

Challenging Perspectives:

Narrative approaches in Ulrike Almut Sandig's *Flamingos. Geschichten*

Heike Bartel

Abstract

In Flamingos, Ulrike Almut Sandig's collection of eleven stories, narrative perspective comes under constant challenge so that these superficially simple texts reveal on closer inspection a multi-layered complexity. The following close readings of a selection of stories will outline how intimately Sandig's narrative approach links form and content. The stories focus on the solitary or 'odd' individual, on gaps or missing pieces in the sequence of events, on the Fluchtpunkte or vanishing points that the seemingly limited narrative perspective in each story leads to. The stories with their detached tone and understated manner are about an unstable, uncentred world. Cumulatively these views from the margins build up a bigger picture, a mosaic composed from otherwise only loosely connected pieces. Whilst Sandig's texts challenge the reader through their complex handling of the narrative perspective, they also query through their innovative form the authority of particular ways of viewing and ordering the world both ideologically and aesthetically.

Keywords: narratology, narrative perspective, child-narrator, power hierarchies, story-telling, feminist theory, eating disorder, translation, *Geschichten*, *Fluchtpunkte*

Challenging perspectives

'Geschichten', the subtitle of *Flamingos*, Ulrike Almut Sandig's first collection of short stories (2010,) emphasizes the process of story-telling. On the surface the eleven stories seem self-contained, even simple. They echo familiar fairy tales and recall the aesthetic closure of 19th-century literary forms such as texts of poetic realism. However, at a deeper level Sandig's masterfully composed stories challenge the reader with their complex exploration of narrative approaches that draw creatively on avant-garde, modern, and postmodern aesthetics and establish Sandig as one of the most interesting contemporary writers in German.

On the level of content the eleven stories are only loosely connected through different takes on the themes of loss, death and the experiences of outsider figures. Other themes and motifs, such as the flamingos of the title, also recur. The flamingos in the short text that introduces the collection appear in groups, stand around and are heavy. 'Und dann fliegen sie auf.'¹ So it is with the recurring motifs; on first appearance they seem solid enough, but then turn into momentary flashes rather than continuing throughout as symbols with fixed meaning. What binds the texts together, I will argue, is to be found not so much at the level of content as in a shared emphasis on a distinct approach to narrative that interlinks formal structure and style with content. The connecting element is not the 'what' but the 'how' of these stories: how they are told, from whose perspective, and how that perspective is unsettled. The term 'perspective' will be used in the following to describe a crucial tool in narrative theory that determines 'the location from which events in a story

¹ Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Flamingos* (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling & Co, 2010), p. 7. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in parenthesis in the text.

are presented to the reader'.² This 'location' refers here both literally to the spatiotemporal coordinates of a narrator in the text and figurally to this narrator's attitudes and values.

My analysis builds in particular on three contemporary narratological theories that critically explore such connections. Fredric Jameson's study of the ideology of narrative form highlights the importance of 'formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own'.³ Jameson stresses the need to apprehend form as content and view narrative forms critically with regards to the power structures and other messages they convey or question. Susan Sniader Lanser questions 'fictions of authority' with particular focus on the 'narrative voice' of women.⁴ She reads the concept of 'voice' as a narrative tool but also as the expression of the particular perspective of women. Lanser situates 'voice' in a referential context that is simultaneously 'linguistic, literary, historical, biographical, social and political' and stresses 'the mimetic as well as the semiotic experience that is the reading of literature'.⁵ Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning also explore the relationship between power hierarchies and narrative structures in fictional texts in an edited volume that systematically analyses how narrative presents, reaffirms or deconstructs gender stereotypes.⁶ Although I will not focus extensively on gender, all three theories inform my analysis of how Sandig's stories engage critically with totalizing concepts or world views. Sandig deploys multi-layered narrative and double-voiced discourse to counteract established ways in narratology to construct and confirm dominant voices, for example with regards to the way certain narrators have been constructed as 'reliable' and 'unreliable'. Accordingly, the role of the narrator in the world of Sandig's stories is crucial. I will analyse the veering between reliable and unreliable narration, the doubled voices that offer dazzling reflections, the exposure to unexpected, sometimes fantastic events that cause interruptions or disturbances and invite multiple readings. Through close reading of a selection of texts, I will explore the shifting narrative levels on which the stories are built and the stimulating challenge they present to the reader. The complexity of perspectives in Sandig's texts, and the intricate 'locations' from which events are presented in them, makes for challenging reading. Yet the stories also challenge established ways of constructing narrative perspectives: through their innovative form, the stories query the authority of particular ways of viewing and ordering the world both ideologically and aesthetically.

A deep suspicion of totalizing concepts and dominant takes on reality marks the content and form of Sandig's stories, which deliberately avoid prescriptive interpretative authority and leave room for different interpretations in readings and re-readings. One explanation for this suspicion, and the openness which results, is tentatively offered by Karen Leeder with reference to the biographical background of the author, who was born 1979 in the GDR into the family of a Lutheran pastor: 'Perhaps we see here one of the shadows of the GDR: the mistrust in hierarchies and the

² Willie van Peer and Seymour Chatman, 'Introduction' in *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, ed. by van Peer and Chatman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 1-20, here: p. 5

³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 99.

⁴ Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority. Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁵ Susan Sniader Lanser, 'Towards a Feminist Narratology', in *Style*, 20:1 (1986), 341-363, here: p. 345.

