

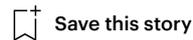
# JENNY ERPENBECK IS KEEPING TIME

*When the Berlin Wall fell, some called it the end of history. For Erpenbeck, history just needed saving.*

**By Lauren Oyler**

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Every time I spoke with the German author Jenny Erpenbeck over Zoom, the conversation began with her cheerfully noting the fun, biographically scene-setting activity we could have done together if I had been permitted to travel to Germany. We could have gone for a swim at her small lake house, about an hour's drive southeast of Berlin. We could have eaten dinner at the big kitchen table at her apartment, in the city, and looked through her "private archive" of ephemera from the German Democratic Republic, or G.D.R. We could have gone on a bike tour of all the places she lived, studied, and "practiced kissing" while growing up in East Berlin, just steps from the Wall. Sitting in her parked car, smiling into her phone camera, Erpenbeck told me that she got her bicycle forty years ago, as a gift for her *Jugendweihe*, a coming-of-age ceremony particularly popular in the G.D.R. "The mechanic sometimes gets a bit desperate when I'm coming," she said as she began to show me around her past on foot, the camera occasionally giving me a closeup of her nose or ear. "He knows that I really like this bike."

Erpenbeck, now fifty-four, is a practiced guide to her life, even when narrating from a shaky smartphone. She is naturally open, and she brings the same intelligent lightness to cynical observations about capitalism that she does to showing off the East German toys she used to play with. She sometimes preempted my questions by showing me objects I didn't know to ask about—for example, a polite letter from Thomas Mann to her grandfather, telling him that he would read his new book when he had the time. When I did ask about something specific, her response might be to pleasantly suggest that it was coming a bit later on the tour.

At first, I assumed that this was because she's done a lot of interviews. Erpenbeck is one of the most celebrated authors in Germany, the winner of many prizes, and is occasionally discussed as a deserving candidate for the Nobel. (Consider this another such discussion.) Five of her works of fiction have been published in English; her most recent book, "Not a Novel" (New Directions), translated by Kurt Beals, is a collection of meditations, essays, and speeches that often overlap—the kind of thing that appears when it's relatively certain people will read anything you've written. For an author in translation, a rare species in the United States, it's especially significant.



In Erpenbeck's Berlin apartment, an entire wall is covered with paper and artifacts from the G.D.R., collected over the course of decades.



professionalism, or of East German *Ordnung*, than of something fundamental about her understanding of time. The *Guardian's* Philip Oltermann called her the “weaver bird of German fiction”; she fills her novels with research and detail, as well as anecdotes from her family history, as though trying to save them from disappearing. Her work is especially concerned with parallel worlds and conflicting truths, and its great achievement is its ability to imply the sweep of history in the stories of who and what gets lost in transition. In “Visitation” (2010), a German lake house changes hands over the course of the twentieth century, its occupants in varying states of awareness, or denial, of their predecessors; in “The End of Days” (2014), the same woman dies five times, with each death (except the last) followed by a set of circumstances that would have kept her alive. For Erpenbeck, the past is layered under the present; its shape, if nothing else, always comes through, and attempts to cover it up only make it more obvious.

