

# Dreaming Journal

## On Translating Clemens Meyer's *While We Were Dreaming*

By Katy Derbyshire

**Spring 2006:** Fischer Verlag publish Clemens Meyer's debut novel *Als wir träumten*. I have a four-year-old at kindergarten and I dream of becoming a literary translator. I'm so captivated by Meyer's book that I miss my tram stop while reading it, and turn up late to collect my child. I contact the publisher and ask if they need a sample translated for their foreign rights department. Someone else sends them one for free. The translation rights don't sell to the UK.

**Spring 2008:** Clemens Meyer wins the Prize of the Leipzig Book Fair for his short story collection *Die Nacht, die Lichter*. I love it, again, and I translate a couple of the stories to submit to journals. No luck.

**Autumn 2009:** A colleague passes my details on to a *Guardian* journalist, who wants to run a series of European short stories. He picks 'Of Dogs and Horses', one of my favourites. It's Clemens Meyer's first publication in English and it's a huge stroke of luck; the *Guardian* doesn't usually publish any fiction at all, let alone in translation.



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**Summer 2011:** And Other Stories publish my translation of *Die Nacht, die Lichter*. The title won't translate directly because it would rhyme; as I work my way through the book, what I come up with is *All the Lights*. And Other Stories is a new publisher set up as a kind of cooperative project by another translator I know. The book is one of their first two. Clemens and I are invited to the Edinburgh International Book Festival; I'm very nervous but it goes fine. We end up in a lot of pubs; I learn to appreciate whisky and Clemens meets an ex-sailor who tells us about Indonesian ladyboys. Clemens is one of those people who meets people in pubs. We're friends now.

**Autumn 2017:** Fitzcarraldo Editions publish my translation of *Im Stein*. Again, the title won't translate: it becomes *Bricks and Mortar*. In a London pub where swearing is banned but we do it anyway, the publisher Jacques Testard tells us he wants to do all Clemens's books.

**Spring 2020:** Jacques follows through and publishes my translation of *Die stillen Trabanten*, more short stories. The directly translated title sounds like an Alanis Morissette song, so we opt for *Dark Satellites*. It works.

**Spring 2021:** Clemens and I persuade Jacques to let me translate *Als wir träumten*. I reread the book and it still has all its original power; I miss my stop again.

**While We Were Dreaming:** The novel is set in Leipzig, before and after 1989. Its narrator, Dani, is not the most reliable, but perhaps more so than some of Meyer's later characters. He and his friends grow up together, moving from stealing ping-pong balls at school to setting up an illegal techno club and dealing drugs. The structure is never chronological, always deliberately confusing. It's a story about ordinary East German lives; some of the characters are in and out of prison, some have addiction problems. The novel doesn't seek to explain any of that, doesn't blame the system for what happens to these boys. It reads, to me, like a literary testament to lived lives. Andreas Dresen and Wolfgang Kohlhaase condensed the characters and plot into a **movie**, which I loved. What both book and film have in common is violence, their trance-like sequences, and the affection between the characters. Translating it was what I'd always wanted.



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**Summer 1996:** I've finished my German degree in the UK and I skip my graduation and

move straight back to Berlin, in with my then-boyfriend in Friedrichshain. We share his one-room flat with a huge tiled stove in one corner for heating; we have to fetch coal from the cellar, rectangular briquettes stacked one above the other in metal hods, one hod in each hand. At least the flat has a bathroom. My boyfriend's training to be a landscape gardener. He buys his drugs from his friends G. and B; they're trainee cooks who met on the job.

Although B. has a flat of his own, he's moved in to G.'s place because they share a set of decks. They have bunkbeds in one corner of the room, a brown leatherette sofa and a long trestle table with the decks on top and the records underneath. We spend a lot of afternoons at their place, drinking cans of beer and smoking joints while they practise playing techno records. They tell us about the time they carved a bong out of a long German radish at work. They're planning to get a techno night started, across the road from the restaurant. B. has his own graffiti tag and a younger sister. G.'s front teeth start to go black and rot away; my boyfriend says it's because he's stopped brushing his teeth. I stop smoking – German drugs are so much stronger than what I'm used to, and I can't speak German when I've smoked. It gets boring quite quickly. When my boyfriend dumps me, B. offers to sublet his flat to me and I move in there; it has a toilet but no shower, but I move out again a few weeks later when he starts getting letters about rent arrears. My next flatshare has a shower in the kitchen; the toilet is down the stairs, off the corridor. More lugging of coal up five flights of stairs.

