

PICK OF THE SYLLABUS

The New Germany as the Wild East

Krishna Winston, Professor of German Studies, selects

Willenbrock by Christoph Hein, translated by Philip Boehm '80



The course known today as German 260 appears in the 1968–69 *University Bulletin* I happen to have in my office as German 160, Twentieth-Century Novel. The readings included works by Mann, Kafka, Hesse, Broch, Musil, and Grass. Today the course bears the less workaday title *Giants of German Prose*, but we still read Mann, Kafka, Hesse, and Grass. I have added works by Max Frisch, Heinrich Böll, and Peter Handke for greater representation of the post-WWII period. The absence of women from the list of German-language writers with ready name-recognition in the United States remains troubling, as does the dearth of exciting works by younger Austrian, German, and Swiss writers available in good translations. But one work by a not-so-young writer affords us a glimpse of post-Wall Germany that the reader will not soon forget.

The Wall that had separated West Berlin from East Berlin since 1961 was breached on Nov. 9, 1989. Eleven years later, Christoph Hein published his novel *Willenbrock*, which then appeared (2003) in a splendidly idiomatic English translation by Philip Boehm '80.

The protagonist is Bernd Willenbrock, an East German engineer who has adapted to the collapse of the old state-owned industries by retooling himself: he has become a used-car salesman, or, as he prefers to be called, a dealer in “previously owned” vehicles. Although he often grumbles about the high taxes he must pay, Willenbrock has done very well for himself; he owns a house in a spanking new subdivision on the outskirts of East Berlin and an old farmhouse with outbuildings about two hours north of the city in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. He has set up his wife in a clothing boutique, to give her something with which to occupy herself, and plans to build a showroom, once the land he has been leasing becomes available for purchase. Willenbrock's chief customer is Krylov, a sinister Russian businessman who buys cars in batches of three or more for immediate resale in Eastern Europe. Krylov shares political and philosophical observations with Willenbrock that reveal the profound cynicism of an intelligent man determined to turn the breakdown of totalitarian order to his own advantage.

Hein's Willenbrock is not a particularly likeable character. An inveterate skirt-chaser, he returns to his wife after afternoon trysts with his libido recharged. He takes no interest in politics and shuns introspection. His relationships with members of his family, his handball team, and his indispensable Polish auto mechanic remain superficial at best. Yet Hein tells the story from the protagonist's perspective and draws the reader into Willenbrock's state of mind as things begin to happen that undermine his smugness and sense of control.

The first crack in Willenbrock's confidence appears when he receives a phone call from a former colleague, who reveals to Willenbrock that another colleague regularly filed reports on him and others with the company management. Unlike many East Germans, Willenbrock has never shown any curiosity as to what files were kept on him, and he at first dismisses this information, irritated that his former colleague has reminded him of the past.

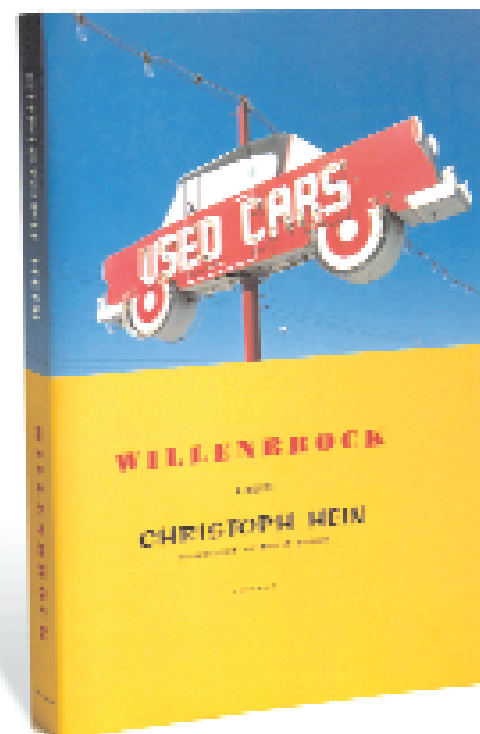
Then comes a nocturnal break-in at the used-car lot. Some cars are stolen, others damaged. The police respond with indifference, hinting that they suspect insurance fraud. Instead of renewing his insurance, Willenbrock hires an out-of-work mechanic as a night watchman. A member of Willenbrock's handball team who does business in Russia tells stories about being robbed in a locked hotel room at night and in a girlfriend's apartment. Then comes an attack on Willenbrock's night watchman and the killing of the man's beloved dog, and finally a terrifying break-in at Willenbrock's country home while he and his wife are there asleep.

