

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Home | Business | National | International | Sports | Columnists | Entertainment | Tech | Travel | Cars

Search Site

YellowPages.ca Canada 4 1 1

Finance Careers



ENTERTAINMENT

Breaking News

Home Page

Business

Personal Finance

National

International

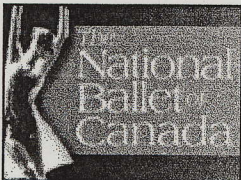
From the Field

Sports

Entertainment

Book Club

Technology



Special Reports

Tech Gift Guide

Small Business

Business Travel

Air-India

Golf Guide

Today's Paper

Front Page

Report On Business

National

International

Sports

Comment

Columnists

Headline Index

BE THE FIRST TO KNOW

globeandmail.com

By REBECCA CALDWELL
Saturday, November 1, 2003 - Page R18

Columnists



Television



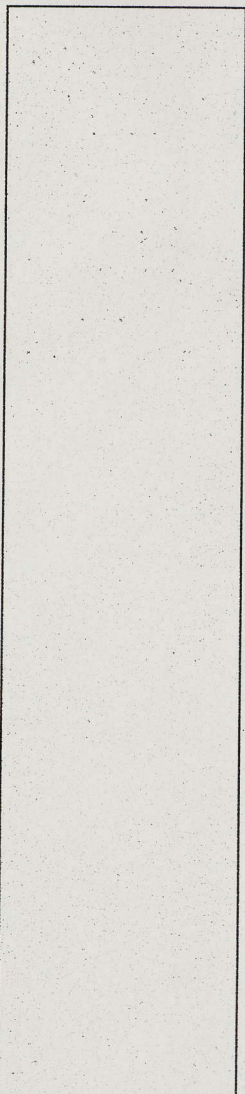
Arts



Moviegoer



Advertisement



If Hegel knew his precious Zeitgeist would travel through centuries and philosophy classes only to find itself co-opted as a marketing tool to glorify anything from Internet search engines to rock bands, he no doubt would have despaired of the dialectic and gone back to bed and waited for the world, and not history, to end.

But while many dread the Z-word, it's still an aspiration for many authors, and usually a genuinely admirable one that reminds readers of the underground streams both nourishing and carving out their lives. Just look at three authors at this year's International Festival of Authors, whose names are or were synonymous with distilling Zeitgeist into book form – from the older vanguard, Tama Janowitz of the United States and Japan's Kaori Ekuni, and relative newcomer, Germany's Juli Zeh. Stylistically different, they each tap into a dark, unsettling existence of desperation and addiction.

TV Li
Enter

Movie
Glob
Enter

Adva
Revie

Infor
Enter

Reco
Enter

News

Get F
review
Style
to you
Friday

Other Sections

Appointments
Books
Births & Deaths
Careers

The electrifying *Peyton Amberg*, Janowitz's ninth novel, concerns a woman who escapes her working-class existence by marrying a dentist. Within two years she finds herself bored and almost repulsed by her husband. Peyton's job as a travel agent gives her no fulfillment, only ample opportunity to embark on a series of

Cars
Cartoon
Classifieds
Crosswords
Education
Environment
Facts & Arguments
Focus
Features
Health
Horoscopes
Obituaries
Online Personals
Real Estate
R.O.B. Magazine
ROB TV
Science
Style
Toronto
Travel

desperate affairs around the world. Janowitz's use of a vernacular suited to the emotionally and intellectually naive Peyton only heightens the bleakness of the character's actions.

"For me *Peyton Amberg* was an exploration of what has happened to women in the last 150 years since *Madame Bovary* was published," explains Janowitz, best known for her collection of short stories *Slaves of New York*, and often credited for reinventing the New York literary scene in the 1980s, along with Bret Easton Ellis and Jay MacInerney.

"Emma Bovary had no options, except a deluded idea about love, but Peyton would have had a great deal many more options, she could have gone back to school, she could have volunteered. So many people say, what's wrong with her, but there's so many people have something missing inside, there's this desperation."

From sex without love to love without sex, there's Kaori Ekuni's bizarre love triangle in *Twinkle, Twinkle*. Told in **crystal-clear prose**, it's the story of a near-alcoholic, Shoko, who under pressure, marries Mutsuki, a gay doctor. With Shoko's consent, he continues his relationship with his boyfriend Kon, a student. It's a dynamic that slowly pulls all three of them apart.

Advertising Info

Advertise with The
Globe: Newspaper,
Web, and Magazine

The book was a breakaway bestseller when first published more than 10 years ago in Japan. (Ekuni says she hasn't yet read the recent English translation and can't say if it captures the spirit of her original work). Ekuni, now 39, and the author of a number of books, including many for children, says she didn't expressly mean to write a tragedy, but one that showed love in conflict with sex.

