

Christa Wolf: *Patterns of Childhood/A Model Childhood*

It's tricky writing a review of a novel that most people will not be able to read in the original and which got published under two different titles in English translation. It's harder still to review this novel in our time, not so long after it was first published, but light years away in terms of the cultural context of its potential readers. Yet Christa Wolf's *Patterns of Childhood* (or *A Model Childhood*) is a novel with a message for a time she probably never envisaged: ours.

Christa Wolf was undoubtedly one of the greatest novelists writing in German in the twentieth century. Why have you, dear reader, probably never heard of her? Simple: because the economics of translation and publication of authors writing in languages other than English means that a lot of worthwhile literature gets ignored. What does get translated tends to be read by smaller readerships than those who read novels written by English-speaking writers: sales of translated novels show this. What sales figures cannot show is how many novels of quality never get translated into English at all, in part because of the economics of translation and in part because of the chauvinism of Anglophone readers. (If you don't think there is such chauvinism, wait until the next Nobel for Literature is announced: there will be a predictable loud outcry from writers and pundits in the US if an American is not the laureate. There will be contempt if the nominee writes in a European language that Americans don't think is 'important', no matter how many languages that writer's works have been translated into.) Wolf is one of the relatively small number of novelists writing in German who did get published in English; nevertheless, she is known to relatively few in English-speaking countries. This is a pity, since she can stand alongside the greatest novelists of the twentieth century, writing in any language.

Wolf spent most of her career writing in what was then East Germany (the Deutsches Demokratisches Republik). She was critical of enough of the regime to have been tailed by the Stasi, although she was a convinced Communist who regretted the reunification of Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her complex relation to her home country is an indication of what we see in her novels: they defy generalisation. In their subject matter, their form, their literary technique, they refuse to fit into neat categories. They are all, in one way or another, risky.

Kindheitsmuster may be the most risky of all. The fact that the title proved to be so difficult to render in English is one small sign of its risks. 'Kindheit' in German means childhood and the -s on the end of it in the German title indicates possession, so the most obvious translation would be 'of childhood'. 'Muster' is the problem. It can denote a pattern or a model, as in a dress pattern or an architect's model of building, or a design or specimen. It can also mean a paragon or exemplar, as in 'a model student'. In English 'model' does not easily escape connotations of superior quality.

The cover of the first translation into English read 'Patterns of Childhood'. The cover of the second read 'A Model Childhood'. The first made a singular noun into a plural, but that decision was defensible, given that there is more than one child depicted in this novel and therefore, presumably, more than one kind of childhood. The problem with Wolf's novel does not lie in swapping a singular for a plural. It lies in how you render 'Muster' at all. The first translator opted to suggest that there are many kinds of

childhood, many 'patterns' and this novel is about more than one of them. The second opted to suggest that the novel is about one kind of childhood.

The problem with the second translation, which presumably came into existence because someone was dissatisfied with the first, is that in English, 'model' generally implies more than a prototype; most often, it signals excellence. The novel certainly does not suggest that its protagonist's childhood was perfect, a shining example to uphold. In fact, the novel makes clear this childhood wasn't. *A Model Childhood* only makes sense as a title for this novel if one understands it as ironic. It's clear to me from having taught this novel in translation—initially under the first title, later under the second—that not every reader gets that, even after reading the novel.

Why not? That has to do with the way this novel unsettles readers' expectations of a period of recent history most people think is a morally open-and-shut case: the Second World War. Hitler was wrong (only Neo-Nazis and Holocaust-deniers dispute this) but was only able to do wrong with the cooperation of a large number of other people (no one who thinks Hitler was wrong disputes this, either). The conclusion that seems obvious to many is that the other wrongdoers were mostly Germans, though some are too polite to say this out loud given that Germany is now a trusted ally of its former enemies. The generally unstated cultural wisdom of English-speaking people is that we were right, courageously battling Hitler in the cause of Good and Germans were at best too gullible or cowardly to resist him, or at worst, willingly complicit, not only in his territorial ambitions but his genocidal mania.

Wolf's novel, set in a town somewhere in eastern Germany in the years leading up to WW2 and just beyond its end, tells a story of growing up in the Third Reich. One protagonist seems to be a child who spent her early years in this context, but there is also a first-person narrator, a writer, who in midlife looks back on her childhood during the Hitlerzeit. The narrator's memories are both clear and confused: sometimes clear memories of a confused time, because they are the memories of a child who grew up knowing nothing but this warped world, a child who could not remember an earlier time, could not remember, in effect, anything resembling normality. Sometimes they are confused memories simply because of the amount of time that has passed, as all our memories of childhood can be confused.

The effect of Wolf's novel comes, in significant part, from the way its narrative technique unsettles its readers, plunging them into the predicament of the chief protagonist and of the narrator. To explain much more would be to give the novel away, and that means in this case not only revealing the plot, but revealing the means by which the telling of the story is the author's way of immersing its readers into the moral maze that the story depicts. To read this novel is to enter into a certain kind of confusion, of moral certainty and uncertainty, of information and lack of information. Part of Wolf's skill is to use narrative technique to reproduce for the reader the dilemmas of its characters.

Patterns of Childhood is, therefore, not an easy novel to read: not easy in both the sense that readers can only slowly figure out what the narrative technique is showing them but also in the sense that the moral questions the novel raises are in themselves harrowing. For an English-speaking reader, steeped in the easily-assumed moral superiority of a descendant of those who were indubitably right, there is a further challenge: what if any of us, plunged into that world, had been no more courageous, no

less blinded that the millions of Germans who failed to challenge Hitler's regime? What if I, the reader, had not been one of those who heroically resisted, at great personal risk, but who decided not to know too much, not to ask questions, in the name of personal survival?

Some readers, of course, will not be troubled by this question. Many of my students were quite sure they would have numbered among the heroes of the resistance or the angels of compassion who sheltered Jews in their basement—and perhaps they would have been. However the sheer disparity between the numbers of those who resist injustice—in any society, in any time—and those who keep silent out of fear, suggests that the likelihood is that most of us would not have been heroic in Hitler's Germany. To acknowledge this is not to excuse complicity. It is to acknowledge our own moral fragility.

The questions the novel raises are both specific to the time in which it is set, but are also perennial, and as such, questions any of us may yet face. When I was growing up, there was a tacit assumption that the worst that could ever be in human history was past. Our parents and grandparents had endured this dark time, but thankfully we, the post-war generations, would never encounter anything similar. Yet we have. Genocide reappeared in Rwanda, Cambodia and Bosnia, to name only three post-WWII examples. We could excuse ourselves for standing by and watching the horror on the pages of newspapers or the screen of a television, by pointing to the fact that these were far-away places and that genocide has not been perpetrated in any country where we ourselves live, but the fact is that the world largely stood by and watched these genocides unfold, step by gruesome step, without intervening. Genocide is happening in Gaza at this moment under the world's gaze and nothing is being done to stop it. Protestors march and chant and their protest is important, but they protest from the safety of countries where freedom of speech and assembly are protected. One could argue that individual citizens are helpless in this matter: none of us, as an individual, has the wherewithal to stop the bombardment of Gaza or the blockade of humanitarian aid to its people. Most of us do not have the skills of the doctors and nurses who risk their lives going to Gaza as medical volunteers. Nevertheless, it's not clear that we are any more helpless than the average citizen of the Third Reich.

In the years I taught this novel, I thought I was giving my students a lens through which to re-evaluate their own relationship to the past. Now I think I was offering them a lens through which to observe the future. From either perspective, Christa Wolf's novel remains important.

Highly Recommended: 5/5 stars