

## **Research Project 2011-2012**

**Dr. Kim Fordham**

**Professor of German, Augustana Campus, University of Alberta**

**Project Title** I hurt: Victims Becoming Perpetrators in Contemporary Fiction by German-speaking Female Authors

### **Objectives:**

I will be searching for additional authors and narratives of violence and survival in German fiction by female authors. I will work at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin Zentrum für transdisziplinäre Geschlechterstudien / The Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies because I want to familiarize myself more fully with the gender research taking place in Germany. Gender research is key to my study as I will examine gendered understandings of violence; of the victim and the perpetrator.

The research questions I wish to examine through the literary texts are the following:

What are the gender issues involved in the question of female perpetrators of violence, including child perpetrators?

What are the factors which lead female victims of violence to become perpetrators?

What are the factors which enable female victims to create a possibility for healing? Such as the "Auseinandersetzung" with violence as Mehr suggests and /or perhaps through creativity.

I want to examine issues of power and control, including those of powerlessness. I want to consider the multiple effects of violence, such as voicelessness (question: when is mutism a form of agency and when is it a result of powerlessness?); self-harming behaviors (question: what is the relationship between self-harming behaviors and harming others; between violence turned inward [self-harming, depression, etc] and violence turned outward [anger, aggression, murder]? Is there a progression?)

### **Context:**

Swiss Jenisch author Mariella Mehr states in a documentary film entitled *Die Kraft aus Wut und Schmerz. Zum 60. Geburtstag von Mariella Mehr* that there must be an engaging with the possibility of violence, of murdering, in order to keep oneself from committing such violence. Since 2005 I have been working with the literary texts of Mariella Mehr. Mehr's works all contain violence which begets violence. Mehr is however in no way stating that violence is an appropriate response to violence. She does not in any way protect us from the details of the horrific abuse suffered by the children nor of the violence they later perpetrate. The ugliness and devastation of the act is clear. Mehr challenges our temptation to see the child victim in pure innocence and the perpetrator in pure evil. We do not want to acknowledge that they could be one and the same for that would force us to confront the possibility that those who commit acts of violence may not be so very different from us and cannot be dismissed as monsters. For, as Dominick La Capra writes that the historian, but I would argue everyone, "should attempt to understand and explain such behavior and experience as far as possible – even recognize the unsettling possibility of such behavior in him- or herself" (41). Judith Lewis Herman also argues that: "... to study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature" (7). Andrew Vachss powerfully describes the long-term effects of abuse and our responsibility in that cycle: "We are tested and sometimes we fail. The maltreated child cries, „I hurt“. *Unheard or unheeded, that cry becomes prophesy*" (1993, 21) [my emphasis]. Mariella Mehr hides none of the horror of child abuse. She speaks honestly and passionately for the need to further understand the workings of violence and the long-term devastating effects of violence suffered in childhood. The novels of Mariella Mehr insist that the line between victim and perpetrator is blurred and that those

caught in violence are indeed each victims. The perpetrators are perhaps much more the societal structures that allow such violence to continue unabated.

Violence is a complex issue and Mehr is asking us neither to excuse nor forgive her characters for their actions but she does challenge her readers to bear witness and to engage with the complexity of their painful stories as victims and as perpetrators. For as Herman writes “simple pronouncements, even favorable ones, represent a refusal to engage with the survivor in the lacerating moral complexities of the extreme situation. From those who bear witness, the survivor seeks not absolution but fairness, compassion, and the willingness to share the guilty knowledge of what happens to people in extremity” (69). Seeing these characters as either monsters or as pathological cases assumes an individual problem and denies the need for social change. Mariella Mehr effectively compels her readers to „share the experiences“ of her characters; in order to, as Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman write: “perceive what is happening to others ... with the power of insight” (108), and look critically at our own reactions and judgments. For when we explore and begin to understand how violence is culturally produced, we can turn our condemnation of the individual into a sense of our own responsibility in the production of violence.

I want to find additional authors and narratives of violence and survival in German fiction by female authors in order to broaden my study and to enhance my understanding of these issues.