**Architecture:** How will my readers imagine the buildings where the book's characters live? During the editing process, I notice it's hard for British readers not to impose their own idea of cities over Meyer's Leipzig. Will they understand that these are tenement buildings with shared stairwells and cellars, not terraced houses with porches or modern blocks of flats? The editor and I make a few small adjustments to make that clearer, subtly explaining layouts so that it makes sense for a character to be weeping in the coal cellar or showering in the kitchen. Ultimately, though, I'm glad of the author's dreamlike narration, because it makes it alright if my readers never quite find their orientation.



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**Winter 1999:** I meet a woman called L., originally from Leipzig. She's a couple of years younger than me, broke off an apprenticeship to have her first child at 18 or 19, and now she's started night school to get some qualifications. L. tells me about how she

used to skip school and go to the library, where she'd read about Native Americans. Or she'd go to the Connewitz district and hang out in squats. Around this time, I know people who live in squats in East and West Berlin and I often go to see gigs in their bars. The ones in the West are older and cleaner, with infrastructure like doorbells and pizza ovens; the East Berlin ones are dark, more provisional. Punks beg outside them, making me laugh by saying they need money for beer and drugs. If you want to get a sense of these places, most of them lost now, try Supamolly in Friedrichshain. That's the one I conjure up in my mind for the chapter when Dani goes to Connewitz.

**Subcultures:** The boys in the book are just ordinary working-class kids, not part of any subculture. They don't care about politics; they like drinking, drugs, techno and sex. But there are subcultures around them, from churchgoers before the Wall comes down to Nazi skinheads at the roller rink and *Zecken* in the squats afterwards. That term is pejorative; its literal meaning is 'ticks' – with all the parasitic implications that come with it. People use it to talk about hippies, punks and squatters. There's an oi-punk band called *Zeckenterror* but the UK never had the same resurgence of squatting and old-school punk that happened in Germany after 1989. How can I translate *Zecken* and keep the sense of dirty subculture? *Crusties* weren't quite the same, don't map one-to-one – but they were around in the UK in the 90s and a lot of people hated them, so the word will have to do.



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**Summer 1992:** I'm an au pair in Berlin, fresh out of school and I don't know anyone except the very wealthy family I'm working for; we don't get on well. But I explore the city in the evenings and on weekends, and while I'm waiting for a night bus at Nollendorfplatz I meet N. and his friend. They're a year or two older than me and they're psychobillies. They offer me some of what they're drinking: a bottle of Apfelkorn. It burns and tastes like fake apple flavouring. N. and I talk on the phone a few times, hang out at Breitscheidplatz one time looking up swearwords in the dictionary. I don't think that's N.'s kind of fun and he stops calling. But one time we do go out, to the Knaack Club in Prenzlauer Berg, a dark brown-and-red place where we hang around outside first and finish a bottle of Apfelkorn; N. pushes the empty through the slightly open window of a Trabi parked nearby. I leave early – N.'s not-quite girlfriend turns up and he tells me she's messed up, she's in care, she's only sixteen and he thinks he loves her. As I wait for the night bus at Alex, a car full of men pulls up and offers to show me a good time. I say no thanks, and they don't seem to mind.

