

Literary Spinoffs

Rewriting the Classics - Re-Imagining the Community

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1. Auflage 2015. Taschenbuch. 500 S. Paperback

ISBN 978 3 593 50311 0

Format (B x L): 14 x 21,3 cm

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Leseprobe

Introductio

In the spring and summer of 2001, a literary "case" kept readers of the New York Times and other American dailies busy. Like other literary headlines, this case involved central aspects of the United States's literary and cultural heritage-questions as to the ways cherished authors of the past and their oeuvres "live" in the contemporary imagination, how they are constructed in popular and academic discourses, and what effect the publication of new or hitherto unknown material has on such constructs. However, Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* was a case in the literary and the literal sense of the word: a novel that triggered a lawsuit and fostered debates concerning the nature of creativity, intellectual property, and cultural communication-about who "owns" culture and whether literary and cultural artefacts and the imaginative realms associated with them constitute "private" terrains that can or should be protected from trespassing, or a "commons" available to the imaginative strolls, or even extended excursions, of all

The Wind Done Gone put the limelight onto a type of text that proliferates in contemporary literature and that I will refer to as "literary spinoff." As applied in the following, the term "spinoff" describes fictional texts that take their cues from famous, and often canonical, works of literature, which they revise, rewrite, adapt or appropriate as a whole or in parts, thus producing alternative voices and/or historical or geographical re-locations for texts that are generally well known to contemporary audiences-be it because of their status as cultural classics and long-term readers' favorites, or because of their medial presence in cinema or tv versions. Specifically, Randall imagines the story of a female (ex-)slave from the Tara Plantation of Margaret Mitchell's Civil War epos *Gone With the Wind*. As Scarlett's half-sister and Rhett Butler's mistress, Cyanara's story unveils an alternative vision of the "Old South," one that includes miscegenation, gay relationships, and the death, both actually and symbolically, of the Southern heroine. The "danger" that plot elements such as these pose to the "myth" disseminated by Mitchell's novel and its famous film version becomes apparent when considering the Mitchell estate's considerable efforts to protect it: In fact, Randall broke each of the conditions that are pre-requisites for authorized rewritings, continuations, or prequels-no miscegenation, no homosexuality, and the survival of the heroine

Although most contemporary spinoff novels do not start their public careers as court cases, *The Wind Done Gone* highlights a problem increasingly encountered by writers who propose to explicitly rework the popularly and/or critically esteemed texts of the past and the cultural heritages associated with them: Just like *The Wind Done Gone*, J. D. California's parodic reprise of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *60 Years Later: Coming Through the Rye* (2009) has recently triggered a lawsuit, as did Lo's *Diary* by Pia Pera, a rewriting of *Lolita*, on the eve of its

publication in English translation (1999), and, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Astrid Lindgren retelling *Die doppelte Pippielotta* in 2009. As the back and forth between the lawyers of the Mitchell estate, Randall's defenders, and the affidavits of literary and scholarly heavyweights such as Toni Morrison, Harper Lee, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Linda Hutcheon, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. demonstrate, the question as to who "owns" culture, and who may claim the leeway to meddle with powerful mental images and interpretatory traditions as conveyed by literary texts, hits the nerve of the time and has far-reaching consequences. Not the least, these include the bases of plurality in societies increasingly determined by ownership and the accumulation of resources in the hands of a powerful few as well as by an increasing control of processes of social and cultural meaning-making that is a consequence of the above

Accordingly, and despite its somewhat unusual-although by no means singular-"career," the engagement with powerful myths and narratives of the past renders *The Wind Done Gone* an apt representative of what in fact constitutes a contemporary and timely genre as I will argue in the following. As characteristic of texts of this emerging literary tradition, *The Wind Done Gone* signals and even openly "advertises" its intertextual nature in the title and through other paratextual markers, as well as by means of shared characters and/or plot elements. Through such striking gestures of affiliation, literary spinoffs direct their readers to a mode of reception that will acknowledge the text's deliberate association with a literary predecessor and take it into account. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* (1848) and one of the founding texts of the genre, Jean Rhys resurrects the lost voice of Antoinette Cosway alias Bertha Mason, thus telling a well-known story from a previously neglected perspective and establishing a pattern that turned out to be extremely attractive to following generations of writers, including, just over the past twenty years and in the United States alone, Sena Jeter Naslund, Michael Cunningham, Jane Smiley, Geraldine Brooks, Anita Diamond, Jon Clinch, Nancy Rawles, Cynthia Ozick, E.L. Doctorow, and Mat Johnson

In a less temporally and geographically determined context, the remarkable proliferation of spinoffs, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, becomes even more apparent, with considerable contributions from British and postcolonial contexts such as *Foe* (J. M. Coetzee, 1986), *Two Women of London* (Emma Tennant, 1989), *Mary Reilly* (Valerie Martin, 1990), *Indigo* (Marina Warner, 1992), *Tess* (Tennant, 1993), *Jack Maggs* (Peter Carey, 1997), *Windward Heights* (Maryse Conde, 1999), *Dorian* (Will Self, 2002), and *Mr Pip* (Lloyd Jones, 2006)-let alone less intensive or less demonstrative "rewritings" such as *The True Adventures of Lizzie Newton* (Smiley, 1998) and *Ragtime* (Doctorow, 1991), as well as earlier, and more playful postmodernist uses of intertextuality like Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations* (1982) and *Don Quixote* (1986), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), *Snow White* (1967) by Donald Barthelme, and John Fowles's pastiche, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Beyond the English language context, novels such as Pera's aforementioned *Lo's Diary*

(originally entitled *Diario di Lo*, 1995), *Die Neuen Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1972) by Ulrich Plenzdorf, and Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983) could be added to this fragmentary list. The great number and variety of spinoffs and rewritings in general not only demonstrates the popularity of intertextual aesthetic practices during the past decades, but also that the boundaries between spinoffs in the narrow sense defined above and other forms of rewritings are fluid. Perhaps the proliferation and success of the genre can best be demonstrated by the fact that fictional authors of spinoff novels have themselves begun to populate the pages of literary fiction, as is the case in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), whose eponymous fictional authoress retrieves Molly Bloom from her reductionist portrayal in her extremely successful spinoff novel *The House on Eccles Street*

Viewing spinoffs as a contemporary genre has at least two important implications. First of all, it is based on the assumption that forms of intertextuality are culturally and historically situated. In other words, specific forms of intertextuality emerge-or are particularly frequently employed-in specific historical and cultural contexts, and their aesthetic strategies and "ends" or "functions" are therefore by no means "uniform" or "universal" within literary and cultural history. Some intertextual forms are closely related to specific periods of literary history, whereas others, such as parody, have been firmly established as literary forms, genres, or techniques for centuries. Moreover, due to political climates, cultural preoccupations, aesthetic inclinations, and epistemological or discursive contexts, some periods in the literary histories of Western cultures have given rise to intertextual activities of a more pronounced and intense nature than others. Hence, conceptualizations of the literary and cultural work performed by intertextual forms and those forms themselves are subject to historical change-and so are the intertextual strategies employed. Like changing definitions of the novel, of literature's relation to the world, or changing theories of knowledge, conceptualizations and conventions or forms of intertextuality change over time, react to socio-historical, and, above all, ideological, philosophical, and discursive shifts, and can, in turn, affect these. This implies that the emergence or preponderance of a distinct form of intertextuality at a given moment in literary and cultural history, as well as shifts in the theoretical explanations that account for the phenomenon, can also serve as appropriate tools for reflecting on their respective historical and cultural contexts.