⁶ Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies* (Weimar/Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004).

transparency of language.’⁷ Sandig’s narrators, situated as they are on the margins, challenge notions of ‘normality’ and of ‘reality’ and are the central focus of this essay. Sometimes they are women, sometimes people with perceived disabilities or ‘oddities’, but they are mostly children or teenagers who offer highly individual and non-normative takes on reality. These voices work against the usual genre conventions of narration, both in the selection of narrators and in deviating from the usual rules governing perspective. Sandig’s multi-perspectival and multi-layered narratives throw new light on dominant worldviews and through narrative interventions interrupt the seemingly self-contained fictional world. This opens up unexpected angles, sounds out new dimensions, and alerts us to the problems of narrative representation.

An attempt to situate Sandig’s prose in a literary tradition leads in several directions; ultimately, her work resists a fixed taxonomy. On the one hand, her stories often reference narrative styles and literary forms specific to the 19th and early 20th century. Thus the title of the collection and the short text preceding the eleven stories allude to Rilke’s poem ‘Die Flamingos’ in his *Neue Gedichte* (1907/08). The title ‘Mutabor’ draws on Wilhelm Hauff’s fairy tale, ‘Die Geschichte von Kalif Storch’ (1826) about the magic spell which means ‘I will be transformed’. The fantastic is evoked when the protagonist grows a third eye in ‘Damespiel’. In its use of the fantastic to activate the story this text in particular recalls Kafka whose influence can be found throughout Sandig’s work.⁸ In its uncanny setting, ‘Siebenleben’ echoes Theodor Storm’s late novella ‘Der Schimmelreiter’ (1888), which hovers ambiguously between poetic realism and the supernatural.⁹ On the other hand, the stories in *Flamingos* also allude to texts and contexts from later in the 20th and in the 21st centuries. In the first text ‘Über mich’ the deliberate amalgamation of perspectives recalls the decentredness of postmodernist writing. The constantly changing narrating subject in ‘Über mich’ leaves it ultimately undetermined whose consciousness is being portrayed. A female first-person narrator emphasizes her non-existence – ‘Es gibt mich gar nicht.’ (F, 10) – but nevertheless comes into existence through a story in which she addresses a reader directly: ‘Aber es gibt diese Geschichte’ (F, 10). In a deliberate shift of focus of the narrative orientation, the reader whom she first addresses becomes a fictional character who then comes to resemble the first-person female narrator. Her story, in turn, will be retold after her death by some highly unreliable witnesses with questionable memories, and in the end ‘[weiß] niemand [...] mehr so recht, was wahr und was falsch ist und um wen genau es am Ende ging’. (F, 11) Playfully reflecting on the fundamental structures of narrative, this first text of the collection unhinges established narrative relationships by such shifts of focus that query who is telling what and to whom. Although this first text stands out from the other ten in its dizzying narrative shifts, it nevertheless sets the tone for the whole collection: its ironic, self-reflective structure points to the fragmentation of ‘reality’ in an age when the authority of grand narratives is collapsing.

Emphasizing the orality of story-telling Sandig stretches narrative form by introducing elements of intermediality thus adding further ‘locations’ from which events in her stories are being told. In ‘Hush little Baby’, a text whose title alludes to Gershwin’s 1939 jazz classic ‘Summertime’, other

⁷ Karen Leeder, ‘Introduction’ in Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Thick of It* (London, New York, Calcutta: 2018), transl. by Karen Leeder, pp. xi-xvii, here: p. xvii.

⁸ One of numerous examples is Sandig’s citation of Kafka’s prose sketch ‘Wunsch, Indianer zu werden’ at the beginning of her 2011 volume of poetry, *Dickicht*: Ulrike Almut Sandig, *Dickicht* (Frankfurt am Main: Schöffling & Co, 2011), p. 1.

⁹ See Elizabeth Boa’s references to ‘Der Schimmelreiter’ in her essay in this volume.

media - music, various sounds, and the protagonist's double voice – are central motifs. This is a story that demands to be performed and heard, not just read and has indeed been produced as a radio play for the *Südwestrundfunk*.¹⁰ Other kinds of music feature throughout the collection. Particularly the texts with child-narrators display elements of performance, play with sounds and language, weaving in words from other languages or different ways of non-standard communication: rhyming, singing, stammering or stuttering. This soundscape echoes Sandig's own and other experimental poetry as well as recalling her vivid performances where she explores the multimedial technology of loop-pedals and computerized echoes. Sandig herself describes her multi-faceted work as a 'Pop-up-Bilderbuchtext' in the opening text 'Mein Löffel, mein Fluss, mein Pfefferminzspech' of our volume: a playing with language and text that also occasionally employs the 'bürgerliche Kulturtechnik des Zitierens', as Sandig ironically puts it.¹¹

Although not by direct citation the eleven stories are nevertheless framed by a reference to one famous text: Rilke's poem 'Die Flamingos' from the *Neue Gedichte* (1907/08). The exotic pink wading birds open Sandig's collection not just in the title and the image on the dust jacket of the 2010 edition but also in a prose poem of nine lines that precedes the eleven stories. Sandig at once echoes but moves beyond Rilke both in content and form. In its brevity and poetic style, this opening prelude is different from the other texts. It evokes – down to the small capitalization of the first word 'FLAMINGOS' – the ambiguous mixing of stylistic and formal elements typical of prose poems, a key genre of modernist short prose in the wake of Baudelaire, and emphasized in the term 'countergenre' for such texts.¹² Although the following eleven texts are short stories not prose poems, they share with this opening text something of the seemingly detached, hyperrealist evocation of objects in Rilke's 'Dinggedichte' which Volker Meid describes as a kind of 'neue "Sachlichkeit", die auf einer genauen Beobachtung des einzelnen Gegenstands – Dinge, Lebewesen, Geschehnisse – beruht:¹³

