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Some Notes About Writing in Germany

In an interview, German painter Georg Baselitz once said his situation as an artist in society today is one of complete isolation. Although successful and independent he (Baselitz) felt almost like a madman free to produce and sell his things without any interaction or discussion.

In the field of literature, it's true, there are a lot of critics in Germany. They are publishing their reviews in newspapers. The bigger the newspaper the better. But that's it. Once he has published a book, the writer hopes to find some response to his work. If he gets it he often will be disappointed. Most of the reviews are simply describing the content, occasionally with some remarks concerning the structure. Only in the last two or three sentences does there happen to be some brief assessment. As I said, for most of the writers that's it.

The media landscape in Germany, like everywhere, is dominated by television. There are just a few brief television shows left dealing with literature. All they can do is give some recommendations and present the new books of well-known writers. However, literature seems to be an annex to the mainstream entertainment industry. In my opinion there is much competition due to the new digital media content (video games) the younger people are wasting their time with. The problem is that there isn't anything left for the imagination. Everything is ready-made, finished and well-crafted—but life isn't.

Looking at the academics, invitations by universities are rare in Germany. I have no clue why they are not interested in writers, but maybe they prefer dead people to talk and write about because they can't defend themselves anymore. However, I've never been to a German university as a writer.

The best thing you can hope for is to become known to those people who are connected to literature, whether they are working for publishers and newspapers or simply like to read. This happens via recommendations on a more private level and, most importantly, it needs a lot of time.

As a beginner the most important thing is to get in touch with some kind of literary scene. When I started I first checked out the bars. After two years of roaming around it seemed this path would more likely lead to becoming an ambitious drunkard than a writer. In Germany there are a few very good institutions that are dedicated to promoting young writers. One of them is the *Literarisches Colloquium Berlin* where I've made my first steps like many others who are now part of the new generation of German literature as presented in the *Chicago Review* "New Writing in German" in 2002. The LCB was founded by Walter Höllerer decades ago. During the nineties they offered a kind of literary course which was not exactly what you in the US know as creative writing. The writers had their novels and other projects already. They just wanted to finish them and afterwards launch them into the market.

A second possibility for beginners is the literary agents. Unlike in the US, this a pretty new thing in Germany. They are providing some reasonable support, especially in the beginning,

but later I guess one may wish to get rid of them (I myself don't have one). However, having an agent is a good thing for those who aren't able to find a publisher (and as we all know this means a lot). The second advantage: if there is someone who wants to pay for your work perhaps the agent will get more money out of him.

There are some big cultural institutions who will send you around the world if you are lucky and in the mood: Above all there is the Goethe-Institut, followed by the DAAD (students exchange) and some locally-based organisations like the foundation of the Villa Aurora (former home of the exiled writer Lion Feuchtwanger) in Santa Monica, CA, just to give some examples.

So if you are feeling isolated like Baselitz there is always a chance to keep on moving.