**Vodka, Korn or Brandy:** Early on, our heroes start drinking *Korn* – *Apfelkorn*, to be precise. There's a lot of drinking in the novel and often, the narrator simply refers to *Schnapps*. But what the characters drink tells us something about them: Apfelkorn is



an apple-y drink for teenagers and old ladies, it's sweet and it packs a punch – but it's only half the strength of other spirits. Later, our heroes switch to beer and full-strength korn, or vodka or brandy, or Eastside special cocktails of brandy, korn, Jägermeister and orange juice. I think for a while of replacing korn with vodka: they're both distilled from grain, after all, and my readers would have a familiar reference to deal with. An idle consideration on Twitter brings a flood of objections, what the Germans might call a *Shitstorm*. No no no, complete strangers tell me, Meyer's characters would never drink vodka, only ever korn. I'm offended; if anyone knows his work, it's me. But then I decide that these characters' origins are a key part of the novel, and changing their drinks choices just to give my readers an easier ride would be taking something away unnecessarily. They drink korn; so be it.

The *Schnapps* issue is thornier: in German the word is used colloquially to cover anything that goes in a shot glass. The correct translation would be *spirits*, but has anyone ever said that in conversation? And *schnapps* is something else, a peach-y drink for teenagers and old ladies. The solution I find is to decide what certain characters like to drink and keep a list. Thilo the drinker is a vodka man; Dani's mum prefers brandy. The boys themselves grow out of korn and move on to whiskey or vodka, but that's in the original already.



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**Child's Play:** I translated the opening chapter many years ago, but I start over because I know I'm a better translator now. Its title 'Kinderspiele' becomes 'Child's Play' – I know now that I can take liberties with meaning for the sake of sound, and I know the sound I want for Clemens's writing: gritty, witty, melancholy. The novel starts with the narrator remembering the good old days – he's remembering them somewhere else, perhaps prison, perhaps hospital; he's clearly damaged. He and his friends were fifteen, the Wall was down and they were making contact with the West, in the form of Holsten Pilsener and Jägermeister, joyriding on pills and trashing cars and going to school straight from the police station the next morning. This is where we get the tone, meet the characters, learn not to trust the narrator. For me, these kids are N. and his not-quite girlfriend, G. and B. and L. They have dreams and crushes but it's hard to make them come true. I want to do them justice. Finding the right tone is the hardest part.

**Danny and Mike:** Two names trouble me from the beginning: the narrator Dani and another boy, called Maik. Neither of them look like boy's names in English: Dani is for girls and Maik is just a random selection of letters – ironically enough, it's one of those East German names that evokes faraway places people couldn't visit, like Rico, another of the characters; it's an imaginary spelling of Mike. In *Bricks and Mortar*, I changed one character's name for similar reasons. This time I want Danny and Mike – Danny is a

classic boy-hero's name, *Danny the Champion of the World*, another boy with big dreams. Plus, I had a kid in my class at school called Danny. I look the boy up online: the only reference I find is to an amateur snooker player. That fits and Clemens approves, but says Maik has to stay Maik. He's right, the name is too odd to change.



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**Boxing:** One of my favourite chapters, the one that stayed very much in my mind in the intervening years but I never previously dared to translate, is 'Die großen Kämpfe'. Danny and Rico watch a televised boxing match in a bar, while Danny remembers Rico's big chance in the boxing ring before things went downhill for him, before he was on drugs. Writing about boxing is hard to get right; it needs to be fast and furious, we need to feel the pain and smell the sweat. And here, Meyer first uses a technique that he goes on to perfect: interlocking two scenes, confusing us, ramping up the pace until the words whirl around our heads and time becomes irrelevant. I love it. I'm utterly daunted by the prospect of translating it.

The fight is Henry Maske versus Rocky Graciano – and it's on YouTube. I find a video with American commentators and move away from my desk to the kitchen table to watch it. I try to make notes without pressing Pause too often, to keep the speed up. I haven't planned it well and all I have is my little kitchen notes for shopping lists, about 5x5 cm, and one of those short IKEA pencils. That only makes it more exciting. I write down phrase after phrase: *trailing slightly, watch your head, pulled into brawl, outside shot, go to the body, going underneath the jab, do not wanna be on the outside, can't sustain attack, good left uppercut stuns Henry Maske, the eyes are starting to look very bad...*

It's a godsend. The whole act of watching and taking notes feels like my own fight, and having watched the actual fight the narrator describes, I understand exactly what's going on. I wonder whether Clemens worked the same way.

