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Sonja Fritzsche

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Sonja Fritzsche, Illinois Wesleyan University, interviewed by Charlie Schlenker, WGLT
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Literature reflects society. And an Illinois Wesleyan University Scholar has a new book that looks at the faceted divided reflections of Germany given by Science Fiction in East Germany. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker has more...

Charlie Schlenker: Sonja Fritzsche grew up in the latter part of the Cold War amid the fear of the Communist nations as nuclear threats. She was studying in Berlin during German reunification. Now the Professor of German and East European Studies at Illinois Wesleyan University has a new book on science fiction in East Germany. Why did you want to study that genre?

Sonja Fritzsche: I've always been an avid science fiction reader and I was quite interested in East Germany as "the other", meaning that it was always the undiscovered country so to speak, the country that I was not able to see, didn't know anything about because it was beyond the wall, and this subject allowed me to combine both of my interests. I feel very fortunate to be able to do so.

Charlie Schlenker: In the U.S., science fiction writers often use their genre to signal to the rest of the world that the light ahead comes from that oncoming train.

[Both laugh]

Charlie Schlenker: It can also be a literature suggesting societal correctives whether the problems are environmental, technological, or class conflict. Do the goals of science fiction writers in East Germany differ?

Sonja Fritzsche: Science fiction by definition is a thought game in many ways, that it allows you, the reader, to see their own world and themselves through a mirror so to speak that—where that makes them think about their own society. The East German science fiction writers were in many ways using science fiction politically in this way because there was—they were writing under conditions of censorship, they had to hide their critique of their society in their writing through metaphor and I want to make it clear that they were critiquing socialism as it was a reality in East Germany but they were also Socialists at the same time and they were looking for Democratic Socialism.

Charlie Schlenker: So what does it say about the East German identity then?

Sonja Fritzsche: I think what's very interesting about these writers and also their readers—they created a niche so to speak within East Germany that allowed these people to speak much more freely than they could generally because this was a trusted community and that was, in many ways, how East Germany worked in the 70s and the 80s. It was—it became what has been termed a "niche society", so where people could have trusted conversations about reality with their friends which were not reflected in the public sphere.

Charlie Schlenker: That's very odd because normally writers want to get published widely.

Sonja Fritzsche: Well this is also what's interested because, of course, the publishing institutions were owned either by the state or were owned by the party or were owned by organizations like the Free German Youth, which was, of course, a party institution. They had a certain kind of story that they could publish. There was another one that was called The New Berlin, which had a much free-er reign because it was just supposed to show what a new Berlin was—would look like. They also had a limited number of books that they could publish because there was a paper shortage and if someone got a hold of a book, which was difficult in itself, they passed it around to all of their friends, so just because, you know, one book was published, often ten people would read that book.

Charlie Schlenker: As opposed to ten books and one reader here.

Sonja Fritzsche: Exactly.

[Both laugh]

Sonja Fritzsche: In many ways—in many ways it was—East Germany was—really people read in East Germany because that was the place they could find the truth. They couldn't find it in the newspapers or in television.

Charlie Schlenker: Are there plot constructs or elements in East German science fiction that would be recognizable and resonate with U.S. readers?

Sonja Fritzsche: This is why I think it's so interesting to study science fiction from other countries and science fiction from the eastern bloc. There are many things that are not in these stories because the stories had to be "realistic". Of course, the party determined what that was so that—you can put that in quotes, but for instance, time travel was not allowed because it was—is not verifiable that that could actually exist. Most of the stories took place in the near future within five to ten years showing what the future would look like as a model for that future but when you get to the 70s and 80s you have stories that took place much further away on completely different kinds of planets allowing writers more leeway because they wouldn't be compared directly to East Germany by the censors but these stories are much more about societies and comparing and playing with what is the best kind of society, the best kind of government in many ways.

Charlie Schlenker: If the past is prologue, what does East Germany's speculative fiction say about the lingering East-West divide in the united Germany.

Sonja Fritzsche: A lot of the writers actually stopped writing. Their economic situation didn't allow them time to write because many of them had lost their jobs, etc. There are a couple of writers who have continued to write and they're not focusing on East-West identity per se but they critique the West in general and globalization and concepts of knowledge and whether or not the knowledge that we have today will help us towards our future or if—won't we destroy ourselves and have to start over again. Some of them are very apocalyptic.

Charlie Schlenker: That's also a fairly common Western theme.

Sonja Fritzsche: Yes, exactly, and that's where I think these two do tend to meet.

Charlie Schlenker: Illinois Wesleyan University Professor Sonja Fritzsche's new book is called *Science Fiction Literature in East Germany* out with Peter Lang Publishers. Fritzsche is now studying the film output of East Germany. I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.