**Kästner, Erich (1899-1974)**

Born in Dresden, and first training as a teacher before joining the military during World War I, German poet, satirist and journalist Emil Erich Kästner gained renown during the Weimar Republic as an author of children’s literature, whose most famous characters, such as *Emil und die Detektive* (1929; *Emil and the Detectives*), remain popular today. Like Kästner, these characters share a modest social background and sense of social justice. In this first novel, Kästner used events from his own childhood in Dresden (see *When I Was a Little Boy*, 109-13) but transposed them onto contemporaneous Berlin to craft the story of Emil Tischbein and his gang of detectives who attempt to catch the thief who robbed Emil of his mother’s savings. Refusing to sublimate everyday reality, Kästner wove familiar landmarks such Potsdamer Platz and Alexanderplatz (<http://bit.ly/NCfgzM>) into his stories, thereby immersing young and adult readers in a metropolitan modernity of honking cars, shop windows, crowds, cinemas, cafes, hotels and high buildings. Modern technologies, particularly the telephone, are critical to the resolution of the plot, as are subways, cars, buses and taxis. Translated into 59 languages, the enduring story has also been adapted for numerous movie versions and was followed by a sequel, *Emil und die Drei Zwillinge (Emil and the Tree Twins)* in 1933.

Another popular and successfully adapted story is *Pünktchen und Anton* (1931; *Annalouise and Anton*), a children’s novel about the friendship of a girl and a boy whose relationship bridges opposite ends of the social spectrum. Addressing issues of social responsibility, the novel deploys throughout the narrative *Nachdenkereien* (moments of thinking through, pondering, or reflecting), whereby the narrator interrupts the story to proffer meta-fictional commentary about ethical questions arising from the events of the story.

Kästner wrote only one novel for a mature readership, *Fabian – die Geschichte eines Moralisten* (1931; *Fabian – The Story of a Moralist*), whose protagonist, Jakob Fabian, holds a PhD in German Literature but works as a writer of advertisements in a cigarette factory. Exemplifying New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), this satire explores the chaos of the Weimar era during the final years of the twenties.

A pacifist, Kästner turned to poetry to document his anti-militaristic position. ‘Do you know the country where canons blossom?’ (http://bit.ly/N9zQVz), he asked in his volume of poems *Herz auf Taille* (1928), prompting Walter Benjamin to coin the phrase ‘Left-Wing Melancholy’ (http://bit.ly/KFpz53). In his eponymous and polemical 1931 review, Benjamin asserted: ‘Left radical publicists of the stamp of Kästner, [Franz] Mehring and [Kurt] Tucholsky are the decayed bourgeoisie’s mimicry of the proletariat’ (29). In 1933, the Nazis banned Kästner’s books; Kästner himself witnessed public burning of his books in Berlin (http://bit.ly/LZmR8O). As Stefan Nauhaus has documented in *Das verschwiegene Werk*, Kästner continued to work silently during the Nazi regime using pseudonyms to work on plays. Throughout his life, Kästner remained popular even amongst those he criticized, evocative of both the plasticity of his humor and its mass appeal, and of the limits of his satire in confronting the darkness of his era.

*Irene Gammel, Ryerson University*

### List of works

### Kästner, E. (1928) *Herz auf Taille,* Leipzig: C. Weller.

### ------ (1929) *Emil und die Detektive. Ein Roman für Kinder,* Berlin: Williams & Co.

### ------ (1931) *Pünktchen und Anton*. *Ein Roman für Kinder,* Berlin: Williams & Co.

### ------ (1931) *Fabian – Die Geschichte eines Moralisten,* Zürich: Atrium Verlag.

### ------ (1935) *Emil and the Three Twins*, London: Jonathan Cape. (1933) *Emil und die drei Zwillinge,* Berlin: Williams & Co.

### ------ (1957) *Als ich ein kleiner Junge war*, Zürich: Atrium Verlag, trans. I. and F. McHugh as *When I Was a Little Boy*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1959.

### References and further reading

Benjamin, W. (1931) ‘Linke Melancholie. Zu Erich Kästners neuem Gedichtbuch’, *Die Gesellschaft* 8 (1): 181-84 (1974), trans. B. Brewster as ‘Left-Wing Melancholy (On Erich Kästner’s new book of poems)’, *Screen* 15 (2): 28-32 <<http://bit.ly/KFpz53>>.

### Kraus, F. (2009) *Erich Kästner: Chronist seiner Zeit. Biographische Anspielungen in seiner Literatur,* München: Grin Verlag.

Nauhaus, S. (2000) *Das verschwiegene Werk*: *Erich Kästners Mitarbeit an Theaterstücken unter Pseudonym*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.