FLAMINGOS stehen in Gruppen, aber jeder Einzelne ist allein. Sie halten Abstand. Sie sind wachsam. Wir finden sie hässlich. Wir finden sie schön. Sie sehen aus, als würden sie brennen, aber das ist nicht wahr. Sie sehen aus, als wären sie nicht kaputt zu machen, aber auch das ist nicht wahr. Sie erwecken den Anschein, als wären sie gar nicht da. Sie sind aber da. Sie stehen mitten unter uns, und sie sind schwer. Doch auf der Oberfläche der seichten Gewässer laufen sie uns davon. Und dann fliegen sie auf. (F, 7)

Simple viewpoints are set up against each other without any mediating authority that could negotiate a particular position. This opener thus anticipates a narrative technique that we will encounter again in other stories, in 'Flamingos' and 'Salzwasser' in particular. In the opening text no single perspective is established as right or wrong, juxtaposed statements stand equal one to another. The repeated use of 'aber' marks a line of adversative stipulations that culminates in a

¹⁰ <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/audiothek/> (last access 11.5.2018)

¹¹ See Ulrike Almut Sandig, 'Mein Löffel, mein Fluss, mein Pfefferminzspech', in this volume.

¹² Thomas Althaus, Wolfgang Bunzel and Dirk Götttsche introduce this term by Claudio Guillén with reference to the Modern 'Prosagedicht'. Althaus, Bunzel, Götttsche, 'Ränder, Schwellen, Zwischenräume. Zum Standort Kleiner Prosa im Literatursystem der Moderne', in *Kleine Prosa. Theorie und Geschichte eines Textfeldes im Literatursystem der Moderne*, edited by Althaus, Bunzel, Götttsche (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2007), pp. ix-xxvii, here: p. xxv.

¹³ Volker Meid, *Metzler Chronik Literatur. Werke deutschsprachiger Autoren* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2006), p. 507.

concessive sentence, beginning with ‘Doch’ that introduces an unexpected event. Then comes the close: ‘Und dann fliegen sie auf.’ Throughout Sandig’s work birds recur as important markers.¹⁴ Here, Sandig lifts Rilke’s flamingos from the *Jardin des plantes* from their ‘heavy’ captivity where they can only ‘schreiten’ and awards them the lightness of flight. The open-endedness emphasized by the birds’ flying up promotes a sense of deliberate indeterminacy; it points to a new but undefined dimension beyond the *Dinge*. As such it echoes Rilke’s flamingos which ‘schreiten einzeln ins Imaginäre’.¹⁵ Read as an introduction to the whole collection the nine lines ask the reader to appreciate the artistic autonomy of each individual story whilst recognizing an element of interconnection in how they ‘stehen in Gruppen’.¹⁶ Read as a narratological programme for what follows, the text promotes arbitrariness or uncertainty of perception and judgment. It emphasizes on the level of content and form the grouping of different points of views without an authoritative mediator to set a hierarchy. ‘Kleine Prosa’ may serve to characterize the minimal narrative traits of this short text. Lacking authoritative prescription or closure, it fits a mode of writing, which as Dirk Göttsche outlines, is highly diverse, eludes generic definition and is shaped by the very different experimentation by individual authors with various other genres including poetry.¹⁷ The closeness to Rilke would suggest prose poem as a category within the ambit of short prose. However, the following eleven texts return to the more extended narrative form of *Geschichten* or *Erzählungen*. They mark what Nikolaus Förster calls ‘Die Wiederkehr des Erzählens’: not a nostalgic uncritical return to historic forms yet a telling of stories that is at once self-reflective and deeply reflective of other texts as well.¹⁸ This not an aesthetic of ‘anything goes’, these texts ask the reader to open up to them, to read and to reread: ‘so wird die Lektüre zu einem gleichsam archäologischen Unterfangen, jenseits trivialisierter Formen und Inhalte weitere (Sinn-)Schichten zu entdecken beziehungsweise zu konstruieren’.¹⁹ Sandig’s prose combines modernist experimentation, and postmodern uncentredness with what could be called a romantic trust in the power of poetic language. This results in poetic but also highly political stories that show a deep suspicion of prescriptive linguistic and other power structures.

¹⁴ There are numerous examples for the central role birds play in Sandig’s poetry and prose ranging from the New Zealand tui, the ‘double-voiced’ bird with two voice boxes, to seagulls in the poem ‘wie Sonne, wie Winter, wie Wind’ in *Dickicht*, swifts in the story ‘Geburtstagsgeschenk’ in *Buch gegen das Verschwinden* and storks in ‘Mutabor’ in *Flamingos*.

¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. by Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski and August Stahl, 4 volumes (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996), *Gedichte 1895-1910*, p. 575. Here Sandig comes very close to Rilke’s *Neue Gedichte* in ‘catching the moment in which the subject is threatened and deprived of self-certainty’. Lawrence Ryan, ‘Neue Gedichte – New Poems’, in *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. by Erika Metzger and Michael Metzger (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), pp 128-153, here: p. 152.

¹⁶ Sandig echoes here Judith Ryan’s problematization in her reading of Rilke’s ‘Die Flamingos’ of the notion of artistic autonomy, given the intertextual reliance of literature upon other texts and contexts. Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 72-3.

¹⁷ Dirk Göttsche, *Kleine Prosa in Moderne und Gegenwart* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2006).

¹⁸ Although Förster emphasizes German-language prose of the 1980s and 90s, many of his perceptive points also help to frame Sandig’s narrative texts. See Nikolaus Förster, *Die Wiederkehr des Erzählens. Deutschsprachige Prosa der 80er und 90er Jahre* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999). Förster’s title plays with the title of a very different book: Volker Hage, *Die Wiederkehr des Erzählers. Neue deutsche Literatur der 70er Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Wien: Ullstein, 1982).

¹⁹ Förster, *Die Wiederkehr des Erzählens*, p. 4.