Hein shows Willenbrock entangling himself in lies as he tries to shield his wife from further anxiety and conceal his own rising panic. As Willenbrock installs one security device after the other and finds himself both appalled at and tempted by the forms of help Krylov solicitously offers his “German friend,” his will is gradually broken (as his name indicates). Every night he and his wife wake up at ten past two, the time of the break-in. Yet when Willenbrock's mechanic Jurek worries about his son back in Poland, who becomes first a “hooligan,” then a gang member, then a criminal, Willenbrock makes light of Jurek's despair.

Hein's deadpan narrative produces a growing sense of foreboding in the reader. Hein recounts

events in simple declarative sentences and conveys Willenbrock's feelings without commentary. But when Willenbrock is asked by the police to identify one of the brothers from Moscow suspected of the home invasion, Willenbrock sees a human being: “. . . he seemed helpless and in need of protection, slight as he was, shabbily dressed in cheap pants and a thin shirt.”

The failure of Communism in Eastern Europe has left social, political, economic, and environmental devastation. Yet in the capitalist free-for-all that has taken its place, poor devils like the brothers from Moscow and slick operators like Krylov threaten the sleep of the would-be bourgeois. To Americans, accustomed to murder and mayhem on the 11 o'clock news, this portrait of the Wild East should seem not unfamiliar. To those blinded by the bright lights of reunited Berlin, Christoph Hein points out what lurks in the shadows. 



BOOKS

Roots Music

In her first novel, award-winning screenwriter and playwright Nina Shengold '77 charts the lives of three outsiders who become involved in a precarious love triangle, set in the rugged forests of the 1970s Pacific Northwest.

My first view of Washington State's Olympic Peninsula was something akin to love at first sight. I was 22, strapped into a red Kelty backpack that didn't quite fit. I was having a summer adventure en route to a theater job in San Francisco; I thought I was just passing through. But the mountains seduced me. For the next year, I strayed ever farther off the beaten path of family expectation, working on trail and treeplanting crews in the Olympic National Forest and a salmon troller in Southeast Alaska.

I left the Northwest, but it's never left me. My first produced play, *Homesteaders*, is set in Alaska; my first published story, *Off the Road*, on Vancouver Island. I've just published my first novel, *Clearcut*, a boundary-crossing love triangle set in the raw, mist-soaked beauty of the Olympic Peninsula.

What's the hook? Why would a woman who was born in Brooklyn, grew up in suburban New Jersey, and educated in the dubious wilds of Middletown, Conn., keep going back to this part of the world with the stubborn fervor of a chum salmon fighting its way upriver to spawn? In Seattle on my recent book tour, I described myself not as a Northwesterner, but as a Northwest fan. It's a landscape that people escape to, wild and inspiring enough to spark dreams of regeneration.

For people who came of age in that odd slice of time between the Vietnam War and the AIDS crisis, between Watergate and disco, the back-to-the-land urge is part of our generational wiring. We may have been the first group of Americans to practice downward mobility, turning our backs on riches and striving for

what blues musicians call "ragged but right."

None of *Clearcut*'s three main characters is a native of Washington state. Earley Ritter, the novel's outsized leading man, is a transplant from Georgia, a self-styled loner who ekes out a living by cutting up cedar stumps left behind on lands clearcut by big timber companies. In the opening chapter, he picks up a hitchhiker named Reed Alton, a privileged Berkeley dropout who's heading north in search of his sometimes-girlfriend Zan, a fiery young woman on the run from her troubled past. Earley falls hard for Zan as soon as he meets her, and erotic sparks fly in unexpected directions. (*Clearcut*, which won *nerve.com*'s Henry Miller Award competition for Best Literary Sex Scene this August, includes healthy helpings of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Reed is a


mandolin player, whose music of choice—Grateful Dead, Allman Brothers, The Band—was the soundtrack to my freshman year at Wesleyan; my research rule of thumb was, "Did I hear this album in Clark Hall?")