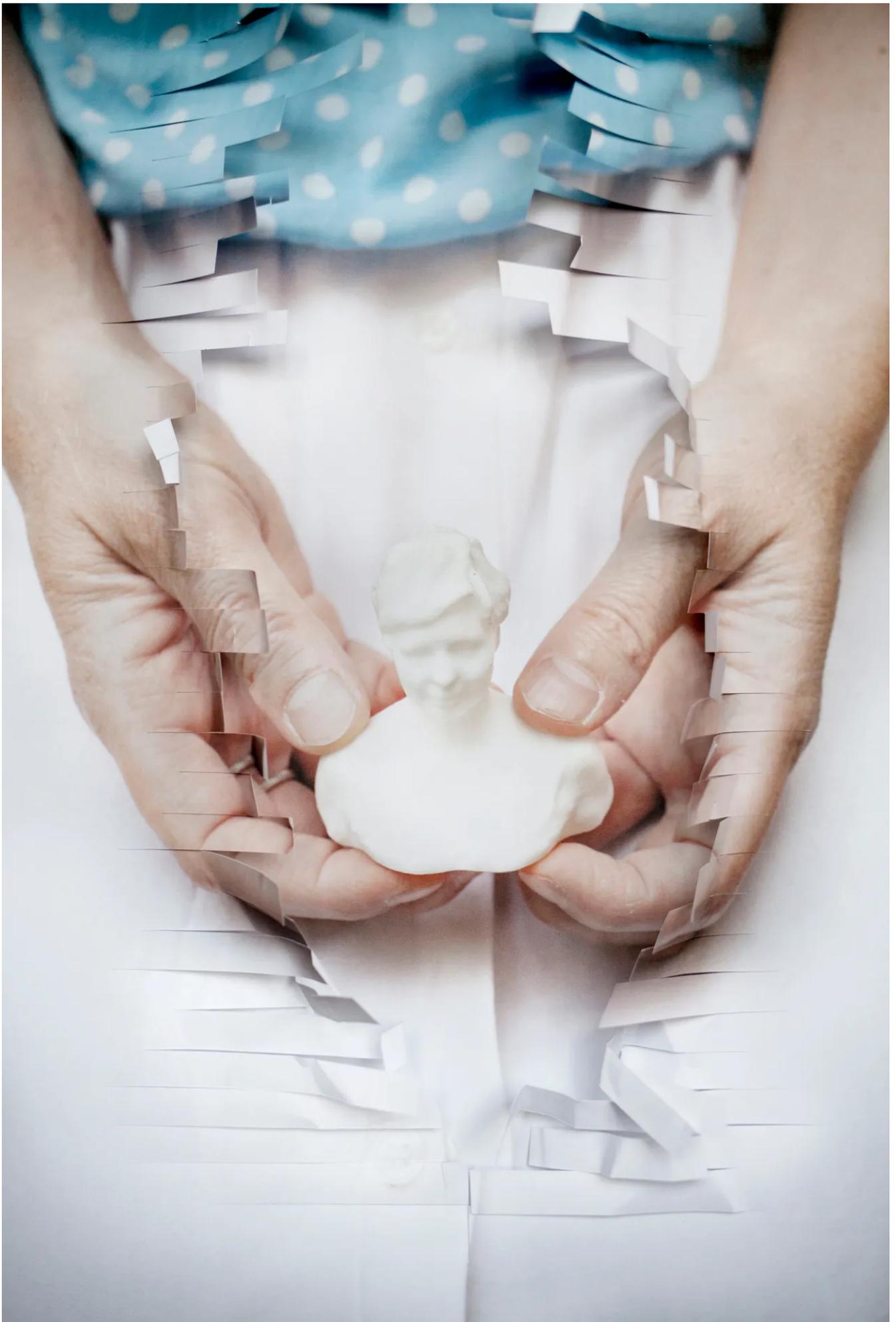
The English subtitle of “Not a Novel,” “A Memoir in Pieces,” suggests the way a life coheres through unexpected moments, which place an individual within history. “I was told that in order to introduce myself, I should briefly tell you how I became the person I am, and why I write, in roughly five minutes,” Erpenbeck jokes at the beginning of “I Become Me,” a speech in the book, before listing a series of details that might meet the challenge. “Should I say, must I say, that the tenement building where my grandmother lived together with my great-grandmother, in an apartment off of the third courtyard back from the street, always smelled like cold ashes from the heating stoves? . . . That I’m happiest when wandering through the brush with bare legs? . . . Did I already mention that my relatives gave me permission to flop down on the rug and suddenly fall asleep during our East-West reunions?” Over and over, she emphasizes the way a narrative is never as solid as the pieces that compose it; her own stories, although written with an almost unbearable sensitivity, shift swiftly and brutally, the way life does. “The times change, and sometimes it’s nice to watch it happen, but sometimes it’s not as nice,” she writes.

