

**When Monsters Migrate**  
**Fairy Tale Motives in German Postwar Literature**

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Let me begin with a brief consideration about what myths and fairy tales have in common. While myths are stories of survival in the face of an unpredictable fate or irresponsible gods, fairy tales contend with the world of humans. Both myths and fairy tales are staying alive in the collective imagination because they represent unresolved conflicts; they grapple with seemingly unanswerable questions and enduring tensions. These core moments of unresolve keep fascinating us throughout our respective histories, as Klaus Heinrich, a scholar of religion and mythology has argued. In other words: What remains unresolved, remains present. Or, to speak with Friedrich Nietzsche: what keeps hurting remains in memory. And there are plenty of unresolved social problems. Wolves still roam our woods, in animal but more often in human form; parents still abandon their children, either by economic necessity or cruel neglect; girls or others deemed inferior are still humbled and humiliated into submission or molested by figures of authority. The patriarchal mirror that grants female visibility or cancels them is still in place. In myths, neuralgic points of conflict or unresolve are not repressed, nor, I believe, are they repressed in fairy tales. To the contrary, we can say that the performance of repression keeps myths and fairy tales both fascinating and meaningful. (Heinrich 340, 336) Here I am thinking, for instance, of Perrault's "Peau d'ame" ["Donkeyskin"] or "Le barbe bleu" ["Bluebeard"] where incestuous or murderous desires of fathers or husbands drive the plot, yet it is the daughter's or wife's behavior that is scrutinized and judged. Thus, while fairy tales ultimately seek to balance imbalances, they also expose social secrets or hidden chambers. They simultaneously repress and expose what they repress. In the following, I will show how Gisela Elsner's *Air Raid Alarm* and Rachel Seiffert's story "Lore" deploy fairy tale elements to address unanswered questions about Germany's perpetrator's history by exposing hidden memory chambers and strategies of repression at the heart of Germany's cultural memory.

Andrew Teverson has observed that "fairy tales are fiction's natural migrants." (Teverson 2008, 54) He is referring to the fact that the origins of fairy remain elusive in many cases. But while we may struggle to locate and locate these narrative migrants in time and place, they are

nonetheless deeply historical. In fact, anything but timeless, fairy tales are incisive memory texts. This is apparent in recent German memory work that uses fairy tale symbols, motifs and narrative structures as the kind of powerful morphology that can expose blind spots in the politics of memory. As I show in my recent book *Writing the Child*, this kind of work grapples with silenced parts in our memory, with underlying suppositions, denial and desire. Fictions of memory, as I define them, address the imaginative at the heart of narratives contending with histories that resist facile understanding. In the case of the material under consideration here, fairy tale elements chart and expose liminal spaces of personal and collective unresolve.

Both Gisela Elsner's satirical novel *Air Raid Alarm* (1989) and Rachel Seiffert's story "Lore" (2001) travel into territories of the implausible in order to reveal the shape of underlying collective frameworks of memory. They are fictions of memory in the double sense of the term "fiction". On the one hand, fiction refers to literature that is concerned "with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters," on the other hand, in law, fiction also refers to existing conventions that underlie our practice of understanding. (Nünning 5) The *Oxford English Dictionary* speaks of suppositions "at variance with fact but conventionally accepted by reason of practical convenience, conformity with traditional usage, decorum, or the like." (quoted by Nünning 4) This is to say, fiction can denote both literary narratives, as well as implicit reference frameworks at variance with reality and fact, frameworks that are conventionally accepted and can thus parade as fact. In Elsner's and Seiffert's work, fairy tale elements are tasked with bringing to light this twofold meaning of fiction. They traverse spaces of the imagination to expose conventionally accepted suppositions in a memory script that rests on the myth of German innocence.