Clearcut wasn't supposed to be my first novel. I'd started another, complex and ambitious, and as it eluded me month after month, I decided to write a nonfiction short story about my treeplanting crew, who resembled live versions of R. Crumb cartoons. I reread the journals I'd kept during my Northwest walkabout and discovered, along with a trove of obsessively detailed descriptions of landscapes, tools, wildlife, and weather, the seed of a shaggy dog story about a backwoods logger who just wanted a shower and found himself thwarted in every attempt to get clean. (Showers matter a lot when you work outdoors and sleep in an unheated tent in the woods.)

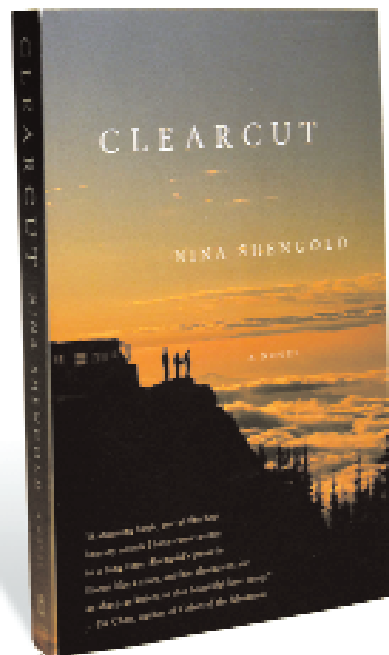
I brought the rude beginnings of this story into my writers' group, where one of my wiser peers told me, "You're sneaking a novel." By god, he was right. Unlike my abortive first novel attempts, the story wormed itself into my every waking moment. I couldn't wait to get back to my desk. I made my living writing other things—television scripts, magazine features, theater anthologies—and stealing a few hours with Earley, usually late at night, was like having a wonderful, furtive affair.

As a woman who lives primarily in my head, it was fascinating to write about a man who lives almost wholly in his body. Some readers have found it surprising that a

FOR PEOPLE WHO CAME OF AGE IN THAT ODD SLICE OF TIME BETWEEN THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE AIDS CRISIS, BETWEEN WATERGATE AND DISCO, THE BACK-TO-THE-LAND URGE IS PART OF OUR GENERATIONAL WIRING.

female writer adopted this masculine point of view, but the things that Earley experiences in the course of this book—loneliness, yearning, desire, lust, confusion, grief—are not male or female emotions. They're human emotions. If *Clearcut* has a theme, it might be that the boundaries with which we define ourselves are a lot more fluid than most of us like to admit. Male or female, straight or gay, Eastern suburbanite or backwoods Northwesterner, we all share the same roots. 

Nina Shengold won the Writers Guild Award for *Labor of Love*, starring Marcia Gay Harden; other TV scripts include *Blind Spot*, with Joanne Woodward and Laura Linney, and *Unwed Father*. With Eric Lane, she has edited 12 theater anthologies for Vintage Books and Viking Penguin.



BOOKS

Just Published

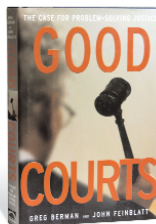
Our selection of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

GREG BERMAN '89 AND JOHN FEINBLATT '73

Good Courts:

The Case for Problem-Solving Justice

(The New Press, 2005)



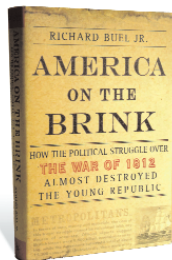
This well-organized study describes the history, objectives, and achievements of a national movement toward problem-solving justice, an umbrella term applied to a wide range of specialized courts—such as drug, domestic violence, and community courts—that allow innovative judges, lawyers, and community leaders to work together to improve the justice system for victims, offenders, and communities. Authors Berman and Feinblatt focus on three groundbreaking problem-solving courts in midtown Manhattan; Portland, Oregon; and Red Hook in Brooklyn, New York; and investigate how they contributed to turning around crime-ridden neighborhoods and had a positive impact on individuals appearing in court.

**RICHARD BUEL JR.,
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY, EMERITUS**

America on the Brink:

How the Political Struggle Over the War of 1812 Almost Destroyed the Young Republic

(Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)



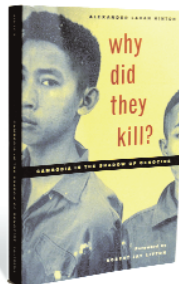
This carefully researched account tells the story of how the struggle between Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party and Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Party two decades after 1795 exemplified and threatened the political life of the early American republic. Buel explores why the Federalists, who worked with great efforts to consolidate the federal government before 1800, went to great lengths to subvert it after Jefferson's election. Readers will gain fresh insights into American political, economic, and legal affairs of the early 19th century and an understanding of how close the young nation came to falling apart almost five decades before the Civil War.

