



by Ulrich Weber
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Biography and Memoir

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Friedrich Dürrenmatt: A Biography

Friedrich Dürrenmatt: Eine Biographie

review

Centre stage

Ulrich Weber, the curator of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's literary estate and one of the foremost Dürrenmatt scholars, has written an authoritative life of the Swiss literary giant.

While Friedrich Dürrenmatt's work is widely appreciated among English-language readers – his work is on the German A-level syllabus, and his most famous play, *The Visit*, was recently staged at the National Theatre in London (interrupted by lockdown), directed by Tony Kushner – no biography is available in English. A translation of Ulrich Weber's biography, with all its new insights into Dürrenmatt's life and work, would be a prime candidate to fill this gap in the market.

Weber's detailed account of Dürrenmatt's life progresses through childhood, primary school, secondary school and confirmation. There is a brush with suspected polio, as well as an account of his early interest in Greek myths and astronomy. The book recounts Dürrenmatt's sympathetic view of the Nazis as a young man – sympathies that continued until shortly before the end of the Second World War. There is an account of his university studies in philosophy in Zurich, his first girlfriend, and military service. Dürrenmatt subsequently breaks up with his girlfriend and marries his first wife, Lotte Geißler. Weber details his early successes as a dramatist and

his turn towards political comedy, his meeting with Brecht and friendship with Max Frisch, his illness (diabetes) and intimations of mortality, intermittent stays in sanatoria, financial difficulties, and finally the great and overwhelming success of *The Visit*.

Dürrenmatt becomes one of the giants of the Swiss literary scene, alongside Max Frisch, and *The Visit* is performed on Broadway, directed by Peter Brook, with Bette Davis, Ginger Rogers, Laurence Olivier and the Rockefellers attending the premiere. Dürrenmatt, finally famous and wealthy, drives a Jaguar, and acquires a wine cellar and a swimming pool. He pursues extramarital affairs, while Lotte attempts suicide and suffers from depression and alcoholism. Dürrenmatt's career thrives, reaching a climax with the success of *The Physicists*. After Lotte's death, Dürrenmatt remarries the actress Charlotte Kerr. The latter part of the book details Dürrenmatt's honorary doctorates, prizes and honours, and charts his change of publisher to Diogenes, who are also the publishers of the present volume.

Weber's book eloquently presents Dürrenmatt in the context of his time and historical circumstances, and explains his significance within the German-language literary landscape. The book's meticulous research includes information gleaned from hitherto unpublished letters and diaries and presents a comprehensive and detailed view of this enduringly influential literary figure.

about the author



© Ulrich Weber

Ulrich Weber, born in 1961, is the curator of Dürrenmatt's literary estate in the Swiss Literature Archive in Berne, and the organiser of the Swiss Literature Summer Academy in the Dürrenmatt Centre, Neuchâtel. He is a visiting lecturer at the University of Fribourg's Institute for General and Comparative Literature.

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