Aside from their play with fairy tale motives, what distinguishes these texts from other memory work is their focalization. They deploy the voice and the gaze of children, a perspective which has been shaped by the fairy tale tradition. As you all know, the classic European fairy tale, from the late 1600s to the 1900s was instrumental in framing children's perception of who is good and who is evil, of what is permissible and what is not. Another two centuries later, authors like Elsner and Seiffert can draw on the readers' familiarity with the focal point of classic fairy tales. While their texts are not intended for children, the voice and the gaze of the child nonetheless take centerstage. In this case, as both objects and subjects of the narrative, the notion of the innocent child comes into view as "naturalized" in Barthes sense of the term. The

fictional child reveals to what degree the claim of historical innocence does the work of obfuscation. As an aesthetic icon of innocence and vulnerability not marked by specific cultural, national, historical or personal circumstances, the child effectively masks the ideological forces that called it into existence. It can thus support the fantasy of collective innocence. In Elsner's provocative novel, the protagonist five-year-old Lisa Welsner aligns herself with the hero of a dark fairy tale, whose sociopathic protagonist cannot experience fear or terror. Lisa and the band of children she belongs to are fearless fighters for Hitler. "Lore", on the other hand, does not explicitly refer to any fairy tale. Instead, it draws on the well-known fairy tale choreography of forced departure, search for temporary shelter, encounter with a villain, the appearance of a magical helper, and finally a happy ending. We accompany Lore and her four siblings, German children abandoned by their high-ranking Nazi parents after May 1945, on their perilous journey to their grandmother's house and into a knowledge about evil that sharply differs from the ideological certainties that framed their childhood.

### **No Time for Play: The Execution of a Dystopian Fairy Tale in Air Raid Alarm**

Let me introduce Gisela Elsner, an author whose work was only recently rediscovered and republished. Born in 1937, Elsner witnessed the collapse of the Third Reich as an eight-year-old. Growing up in the city of Nuremberg as the daughter of a wealthy *Siemens* executive, she resents her upper-class privileges while nonetheless remaining forever defined by them. She joined the communist party in 1977 and for the rest of her life remained committed to the social ideals envisioned by Marx, Engels and Lenin. After the initial success of her first novel *Die Riesenzwerge* [*The Giant Dwarves*] published in 1961, Elsner's oeuvre (16 prose works and 4 collections of essays and diaries) was quickly sidelined by the literary establishment, not least due to its ideological slant. Summarily judged as unseemly, her satires were considered unsuitable for a woman author. Ideologically and socially isolated at the time of the publication of *Air Raid Alarm*, Elsner had difficulties finding a publisher and was in financial distress, a situation that may have contributed to her suicide in 1992, three years after the publication of her last novel.

Elsner's text counters a script that gained traction in the late 1980s when the German *Kriegskinder* rewrite postwar memory. For the first time, a generation, who had been silent in light of the genocide committed in the name of their nation, spoke out about their traumatic

wartime experiences. In fact, forming a “community of mediated remembering” as Sara Jones has called it, their voices support a shift in the collective memory script. Their narrative homogenizes a multitude of eye-witness testimony about the same historical period without, however, offering the recipients “a range of conflicting accounts. Rather the different voices confirm an overarching narrative about a past that remains contested. These are not rival testimonies mediated alongside each other, but complementary testimonies, with each supporting the “truth” of the other.” (Jones 37) Numerous edited volumes of war time memories of German children (Bode, Lorenz, Alberti, Dörr) validate privately shared but publicly unacknowledged memories of war. In short, echoing the early postwar script of the 1940s and 1950s, fifty years later, the *Kriegskinder* voices invent a new memory centered on a nation of traumatized but innocent German civilians.

