

## English Poems from Prenzlauer Berg

**Literature with a sharp Weimar-era-design: Bordercrossing is a new journal for Berlin's English-speaking literary crowd. It's a new home for authors from all around the world**



Johannes Frank dresses like an Englishman, with a blazer and a collared shirt under a blue jumper. He sweeps his long brown bangs behind his ears; he even smokes a pipe. His office is a spacious apartment in a crumbling nineteenth-century townhouse in Prenzlauer Berg, and the only indication of what goes on inside is a sign in the window – "Verlagshaus J. Frank," under a block print of a manual typewriter.

Frank publishes two literary journals, one English and one German, from his study, along with a number of small-circulation fiction and poetry books. His English is sarcastic, proper, and imported from London, where he lived between the ages of four and thirteen. But he's not English. He's German. So what motivates a youngish theology student in Germany to put out something like *Bordercrossing: Berlin*, a literary review for all the English-speaking poets, authors, journalists, and artists who have collected in the German capital?

"It just sounded like a very good idea," he says. "There are enough people who speak English, and who are interested in the English language, in Berlin ... And it's self-explanatory. With a German literary magazine you sometimes have to explain to people why it's there and what it's for, but with an English literary magazine it's quite obvious why it's there."

Fiona Mizani edits *Bordercrossing*. The journal was her idea. She's a cheerful pink-cheeked writer from Devon, England, who wears wide embroidered headbands to hold back her thick brown hair. For several years she ran regular readings at her own café, called *Café Rosa*, and she says she watched the scene grow. "I think four years ago, when we started the readings, there wasn't actually that much going on, in terms of English-language literature, so maybe we even helped to create that," she says. "And now there was a need for the next thing."

Their collaboration started in late 2005 after Frank stumbled into the now-defunct *Café Rosa* in search of a place to host readings for *Belletristik*, his German journal. "It was very much by chance," he says. "I just went past the café one night and thought, 'Oh, this looks nice.'"

Mizani convinced him to fund *Bordercrossing*, then set to work recruiting a staff that includes Darrell Alvarez, an artist and writer from San Francisco who helps edit fiction. Alvarez moved to Berlin just after both his parents died in 1999. "I wanted to do work that felt important to me personally, so I moved to Berlin," he says. "It started as a decision to live away from the financial demands of New York, but then I fell in love with Berlin on its own merits. There may be fewer galleries and other cultural institutions than in New York, but the ratio of good art over bad art is higher."


The official J. Frank typewriter – the model for Frank's company logo – can be found in his study, perched on a narrow chest of drawers. It's a Borsig from 1941. He asks poets involved in one of his German book projects to type poems on it. "I got that as a present from an actress," he says. "It's actually got a terrible history, because it was used by one of the *Schreibtischtäter*," or Nazi bureaucrats, "in the early '40s. The actress got it from her grandmother, and she had an affair with this *Schreibtischtäter*. He obviously went to jail, and she kept the typewriter. I like the idea of using it now for literature. Because it's a thing that once killed people, and it now helps enrich people's lives."

Frank is terse about where the money for these projects comes from. How, for example, is *Bordercrossing* funded? "Privately," he says. The first issue came out in December 2006, a 172-page paperback with a sharp Weimar-era design – Art Nouveau fonts and calla lilies – to frame poems, stories, articles, art, and short correspondents' reports on English writing from other European cities. It has a circulation of 750, and it's sold at German- as well as English-language bookstores, at newsstands, and over the Internet. Some of the fiction and poetry is drawn straight from the Berlin "scene," but the rest is as eclectic as the authors'

backgrounds, which can be Scottish, Australian, South African, or Indian as well as British or American. "We're not representing a nation," says Mizani, "but a language that's known all over the world."

The magazine sets up readings in Amsterdam and Prague; it considers work from English-language writers anywhere in Europe. And it's kicked off a popular reading series in Berlin derived from Mizani's now-defunct Café Rosa. A small room in a refurbished brick factory building in central Berlin, above a theater called the Sophiensaele, fills with writers and friends every month, who drink cheap red wine and sit still for two hours of brilliant or unusual or startling poems and stories. "I have the impression that Bordercrossing readings are a good night out," said Frank. "They're fun. You don't just go home with heavy ideas."

*Michael Scott Moore, 36, is a journalist from California and author of a novel called Too Much of Nothing.*

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