

LA WEEKLY

ROSTOCK OR BUST

Achtung!

Wednesday, February 24, 1999 - 12:00 am

By Daniel Akst

I am no stranger to tough audiences, being one myself, but you don't know tough until you've tried reading portions of a comic novel in English to a roomful of stony-faced East Germans. Looking out at my unsmiling listeners as I was about to begin, I tried to draw on some imagined well of tribal experience. What would Henny Youngman have done? Groucho Marx? Woody Allen? Did any of those guys ever play Rostock?

That I was playing Rostock was strange enough. In the States my first novel, *St. Burl's Obituary*, had been well-reviewed and shortlisted for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, but otherwise earned me the fame and fortune usually associated with first novels, which is to say none whatsoever.

In Germany, it seemed, things would be different. For reasons known only to themselves, the venerable firm of Deuticke, in Vienna, brought out a German-language edition of *St. Burl* by a distinguished translator and then called to see if I would do a book tour. Right up until I landed, I suspected a hoax. But no! Not only was there a tour, but there were media interviews, reviews in prominent publications, posters with my face on them heralding the author's appearance, even paperback offers.

What a change! In Los Angeles, I would show up at a bookstore and, if a few of my friends turned out, give a reading. In Germany I had a whole entourage, including a brilliant young Bavarian sherpa to escort me around and pay all the bills. In most cities, a professional actor joined us to read a different section of the book in German, and there were various cultural functionaries as well, so that on at least one occasion, in Hamburg, my party vastly outnumbered the audience, which consisted solely of the adorable Svenja, a strawberry-blond literature student who had lived for a year in Atlanta and spoke English with a Southern accent. Afterward we all went out for margaritas, and I put my foot in my mouth by mentioning the war.

Germany is a spooky place for a Jew, but it is especially surreal to find yourself feted as the author of a work you cannot read. The spookiest parts of Germany I visited were in the East. In the former communist sections of Berlin there are still bullet holes all over the place, and after the reading in Rostock (where we had been warned about skinheads), we had dinner with an embittered Marxist university student who had done the reading in German and complained that the people dancing and singing once the borders opened up didn't even understand what freedom meant. He also claimed that those shot trying to escape bore some responsibility for their deaths; they knew, after all, that this is what would happen if they tried to cross the border. I wondered if comic timing might not be this fellow's strength.

It was a relief to get back to the West. In Dortmund, I was introduced by a professor of American literature who wrote a hymn to *St. Burl* in *Der Standard*, the leading Viennese daily. When we had dinner I was amazed: He was practically the first person I'd met who really got my book. He flagged the line from Whitman and even noticed the echoes of Wallace Stevens, which no American critic did. Later, I got a rave in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, sort of *The New York Times* of the German-speaking world. This was a consolation of sorts: The actual *New York Times* — you know, the one in Manhattan — hadn't bothered to review the book at all.

Evidently, what the Germans liked about my book was what they saw as the sheer Americanness of it, its concern with excess and self-transformation. Germany seems very American in some ways, with its prosperity and its stout, polyglot population, but you shouldn't be fooled by appearances. When I asked about American writers, the name that came up again and again was Paul Auster. I thought: These people really are *Germans*.

My 15 minutes in Germany were an invigorating brush with celebrity, compared to the invisibility of the writer's life in this country, and I hope they will make good practice for yet another surreal foreign-publication experience, one that will mean a strange juxtaposition on my bookshelf — not to mention in my mind. In May, *St. Burl* comes out in a second foreign language: Hebrew.

St. Burl's Obituary is available in English as a Harvest Books paperback.