Currently, we’re in a “not as nice” period. I brought up the pandemic during our first interview, last summer; Erpenbeck was at her lake property, where she writes from a tiny hut with weak Internet. She has little hope that the crisis will transform the world: big business will expand, low-wage workers will continue to lose their jobs, and the rest of us will fail to adopt the “more modest way of our parents and grandparents,” which had its advantages. “But that’s how it is, in fact,” she writes, “and so it makes sense to brace yourself for whatever may come.”

**H**er pragmatism comes from experience. The Wall between East and West Berlin fell on November 9, 1989, when Erpenbeck was twenty-two and in university. She spent the evening that would become the fulcrum of her life hanging out with friends just a few blocks away from the border. “And then: I went to sleep,” she writes in her 2013 essay “Homesickness for Sadness.” “And while I was asleep the pot was not just stirred, it was knocked over and smashed to bits. The next morning I learned: We don’t even need pots anymore.” This is just one of several striking ways that she characterizes the night when “everything that had been called the present up to that point was now the past.” From then on, she writes, her childhood “belonged in a museum.”

Erpenbeck was born in the East Berlin district of Pankow in 1967, to an intellectual family well known in the G.D.R. Her mother, Doris Kiliass, was a translator of Arabic who worked with the Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz. Kiliass's mother was a seamstress who was taken to Siberia as a prisoner of war; her life is the material for Erpenbeck's short story "Siberia." Erpenbeck's father, John Erpenbeck, is a physicist, philosopher, and writer who's currently working on questions of "how learning is a process of developing values," she told me. Her paternal grandfather, Fritz Erpenbeck, and grandmother, Hedda Zinner, were communists who fled to the Soviet Union in the nineteen-thirties; Zinner was a beloved actress and writer, and Fritz Erpenbeck was a publisher, editor, writer, and actor who was eventually tasked with helping to rebuild culture, in the forties, for the new East German state. (There is a street named after him in Pankow.)

Erpenbeck's parents divorced when she was five years old, an amicable split that allowed Erpenbeck to see her father daily. Her childhood was happy; "there is nothing better for a child than to grow up at the ends of the earth," she writes in "Not a Novel," though her family's status meant that she didn't live as insular a life as she might have otherwise. (When she was seven, she even spent a year in Italy with her mother.) As a teen-ager, she apprenticed as a bookbinder, hoping to work in book design, before switching to stage design, before switching to theatre, before switching to opera direction. She wasn't a "punk or something like that," she told me as we toured one of the areas where she grew up, the Leipziger Strasse in central Berlin, now a difficult-to-love thoroughfare filled with chain stores and tourist attractions. Once East Berliners started fleeing to the West, in the nineteen-eighties, some of her friends squatted in abandoned flats; when it came time for Erpenbeck to get her own apartment, her father helped her find a one-bedroom. "Parents make a big difference in everyone's life, even in America," she said, a little sheepishly.



A bust of Erpenbeck, which was given to her on one of her visits to the United States.

Erpenbeck stresses the surprise of East Germany's collapse, how swiftly talk of reform became talk of reunification. "We were not stupid, you know. We could see that the government was old . . . we could see that the elections had been manipulated," she said, after proudly showing me Max Lingner's socialist mosaic "Building the Republic," which adorns the Federal Ministry of Finance, in Berlin. "Especially when Gorbachev started to take over in the Soviet Union, my family was hoping that the good people would take over. The good people are very nice, very bright, very creative—but very few of them can organize a system quickly so that it works." Any calls for something like "socialism with a human face," the slogan of the Prague Spring, were subsumed in growing protests for democracy. Reunification quickly came to signify the integration of the East into the West rather than anything like a compromise.

The *Mauerfall* can be felt in all Erpenbeck's novels, as a way of thinking about borders, transitions, and the elusiveness of freedom. She believes, and resents, that Germans too often simplify this history as a victory of democracy over totalitarianism, erasing the lives of millions of people, from the optimism of their economic system to the word they used for "grocery store." "I was convinced in a deep sense—and I still am, I must confess, even if some readers stop reading me right away—that it's not a good idea to have no alternative to capitalist society," she told me. After Erpenbeck finished her degree, in 1994, she got a job as an assistant opera director in Graz, Austria, hoping to escape "the endless questionings" she endured in Berlin. "It was, like, 'Oh, we embrace our poor brothers and sisters from the East,' and I didn't feel like being a poor sister from the East," she said. "I was rich in another way, in the intellectual tradition and the people around me."

