

Review Essay**Nora Krug, *Belonging*. Scribner, 2018.**Ryan Scott Walker
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Nora Krug's 2018 graphic memoir, *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*, offers an honest, at times unsettling, exploration of the legacy of World War II as it continues to impact lives generations removed from the war itself. Krug reveals the power of everyday objects to both anchor and reveal aspects of our individual and collective identities. These objects also evoke bittersweet memories of a displaced sense of home, in a manner that recalls a work like Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. Krug skillfully combines her own recollections of the past and historical research to weave a multi-layered narrative, approaching themes of shame, exile, and *Heimat* from her own perspective and German society as a whole. This book deserves to be read alongside other major works of the non-fiction graphic genre; *Belonging* shares a careful treatment of its themes with works like Spiegelman's *Maus*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and Bui's *The Best We Could Do* and would enrich the syllabi of countless humanities courses.

Belonging opens with a visual and textual description of *Hansaplast*, a German brand of bandage. Krug, in handwritten text, announces "From the notebook of a homesick émigré/ Things German No. 1" The elements of the page

weave an evocation of this everyday object together with a memory of her mother applying it to the author's scraped knee. The memory creates an association between her mother and this bandage; for the author safety, reliability, and the familiarity of *home* hover around this humble household item. Yet, the passage ends on an ominous note: "It is the most tenacious bandage on the planet, and it hurts when you tear it off to look at your scar." This striking first page hints at the quiet complexity by which Krug wrestles with the past throughout the novel. Similar pages are peppered throughout the text describing "German Things" (The forest, a type of mushroom, a binder, bread, soap, and adhesive) which feature these mundane objects to both elucidate and meditate on collective German culture. What follows is the story of Krug's journey to understand her own identity as a German in the world and a member of a family whose lives have been marked by World War II for generations. The first chapter ends with a full-page rendering of Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above the Mist*, the iconic German painting depicting a Byron-esque man staring off into the distance. Over the figure, Krug places a post-it or a strip of construction paper with the words: "How do you know who you are, if you don't understand where you come from?" This question underpins Krug's narrative.

Krug centers the book on her investigation into her family's involvement in the war, although narrative digressions allow Krug to reflect on her own experiences as a German at home and abroad. Pivotal in these explorations are the roles her grandfathers played in the war. Krug uses her own recollections, photographs, notebooks, interviews, and even travels to her father's hometown to comb through archival material. Many of these documents comprise the collages that crowd the pages, alongside Krug's handwritten text and drawn illustrations. Her research brings her face-to-face with uncomfortable realizations about her grandfathers' actions during the war, her father's difficult childhood, and the inconsistencies in the stories which the family has told itself for decades. A sense of dread haunts Krug's narrative as she approaches the truth, beginning to understand why the family might have chosen never to discuss certain elements of those dark years.

Krug utilizes the digressions in the narrative to contextualize her own experiences, as well as to tarry over some of the broader themes of the book. These detours are often deeply personal, almost confessional. One two-page spread features a hand-drawn illustration of a wedding cake, inscribed with the words, “Not even marrying a Jewish man has lessened my German shame.” On another two-page spread, Krug has transcribed posts on an online forum discussing men’s hairstyles. “I am widely interested in the hairstyles of German men during the Third Reich,” one user posts.

The visual elements of the book underscore the emotional tumult of Krug’s undertaking. Disorganized images with text stuffed between them clutter many pages. The reader is often assaulted by colors and overlapped images whose edges run off the page. Yet often these pages are followed by carefully hand-drawn paneled comics or a muted, opaque figure of a woman in watercolor. Still other pages are presented as if one had opened a tidy diary, complete with doodles and taped photographs with captions. The visual cacophony might put off an impatient reader. Krug forces us to sort through the imagery, return to written text after encountering the images, and flip back to earlier sections to keep track of the interwoven storylines and themes. The technique rewards patience. *Belonging* exemplifies the ability of the graphic novel format to express emotions, contradictions, and themes more effectively than written words alone. Krug includes a photo of her uncle as a boy, with the caption “Franz-Karl, 1936.” He died, fighting for the Nazis during the war in Italy. On the opposite page is a very similar photo of another boy, also named Franz-Karl, taken in 1956. Krug reveals that her father was born two years after the death of his brother, was given his name, and constantly compared to him. The tortured meaning attached to this pair of photographs becomes more apparent each time Krug returns to the subject of her father’s difficult childhood. *Belonging* in this way encourages readers to return to these and other images and see them differently each time.