Sandig's vividly evocative writing does not force individual experience into any hierarchical order – be it through narrative or ideological structures. Her texts require a fine-tuning of the reader's attention to small details and hidden clues. Part of their narrative strategy is to reveal through layers of double-meaning the hidden depth and wider relevance of small acts and marginal characters in a way that challenges aesthetic and socio-cultural conventions and hierarchies. I have argued elsewhere that Sandig's prose reflects both through its form and content on a world that is in its essence not whole and centred but a 'world in pieces'.²⁰ The texts address what Clifford Geertz, writing of anthropological and socio-cultural structures, calls 'a pervasive raggedness' of the world marked by '[t]he shattering of larger coherences [...] into smaller ones, uncertainly connected one with another'.²¹ Violent loss, unresolved trauma on a personal and a political level, forced migration, worrying family, gender and wider social, national, and international relations are mapped onto the highly vulnerable individual, often a child or an outsider. Quietly and with seeming detachment, the texts reflect from the margins an instable and decentred world. Sandig's stories focus on the solitary and 'odd' individual, on discontinuous stories, on missing pieces and limited perspectives. Seemingly small-scale experiences of loss and acts of repression - for example the small gesture of 'fetschen' in 'Mond' (F, 149) that describes how an adult deliberately lets go of a twig during a walk so it lashes into the face of the child behind him – reflect loss and violence on a much greater individual or political scale. Examples are the tragic death of a family member (in 'Vatertod', 'Flamingos', 'Siebenleben', 'Mutabor'), a catastrophe like the 1986 Chernobyl disaster ('Dreitausend Blauwale') or the breaking down of a state/the GDR ('Kuba', 'Dreitausend Blauwale'). These marginal views build up a bigger picture through loosely connected stories that each allow fleeting but telling insights.

'Flamingos'

Narratological theory tends to regard child narrators in the first person as unreliable. Although their untrustworthiness is judged according to different criteria than that of the unreliable adult narrator, child narrators are nevertheless considered to be incapable of giving an objective rendering of events. Accordingly what they tell is to be read with suspicion.²² Faults and flaws are picked on and a clear hierarchy posited between the assumed ability of adults to analyse and convey experiences accurately because of their greater experience, insight, and linguistic skills, all which the child is perceived to lack.²³ Yet narratives told from a child's perspective evince that particular interconnectedness of form and content that is so valued in the theories of Jameson, Lanser, Nünning and Nünning. On the basis of these theories, I will explore the narrative hierarchy in several of Sandig's texts and question the unreliable status of the child-narrator. The child's perspective, I

²⁰ See Heike Bartel and Elizabeth Boa, 'Urike Almut Sandig's *Flamingos* and *Buch gegen das Verschwinden* with an excursus on Elisabeth Bovenschen's *Verschwunden*', in *The Short Story in German in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Lyn Marven, Andrew Plowman and Kate Roy. (Rochester/New York: Camden House, 2019 forthcoming). The phrase refers to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his analysis of culture and politics at the end of the 20th century, particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Clifford Geertz, 'The World in Pieces. Culture and Politics at the End of the Century', in Geertz, *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 159-230.

²¹ Geertz, 'The World in Pieces', p. 161.

²² For an analysis of the narrative voice of the child and the child as unreliable narrator see also Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice. The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

²³ Wall, *The Narrator's Voice*, p. 248.

shall argue, is generally innovative and strategically composed so as to allow the reader insight into a bigger picture beyond the unreliable and limited accounts in the foreground.²⁴

The story 'Flamingos' is constituted around something that is missing from view: a 'toter Winkel', the blind spot that cannot be directly observed from certain points of view, for example when driving a large vehicle. Sandig constructs a young boy's worldview around such a spot in his perception so that he does not see the shocking reality of the whole picture that gradually reveals itself to the reader. Perspective, or 'focalization', to use Gérard Genette's more precise term, is central to this story. The narrative is mediated through the eyes of the child, however narrative elements add information to the story for the reader so expanding the focus beyond the limited view of the child.²⁵ Thus, a story of two layers slowly emerges showing two parallel but highly contrasting worldviews. Distinctive in Sandig's narrative approach is the lack of hierarchy between these layers and her breaking down of narrative boundaries between them so opening up unexpected vistas.

The visual element inherent in the narrative term 'perspective' is particularly pertinent in this story that engages with perspectives – literally and metaphorically. The unnamed young male protagonist, the crossbearer in his local church, leads a funeral procession for the first time. As the story follows him on the procession from the chapel to the grave, the reader learns through the boy's voice that he has been introduced to this tradition in the German Protestant Church by his older brother Gunnar. For Gunnar this paid job is a way to increase his pocket money – he is saving up for his driving licence when he reaches sixteen and planning adventurous trips on a motorbike. The experienced bigger brother's advice is constantly in the young boy's ear with particular emphasis on the right kind of 'schreiten': 'Nicht zu schnell, aber auch nicht trippeln, Kleiner, also große Schritte, aber nicht so groß, dass du beim Laufen wippst, es muss der Situation angemessen sein, hörst du?' (F, 81) Here, the narrative leaves ambiguous whether Gunnar's voice is situated in the inside or outside world, whether he is present at the scene or only remembered in the mind of his younger brother.

