ARTS & LETTERS

The Village

A young German reinvents the Holocaust novel

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In the fall of 2005 the vaunted Suhrkamp Verlag—which manages to be at once the Knopf, the Routledge, and the Harvard University Press of Germany—quietly published twenty-eight-year-old Kevin Vennemann's 140-page debut novel, *Close to Jedenew*. Initially it got very little press. The book had the misfortune of being about a pogrom at a time when books about war guilt and resentment weren't as fashionable as those about young, indecisive people leading urban, indecisive lives. (While the MFA hasn't quite yet caught on here, the style has gotten along famously.)

A few months after the book's publication, a critic on an influential radio program, Deutschlandradio Kultur, called it "by far the best literary text of the last few years that's appeared from a writer under thirty" and "an extraordinary work of art." A month later it was praised, at great length and with great intelligence, on the cover of the book review of *Die Zeit*—a rare occurrence for any first novel—by the editor of the section itself, Georg Diez, who probably guaranteed its success by calling it "the first war-novel of a new generation." By the following fall the book was in its fourth edition, and translation rights had been sold in half of Europe and in the United States, where it was recently published by Melville House.

What makes the book "the first war-novel of a new generation," Diez explained, was that "it is a book of a generation that no longer asks itself how it ought to relate to German guilt—for them, *Close to Jedenew* says, this history is more than anything a story." (The German words for "history" and "story," it's relevant to note, are the same.) What Diez might have meant by this is that Germany has reached the point where, when it comes to cultural treatments of the Holocaust, content no longer overwhelms form. Germans have a tendency to document the National Socialist past flatly, as if formal inventiveness were too playful, or perhaps too self-important in its advertisement of imagination and sensibility. ("Everyone likes Günter Grass because he is such a bad writer," a German writer friend said to me once, and I'm fairly sure he wasn't kidding.) But what makes Vennemann's novel worthy of its reputation is not only the novelty of its form, its storylike qualities, but how well such a mode accommodates his bleak content.

"We do not breathe," the book begins. "The place is close to Jedenew, we hear the Jedenew farmers singing, bawling, playing clarinet, accordion, we hear their songs for hours already, old partisan songs, they play and sing and bawl in a strangely melodious fashion." It's clear, though never explicit, that this village of Jedenew is in far eastern Poland, near what is now the Lithuanian border, and that the chronological events of the book are taking place in the summer of 1941. The Russians have just decamped and the Germans are just arriving, and in a moment of fear and uncertainty the local Poles—German involvement is never quite apparent, though soldiers are present—have turned on a local secular Jewish family with whom they have been not just friendly but intimate for at least two dozen years. *Close to Jedenew* seems to follow the events of July 10, 1941, when most of the Jews of Jedwabne were shot or burned in a barn by the Polish half of the village. (This story was told in Jan T. Gross's 2000 book *Neighbors*; Vennemann has not explicitly acknowledged the connection.)

The "we" who are not breathing are here hiding from their neighbors in an unfinished treehouse, and it is the "we" who narrates throughout. Unlike other recent examples of first-person-plural narration—Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* and Ed Park's *Personal Days* come to mind—the "we" does not represent a

cohort from which individuals are intermittently rotated out for examination, but rather a single narrator here speaking at the center of concentric crowds. At its most inclusive, the narrator's "we" represents the Jews of Poland; it narrows to mean her family in Jedenew; it narrows again to mean she and her twin sister, Anna; it narrows, in the last three pages of the book, to a final "I." As the story moves along—which, in this book, means as the story moves back through the recent past and then forward again—the diminishment of the "we" is described. At first the "we" is eight: There is Wasznar, the nearest neighbor; Antonina, his daughter; Marek, her new husband and a Jew; Anna and the narrator, Marek's younger sisters; their father; and a Polish housemaid and her young son. This becomes nine when Antonina and Marek have a daughter. It becomes six when they are hiding in a closet, and, later, two in the treehouse.