ALEXANDER LABAN HINTON '85

Why Did They Kill?:

Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide

(University of California Press, 2005)



In this remarkable study, one of the first anthropological attempts to analyze the origins of genocide, Hinton examines the period in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, which lasted from April 1975 to January 1979, when government policies resulted in the death of 1.7 million of that country's 8 million inhabitants—who perished from execution, starvation, arduous labor, illness, and malnutrition. Hinton traveled to Cambodia to interview both Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers and survivors of that horrific time, and he investigates why mass murder happens and what motivates perpetrators to kill.

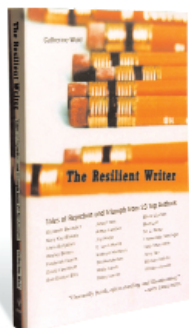
CATHERINE WALD '76

The Resilient Writer

(Persea, 2005)

In this entertaining interview collection, Wald talks to 23 successful authors about their experiences dealing with rejection from literary agents, editors, publishers, critics, and even those close to them. Reading about how these writers continued to write and triumph despite a lack of encouragement should prove inspiring to both novice and experienced creative artists.

— David Low '76



FICTION AND POETRY:

AMY BELDING BROWN P'07

Mrs. Emerson's Wife

(St. Martin's Press, 2005)

JACK MCDEVITT MALS '72

Seeker

(Ace Books, 2005)

ANATOLY NAIMAN (author)

F. D. REEVE, PROFESSOR OF LETTERS, EMERITUS,
AND MARGO SHOHL ROSEN (translators)

Lions and Acrobats

(Zephyr Press, 2005)

PETER PEZZELLI '81

Every Sunday

(Kensington, 2005)

KIT REED

ADJUNCT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

Dogs of Truth: New and Uncollected Stories

(Tor, 2005)

F. D. REEVE, PROFESSOR OF LETTERS, EMERITUS

My Sister Life

(Other Press, 2005)

NONFICTION:

CATI COE '92

**The Dilemmas of Culture in African Schools:
Nationalism, Youth, and the Transformation
of Knowledge**

(University of Chicago Press, 2005)

JOSEPH J. FINS '82, MD

A Palliative Ethic of Care:

Clinical Wisdom at Life's End

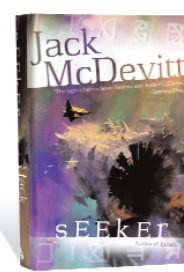
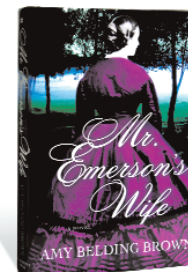
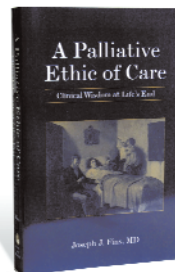
(Jones and Bartlett, 2005)

BOARDMAN W. KATHAN '51

A Church Set Upon a Hill:

The Story of the Prospect Congregational Church

(Brandywine, 2004)



CATHERINE KANO KIKOSKI MA '63 AND

JOHN F. KIKOSKI '63

**The Inquiring Organization—Tacit Knowledge,
Conversation, and Knowledge Creation:
Skills for 21st-Century Organizations**

(Praeger, 2004)

STEPHEN LEWIS '89

The Ambivalent Revolution:

Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910–1945

(University of New Mexico Press, 2005)

DAVID NELSON '75

**Judaism, Physics and God: Searching for
Sacred Metaphors in a Post-Einstein World**

(Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005)

ANNE PETERS '79, MD

Conquering Diabetes

(Hudson Street Press/Penguin, 2005)

KAREN RICHMAN '78

Migration and Vodou

(University Press of Florida, 2005)

NICHOLAS SAMMOND '83, EDITOR

Steel Chair to the Head:

The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling

(Duke University Press, 2005)

JOE VANDER VEER JR. '59, MD

A Surgeon's Devotions

(Pleasant Word, 2004)

MARIS A. VINOVSIS '65

The Birth of Head Start:

**Preschool Education Policies in the Kennedy
and Johnson Administrations**

(University of Chicago Press, 2005)

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