



Interview with Helga Frese-Resch, editor at Kiepenheuer & Witsch

This interview was conducted during the Berlin Literature Seminar, organized jointly by the British Council and the Centre for British Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The seminar focused on “Brit Crime – A New Golden Age of Crime Writing?”

What role does crime fiction play for your publishing list?

About ten years ago, we began with highly politicised crime novels, e.g. by Christian von Dittfurth, and also with historical crime fiction. We then continued with German crime authors and realized that these sell well. We then had a look around abroad and now have a few crime series on our list, but not from England. Most of the crime novels are from Scandinavia.

How important are public readings for your marketing strategies?

Not very, one must admit, since most crime readers are not really interested in meeting the author. They ask fewer questions than at readings with literary authors.

It is my impression that reading crime fiction is escapist reading which makes one feel content after having finished the book. In order for readers to have further questions for authors the latter need to be very well known.

Lesser-known authors are difficult in terms of public readings, but that is true in general, not just in terms of crime fiction.

Then how do you market crime stories?

There are websites, e.g. Krimi-Couch, where readers are active online. We use printed advertisements in publications. And much is achieved with the help of booksellers: we send out reading copies and if the booksellers like the book, they will concern themselves with promoting it.

Do you pay authors for readings?

Yes, of course. Foreign authors often receive less than German ones, because the additional costs are high. But they receive a fee for the reading.

In Germany, creative writing-courses are less important and not so wide-spread compared to the UK. Do you think you might learn something in this area from Britain?

There are two universities in Germany where one can study creative writing. I think that is a good idea since in Germany there still exists this odd idea of the writer as “genius”, who can write as soon as inspiration has come to them. But a lot of it is craft. That is the reason why I believe that such courses are important, in particular for the purpose of practicing writing. Whether one does that in creative writing study programmes at university or whether one does that in more informal group settings is less important in my opinion.

I think creative writing is a good thing. But it is a bit odd that one can write a PhD in creative writing. I don't find that convincing. There is a difference between working academically or doing a kind of further training. In general, I have nothing against such activities.

Do you think more wide-spread creative writing courses would change your publishing activities?

No, I don't think that because we check very carefully anyway whom we adopt for our list. We don't chose people who we think cannot write yet.

How do you find new talents then?

There are quite a few different ways. Encounters with foreign authors happen during the book fairs. We are in touch with many foreign publishers and agencies. Quite a lot is done via the agencies but also via the recommendations of other authors, in particular in the German-speaking areas. But for foreign writers this works mostly via agencies and foreign publishing houses.

Thank you for the short interview.

Sandra van Lente, 30 January 2016, translated by Gesa Stedman