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After The Wall



Synopsis

Jana Hensel was thirteen on November 9, 1989, the night the Berlin Wall fell. In all the euphoria over German reunification, no one stopped to think what it would mean for Jana and her generation of East Germans. These were the kids of the seventies, who had grown up in the shadow of Communism with all its hokey comforts: the Young Pioneer youth groups, the cheerful Communist propaganda, and the comforting knowledge that they lived in a Germany unblemished by an ugly Nazi past and a callous capitalist future. Suddenly everything was gone. East Germany disappeared, swallowed up by the West, and in its place was everything Jana and her friends had coveted for so long: designer clothes, pop CDs, Hollywood movies, supermarkets, magazines. They snapped up every possible Western product and mannerism. They changed the way they talked, the way they walked, what they read, where they went. They cut off from their parents. They took English lessons, and opened bank accounts. Fifteen years later, they all have the right haircuts and drive the right cars, but who are they? Where are they going? In *After the Wall*, Jana Hensel tells the story of her confused generation of East Germans, who were forced to abandon their past and feel their way through a foreign landscape to an uncertain future. Now as they look back, they wonder whether the oppressive, yet comforting life of their childhood wasn't so bad after all.

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Customer Reviews

Hensel was born in Leipzig, East Germany, in 1976 and was 13 when the Berlin Wall fell. This intriguing but frustrating memoir, a bestseller in Germany, portrays the disorientation of her

generation, whose upbringing under communism ended abruptly with the integration of East and West Germany. Hensel rambles through a wide range of subjects: the erasure of memory; East German youth's alienation from their Western peers; her ambivalence about her childhood; their inability to adjust to the new world, which resulted in a role reversal in which Hensel had to "interpret" Western customs for her parents; and her generation's compulsion to disguise themselves as Western, changing their clothes and even their accents. But the disappearance of the artifacts of her childhood and the lack of value attributed by her Western friends to her memories leave Hensel at a loss. According to Clarke's note at the book's end, this was the first title to expose the experience of Hensel's generation. Although the memoir clearly struck a chord in Germany, it is so blurred by the "twilight zone" of Hensel's existence, "in which daily life seems arbitrary, provisional, and somewhat unreal," that Clarke's thoughts more clearly reveal East German history and Hensel's generation than the author does herself. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

A best-seller in Germany under the title *Zonenkinder*, Hensel's memoir is one of the first from her generation to examine the cultural effects of communism's fall in East Germany. When the Berlin Wall came down, Hensel was only 13 years old, and her high-school class was the first to follow a West German curriculum. Hensel writes refreshingly unaffected personal anecdotes about growing up behind the iron curtain and, postcommunism, about how she and her young adult peers strove to assimilate in the West--losing accents and clothing styles--anything that would betray which side of the wall they grew up on. With candor, deep insight, and occasional bursts of acid wit, Hensel describes the bewildering divides between older generations of East Germans and her own. And in deeply moving observations, she shows how the universal ache of leaving childhood behind was, for her, even more profoundly disorienting because an entire culture, not just a childhood, had been lost. A fascinating, highly readable memoir that should interest a wide audience. Gillian Engberg Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Hensel is a former resident of Leipzig who was thirteen years old in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. She wrote this book thirteen years later when she was twenty-six. The book is a bit hard to follow as she meanders from subject to subject and time period to time period. It is basically a series of impressions with no strict chronology. It's almost as if she hasn't recovered from the culture shock enough to write a more logical accounting. Life in East Germany was simple, secure, and predictable (as long as you didn't challenge the communist government). Most of her free time was scheduled

by government run activities after school and on Saturdays. Like every one else her age she was a member of the Young Pioneers, the main socialist scout-like organization. There was a strong sense of community. When the wall fell she soon found herself with plenty of free time and spent most of it at McDonald's, reading comics like Mickey Mouse, and playing games like Monopoly. While everyone had enough to eat in East Germany, the main obtainable luxuries were special food items from other communist countries and the west. Examples include Hungarian salami, Czech beer, and western chocolates. These were given as Christmas presents. Shopping was simple since there was only one version of everything. After the fall easterners were confused and bewildered by the massive range of goods available. The older generation decided quantity was the key and ended up buying mountains of junk. Her younger generation tried to copy western habits but had difficulty figuring them out. East Germans used to think of themselves as the most westernized of the communist countries but soon found themselves overwhelmed by the real thing. She describes the 1990s as the ugly years because of this difficulty following western ways. The young western women were self-assured and always seemed to be able to handle fashion trends. The eastern women were generally anxious about all the changes and never seemed to get it right. They dreaded standing out as easterners. It took until the end of the decade before she couldn't tell the difference between a westerner and an easterner. Meanwhile, she attended university in France but felt most at home with the Austrian students there. She then moved to Berlin from provincial Leipzig to attend university. But she stayed in former East Berlin like many of the other easterners where they felt more secure. It was a safer way to dabble in western ways without facing the full effects of them. She got rid of her provincial Saxon accent. By the end of the decade she and her eastern friends felt secure in a westernized culture. But she was also tired of hearing western criticisms of East Germany. It wasn't that bad she said. Nevertheless, a big gap had developed between her generation and their parents. While the parents were grateful that they could travel to the west and that their children could attend western universities, they always ended up launching into a tirade about unemployment, social anonymity, and other results of unification. They were depressed and defeated with all illusions destroyed. The two generations had nothing in common anymore. After explaining all this, Hensel suddenly reverts to a second description of her childhood in East Germany. There was a strong sense of social responsibility and countless volunteer activities. The prevailing attitude was to be a good socialist. This was accompanied by a tendency to be average and invisible without attracting attention. The students did these activities diligently but needed some relief and got it from secretly watching West German television. After unification western (or western trained) teachers encouraged the students to criticize everything as

