.

15 For a scholarly response to this criticism, see Anke Biendarra, ‘Gen(d)eration Next: Prose by Julia Franck and Judith Hermann’, *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* 28/1 (2004), 211–39.

16 Julia Franck, ‘Second Interview’ [interview with Alexandra Merley Hill] (Berlin: 20 June 2007).

Feminism

Franck's relationship to feminism has been complicated and only recently has it been explicitly connected with her role as an author. The *Fräuleinwunder* was a key point in Franck's career, in part because of its connection to the success of *Liebediener* and *Bauchlandung*, but more important because it marked the start of her public engagement with issues of feminism. Commissioned by *Die Welt* to write an article on the popularity of women's writing, Franck wrote 'The Wonder (of) Woman' in 2000. Rejected by *Die Welt* for being 'fundamentalfeministisch' [hardline feminist], it was first published in *Women in German Yearbook* in 2008.¹⁷ In the essay, Franck critiques the sexist label as one that belittles women's writing as miraculous, much as others had done before her. Yet, while some struggle to free women writers from gender-specific categories, Franck proposes the concept of 'Female Sobriety' as an alternative. She argues that 'a supposedly unifying approach to the erotic', to borrow the words of Peter Graves, does exist in literature by women:¹⁸

I have noticed in the books of my female colleagues that they prefer an unemotional narrative style. Where male colleagues demonstrate uninhibited courage in using pathos, female authors – who are much more easily accused of kitsch because of their gender – walk the line between casualness and sobriety. The fear of the sweet and the nice, of the touching and the maudlin, is great.¹⁹

17 Julia Franck, 'Re: Ihre Frage' [email to Alexandra Merley Hill] (6 December 2006) <amerley@german.umass.edu> accessed December 2006. Also: Julia Franck, 'Das Wunder Frau', *Women in German Yearbook* 24 (2008), 229–35. The original German essay was published simultaneously with an English translation: Julia Franck, 'The Wonder (of) Woman', tr. Alexandra Merley Hill, *Women in German Yearbook* 24 (2008), 235–40. Excerpts from this essay are taken from the published English translation.

18 Graves, "Ein literarisches Fräuleinwunder"?, 196.

19 Franck, 'The Wonder (of) Woman', 239.

In other words, women writers have adopted a certain writing style because they are socially conditioned to do so and because they seek to avoid the criticism that female authors tend to receive.²⁰

Like many of her fellow *Fräuleinwunder* authors, Judith Hermann for example, Franck was uncomfortable with being labelled a feminist in the early 2000s. As late as 2006, she pointed out the following distinction: ‘Ja, ich halte mich schon für eine feministisch denkende Frau – ob ich eine feministische Schriftstellerin bin, weiß ich nicht’ [Yes, I consider myself a feminist-thinking woman – I don’t know whether I am a feminist author].²¹ She and her colleagues avoided the term in part because it was associated (especially in the German media) with an out-dated conception of the women’s movement with which younger generations did not identify. The expectations associated with the idea of feminism meant, for example, that Franck’s critics have frowned upon her unsympathetic representation of women who make mistakes and do ugly things.

Since the publication of *Die Mittagsfrau*, Franck has been a much more active and outspoken member of the feminist community. She has worked publicly with some of the icons of early German feminism, such as Alice Schwarzer and Silvia Bovenschen, and remains actively engaged in discussions surrounding women’s roles in contemporary German society. She served on the jury for the *Emma* prize, which is named for the German feminist magazine. She also spoke on a forum with Schwarzer on Simone de Beauvoir. Franck has been situated in the media as a representative of women’s issues, and she has written newspaper essays and given talks on motherhood, children and education.²²

20 For a lengthier analysis of Franck’s essay, as well as its connection to other feminist investigations of women’s writing, see Alexandra Merley Hill, “Female Sobriety”: Feminism, Motherhood, and the Works of Julia Franck, *Women in German Yearbook* 24 (2008), 209–28.

21 Julia Franck, ‘Re: MLA Vortrag’ [email to Alexandra Merley Hill] (12 March 2007) <amerley@german.umass.edu> accessed March 2007.

22 See for example Julia Franck, ‘Lust am Leben’, *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* (29 April 2006) and Julia Franck, ‘Staat und Religion’, *Der Spiegel* 4 (2009).