*Air Raid Alarm* describes the bombing attacks in Nuremberg during the last years of the war as a “wonderful childhood” (FA 11) for children of the “master race,” that is. Bombed-out ruins in their neighbourhood serve as their “home” (FA 10) and their make-shift concentration camp. These serious children “have no time to play” (FA 170). They have their own SS division and decide to capture Rudi, a neighbourhood boy, and haphazardly mistreat him until he confesses to be what they accuse him of being: a Jew and hence an *Untermensch* [of inferior race]. While seemingly outrageous, the mind-set and actions of these children accurately reflect the historical reality at the home front.<sup>1</sup> Like their fairy tale cousins, Elsner’s protagonists are not conceived in realistic or psychological fashion. Rather, they are highly stylized and sardonically distorted. Yet it is this distortion that preserves cultural memory, both its manifest and its repressed parts.

Lisa and her friends are unapologetically enthusiastic about Hitler’s demands. They seek to be “Hard as Krupp steel, tough as leather, agile as greyhounds,” a directive repeated over fifty times throughout the text, visually distinct in capital letters. They know what the *Führer* wanted: „I want a violent, imperious, undaunted, cruel youth. Youth has to be all that. The free magnificent predator has to again radiate out of their eyes. [...] They shall learn to conquer fear of death for me in the most difficult trials.” (Rauschnig 237) *Air Raid Alarm* evokes a type of older dystopian fairy tale (omitted in the second edition of the Grimms’ *Household and Fairy*

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<sup>1</sup> This is described in some more carefully curated *Kriegskinder* memoirs as a time of adventure and excitement. See for instance Dörr.

*Tales*) that features the inadvertently ‘evil child’ whose play ends in death and destruction since s/he lacks emotional intelligence and fails to understand the difference between reality and fiction, life and death. In this case, in contrast to her terrorized parents, who tremble and howl in the air raid shelter, a totally fearless children celebrate the bombing attacks. It is no chance that a box of fairy tales has been deposited in the liminal space between air raid cellar below and the domestic quarters above. Elsner writes her story half a century after the end of the war when collective memory narratives again coalesce into tales that know only victims and no perpetrators. In other words, in the late 1980s Germany’s memory culture effectively rests on a mix of wishful thinking and magical adjustments; the bombing war has become a story that creatively blurs differences between fact and fiction.

Like all fairy tale characters, the child protagonists in *Fliegeralarm* lack any kind of reflective interiority, the plot is driven by the kind of wish-fulfilment fantasies that animates both fairy tales and Hitler’s ideology. In order to understand that which is beyond their grasp, yet omnipresent and claimed to be the irrefutable truth by the Führer, such as “final solution,” they resort to magical thinking. How, for instance, can Rudi, the boy they declared to be a Jew, look like a human and have no fear? The only plausible explanation is a kind of magical transformation: “He must have been transformed by some magician, by some witch or by some evil fairy into a human.” (FA 114) Since they have no clue of what any of the Nazi slogans actually mean, they consider them to be part of a magical realm, replete with fairies, witches and magicians. This faulty logic nonetheless does its work. The children manage to transform their victim from a self-assured boy who refutes their absurd claims with clear reasoning into a boy who in the end believes his captor’s fantastical assertions. He must be a Jew, an “Untermensch,” of inferior race, destined to die. In the end, he pleads to be allowed to die and accepts that he must be a Jew who somehow was transformed into a human in his sleep (FA 184).

Like in the classic fairy tale, the plot line, is defined by leaving home and finding refuge in a temporary home before reaching a final destination and happiness. In this case, it is a voluntary departure since the siblings do not feel appreciated by their regime-critical and cowardly parents. The text both evokes and subverts the topos of a temporary home or site, the testing ground in the “forest” often occupied by witches and ogres. In this case, a makeshift concentration camp ruled by preschool-age children playing Nazis is the “forest.” Instead of being victimized by witches and ogres, the children themselves are the monsters. Lisa hopes that