This history is told in a way that is less nonlinear than simultaneous. The book's times and places often shift between the beginning and the end of a sentence:

> Not until the second or third day do we notice how hungry we are. We draw lots, and Anna has to set off first to scrape up something to eat in the fields, we agree that she should go as soon as it's dark enough and the fog is high enough that she can climb without risk out of the treehouse, down the rope-ladder and onto the ridge to fetch us what we need from the fields. Before she goes, we wait until the guard in the garden behind the house is alone and turns away from the ridge and from the woods, when she goes, Marek gazes silently after Antonia, gazes silently at the wall for a few minutes, and then says to Anna: I have to go to work, and Marek, already on his way out, turns around briefly once more outside the bedroom door, and says with a smile: In summer, then, in summer, when Zygmunt is big enough to get something out of it, too, we can finish building the treehouse.

At the beginning of this passage, "we" are the two twins in the treehouse; the scene pivots on the transition "when she goes," however, with the "she" no longer referring to the hiding Anna but to some earlier point at which Antonina is leaving a bedroom, and Marek finds himself promising that they will finish the treehouse

come summer. Naturally, it is still unfinished when the girls must hide in it. This treehouse is the book's organizing metaphor: It speaks at once to the incomplete projects of childhood and the minor unpreparednesses that, together, made up the major one. The dissipation of childhood innocence and the extermination of a village's Jews are presented with a simultaneous melancholy urgency so that one never trivializes the other; they each are allowed to vibrate in different registers of loss.

The combination of a certain sinuousness, a preoccupation with memory, and extended-remix sentences have led some German critics to compare Vennemann to Sebald—Germans, who tend not to like Sebald all that much, are still eager to produce his successor for Anglophone audiences—but I think the more useful comparisons are to the Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard and the poet Paul Celan. Vennemann's prose is fugal; like Bernhard's, its insistent repetitiveness creates a lull of grayness against which minor variations are set off like flares. But where Bernhard's repetitions are strategies of evasion and reticence, Vennemann's style creates a hungry atmosphere of lack: There is simply not enough memory for a sixteen-year-old trapped in a treehouse to retrace. There is not enough memory because there was not enough time—for actual events and for those events to be compressed and insinuated as memory—and there will not be enough time. The narrative "we" treads the grounds of the recent past in smaller and smaller rotations.

But this repetitive vagueness functions on a different, extra-narrative plane as well, and this is perhaps the primary reason the book has been plausibly described as the inauguration of a new generation of German Holocaust fiction. Throughout, the narrator's father haltingly relates the foundation myth of their family farm close to Jedenew, which involves getting lost in a snowstorm with a surly coachman and a frozen corpse. Father has been telling this story for years, and at some point his children discovered that he has probably lifted it from one of the books in his library. The narrator comments:

> That doesn't bother us. For everything that happens at our home close to Jedenew is a story, we determine and decide, when we consult about how we're going to deal from now on with the fact that Father's story is not his at all, that he only pilfers his story from here and there and devises it as his, that we know nothing about his true story, and so also don't know how he actually in reality comes to be on the farms close to Jedenew, but we decide that this story that he pilfers from here and there and devises as his is now, for us, his story, just as everything around us is only a story that can just as well be an invention as Father's. That we preserve and keep for ourselves, or forget, or someday pass on, or can only remember for ourselves, once, twice, more often, and then can forget when we want, or must forget when nothing else is possible. But always remember and must remember again one last time when, as we decide, we have no other choice.

One can't help reading this as a reflection on the German storyteller's anxiety that in writing about the Holocaust—in writing a story, in Vennemann's case, about an event in which there are no survivors—he has pilfered from here and there and devised what has become his story. But, *Close to Jedenew* says, that might, by now, be okay; there is no other choice but to inhabit the invention. This is what it means to be the first Holocaust book from a generation of writers who do not feel burdened by guilt. It is a harrowing, remarkable, serious novel, in part because it is not a guilty one. This is no "never forget" platitude. This is new remembrance.

#CLOSE TO JEDENEW #FICTION #GERMANY #HOLOCAUST #KEVIN VENNEMANN #LITERATURE #NOVEL #WRITERS

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