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Review of Anja Reich-Osang's *The Scholl Case* (trans. Imogen Taylor)

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Reich-Osang, Anja. *Der Fall Scholl: Das tödliche Ende einer Ehe*. Berlin: Ullstein Extra, 2014.

———. *The Scholl Case: The Deadly End of a Marriage*. Translated by Imogen Taylor. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016.

In the Anglophone world, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 is often referred to as a fixed point in time – a time that connotes everything from the triumph of the human spirit and liberation to the triumph of the graffiti that still adorns what's left of the wall today. In German, however, the term most frequently used to describe this event – “die Wende” – is not so much a fixed point in time as a process or “turning point”. What happened later was described as the “Wiedervereinigung” or “reunification”, which speaks specifically to the stumbling blocks encountered by the two separate Germanys after decades of separation. It encompasses the complexities of adapting the lagging East Germany to a free market economy as well as the social issues that arose when the two diverging populations were brought together once more.

It is against this backdrop that Heinrich Scholl came into the spotlight. He became a legend in his East German hometown of Ludwigsfelde following his 18 years as mayor. He was renowned for bringing thousands of jobs to the town and was regarded as one of the most successful mayors in the former German Democratic Republic. When Scholl was arrested for the murder of his wife three years after his retirement, it was no surprise that the trial was closely scrutinised. Award-winning journalist Anja Reich-Osang was one of the reporters covering the trial. Initially, she only intended to be present for a few days, but she quickly grew transfixed by the unreliable witnesses, the complicated histories, and the changing alibis. And, perhaps most curiously, by Heinrich Scholl's adamant denial of any wrongdoing, despite having no confirmed alibi, and DNA evidence and a (later discarded) mobile phone record placing him at the crime scene. In 2014, Reich-Osang's complete investigation of the case was published in German by Ullstein under the title *Der Fall Scholl*, and was later translated into English by Imogen Taylor as *The Scholl Case*.

Like his trial, Heinrich Scholl's life was complex and perhaps not quite what it seemed. In rendering the events, Anja Reich-Osang's pacing is exemplary. Opening the book with a recreation of Brigitte Scholl's movements on her final day, up until she took that fateful walk into the woods from which she never returned, Reich-Osang presents us with an image of the Scholls' marriage as viewed from the outside. But there is a long history behind the words that appear on the first page of chapter one: “Their marriage was said to be irreproachable.” And this history is as confusing as only true stories can be. As Reich-Osang goes on to unravel the story of the Scholls' lives, each added layer builds the suspense and mysteriousness of their shared history. As a true story, *The Scholl Case* works quite well as a thriller, though it never fully commits to being a ‘whodunit’. As each new facet of the Scholls' life together (and apart) is revealed, a general sense of foreboding begins to grow. Reich-Osang builds a compelling narrative that constantly stays one step ahead, continuing to give just enough information to keep the reader engaged. Following the eight months she spent observing the trial, and the hours of interviews with friends and family of Brigitte and Heinrich Scholl, Reich-Osang paints a complex – and confusing – portrait of the man who, to this day, denies his guilt. But at the

moment one expects her to interweave and overlay her own analysis, she takes a step back and simply chooses to allow the reader to form his or her own opinion.

Starting with Heinrich Scholl and Brigitte Knorrek's childhoods, the story winds its way through the confusing series of events that led Brigitte Knorrek, the Ludwigsfelde beauty, to marry the small and inconspicuous Scholl. The subtlety with which Reich-Osang is able to do this is remarkable. From the foreshadowing of that first sentence which claims their marriage was "said to be irreproachable", through her own keen observations and recreations of events as well as the voices of friends, family, and Heinrich Scholl himself, Reich-Osang explores what was, in actuality, more like a marriage of convenience. She carefully retraces their lives, from their childhood friendship to their marriage to Scholl's job in the circus that took him away from Ludwigsfelde, and finally to the way he began to clash with his wife and moved to Berlin following his retirement. *The Scholl Case* delves deep into the human psyche and into the politics of manipulation and deception. But in the end, Reich-Osang is transparent in her intentions. While she uses the power of suggestion to build suspense throughout the book, in the final pages she is clear in separating her opinions from fact, writing: "It is hard to know what to say. Is this an ice-cold murderer and a liar speaking? Or is it a madman? Or a victim of the justice system? Heinrich Scholl makes for a very convincing innocent" (200). Reich-Osang does not intend to solve a mystery, but rather to connect as many pieces of a very complicated puzzle as possible.

Published in 2016 by Text, Imogen Taylor's English translation manages to tread a careful line between retaining the ubiquitous references that place the story in former East Germany, while also providing a certain amount of explanation to a readership that could otherwise be left in the dark. While she does occasionally use words like "mum" or, more significantly, "loo", that could connote a particular (unintended) English-speaking context, Taylor has made a point of not ripping the story from its German setting by inserting repetitive and facile explanations for every unknown concept. The brief glosses (for example, her reference to the "department store Kaufhaus des Westens" on page 27) and insertions she does provide are generally incorporated into the text in a way that, rather than being noticeably instructional, work instead to enhance the reader's knowledge of relevant German culture and history. She introduces Klaus Wowereit, Scholl's associate and former governing mayor of Berlin, as "an icon of the gay rights movement" (74), and describes "the border crossing point known as the 'Palace of Tears', the site of many emotional reunions and farewells" (44). With every one of Scholl's actions so important, given Reich-Osang's open-ended conclusion, Taylor's careful analysis of the text is vital in ensuring that the reader has access to every layer of meaning.

The Scholl Case functions primarily on two planes: both as a murder mystery and a psychological thriller. While it is a German story – one that sold well in Germany by delving into an already mysterious national affair – Taylor's ability to focus on the relevant makes it accessible to an Anglophone readership as well. Those looking for a true crime novel, where the clues come together to determine the perpetrator's unequivocal guilt, will be disappointed; rather, *The Scholl Case* is for those readers interested in probing the darker side of humanity. It is a fascinating portrayal of an enigmatic man and an enigmatic time, laying bare the many complicated – and disturbing – facets of human life.