Focused entirely on conducting his duties as a crossbearer according to the instructions of his older brother, the boy appears physically and mentally detached from the grieving congregation and treads a solitary path. Although the reader learns that his parents and close family members are also present they are far removed from him - and from each other. A family story is being narrated through the child as outsider. Parallels can be drawn between the majestic wading birds and the boy's focus on finding his stride in leading the funeral procession and keeping the right 'Abstand' or distance, as the opening note emphasizes (F, 7). The verb 'schreiten', repeated five times in the first paragraph alone, clearly alludes back to Rilke's poem. Accompanied on every step by his brother's words on this otherwise lonely procession, the boy observes the service with both detachment yet with great attention to detail. Like many characters in Kafka's novels and short stories the boy is what Franz K. Stanzel calls a 'Reflektorfigur' for the narrative: 'Der Leser erhält, wie es scheint, unmittelbar, das heißt durch direkte Einschau in das Bewußtsein der Reflektorfigur, Kenntnis von Vorgängen und Reaktionen, die im Bewußtsein der Reflektorfigur einen Niederschlag finden.'²⁶ The reader follows the boy's thoughts and seemingly objective observations, seeing the world through

²⁴ See also Tom Smith's essay in this volume.

²⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 186.

²⁶ Franz K Stanzel, *Die typischen Erzählformen im Roman dargestellt an 'Tom Jones', 'Moby-Dick', 'The Ambassadors', 'Ulysses' u.a.* (Wien: Braumüller, 1969), p. 194.

his eyes, sharing a realistically detailed yet also limited perspective: scrutinizing the coffin and the 'Schriftbänder' on it with writing that the boy cannot decipher, noticing the nicotine-stained fingers of the pallbearers who look at him 'komisch' (F, 83). The story, however, accompanies these limited insights with hints at something significant beyond the boy's perception. These hints are delivered through a more distanced perspective that is, however, not achieved through for example the intervention of an omniscient narrator. Moreover, it is left to the reader to piece the whole story together, deciphering the possible writing on the wreaths, interpreting the looks and behaviour of the congregation, guessing who is hiding in the large walk-in cupboard – or not – and filling the boy's blind spot. The boy's point of view is the point of orientation for the narrative but with each detailed observation the limited child-perspective shifts slightly to reveal a new layer to the story. Subtle narrative interventions by the author – such as changes in the use of present and past tense when referring to Gunnar or innocent comments that nevertheless reveal the strained relationship between their parents – guide the reader to a different understanding of the plot. Thus, the detached singular observations of the boy are linked and gaps are filled to form a bigger picture.

Flamingos, the birds of the title, lead to the boy's report of the newly acquired motorhome bought for a family holiday with the plan to see these pink and white waders in the wild on their route through France. The mention of the new motorhome sharpens the boy's focus on Gunnar, the older brother with the fascination for driving whose money for crossbearing will go towards his driving test. Already practising for the written part, Gunnar is particularly interested in the phenomenon of the 'toter Winkel', the dangerous blind spot that cannot be directly observed by drivers unless they practice their 'Schulterblick', glancing over one shoulder. 'Jetzt ist Gunnar in meinem toten Winkel' (F, 84), the boy thinks, but the reader can piece together those parts of the story that are blanked out by the young boy: Gunnar – whilst 'testing' his blind spot theory – was killed in a tragic accident by his own father driving back home in the new motorhome, a tragedy witnessed by the younger brother. The story ends with the young boy turning away from the open grave practising his 'Schulterblick' glancing over the shoulder to see what is hidden in the blind spot: 'Ich drehe mich vom Loch weg, mache meinen Schulterblick und hole Luft: Gunnar bist du noch da?' (F, 88) Until this final sentence the double-layered text maintains the different views of events in parallel. The reader may well anticipate that the boy's 'Schulterblick' will reveal the blind spot, where the child expects to find Gunnar, to be empty which may well revive the shocking realisation of his brother's death. However, the centre of orientation in the story remains throughout the boy's perspective. He strides – 'like Rilke's Flamingos' – alone into the imaginary, and it is the reader rather than the older brother who accompanies him. Sandigs' story 'Flamingos' shares what Lawrence Ryan describes as the goal of Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*: 'Versuch eines grundlegenden Perspektivenwechsels [...] sich in einen imaginierten Fluchtpunkt hinein zu versetzen, der jenseits der auf sich selbst beziehenden Subjektivität liegt.'²⁷

Rather than enforcing a hierarchy that ranks the 'unreliable' child-narrator below an omniscient narrative voice, his different perspective is acknowledged and validated. Gunnar's tangible presence for the boy – 'in meinem toten Winkel' – could possibly be explained as denial, post-traumatic stress or psychological mechanisms of self-protection. However, the older boy's presence in his brother's account is not explained away. Moreover, Gunnar standing right behind his brother or hiding inside the large cupboard where the cloaks are kept is evoked with such conviction as to

²⁷ Lawrence Ryan quoted in Meid, *Metzler Chronik Literatur*, p. 507.

penetrate empirical reality. The reader starts wondering whether Gunnar is really there. The boundaries of the realist narrative are being pushed with an element of the fantastic contributing to the breaking down of the distinctions between outside and an inside view. Sandig keeps multiple perspectives open simultaneously creating a narrative where presence and absence, past and present co-exist and the reader has to negotiate a stance.

