

THE LOST HONOUR OF KATHARINA BLUM. By Heinrich Böll. (Trans. by Leila Vennewitz.)  
Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975. Pp.140. \$ 8.75.

Together with Günther Grass, Heinrich Böll is probably the most important representative of post-war German literature. In the English-speaking world Böll is without doubt the most widely read literary export among living authors coming out of West Germany today. Böll was born in 1917 in Cologne and published his first book entitled *Der Zug war pünktlich* (*The Train Was on Time*) in 1949, followed in 1950 by *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa ....* Though a little known author at the time, he received the Group 47 prize in 1951, and after having written more than a dozen novels was awarded the 1972 Nobel Prize for Literature for his recently published novel *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (*Group Portrait with Lady*). Thus Böll was the first German author to receive the prize since Thomas Mann in 1929. (Hermann Hesse was a Swiss citizen when he received the award in 1946.)

Due to his outspoken statements in the past nine or ten years on the misuse of power by the state, Böll has become an *enfant terrible* in conservative circles. It was clear to Böll that the German daily press, and in particular the tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*, were the real instigators of general insinuations and the witch hunting of anarchists or suspected anarchists. When the police came to his door with a search warrant several years ago, Böll, as a suspected Baader-Meinhof sympathizer, was, unlike his heroine Katharina Blum, able to defend himself. Unless the English reader is familiar with the dimensions and circulation of the *Bild-Zeitung*, (a "rag" which specializes in gigantic headlines with no backup story, manufactures scandals and reports trimmed for the lowest level of intelligence imaginable), he may tend to gloss over the preface of the novel without realizing the extent to which *Bild* is the opiate and conscience of the German masses. However, after one reads the novel he requires no Imagination to appreciate what a dangerous weapon this tabloid is.

The subtitle of Böll's latest book points to a problem which is common both to contemporary German society and to world society in general: "How violence can develop and where it can lead." (The original German is not rendered correctly in the translation.) This is exactly what Böll proceeds to demonstrate. The plot is simple enough: A young woman, Katharina Blum, who has an "unhappy childhood" and an "unfortunate marriage" behind her, is turned into a murderess because of newspaper reports and a police apparatus unwilling to accept the tenet "innocent until proven guilty." The reader already knows the outcome on the third page and the "reporter" Böll need only – not "compose" but on the contrary – "bring" his material "together," as he puts it.

Not one but two murders are occupying the police and the *News*: the star reporter of the scandal sheet, Tötges, and the star photographer, Schönner, are dead, both victims of their lofty profession. Following a fleeting contact with a wanted criminal by the name of Ludwig Götten, Katharina becomes an accomplice by helping him escape the police cordon. The bill Katharina now has to foot is very high. From the outset she is humiliated by the police interrogators who picture her as something she's not, namely, an anarchist, a communist and a hardened criminal. The police authorities even misrepresent her situation to the press, insinuating that her arrest is imminent. The entire investigation is

based purely on suspicion and the wishful thinking of the police commissioner. Nothing, not even the trivial things Police Commissioner Beizmenne investigates, seems to point to Katharina's guilt until he comes across her high gasoline bill. Before any further proof is brought forth, the *News* takes over the game of speculation and denounces Katharina in front page headlines as "murderer's moll," anarchist and radical, and makes references to her "male visitors" and her "murky past." Her acquaintances, among them the attorney Blorna (a "leftist") and his wife "Trude the Red" also suffer from the defamation.

When Katharina points out that these claims by the *News* have no basis in reality, the reactionary police prosecutor cites the phrase "Freedom of the Press" without bothering to define to what ends this freedom exists. Thus, the *News* has the green light to slander Katharina even further. When Katharina asks if the government could not do something to protect her from this filth and restore her honour, the prosecutor defends the *News* reports in terms of "justifiable public interest." Thus, the "unfortunate involvement of a completely blameless person," as another paper puts it, results in the "destruction of a young life." When the *News* journalist Tötges brings his attack on Katharina to a climax with the "murder" of her mother, she decides to get to know the person who has destroyed her honour under the pretense of giving him an exclusive interview. The *News* and the police both do their best to incite public hysteria. Katharina is subjected to crank calls, anonymous letters and further defamation of character and, unable to defend herself against the character assassination, she avenges herself by shooting reporter Tötges. Several hours later, she turns herself over to the police, confesses her crime without any sign of remorse and faces a prison sentence of fifteen years.

Böll's novel is an indictment of press and police, of the methods to which both stoop in order to make reality conform to popular stereotypes, by employing distorted headlines and bribery practices. Criminal investigation becomes a mere theatrical farce. In this regard, Böll's ironic commentary on wiretapping also deserves mention. The police apparatus and the newspaper are portrayed as being complementary: the *News* creates such an atmosphere that the conservative masses (including politicians) cry out for more "law and order" (a German expression, by the way) and the police overreact to appease this desire.

All in all, the translator Leila Vennewitz has succeeded in rendering the German quite well. There are only a number of small points which could be criticized.

A film version of Böll's novel with a completely different ending premiered in the fall of 1975, and was produced by Volker Schlöndorff, who also produced the film of Robert Musil's *Young Törless*. However, *Bild-Zeitung's* most eager reporter with the greatest talent for flushing out anarchists has yet to pay any attention to the film.

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