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'How do I speak about the past?" Bernhard Schlink and the genre of Vaterliteratur

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Abstract

This dissertation functions as an exploration of German author Bernhard Schlink's engagement with the genre of *Väterliteratur* (Literature about Fathers). By examining how Schlink has used adaptations of this genre in his novels *The Reader* (1998), *Homecoming* (2009) and short story *Girl with Lizard* (2002), this project will attempt to ascertain the extent to which one can view these texts as part of a new wave of father writing that has emerged in the German post-unification space. The question dominating this research project and contained in the first part of the title: "How do I speak about the Past", implies that part of this research will examine Schlink's portrayal of the second-generation's attempt to understand and give voice to their experiences in postwar Germany. As such, my work engages with the emergence of *Väterliteratur* as being the result of an incomplete attempt by second-generation Germans to confront Germany's national traumatic past during the 1968 Student Movement. However, while Schlink's work demonstrates a familiarity with the content, structure and themes present in the first wave of *Väterliteratur* he appears to rewrite these into a fictionalised format, demonstrating the continued need in German society to work through the past.

In many respects the texts selected for analysis in this dissertation deviate from the traditional conventions found within the earlier father novels, and interestingly appear to emphasise the previously marginalised role of women both during and postwar. What I will demonstrate is that while Schlink's work makes use of the conventions found in *Väterliteratur*, and by doing so explores the postwar relationships between fathers and sons, it also indirectly engages with the experiences of German women and their own perpetration of, or suffering as a result of the patriarchal attitudes present in, Nazism. Through this dual portrayal (the presence of both men and women) Schlink gives a new perspective to the complexities of German postwar life as seen through the eyes of the second-generation.