



Fall 11-17-2006

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Recommended Citation

Aubry, Ann, "Professor's Book Examines East German Identity Through Science Fiction" (2006). *News and Events*. 3317.

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Professor's Book Examines East German Identity Through Science Fiction

November 17, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Sonja Fritzsche grew up during the latter part of the Cold War, when bomb fears had taught Americans to dread communist nations such as East Germany—which made that culture fascinating to her as "the ultimate 'other.'" She was studying abroad in Berlin when East and West Germany were reunified into a single nation in 1990, and she felt the excitement of that threshold in German history.

Fritzsche also grew up with an appreciation for science fiction and "the thought game that goes with it: The exploration of philosophical ideas, the exploration of the 'other' of alien worlds, and the reflection upon your own world while you're reading a story," she says. Science fiction "gets you to think analytically."

She combined these two interests in her doctoral dissertation, which she expanded into a book just released by Peter Lang publishers, *Science Fiction Literature in East Germany*. The book explores East German science fiction and the context in which it was created throughout the country's 40-year history—providing an overview of domestic, international, literary, historical and cultural influences.

Fritzsche, who is assistant professor of German and Eastern European Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University, said it was the double marginalization of East German science fiction that compelled her to explore that mostly uncharted form of literature: It was marginalized both by the West German assumption that East German literature was worthless propaganda, and by the prejudice against science fiction as "trivial literature."

Fritzsche studied authors who used science fiction to express socialist ideals, often as a corrective vision that was seen as subversive by the party—and sometimes employing the fanciful nature of the genre to get their alternate version of communism past censors.

She thinks the examination of East German work is important in light of the country's continuing Eastern/Western "identity split," and a lingering perception that East Germany's past is not worth further investigation.

"I think the more that you can talk about the past, the more that helps the present, because it helps them understand each other. I think it's important for Easterners to look at their past and work through that past, and find out what was worthwhile and also what wasn't."

Fritzsche is now extending her research to include science fiction film in East Germany, for which she has been awarded an internal University grant.

Fritzsche received her bachelor's in German and History from Indiana University, her master's in Modern European History from the University of California—Los Angeles, and her doctorate in Germanic Studies from the University of Minnesota.



Sonja Fritzsche

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