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Brygida Helbig Angels and Pigs in Berlin

Excerpt

Brygida Helbig's *Angels and Pigs in Berlin* is one of the most interesting émigré stories to appear in Polish literature over the last decade, and there have been a profusion of these novels. However, the problem was that of the million Poles who left the country and dispersed about the globe, the decided majority experienced a typical story saying that anyone who earned money in the West either remained a slave to the illegal labour market, or was a criminal, or sold their own body.

Angels and Pigs is a refreshing change in this context. Ironical and sensitive, caustic and sentimental by turns, this book tells a story that's expressed in the style of personal biography. As a result there is no stereotyping, even if the episodes described are quite ordinary. It is the story of Gisela Stopa, a girl from Poland who arrives in Germany, learns the language while living at a resettlement centre and does some studying. Then she has a modest, but big success – she gets a job at a college. And then more: she finds a husband, adopts a child and produces her first literary attempts. All three events mark her triumph over being foreign – culturally, socially and in terms of language. The heroine has achieved the hardest thing of all – she has reinvented her own everyday life in a foreign country, made close ties with other people and developed her own style of self-expression.

However, the story doesn't have a happy ending. Quite the opposite: her marriage fails, the university closes her department and the literary club turns into nonsense. Despite these misfortunes the energetic Gisela goes on striding the streets of Berlin. For a while she has no job and no husband, but she has achieved the most important thing – she knows she can cope.

Thanks to her literary sensitivity she also knows what an important role language plays. Helbig uses some awful metaphors such as "Polish pigs" or "German precision" because in her story language is one of the protagonists. Brought to the surface and examined under the light, it shows how society lives in terms of metaphors which it uses to label the world. In the early 1980s the Germans were hungry for something different, so they took in foreigners, gave them grants and sent them to university. Now, in the early twenty-first century, they are fed up with strangers.

So should they change their diet? "Savour" their foreigners rather than "devour" them? Brygida Helbig's tale is more likely to convince them they should refresh their own metaphors. And to do that you need literature.

Przemysław Czapliński

Brygida Helbig (b. 1963) is a writer and scholar of literature. She read Polish studies at Szczecin and Slavonic and German studies at Bochum University, and worked in the Slavonic department at Berlin's Humboldt University. She has published a volume of poetry entitled *Jasmine Poems* (1997) and a novel entitled *Pałowa* (2000).

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