

GO, WENT, GONE, by Jenny Erpenbeck



“Where can a person go when he doesn’t know where to go?” (p.266)

This novel is set in Berlin. As the story develops it is clear that it could have been set in Grimsby or Lincoln or Skegness, or anywhere else in Europe. This story raises many questions, but only offers one answer — and that one answer raises even more questions.

It tells the story of Richard, a University Professor, who lived and worked in East Berlin and retired just after the Berlin Wall was demolished. Richard does not know how he is going to fill his retirement (his wife has died). By accident, he hears the TV news report about a group of asylum seekers (illegal immigrants) living in tents on one of the Berlin City Squares. His curiosity compels him to visit and talk to them. Both he and the asylum seekers are in a situation which they could not have anticipated; how are their futures going to mingle? The story follows the development of their relationship.

What is the similarity between an ancient lake in Germany and the Sahara Desert in Africa? How does a dinghy crossing the Mediterranean equate with a tent village and a temporary hostel? These are obtuse questions, but become more clear as the story develops.

The novel may seem to be slow-going at the beginning, but that is because it reflects Richard becoming enveloped in boredom. But the story soon picks up speed and in places it becomes quite frenetic, but never loses its purpose. The author occasionally repeats phrases or short sentences in what I initially thought of as a rather Dickensian style; but Jenny Erpenbeck uses these repeats to emphasise their importance to characterisation and the development of the story. (In Dickens I think the repeated sentences just helped his word-count: he was paid by the word!) Can you solve the many ethical, humanitarian, and personal problems created by this encounter? They are left open for you to work out. It is a good read, with the opportunity for brain exercises.

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