It's possible that Erpenbeck and her family took the G.D.R.'s collapse especially hard because they were relatively well off there. But the economic disparities between the former East and West persist, and are often linked to the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland party. After reunification, the Federal Republic offered East Germans a gift of a hundred Deutsche marks; Erpenbeck never picked hers up. She received a grant to complete her studies, but the rent on her fifty-five-square-metre apartment increased nearly tenfold. "That money became something one has to worry and talk (!) about was completely new to us, and filled us with a kind of desperate contempt," she wrote me. Many lost their homes, including Erpenbeck's family, as former owners were permitted to reclaim property they had abandoned when the border went up. Erpenbeck still doesn't believe in private property, though she does own her apartment. "It's the dialectic, you know?" she joked. After the Wall came down, she learned a new way of life: "Everything that you don't own is taken from you."

Growing up, Erpenbeck didn't want to be a writer; she was self-conscious about following in her family's footsteps. But she had always kept a journal, and before she took the directing job, in Austria, she wrote a story about a grown woman who moves into an orphanage, having apparently forgotten her name, her parents, and where she's from; "there seemed, from the beginning, to be something implausible about her very existence." It's loosely based on an anecdote from her grandmother's life—Zinner began corresponding with a young fan of her books, only to discover that the fan was an adult woman—but it can also be read as a portrait of the lost G.D.R. citizen, looking to retreat from overwhelming newness into an illusion of safety. Erpenbeck, who looked young for her age, posed as a high-school student to research the story, and she was surprised at how quickly she adopted the anxieties and concerns the context created.

Although a few East German authors were published to acclaim in the West, most were not, and no one in Erpenbeck's new country knew that she came from a line of successful writers. Years after she wrote the story, she submitted it to a publisher. Her editor, Wolfgang Ferchl, placed it in a stack to review while on vacation. He was in a deck chair, dressed only in shorts, when he came upon "a manuscript that electrified me: a mysterious Kaspar Hauser story with a very unique and special tone. I sat upright and felt that I was not properly dressed for this piece of literature." The story was published, as "The Old Child," in 1999, and became an odd sensation; Erpenbeck's detached, unclouded prose made space for a dramatic plot, and the book's timing grouped her in a new wave of young German writers. From then on, she published regularly, while directing operas and plays, until writing slowly became her primary preoccupation.

There's something a little serendipitous about the way Erpenbeck characterizes her success in "Not a Novel"; she approaches the subject with a tentative irony, suggesting that one assignment led to another, one story to the next, and now she's ended up with a hoard of prizes. But a success arises from the same broad shifts and unexpected contingencies as a failure. The collapse of the G.D.R. created a new border, Erpenbeck writes, "between the two halves of my life." Her father, meanwhile, published one more novel after the fall of the Wall and then stopped writing fiction. "For him, it was losing the society that he had known so well," she said. "All the social relations that were meaningful, or had been meaningful to him before, changed." The event that gave her a subject took her father's away.

Erpenbeck's most recent novel, "Go, Went, Gone" (2017), translated by Susan Bernofsky, follows a character not unlike John Erpenbeck. In it, an uncomfortably retired East German professor, Richard, befriends a group of African refugees in contemporary Berlin, at first interviewing them, hoping to understand a situation about which he realizes he maintains a shocking ignorance, before inviting several to stay in his home. Erpenbeck approaches her material with a cool yet unrelenting curiosity. As in "The Old Child," she grounds her story in research and experience, and she began interviewing, and then befriending, African refugees in order to write the book. (Her well-meaning efforts to help them—financially, bureaucratically—have been met, like Richard's, with obstacle after obstacle.)