Voices of outsiders and children

The story 'Flamingos' anticipates in its last sentence a threatening confrontation of the child's perspective with a supposedly wider more 'realistic' view brought into the story through narrative clues that reveal an outside perspective. This looming collision of perspectives and its anticipated violent impact on the child-narrator mirrors the tragic death of the older brother colliding with the motorhome while practising the 'toten Winkel'. In the collection *Flamingos* there are several instances of child- or outsider-narrators falling victim to fatal or near-fatal collisions in traffic accidents or through other violent encounters: 'Hush little Baby', 'Mutabor', 'Siebenleben' and 'Mond'. Highlighting the vulnerability of the individual in the modern world, these incidents also clearly mark the points where the open multiperspectival narrative structure is forcefully collapsed when interior perspective and exterior worldviews collide literally and metaphorically – marked in 'Flamingos' by the boy's 'Schulterblick'. This shock emphasizes the marginal status of the narrator as outlined in the theoretical approach to narratives by Nünning and Nünning: 'keine harmonische Eingliederung der [...] Perspektive in die Gesellschaft [ist] möglich'.²⁸ The visually impaired Anja in 'Mutabor' falls victim to this lack of harmonious integration on many levels and dies in a traffic collision that leaves it open whether she jumped out into the street or not. Young Michi in 'Mond', with her final small act of defiance that uses rhymes and playful language as her only weapon, highlights male violence and emotional neglect on a much larger scale. A near hit in 'Siebenleben' highlights the protagonist's outsider status and brings about a turning point. This fairytale-like story features a boy who is withdrawn, stutters and stammers to communicate and shows signs of a learning disability. In a narratological juxtaposition of the natural and the human world the third person narrative describes him as preferring the refuge he finds outdoors with animals to the company of humans, especially his father. This story in particular could be seen as a return to 19th-century narrative forms in its reminiscences of Storm's late poetic realist novella 'Der Schimmelreiter' (1888) that merges realist descriptions of nature juxtaposed by the intervention of humans with elements that hint at the supernatural – such as an ominous foreboding white horse or the seven lives of a cat. However, 'Siebenleben' is drawn into the 21st century by concepts such as 'Ausbildung', 'Jugendamt' and 'Wohnprojekt' (F, 98). In addition, passages of deliberate ambiguity in 'Siebenleben', emphasized by the repeated use of the subjunctive mood – the *coniunctivus irrealis* – and phrases such as 'es sah so aus' (F, 92), question grammatically and on the level of the plot what is the 'realis' what the 'irrealis' mood. In a similar way to the unreliable narrator, Sandig's technique and inherent scepticism regarding dominant narratives 'highlight the borderline between the normal and the deviant; [...] show those implicit norms and values that are part of the implicit cultural knowledge. [...] the fuzzy borderlines between normal and abnormal [...] become visible'.²⁹

²⁸ Nünning and Nünning, *Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies*, p. 166.

²⁹ Nünning and Nünning, *Erzähltextanalyse und Gender Studies*, p. 14.

'Hush little Baby' is another story that questions the distinction between the normal and abnormal introducing a protagonist from the margins whose unexpected and 'odd' characteristics clearly deviate from, yet also question, the norm. Kai Arno is a boy who possesses different coloured eyes, grows mismatching body halves and talks and sings to himself as if he was two persons. He is mocked, bullied and shunned and embodies the marginal outsider protagonist in a third-person narrative. In a story that interweaves the fantastic with the psychologically and medically plausible, Kai Arno's 'oddities' seem to stem from the in-utero diagnosis that his mother was expecting twins. However, born alone, with no trace of another baby his life is dominated by an uncanny doubled existence – as if he were carrying a lost twin brother inside him. A near-fatal traffic accident marks the violent loss of his dual nature. Only 'Kai' survives the accident, it seems, whilst the other half 'Arno' is killed. After the accident the loss of his dual nature marks the protagonist's transition from child- to adulthood, yet at the expense of his identity as double-voiced 'Kai Arno'. Elaine Showalter's narrative analysis of marginal characters and their 'double-voiced discourse' – outlined by her with reference to women's writing – fits this protagonist.³⁰ Another approach to women's writing that unveils power structures and ideology in narrative discourse – outlined by Lanser as the 'conscious subterfuge or [...] tragic dispossession of the self' – can also be applied to Sandig's protagonist.³¹ The violent transformation of the double-voiced child Kai Arno into the single-voiced adult Kai critically juxtaposes the loss of a non-normative identity and voice and gaining of an adult normative identity.

In the story 'Dreitausend Blauwale' the schoolchildren at its centre are called 'die Oberelbischen, weil wir auf der anderen Seite der Elbe wohnten' (F, 164). Their outsider status is clearly geographically marked but language also plays a role and both highlight historical and national contexts specific to Germany. The ability or inability to roll the Russian 'r' divides the children within their small outsider group and echoes processes of social demarcation on a larger level at school and in society. The story of these teenagers is set in a contemporary Germany nearly two decades after the *Wende* where references to the GDR have blended into a more encompassing view of Germany as the pupils travel every day from the rural East German district of 'Upper Elbe' to school in the 'Stadt'. This does not mean, though, that these references are blurred or diluted. Testimony to this history as part of a past that still has very real consequences for the present are the character Sergej, who comes 'aus der Nähe von Tschernobyl' (F, 167) and has a crippled right hand, or Marcel's father, who leaves his son and family once his codename as an Unofficial Collaborator for the Stasi, 'Zündkerze', has been made public, who 'wird nicht mehr mit Handschlag begrüßt' (F, 169) and whose barn behind the family home is being burned down. Throughout the collection such occasional but highly specific references to the GDR mix in with a plurality of equally specific references to other contexts. We find examples in 'Mutabor', 'Vatertod', 'Über mich' and particularly in 'Kuba' but also in the auto-fictional opening text to our volume. 'Mein Löffel, mein Fluss, mein Pfefferminzspeck' introduces the mother of the narrator. This mother, like Sandig's mother, has spent her whole life 'im ostelbischen Sachsen'. Yet it is not the fall of the Berlin Wall that is singled out as a marker in her biography but the much longer history of this region with its struggles and battles and its very specific linguistic characteristics. Leeder comments on references to the GRD in 21st-century German prose: 'The present, the past, blurs into one, thus opening onto a post-human

³⁰ Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1981), p. 263. For Sandig's 'double-voiced bird', the 'doppelzüngiger Vogel' in her poetry, see Karen Leeder's essay in this volume.