an element of democracy. So the students criticized everything. Before long their main activity became shoplifting (a form of criticism). They had become the proverbial western rebels without a cause. By the time they reached university their main focus was to earn money and any political activism was out. They were relieved to live in such a smaller world as opposed to trying to save the world. Around this time Hensel found that postmodern western students could be best described as having no enemy, no good or evil, and focused on individual goals. This contrasts when her enemy was the imperialist west, which conflict defined good and evil on a daily basis, and everyone was always concerned about Cuba, Angola, or someplace else. Here Hensel ended up by describing western life as boring without any further explanation. I think she means it is mundane as compare to saving the world by building a socialist future. This is why entertainment is one of the biggest industries in the west if not the biggest. Also at this point Hensel incidentally mentions that her family was able to make some short trips across the border into West Germany before the fall, thereby negating some of the suddenness described earlier. But the long adjustment and the culture shock were real. The book ends with Hensel explaining that she and her generation had become thoroughly westernized. This was evidenced in the way they spoke (western slang and free market concepts), behaved (individual focus), and dressed (latest fashions). Thinking that a pair of Adidas was an unobtainable luxury was over. An interesting side note is the cover of the book. The one pictured here on appears to show a dejected East German girl. The one I got shows an obviously secure western girl in the latest fashion with a bare midriff. This is the change Hensel apparently went through.

I'm giving this a 3/5 because at times the book is very interesting culturally of the period that happened during the fall of the Berlin wall. However the author goes out of her way to idealize herself to the reader as the prime source of all that is good during this time period. It glosses over periods in history that should not be glossed over as assimilation of East Germany was almost immediate due to the soviets holding back its push forward. In a manner of saying this I found this book both interesting and boring at the same time which rarely happens to me. It was like looking back in a grey past that had no liveliness to which to speak of as nothing stuck out to me. The repetitions occur over and over again through out the book never piercing the vale of intrigue that the book was supposed to explain.

I've read both the German and English version. I think it did a great job in explaining the former East-German life, even though I believe that the original version in German was able to capture the

emotions and sentiments a bit better. But I guess it's not really fair to compare those two, since the German language is more expressively exhaustive to begin with.

This was my second reading of this book....I liked it again. Recent travels to Poland and Hungary and stories of their life under soviet rule enhanced my understanding of Jana's life. Also last year when we visited Cuba, we were made aware of being 'careful' as our Cuban guide is being watched, lest we jeopardize his job. We were constanly reminded of freedoms we take for granted.

This book is beautiful. Having briefly visited East Berlin in 1959, I was impressed with its cleanliness and dullness in contrast to the chaos, colour, mess and joy of life in West Berlin. Hensel explains the difference with skill and personal example: East Germany, the most successful and prosperous of the Soviet satellites, was a collection of industrious, intelligent and obedient ants. In many ways, her life until the collapse of "The Wall" was marvelous, packed with activities, programs, events and adults intended to uplift, enlighten and motivate youngsters to do good for others. The frightening aspect of her life was the unrelenting pressure to support these organizations to do good for others. East Germany was a cult without charisma, a ritual without religion in a minutely organized system designed to eliminate every element of chaos from the otherwise free human spirit. She is acutely aware of her parents' and grandparents' generations who lived a rigidly controlled life for almost 60 years, during which even so much as smiling at the wrong event would bring suspicion and possible punishment. When very young, Hensel knew it was dangerous to pick up a discarded Western chocolate bar wrapper from the street; but, she also knew the pure joy of such rebellion. As a teen, she suddenly plunged into a free lifestyle in which almost everything was possible and nothing was unlikely. This is a beautiful portrait of her astonishment at the democratic freedom -- much the same sense of astonishment I feel, having lived all my life in the luxury of such freedom -- the chaos and pure joy of "leaving people alone". In today's politics, too many talk about creating an inspiring sense of purpose for their country; Hensel deftly and with chilling starkness portrays the cost of such enforced "purpose", and the wondrous freedom and peace of mind that comes from respecting the rights of others. The happiness of Americans is the ability to celebrate or condemn their consumer culture without restraint; this book is a warm, human and personal memoir of what it is to not have such freedom. This book is everything anyone could want in a good book; it's well written, concise, poignant and utterly relevant to American society and the world at large. Thank you, Jana Hensel, for a marvelous explanation of what I saw in Berlin almost 50 years ago but didn't fully understand until now.

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