seeing a Jew, supposedly an inferior human being, would finally teach her fear, absurd reasoning that shows how deeply children absorb ideological directives without understanding factual reality. There is a happy end, albeit a distorted one, marked by the destruction of their “Wätz concentration camp” during a bombing attack. This act of destruction caused by the Allied bombing war for ever erases the scene of the children’s crime. Hence, there can never be accountability for their murderous act. The innocent victim is dead, while his clueless executioners are let off the hook. This, the children guess, must be the much discussed “final solution”, the event “that would finally resolve everything” (FA 96). And ironically, it is indeed a solution, a magical erasure of the true extent of anti-Semitic violence committed by civilians during the Third Reich, here provocatively revealed as child’s play, directed by a dystopian fairy tale. It is no chance that the parents had deposited a box of fairy tales on the threshold between domestic quarters above and air raid shelter below: At the time of the conception of *Air Raid Alarm*, experiences at the home front had been transposed into the palatable adage of what then chancellor Helmut Kohl called the “mercy of a late birth.” The *Kriegskind* generation, while old enough to have witnessed it was too young to be held accountable. Yet, as *Air Raid Alarm* insists, while not exactly a fairy tale, it nonetheless became a story that did not register acts of complicity and implication. In the final part of my paper, I will examine how Seiffert’s story “Lore” uses of fairy tale elements to expose layers of complicity and implication.

### **What do you want from Me? Implications in Seiffert’s “Lore”**

Born and raised in the UK as the daughter of a German mother and an Australian father, Rachel Seiffert has published five novels. Concerned with grey areas of history, they trace intimate and complicated connections between victim and perpetrator, colonizer and colonized, good and evil. Her own multilingual and multicultural biography is shaped by unresolved parts of history. Although well aware that they were convinced and active Nazis, she remembers her German grandparents fondly. She also remembers being called a Nazi herself while growing up in Oxford, UK. Born in 1971, she belongs to a “belated” generation, the so-called *Kriegsenkel* generation (grandchildren of war), tied to Nazi atrocities through her family. Aware that Britain has been spared many of the horrors of World War II, she is also aware of the cost of empire, the

cost of collective domination and exploitation: “How does it feel”, she asks, “to be on the wrong side of history? Questions like this spark my urge to write.” (Seiffert, 2017) “My grandparents were Nazis. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know this. Opa – my grandfather – was in the Brownshirts and was later a doctor with the Waffen SS; Amfi, my grandmother, was an active party member. I owe a great debt to my mother Gretchen for never hiding these uncomfortable facts from me.” (Seiffert, 2017)

“Lore” is the middle story of *The Dark Room*, a collection of three interrelated stories about the intra- and intergenerational legacy of the Third Reich. Lore, a young teenager, is the daughter of high-ranking Nazi parents, tasked with guiding her four siblings to their grandmother’s home across war-torn Germany in May of 1945. Not only is their family background a liability, the children’s convictions are also contradicted by everything they see and hear on their journey from the South of Germany to Hamburg. They have to confront the difference between a firmly ingrained victor’s perspective and the reality of humiliation after total defeat and feelings of shame about mass-sanctioned genocide. Their journey becomes even more complicated when they meet Tomas, a young man with a questionable background, who possesses papers and a tattoo that identify him as a Jewish survivor. Although he is an inferior human in Lore’s eyes, the younger siblings appreciate him as a magical helper. His savviness ultimately allows them to navigate the rules of the Allies and different occupation zones.

“Lore” deploys fairy tale elements in more indirect ways than *Air Raid Alarm*. On the plot level, the text modulates the fairy tale script: there are evil outside forces that lead to a sudden departure from the family home; encounters in the metaphorical forest with helpers and villains; and a happy ending that allows the children to find a safe home. Like the classic fairy tale, the protagonists are closely identified by their social status and actions and lack interior depth. Moreover, the reader remains at a remove from both characters and the unfolding events. Lastly, the story’s implausible finale also bears fairy tale elements. Not only do the children find their way across various occupation zones, they are able to find their grandmother’s house in Hamburg, which would have been highly unlikely in a city devastated by a firestorm in 1943. That said, in stark contrast to the simplicity of the classic fairy tale, which insists on clear boundaries between good and evil and seeks to establish order and justice in the face of social violence, there is no redeeming moral symmetry in “Lore.” (Martinez-Alvaro) Yet their

miraculous arrival is not really a fairy tale ending since their childhood innocence, their sense of knowing what is right and what is wrong has given way to a sense of confusion. Aware of her inadvertent implication in a collective story of perpetration, Lore is both defiant and disoriented.

