



by Johannes Groschupf
Eichborn
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Fiction

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Backyard Heroes

Hinterhofhelden

review

This is Johannes Groschupf's second novel. The author, born in 1963, earned his living as a travel journalist until the age of thirty, when, during a trip through the Algerian desert, his helicopter crashed and burst into flames and he emerged as the sole survivor. Groschupf's extraordinary adventure and recovery from severe burns became the subject of his first novel, published in 2005 under the title *Zu weit draussen* but not so far in English. Now he tackles something very different.

Hinterhofhelden takes us into the characteristic 'Hinterhöfe' of Berlin, the courtyards which connect turn-of-the-century blocks of apartments and where much of the residents' life takes place. The story is set in the 1980s, before the fall of the Wall, in the district of Neukölln, where workingclass Berliners, immigrants, and students live side by side. This third-person narrative revolves around Odefey, a naïve young man from West Germany, who arrives in Berlin to go to university there. He finds a flat, set in deepest Neukölln, by accident, which sets a precedent for his subsequent, seemingly random, adventures. Very soon after his arrival he gives up his studies and spends most of his time drifting through the streets, photographing scenes of everyday life with his newly acquired camera. He makes a series of chance encounters with typically feisty neighbours and soon becomes integrated. He is chased by a sex-crazed middle-aged housewife but restores his reputation and earns everyone's respect by agreeing to take on the bully of the block in a staged fight, which

guarantee.

he ends up winning by accident. There is also a proper love story, when Odefey meets Meetje, a student and fellow resident of Neukoelln, and after various crises decides it is time to grow up.

This novel excels in bringing Neukölln to life, its atmosphere, smells and noises and its idiosyncratic inhabitants. It is refreshing to read a book that highlights the sense of community and ordinary, everyday life in this area which, in the German press, is so often portrayed simplistically as a place of deviant behaviour and seemingly unresolvable social problems. It stands in the tradition of a wave of 'alternative' Berlin novels, which started in the 1990s, and explores its theme with a sense of humour and real empathy. Well worth considering.

press quotes

'Johannes Groschupf has written a terrific novel about distortions, social and physical ... The minimalist style is spectacularly penetrating.' – *Frankfurter Rundschau*
'A compelling and poetic piece of literature.' – *RBB*
'He makes literature out of his life, literature that can stand alone.' – *Berliner Morgenpost*

about the author

Johannes Groschupf, born in 1963, has been a freelance journalist since 1988, during which time he has contributed to newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit* and *die taz* and also written for the radio. In 1999 he received the acclaimed Robert Geisendörfer Prize for his radio feature *Der Absturz* ('The Crash'). In 2002 his novel *Zu weit draußen* ('Too Far Out') was published and became both a critical and commercial success: it has sold over 15,000 copies to date.

Previous works, and translations thereof, include:

Zu weit draußen (Eichborn, 2005)

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Eichborn was founded in 1980, and is one of Germany's few independently-owned general publishers still operating. Its imprints include Die Andere Bibliothek ('The Other Library'), founded by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Eichborn Berlin, which concentrates especially on first novels by young German authors. Its non-fiction list covers humour, gift and reference books, among other subjects. Many titles originally published by Eichborn have been translated into English, including W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants and The Rings of Saturn*; *A Woman in Berlin* by Anonymous (winner of the 2006 Schlegel-Tieck award); Jenny Erpenbeck's *The Old Child and Book of Words*; Walter Moers' *The 13½ Lives of Captain Bluebear*, and Jan Costin Wagner's *Ice Moon*.