

Heinrich Böll, *Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*

We turn this week to a novel published in the mid-1970s.

Although fiction, its story rings true in that it reveals some of the basic structures of daily life and interaction in a highly industrialized society near the end of the 20th c.

Due to its treatment of the theme of violence following the outbreak of severe violent acts in the west in the 1960s and 1970s, *KB* is often overused as a document of the period, and it is often read for its surface features alone.

Yet Böll had much more in mind than a literal reading of the text as a direct reflection of an actual event.

Böll distinguishes between the 'topical' and the 'real'.

'Real' events, he argued in 1953, were events identified as having had significant impact upon our lives (an example would be WWII).

'Topical' events, by contrast, were more ordinary (in that they were forgotten and therefore seemingly inconsequential).

But Böll's mind, 'topical' events were the keys to reality.

He cited the example of Japanese fishermen exposed to the radiation of American atomic testing in the Pacific.

The 'event' was 'topical'

—the men were not agents of history or of change—

but even so, the 'reality' of the event was such

that it introduced into everyone's mind

a new consciousness that air itself can be a form of death.

So Böll is partly trying to explain the consciousness that governs postwar life

(why do we think this way and not that?).

To help him achieve this end,
he introduces into his narratives individuals who themselves have made no history,
but who carry in their own stories the keys to the overarching structures and
forms of power governing life.

Katharina Blum is one such character.

Social violence dominated the west in the '60s and '70s.

In Germany, student protests broke out in 1968,
there were running protests over the Vietnam War
and the deployment of nuclear missiles on German soil,

and at the Munich Olympics in 1972
terrorists shot and killed Israeli athletes.

Small hostile violent groups, such as the Baader-Meinhof Group or Red Army Faction,
ravaged German life.

In 1971 two members of that group were killed,
and in 1972 the US army barracks in Heidelberg were bombed,
as was the Springer publishing house in Hamburg.

The entire Baader-Meinhof affair was exploited by right wing media
which used stories on the affair
as a means to bring down the German government.

Böll intervened on behalf of Ulrike Meinhof in 1972
because he believed that the press,
which had been accusatory, had deprived her and her group of a fair trial.

Böll was then himself criticized, subject to police searches,
accused of creating a climate for violence,
and cast as a threat to the internal security of the nation.

Böll sued for defamation and eventually won his case in Constitutional Court in 1981.

The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum appears in the midst of this period, in 1974.

The story is a polemical parody of the structures and mentalities of life.

Böll uses the story to criticize several forms of violence in modern society;
physical violence is actually the least among them.

The story of *KB* is well known.

Katharina Blum sleeps with a suspected terrorist,
and is subsequently charged by the police with murder.

Let's look closely at what he is saying
about the systematic dangers that exist in postwar society.

question: what is the public sphere? how does media participate?

Consider for discussion:

1. The newspaper *News* in this story (*Die Zeitung* in the German version) is actually *Bild-Zeitung*, a tabloid published by the Axel Springer (discussed in class). It was and still is the major source of news for a large portion of the German population. What is the relationship between the *News* and the public sphere?

2. What are the forms of violence that Böll addresses in this work?

3. How does the notion of the public sphere help us to understand what Böll is trying to say about violence?

3. Those who control truth—its construction as well as its certification—in a society are in a position of power. Address the relationship between the *News* and the truth (for instance, compare Katharina's 'facts' to the police's 'facts' to the *News*'s 'facts').

<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/terminology/terms/springer.html>

Springer Press

11 April 1968 - Thousands of protestors riot at the Berlin headquarters of the Springer Press after SDS and APO leader Rudi Dutschke is shot by an extremist.

The bane of leftist Germans, the Springer newspapers were outrageously conservative. Owned by [Lord Axel Springer](#), the Springer Press controlled almost half of the newspaper circulation in West Germany.

Springer was an avowed anti-communist. During a time when others corporations were leaving West Berlin in droves (fearful of the tenuous political situation that barely kept the city out of East German hands), Axel Springer chose to put the headquarters for his publishing empire in Berlin. Springer built a 20-story monstrosity mere yards away from the Berlin Wall (a block away from Checkpoint Charlie), and put a huge reader-board on the side facing East Berlin. The board would flash the news of the free world to the "enslaved Germans" on the other side of the wall. The sheer size of the building was intended as a constant reminder to East Germans of the superiority of the Capitalist system.

The [Baader-Meinhof Gang](#) bombed the Springer building in Hamburg in May of [1970](#), injuring 17 workers.

<http://www.boell.org/welcome.asp>

German writer, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972. Böll portrayed Germany after World War II with a deep moral vision and attacked the materialistic values of the post-war society. Böll's unorthodox Catholic belief often marked the spiritual content of his stories.

"Art is always a good hiding-place, not for dynamite, but for intellectual explosives and social time bombs. Why would there otherwise have been the various Indices? And precisely in their despised and often even despicable beauty and lack of transparency lies the best hiding-place for the barb that brings about the sudden jerk or the sudden recognition." (from *Nobel Lecture*, 1973)

Heinrich Böll was born in Cologne. His father was a cabinetmaker and sculptor, whose ancestors had fled from England to escape the persecution of Roman Catholics. Böll started to write poetry and short stories in his youth. He was one of the few boys in his school who did not join the Hitler

Youth movement. However, his elder brother, Alois, joined the movement to keep his father's business afloat. Böll graduated from a high school in 1937. In his certificate Böll had two errors: his birth date was incorrect and his choice of career - "book trade" was altered by the school principal.