**Swearing:** During the editing process for *Bricks and Mortar*, my editor and I really ramped up the swearing. German swearwords seem so tame, and surely these kids would toss the f-bomb around like confetti if they were speaking English. But the novel doesn't tell its story chronologically; it skips back and forth, sometimes we know a character will die at some point but not how, sometimes we hear echoes of past events we have yet to read about. I want the characters' language to change subtly as they get older, from childhood to youthful bravado to jaded machismo. The swearing, I think, should follow a curve: as kids, it needs to feel daring, almost frightening for them to use bad words, then after the Wall comes down and the system around them collapses, swearwords become commonplace, only to fade out slightly once they're adults, used only for emphasis. It's hard because it doesn't come instinctively the way much of this translation does; I have to sit down and work out how old the characters

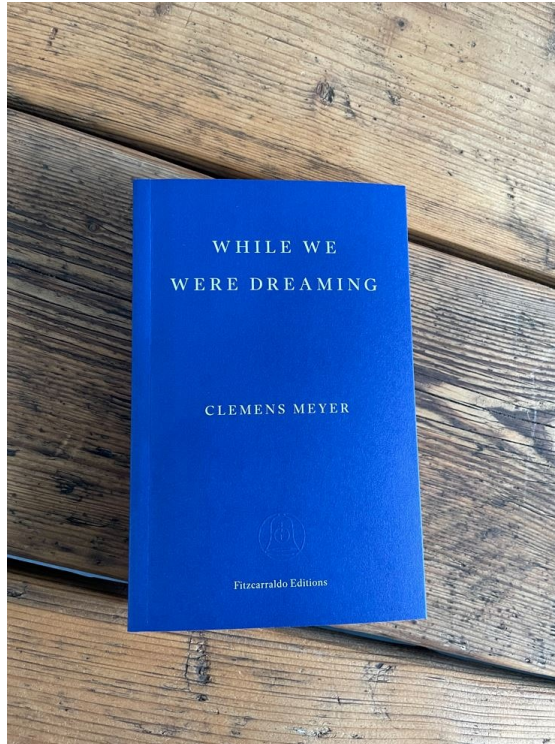
are in each chapter, and choose words that are stronger than in German.



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**Summer 1989:** I'm sixteen and I spend the summer holidays working on a playscheme for children of homeless families, at my local community centre. They're not much younger than me but their lives are tough. We pick them up from hostels and B&Bs around the borough in a minibus driven by my boss, probably the first young German woman I meet. Then we do activities with them so they don't have to spend all day in their family's one room. From here on, I spend most of my holidays working with children. These are possibly the least difficult kids I ever worked with; they're grateful to be with us. One key skill I learn is how to adjudicate a game of pool. I don't play myself but I pick up the rules to stop the kids from fighting over them. It's a useful professional skill.

**Pool:** The novel features a long chapter about a funeral followed by a game of pool, embodying a major fracture in the boys' friendships. But instead of just red and yellow like I'm used to, the pool table has numbered balls in different colours. There's only so much research I can do and I'm floundering – I don't understand the game well enough to render it consistently; it's been too long. That's when I remember meeting a translator friend at a pool hall in Berlin one time, for a late drink. It turns out Tim Mohr knows his pool, even if he knows it in American English. I'm very grateful for his review of the chapter, which gave me the confidence to step away and stop fiddling endlessly with the phrasing.



Clemens Meyer: *While We Were Dreaming*. Translated by Katy Derbyshire. Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2023.

Spring 2023: The book comes out in the UK on 30 March. Two weeks before that, it is longlisted for the International Booker Prize. Clemens and I are dreaming of a win.

#Berlin, #InternationalBookerPrize, #Leipzig





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**Katy Derbyshire** is a London-born translator based in Berlin for over twenty years. She translates contemporary German writers including Sandra Hoffmann, Heike Geissler, Olga Grjasnowa and Selim Özdoğan. Katy also teaches translation, co-hosts a monthly translation lab and the Dead Ladies Show in Berlin, and heads the V&Q Books imprint, publishing remarkable writing from Germany.

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Veröffentlichungsdatum: 21.03.2023

Stand: 20.04.2024

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