Richard and the men share a sense of dislocation, and Erpenbeck juxtaposes so many instances of "crossing over and passing under" that the text comes to resemble a musical composition, allowing the reader to feel both the passing of time and the way events can loop back on themselves, creating dissonance and resonance. (The line "crossing over and passing under" comes from a section in which

Richard is teaching Osarobo, an asylum seeker from Niger, to play the piano.) But Erpenbeck also maintains a sense of proportion. If the professor's struggles to fully adjust to the West after twenty-five years are poignant, the refugees endure similar experiences at exponentially greater magnitudes. In one passage, Richard remembers the "emotional West Berliners punctually gathered" at a new crossing point to welcome their neighbors from the East. The first time he made the crossing was to access a more convenient metro station. "Unemotional and in a hurry, he'd used his elbows to fight his way through this weeping crowd," Erpenbeck writes. "One of the disappointed liberators shouted an insult at his back—but for the very first time, Richard got to school in under twenty minutes."

The refugees, meanwhile, have had everything taken from them—the destruction of their SIM cards creates the refrain "they broke the memory"—in their attempts "to gain admittance to this world that appears to them convincingly idyllic." As they are assailed by the German government's "secret weapon called time, poking out their eyes with days and weeks," all they want is permission to work. Dressed in freshly laundered clothes and bright colors, they, too, receive misguided support from their foils, "white sympathizers" wearing the ripped, black uniform of activists, who "refuse to believe that the world is an idyllic place." Watching a newscaster declare that it's "only a matter of time" before a solution is found for a particular settlement of asylum seekers, Richard thinks that "he doesn't even know yet if time exists for the purpose of making various layers and paths overlap, or if it's to keep things separate. . . . Speaking about the actual nature of time is something he can probably do best in conversation with those who have fallen out of it."

One night, Erpenbeck and I arranged to "meet" at her Berlin apartment. The sky outside her window was not yet dark, and I asked about something she mentions in "Not a Novel." After the fall of the Wall, she started collecting East German packaging; she writes that she hung some samples in her home, and I wanted to see them. I assumed that she would show me a couple of pieces of packaging paper, possibly framed. Instead, she led me to her guest room, where half a wall is covered in rough, brown paper and what, absent history, would be called trash. She has kept the carbon copy of the form her mother filled out to order a Trabant; she has hung up the piece of paper on which she wrote down the last time she shopped with G.D.R. marks, on June 28, 1990; she has two triangular milk cartons and a package of ten-minute lentils displayed in clear boxes fixed to the wall. (There is also an exercise bike.)

Her fascination with these objects didn't strike me as sad, or clingy, but as willful. On one level, she simply likes this bric-a-brac—the German word, *Tand*, is the title of her first story collection—and anyone familiar with the pressures of Marie Kondo's minimalism will see how collecting might become an anti-capitalist act. On another, she is able to recognize what one person is capable of preserving, and so she preserves it. "It was very clear that these things would be lost," she told me.

Of course, writing is an act of preservation, too. From 2007 to 2008, Erpenbeck wrote a column in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* called "Things That Disappear," which was published as a short collection of essays in Germany; her subjects ranged from a piece of expensive cheese in her fridge to youth and the monumental *Palast der Republik*, the building that housed the East German parliament. Only bank accounts have a real chance at permanence. In an essay about handling the logistics of her mother's death, Erpenbeck learns that "payments deducted from her bank account during the period

when she was already dead cannot be refunded”; in “Go, Went, Gone,” an asylum seeker, while telling the harrowing story of how he almost died crossing the Mediterranean, suddenly remembers, “I actually had an account at a Libyan bank. Maybe it still exists. The number was 2074.”

The selection of detail is a foundation of good writing; specificity, we learn in composition class, is what conveys meaning. But, in her meditative accounting, Erpenbeck manages to transcend evocation and arrive at something larger, a mode in which nothing feels insignificant. Near the end of “I Become Me,” after proposing those many details that might explain how and why she is the way she is, Erpenbeck arrives at what is, for her, a moment of certainty. “Save the living things and at least write down the rest, if it’s too bulky to take with you, or too heavy, if it doesn’t fit in the suitcase, or if it’s already gone, lost, forbidden, confiscated, indecent, outdated, stolen, burned, or returned,” she writes. “Maybe you could say it like that.”

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