Böll was drafted into the compulsory work program. "... my unconquerable (and still unconquered) aversion to the Nazis was not revolt," Böll later wrote, "*they revolted me*, repelled me on every level of my existence: conscious *and* instinctive, aesthetic *and* political." (from *What's to Become of the Boy?*, 1981) During World War II Böll served six years as a private and corporal in the army on both the Soviet and Western fronts. He was wounded four times, and at the end of the war he was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in France.

After returning to Cologne, Böll studied at the university and worked then for a short time in the family workshop and later at the city's Bureau of Vital Statistics. Böll's first stories appeared in 1947. Some of his early works were published in English in *The Mad Dog* (1997). The title story depicts two friends, a priest and a murderer, who meet at the end of the war but find that they are separated by their own horrific experiences and spiritual emptiness. Böll's first novel, *The Train was on Time*, appeared in 1949. From 1951 he was a full-time writer.

In his early novels Böll depicted the despair of soldiers' lives, the oppressive cruelties he witnessed in his youth and in military service. From the "worm's-eye" view of World War II his scope widened gradually on the reality of modern German society.

In a 1952 essay, Böll accepted the label "rubble literature" as a designation of literary trend which focused on the war, coming home, and reconstruction. Böll wanted to find a realism that would correspond "to the laconic nature of the generation which has 'come home,' a generation that knows there is no home for them on this earth."

Billiards at Half Past Nine (1959) took place in a single day (September 6, 1958). It depicted a prominent family of Cologne architects, who have been successively involved with the building of an abbey at the beginning of the 20th-century, its destruction during World War II, and its rebuilding after 1945. In the course of the day Böll reveals the crucial incidents in the past of the family, from the Wilhelminian empire through Weimar and Hitler to the prosperous West Germany of 1958.

In 1971 appeared *Group Portrait With a Lady*, which was again formally innovative: it was composed from interviews and documents about Leni Pfeiffer, through whom the lives of some

sixty other characters are depicted. Böll parodied fashionable documentary novels, but also used the dead language of real documents of Nazi bureaucracy. The narrator tries to reconstruct the life of Leni, the simultaneously saintly and sensuous heroine. "The female protagonist in the first section is a woman of forty-eight, German: she is five foot six inches tall, weights 133 pounds (in indoor clothing), i.e., only twelve to fourteen ounces below standard weight; her eyes are iridescent dark blue and black, her slightly greying hair, very thick and blonde, hangs loosely to her shoulders, sheathing her head like a helmet." Leni has survived a difficult childhood, a bad marriage, a forbidden love affair with a Soviet prisoner-of-war, the bombing of Cologne, and postwar series of losses. In the end his friends, social 'discards', organize a 'Help Leni Committee' to bail her out of bankruptcy and prevent her eviction.

In 1968 Böll worked as a teacher at the University of Frankfurt and later at other universities (in Prag 1969 and in Israel 1970).

Böll was politically active and in 1972 he participated in SPD's election campaign.

The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum (1974)

The protagonist, Katharina Blum, is a decent young housekeeper.

She falls in love with a young man, who is wanted by the police.

Katharina helps him to escape, and is interrogated by the police as if she had participated in terrorist acts.

She is persecuted in the sensation-seeking press, and especially an unscrupulous reporter named Tötges, who is responsible for ruining her reputation.

Finally she is driven to the act of murdering him.

When the reporter says, "How about us having a bang for a start?" she shoots him.

Böll himself had experienced harassment by the media and his house was searched by police when he announced that terrorist Ulrike Meinhof should be given a fair trial.

Volker Schlöndorff and Margarethe von Trotta adapted the book into screen in 1975.

Safety Net (1979) was inspired by the press coverage of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group.

In his essays Böll saw his role as a writer to act as the social conscience of his age. He ridiculed contemporary jargon, defended individual freedom and self-determination, warned about the dangers of escalating nuclear armament and the creeping powers of the state security system.

Often returning to his Catholic faith Böll examined the godlessness of the times but viewed critically the church itself.

Böll died in Bonn on July 16, 1985. After his death, critics lamented the lack of a successor capable of carrying on his public missions as moral authority and a spokesman for intellectual freedom.

<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/who/terrorists/bmgang/meinhofulrike.html>

Ulrike Meinhof's parents both died early, leaving Ulrike and her sister Weinke in the care of Renate Riemack, a friend of their mother's. Riemack was a devoted socialist, and a profound influence on Meinhof.

Meinhof married [Klaus Rainer Röhl](#), publisher of the left-wing student newspaper, *konkret*. After a few years Meinhof became *konkret*'s editor. Röhl and Meinhof have twin girls, [Bettina and Regine](#), on 21 September, 1962.

Meinhof drifted away from Röhl, and towards the radical fringe of the student movement. She left her husband in the late sixties. On 14 May, [1970](#), she participated in the freeing of [Andreas Baader](#), giving birth to the so-called "[Baader-Meinhof Gang](#)." Though partially named after her, Meinhof was not, as is often assumed, the co-leader of the gang (Baader, along with his girlfriend [Gudrun Ensslin](#), led the group, with Meinhof, [Jan-Carl Raspe](#), and others comprising a second tier of leadership). She spent the next two years on the run, robbing banks and bombing buildings, before being captured on 15 June, [1972](#).

While in prison over the next four years, Meinhof grew increasingly depressed as the other gang members ostracize her. She hung herself in her cell on 9 May, [1976](#) (though some have questioned this official explanation and instead suspect that she was murdered by the state).

Ulrike Meinhof

Member

Baader-Meinhof Gang

Born

7 October 1934

First Active

May 1970

Current Status

Committed suicide in prison 9 May 1976

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