Like *Air Raid Alarm*, “Lore” puts into question the reassuring binaries of a fairy tales. Who is a victim? Who is a perpetrator? Who is good? Who is evil? Tomas seems to be the magical helper. But is he really? A petty thief who seemingly spent time in a concentration camp, he shows up at just the right moment. He wants to travel with the group of five children is since their baby brother guarantees more access to food. This encounter between a young German girl raised as a fervent Nazi, and Tomas, a young German who uses the identity of a Jewish victim, speaks to the presence and role of the Jewish other in the collective imagination of a perpetrator nation. Conceived in 2001 by an author born well after the World War II in a country that battled Nazi Germany, the story shows the complicated German-Jewish (negative) symbiosis. Those persecuted under Hitler (and their descendants) continue to trigger unresolved feelings of attraction and repulsion. In other words, philosemitism and anti-Semitism reside side by side, forming a “negative symbiosis” (Diner, Bartov). This configuration is brought into focus by a question Tomas eventually asks Lore: “What do you want from me?” Lore, haunted by the photographs of concentration camp victims posted by the Americans and acts violence committed by men who look like her father, is confused about her ambivalent and contradictory feelings for Tomas. She keeps obsessively mulling over his question:

*What do you want from me?* She tries to unravel Tomas and prisons and skeleton people; lies and photographs; Jews and graves; tattoos and newspapers and things not being as bad as people say. In the middle of this all are Mutti and Vati and the badges in the bushes and the ashes in the stove and the sick feeling that Tomas was both right and wrong; good and bad; both at the same time. (DR 151–52)

Lore’s thoughts make clear that she struggles with understanding what it means, to be “on the wrong side of history”, implicitly confronting the reader with the question what and who we should remember.



First uttered by the impostor of a Jewish victim, and then repeated by the daughter raised as a Nazi, this question addresses the reader as well: What do we want from him? From the vantage point of our belated perspective we, the readers, also demand clarity. Who is Tomas? What does he stand for? Passing as a Jewish survivor, Tomas is aware of and probably complicit in acts of perpetration. Yet at the same time, he, like Lore, is a young adolescent born into a country torn apart by ideological distortions who is looking to survive the chaos of the end of the war. As such both are victims of circumstances beyond his control. Moreover, we, the readers, also have to confront the fact that suspicions about Tomas are at once unfounded and founded. On the one hand, he opportunistically used the persecuted ‘other’ to both his and Lore’s advantage. On the other hand, he is a magical helper whose knowledge allows the children to survive. In short, along with the protagonist, we have to grapple with the fact that at this point, almost everybody inhabits a grey zone of complicity and implication, few can be sorted into good or bad. The text brings to light what it means to be an implicated subject as outlined by Michael Rothberg. While aligned with Nazi power and privilege, these *Kriegskinder*, are not direct agents of harm in that they have not actively contributed to the violence that surrounds them. But they nonetheless inhabit, inherit, and most importantly, benefit from Hitler’s ideology and its fall-out. (Rothberg 1) Exposing unresolved and repressed parts of history, “Lore” at once underscores and deconstructs our desire for fairy tale certainties.

As my brief reading of *Air Raid Alarm* and “Lore” has shown, part of a collective script, the fairy tale narrative continues to preserve and navigate unresolved parts of cultural memory. These fictions of memory indicate that the fairy tale register has retained its power to delineate not only a sense of shared memory but also those parts that remain repressed. As fictions of memory they expose the unremembered parts, the suppositions “at variance with fact but conventionally accepted by reason of practical convenience.”

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