³¹ Susan Sniader Lanser, 'Towards a Feminist Narratology', p. 349.

vision in which the particularities of history are eclipsed. [...] the memory of the GDR [appears] simply as a historical oddity, a brief stage in a much longer trajectory.'³²

The teenagers in 'Dreitausend Blauwale' have to make a long daily bus journey from the rural East German district of 'Upper Elbe' to the 'Stadt' arriving late and leaving early thus missing chances of integration into school life and life in general. A narrative move at the end of the story completely changes not just the narrative perspective but also the conception of time. The main protagonist, a young girl, expresses her view that the lost time, spent in transit on the schoolbus, is in fact not irrecoverably gone but in fact saved up by her for a life beyond the present marking another *Fluchtpunkt* for a marginal character. The last sentences of this story and of the whole volume reads: 'Aber ich hob sie [die Zeit] mir auf, jeden Morgen von sechs bis sieben. Ich hatte Zeit, ich hatte viel davon. Bald würde meine Fahrt erst richtig anfangen. Sie würde lange dauern. Und ich wäre bereit.' (F, 172)

'Salzwasser'

In a similar way to 'Dreitausend Blauwale' the story 'Salzwasser' evokes linguistic, geographical, social and historical boundaries – yet also overcomes them through the process of translation as will be outlined at the end of this essay. The story maintains throughout two narrative versions of events running in parallel to each other. In contrast to the story 'Flamingos', here the account of the first-person child narrator is not caught up by a more encompassing 'truth' in the end but remains insistently independent from 'real life'. The personal story of a young girl, the I-narrator, and her older sister – both half German, half Russian – also raises wider issues regarding the problems of bringing different perspectives, languages, worldviews and people together and the need to create imagined *Fluchtpunkte* or vanishing points for an otherwise unbearable existence.

The younger sister, Katja, nicknamed 'Malve', insists on her angry understanding that her older sister, Irina, has secretly spent the last months with their estranged mother by the Black Sea. The child vehemently rejects her father's explanation that Irina has in fact been in a clinic where – as it emerges in the course of the narrative – she has been treated for severe anorexia nervosa. Katja registers with great accuracy and insight, details confirming Irina's eating disorder but she puts them into a very different context: her description of Irina's increasing skinniness; her sister's disgust for 'Nutellabrote'; Irina's rejection of 'Fanta' and desire for 'Salzwasser' to – as it transpires – induce vomiting; the father's anxious feeding behaviour of Irina when she returns back from the clinic somewhat helplessly putting an enormous bowl of biscuits on the coffee table and treating his older daughter like a raw egg. Katja's version of events overlays this reality with a very different story. Stubbornly insisting on her perspective without wanting to see other angles, this child-narrator fits in her *Eigensinnigkeit* with Friedrich Beißner's narratological term 'Einsinnigkeit' to categorize one-dimensional, limited-focus narration.³³ Katja insists that Irina has secretly behind her back been

³² Karen Leeder, 'After-images – afterlives. Remembering the GDR in the Berlin Republic', in *Rereading East Germany: The Literature and Film of the GDR*, ed. by Karen Leeder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 214-37, (p. 232).

³³ Friedrich Beißner, 'Der Erzähler Franz Kafka', in *Der Erzähler Franz Kafka und andere Vorträge. Mit einer Einführung von Werner Keller* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), p. 19-54 (p. 37). The term can be read in parallel to Stanzel's 'Reflektorfigur', see footnote 11. Walter Müller Seidel emphasizes, though, that Beißner's focus on Kafka fails to take distancing elements from this 'Einsinnigkeit' into account. Walter Müller-

visiting their mother who left the family when Katja was a baby to go back to the Black Sea. She is jealous that her mother and sister have spent time without her swimming and eating fish, so that Irina would put on weight. This place is filled in Katja's imagination with wonderful images – taken from the letters her mother has written to the girls. However, the mother's written promises to get her daughters to visit her, have not been kept. The child's focus on Irina who looks like their mother and the anger at her sister's departure a few months ago superimposes her ideas of the absent mother onto the older sister.

Here again, the notion of the unreliable child-narrator must be questioned. Katja's misunderstanding does not indicate the lack of knowledge that is generally associated with a narrator with a limited or incorrect view. Moreover, her seemingly naïve view opens greater insight into deeper levels of the story: 'Irina hatte aber wegen des Schwarzen Meers zu wenig gegessen. Wegen des Schwarzen Meers und wegen ihres schwarzen Haars, das aussieht wie das von Mama. Irina hatte bloß Reisefieber.' (F, 60) This explanation by the child as to why her older sister has been dangerously starving herself touches upon the complicated possible reasons for Irina's eating disorder in an insightful manner, linking it to the absent mother and a longing for a different existence. Through the detached narrative perspective and the distinct voice of the child the story finds ways of broadening the understanding of Irina's illness and of their whole family story rather than limiting it. The child's narrative focus does not narrow down but widens the view so opening new perspectives in an unexpected way. Furthermore, Irina's status as half Russian and half German raises – beyond the context of the plot – awareness of possible links between individuals' background as migrants, be it in the first or second generation, and their health and mental health.³⁴ Irina's own account substantiates this when she finally plays along with her little sister's version that she has been to the Black Sea. She tells Katja a story that conflates their mother's Russian home, the desired far-away Black Sea that is utterly out of reach for both sisters, with an image of fish dying of thirst in the 'Salzwasser' of its deeper levels, which, in turn, evokes Irina's own starvation.