Services
Newspaper
Corrections
Customer Service
Help & Contact Us
Reprints
Subscriptions
Web site
E-mail Newsletters
Free Headlines
Help & Contact Us
Make Us Home
Mobile
Press Room
Privacy Policy
Terms & Conditions

"For such a long time, people have been free to live the sexual lives that they please, but there are a lot of single acts of love that are taken for granted – touching someone, holding hands," she said through her interpreter, Anne Ishii. "I wanted a super-simple relationship situation, which should involve sexual freedom and sexual liberation, keeping in mind what is taken for granted."

While Shoko, Mutsuki and Kon have a particularly unique arrangement, the book was also meant to reflect a greater unease about the state of marriage and love in Japan.

"Certainly love is in a problem state right now, for everyone, the young and old," said Ekuni. "People in Japan are receiving too much information, so when it comes down to dealing with their own feelings, it becomes more problematic dealing with all the variables."

Marriage isn't an issue in Juli Zeh's modern noir *Eagles and Angels*. Max is an international lawyer working for the UN when his highly unstable girlfriend, Jessie, the daughter of a European drug lord, kills herself. Her death sends Max into a cocaine-fuelled bender during which he uncovers a conspiracy between his boss and vicious Albanian war criminals. Part doomed love story, thriller and political social commentary, Zeh mixes Jessie's invented metaphorical code alongside

numbing descriptions of Max's addiction creating an oddly compelling, dream-like work.

Zeh's writing has produced comparisons to Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq and Zadie Smith. *Eagles and Angels* won a fistful of awards in Germany, notably the best new novel award. The recently released English translation (which Zeh

admires, but as a unique work in itself), just picked up a prize.

Born in Bonn but now based in Leipzig, 29-year-old Zeh enrolled in a creative writing course while studying international law – she's set to take her last exam in a few months time. She's already written two other books since *Eagles and Angels*; the second is a blend of fiction and travel memoir describing her journey through Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2001, but her third book is not for a commercial audience – it's a potentially precedent-making, theoretical case study arguing for a country's right to take the European Union to court should they be turned down for membership.

"Writers should have a political opinion," she says. "If you try to ignore it, you're not being honest. You can't ignore it, if you really want to take part in a 100 per cent way, politics should be there."

If anything links these three writers, it's the flat, disconnected sense of morality in their books. Max says outright that he never had any concept of fairness, of right from wrong, stating simply that all lawyers are like that. The semantic intellectualization of morality is "very much my topic" Zeh says.

"I have the feeling that morality went from the core of things to the surface because we are trying really hard, with politics especially, to legitimize things by finding words for it, putting it in certain word patterns, and this is where morality exists," she says. "For example, if you want to lead a war against whomever, you wouldn't say like we did 150 years ago, 'People, we need resources, and it's important that we go and get them.' We wouldn't say that today. That would be considered amoral. We'd use words like human rights, or self defence, and you'd find all those terms for it, and that's rather how you'd consider morality now."

Peyton Amber opens with a poem, *The Soul Has No Morality*, written incidentally, by Janowitz's mother, Phyllis, a respected poet in her own right. It immediately lays bare the book's girders and bolts. But the author says she's not condemning her character, only reflecting a society where women are supposed to be gratified by their careers and motherhood, even if their careers are limited. "It's an incredibly hideous value system we've imposed on ourselves. We have become more and more about celebritydom and sex. I came from a period of the women's movement, and I don't see that the battles women fought have continued to remain as victories."

There is less of a morality struggle in *Twinkle, Twinkle*. Shoko's wild drinking binges mask her depression, seemingly caused by living in a world that imposes a different set of values on her than her own. Before she met Mutsuki, her doctor told her that getting married would cure what ails her. The malaise, of course, continued after the marriage, only the new prescription was for Shoko to have a child.

Peyton, Shoko and Max are all fractured people, missing something that can make them feel satisfied, despite having all the trappings and success of life. They are inhuman, monstrous only in the sense that they may never be fixed. But they are

perhaps not meant to be fixed, either. While these are all realistic characters, these stories are still meant to be fables – not cautionary tales or manifestos.

However, for Zeh, from the country of Brechtian didacticism, writers are artists and they should create and entertain, but they also have a duty. The role of the author, she says, involves being political, but also developing a storeroom for history, "to

be like a memory for society. They should open the eyes of people, to make them travel around in their heads, through their own countries or others."

There may be some life in the old Zeitgeist yet.



Site Search

[Home](#) | [Business](#) | [National](#) | [International](#) | [Sports](#) | [Columnists](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Tech](#) | [Travel](#) | [Cars](#)

[gl.beinvestor.com](#)

[gl.betechnology.com](#)

**REPORT ON
BUSINESS**
TELEVISION

[workopolis.ca](#)

[cnet.ca](#)

DISCOVER