The most affecting pages rely on the dissonance between the familiar mundanity of everyday objects and the sinister context of the Third Reich. Krug discovers her uncle’s childhood notebooks and includes photocopied pages early

in the work. They contain school exercises written in a child's hand. In the margins are doodles of mushrooms, trees, and books alongside doodles of swastikas, Nazi flags, eagle standards, and a caricature of a Jewish man. Some of the book doodles are labeled, including *Grimms Märchen* (Grimm's Fairytales) and *Mein Kampf*. The juxtaposition of the child's work and these symbols of the regime is disturbing. Krug increases the reader's discomfort by translating some the exercises:

When you go to the forest and you see mushrooms that look beautiful, you think that they are good. But when you eat them, they are poisonous and can kill a whole family. The Jew is like this mushroom. When you see a Jew from behind, you don't immediately recognize him. But if you talk to him, you recognize him immediately. He pretends to be nice and flatters you shamelessly. Just like the poisonous mushroom can kill a whole family, the Jew can kill a whole people.

By revealing the propagandistic nature of the exercise, the diligent, childlike handwriting takes on a menacing tone. Through her employment of this and similar objects throughout this memoir, the distance between the Nazi regime and the (fictional) reader's own associations and experiences becomes uncomfortably narrow. Her own description of the experience reading these notebooks ("intriguing but chilling") is superfluous; the power of this book consists in its use of visual elements to communicate the banality of evil. Such passages highlight the effectiveness with which the book asks non-Germans to consider the legacies of their own national history.

A book that focuses on both the collective suffering of generations of Germans and the author's intensely personal journey to understand what the legacy of the Nazi regime means for her own life might be criticized as self-indulgent, insensitive or as some sort of exoneration. Photographs of distraught German civilians as they are marched by rows of the dead might suggest the author is asking for sympathy on their behalf. Several pages of section 9, "Melting Ice" focus on the death of (uncle) Franz-Karl. Krug includes and translates the written announcement of his death, which she describes as "A letter equal in

kindness and in cruelty.” Immediately following the letter is a two-page spread imagining the young man’s death, and a wrenching series of panels recounts the day his parents received the announcement. Yet, Krug manages to explore the German experience without excusing German passivity under the Nazi regime. For example, the fifth section of *Belonging*, “Unhealed Wounds,” begins with a twenty-paneled comic, “A Fragmentary History of Kùlsheim,” (the hometown of Krug’s family). Most of the history is a catalogue of antisemitic actions the townsfolk have committed against their Jewish neighbors. These incidents begin in the thirteenth century.

She describes and depicts her own suffering and guilt throughout the memoir often through the shame of Germanness abroad. “Just say you’re from the Netherlands” Krug recalls an aunt suggesting. Below the words are depictions of her non-German peers laughing and performing the “Sieg Heil” salute upon learning her nationality. Krug does not seek catharsis or absolution. Despite her investigations, Krug is unable to find every answer she is seeking. Her personal journey ends with the recognition that whatever she learns about her past, the shame of her legacy will remain:

Whether actively involved or not, by joining the Nazi Party, Willi had inevitably contributed to furthering the cause of a murderous regime. Would it make a difference in my life, if I had found proof that Willi had never worn his uniform, that his wife had, in fact, been dispossessed of her milk business by the Nazis, that he hid his Jewish employer in a shed, or that he himself was half or a quarter Jewish? Or would it be easier to navigate my shame if I had been able to prove his guilt, if I had learned that he had been a Nazi through and through, without the shadow of a doubt?

Krug must learn to live with incomplete answers. Willi serves as a case study for attempts to reconcile the actions of individuals who support or were indirectly complicit in terrible regimes. The complexities of human motivation do not simplify the moral calculus in the evaluation of an individual’s actions—instead they illuminate the complexities of history. Krug articulates the struggle to approach these issues with nuance and compassion.

Perhaps the most predominant theme of the book is Krug's wrestling with the notion of *Heimat*. Facing the reproduction of the *Wanderer Above the Mist*, Krug places an index card with a thorough definition of the word. The scholarly discourse on *Heimat* has literally filled volumes, and *Belonging* grapples with many aspects of this multifaceted term.¹ As Krug reflects on her journey in the epilogue, she concludes: "I know something that I didn't know before: that HEIMAT can only be found again in memory, that it is something that only begins to exist once you've lost it." She follows this statement by mentioning that for the first time since the end of the War, the extreme right wing has claimed seats in parliament. The proximity of *Heimat* and this political observation is no accident. *Heimat* stands at the center of a long debate about what it means to be German. The title of the book as well as the title image (a hand-drawn rendition of the *Wanderer Above the Mist* featuring Krug herself replacing the subject) suggest that Krug is attempting wrest this concept from the right. *Belonging* is an engrossing, complex, and above all, earnest memoir. Krug contends with the past in a way that is both intimate yet applicable to broader historical and cultural conversations.

¹ Readers interested in the discourse might consider Celia Applegate's *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (1990) and Peter Blickle's *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (2004) as starting points, as well as the recent volume *Heimat Revisited: Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf einen umstrittenen Begriff* (ed. Dana Bönisch, Jil Runia, and Hanna Zehschnetzler, 2020)—also reviewed in this issue—for the most recent developments.