'Salzwasser' introduces an array of singular stories that correspond with the perspective of different individuals. It also addresses how these stories fail to connect on a narrative and on a personal level. Katja's parents seem to be part of another story along missing tangents that hint at a much larger context. 'Wir sind Zugezogene, seit Mama zurückgezogen ist.' (F, 57), is Katja's description of the girls' present situation of double alienation: as newcomers in a block of flats at the edge of a small village and as a family growing up without a mother yet with a background in migration speaking to each other in their father's German and in their mother's Russian. The sentence also situates the fact that the mother has apparently left her young family to go back to a place 'am Schwarzen Meer' within a context of failed immigration. No specific reasons for her leaving are given in Katja's first

Seidel, *Die Deportation des Menschen. Kafkas Erzählung 'In der Strafkolonie' im europäischen Kontext* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986), p. 93-94.

³⁴ See also Bridget Dolan, 'Cross-cultural aspects of anorexia nervosa and bulimia: A review', in *Eating Disorders* (10:1, 1991), 67-79; Cynthia M. Bulik, 'Eating Disorders in immigrants. Two case reports', in *Eating Disorders* (6:1, 1987), 131-141. Heike Bartel, 'Writing Food and Food Memories in Turkish-German Literature', in *Memory and Postcolonial Studies: Synergies and New Directions* ed. Dirk Göttsche (Oxford: Peter Lang 2018, forthcoming). For further information on arts and humanities approaches to the interdisciplinary treatment of eating disorders see Heike Bartel's (PI) AHRC research network:

<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/hungry-for-words/index.aspx> (last access 11.5.2018).

person account but the topological contrast between the openness of the Black Sea and the high hedges that enclose and separate neat gardens in the small German village with its block of flats for 'Zugezogene' on the outskirts tells its own story. The biography of the mother also evokes the long and problematic history of German-Russian power relationships in which so many people have been caught up: Russian Germans, Black Sea Germans, ethnic Germans, Russians migrating to Germany or *Spätaussiedler* after the *Wende*. Problems of integration in Germany for these people with often very mixed 'Sprachbiographien' have affected many lives.³⁵ Katja's mother also seems to have been entangled in this complicated history. 'Wir sind doch zur Hälfte vom Schwarzen Meer', emphasizes Irina speaking Russian to her younger sister which she learnt from their mother and now passes on to Katja – a mothertongue with a painfully absent mother, and a father who speaks German with his daughters.

Bringing perspectives together: conclusion

Sandig has contributed with 'Salzwasser' – this story about miscommunications and misunderstandings, about the deeper reasons for them, their link to (language) biographies and the painful insights they can deliver – to the 'TransStar-Projekt'. This European initiative deals creatively with transcultural (language-)biographies, 'European (his)stories' and 'wandernden Muttersprachen' bringing together a diverse range of European literature through innovative translation projects. 'Salzwasser', the text that problematizes the interlinking of individual and German-Russian biographies, languages and perspectives has been taken up by TransStar's 'Übersetzungswürfel' and translated into all of the languages represented by partners in this project: Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Slovenia and Croatia.³⁶ A resulting 'musikalisch-poetische Installation' – a radio play – interweaves the German source texts with all its translations and also add sounds and music.³⁷ This intermedial engagement with the text reveals new narrative perspectives by broadening the spatial, national and linguistic location from which the story is being narrated. It acknowledges separate and disparate language biographies contained in the story on the one hand, yet the presentation of the text in German and in various translations also breaks through these disparities. The multimedial translations and interpretations convey artistically a process of exchange and echo that overcomes the boundaries not just between translation and source text but also between the voices within the text. It makes a plea for dialogue between perspectives, generations, languages and nations that – if successful – would ultimately make the self-protective act of Katja's deliberate misunderstanding unnecessary. The translation project challenges perspectives creatively and shows (his)stories coming together instead of falling apart.

³⁵ See Katharina Meng, 'Russlanddeutsche Sprachbiographien: Rückblick auf ein Projekt', in *Leben in mehreren Sprachen: Sprachbiographien, Vivre avec plusieurs langues: Biographies lanagières*, ed. by Rita Franceschini and Johanna Miecznikowski, (Berne, Frankfurt am Main, New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 97-120.

³⁶ <http://transstar-europa.com/> (last accessed 11.5.2018). The project was coordinated by the Slavic Studies Department of the University of Tübingen, in cooperation with Literaturwerkstatt Berlin and partners in Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Slovenia and Croatia.

³⁷ For the radioplay see: <http://ulrike-almut-sandig.de/audiothek/> (last accessed 11.5.2018).

As discussed at the beginning, Geertz talks about a 'world in pieces' formed from the vestiges of a coherent whole, with an uncertain relationship to one another. For him, the emergence of this fragmentary world is marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall which signals the end of the 'fearful symmetries' of the post-war era and of a once seemingly fixed and hostile East-West divide.³⁸ Sandig's texts respond to the 'raggedness' of this world – they tell stories of loss and disconnectedness, embrace the instability of uncentredness and find their footing in the uncertain orientations provided by voices from the margins whose *Fluchtpunkte* they share.³⁹ They vehemently resist dominant ideas – aesthetically and ideologically – yet they still aim for ways of experimental and open interconnectedness. Sandig's *Geschichten* are poetically sensitive and responsive to voices that are solitary, broken, odd, vulnerable, particular and beautiful.

Heike Bartel is Associate Professor in German at The University of Nottingham and Fellow of Nottingham's Institute of Mental Health. She has published on Hölderlin and Goethe, German-language poetry from the 18th to the 21st century, contemporary women's writing in German and the reception of the Medea myth in European literatures and cultures. She is currently working in the field of Health Humanities and leads the interdisciplinary AHRC-research network 'Hungry for Words' that researches representations of eating disorders in the contexts of arts and humanities and science and medicine.

³⁸ Geertz, 'The World in Pieces', p. 161.

³⁹ Geertz, 'The World in Pieces', p. 161.