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Katarina Witt. *Only with Passion: Figure Skating's Most Winning Champion on Competition and Life.* M. Swift. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005. 224 pp. \$23.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58648-274-9; \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58648-427-9.

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Katarina Witt for Americans: East German Icon and Female Role Model?

This new autobiography by Katarina Witt, celebrated figure skater and Olympic gold medalist in 1984 and 1988 for the German Democratic Republic, provides an interesting self-appraisal of her life and skating career in the GDR and after the *Wende*, as well as an address to American teenage girls today. This dual focus reflects Witt's multifaceted role in the United States as both a socialist-era icon and a still-active and popular figure skater. Her stated aim in her new autobiography is to inspire young girls to follow their passions. To achieve this, Witt and her co-author, *Sports Illustrated* writer E.M. Swift, have devised a composite character named Jasmine, a sixteen-year-old German ice skater who is contemplating putting her boyfriend ahead of her future as a skater. Witt narrates her life to the fictitious Jasmine, sharing "thoughts I'd have liked to express to a daughter or a younger sister about skating, competition, and life" (p. xvi).

Although certainly not an academic work of history, Witt's account of her life and her fictitious conversations with Jasmine nonetheless provide interesting insights into Witt's attempts to construct a personal history of triumph and lasting relevance. Her interesting narration of her relationship to the East German state features laudable balance, albeit pitched at a non-specialist audience. The rhetorical device of the fictitious Jasmine, however, ultimately provides mixed signals that threaten to undermine Witt's attempt at self-representation as a strong, independent woman.

Particularly interesting are Witt's references to how

her East German background shaped her as a skater and as a person. Rather than devoting one section of the book to East Germany, she refers to East Germany at different moments throughout the narrative. This strategy has the effect of treating East Germany as both integral and marginal to her identity, and she in the end produces a balanced account that should be of interest to the parents of many of her teenage readers, if not to the teenagers themselves.

Witt describes the East German system of special sports schools, emphasizing that "[i]t was a sophisticated system ... and was one of the reasons our small country was so successful in the Olympics" (p. 82). Indeed, she emphasizes—echoing official pronouncements she also made during the GDR years—that she would have never been able to afford to train as a skater had she lived in the West (p. 140). She also credits spending her early skating career as a citizen of socialist East Germany for the fact that she continued to compete as an amateur skater after winning her first gold medal. Although she got some perks, including a car, she received no tempting endorsement offers from East German companies. Yet, she recalls, "If I'd been from the West, from a capitalist country, I almost certainly would have stopped competing after winning in 1984, because I could have made so much money from endorsements and speaking engagements and TV shows. I'm sure I'd have turned pro. Which is why, looking back, I'm glad I grew up in the GDR" (p. 103).

Witt does not, however, deny the sometimes oppressive nature of East German state power. She mentions early on that she had a “handler,” appointed by the state to supervise her activities. She acknowledges the hypocrisy of state-proclaimed amateurism, noting that she gained privileges such as an apartment and a car for winning events. Yet, she points out, she had to confer with her “handler” before she spent any of the money (pp. 6-7). Quite interestingly, she remembers that she was in love with a boy named Ingo, but sports officials and her coach Jutta Moller were concerned that her relationship was distracting her from skating. Soon, a sports official arranged to get Ingo away from her by having him stationed very far away for his obligatory military service. She writes, “That’s a true story. I read it in my Stasi files” (p. 64). However, the book does not specifically address accusations that she herself cooperated with the Stasi, perhaps reflecting the uncomplicated image she wished to project to her American fans. Such reflections are included in her German autobiography, *Meine Jahre zwischen Pflicht und Kar* (1994).

Ultimately, Witt reveals that she was largely satisfied as an East German citizen and as an athletic representative of the East German state. She specifically mentions not supporting an East German friend who defected to the West. She describes herself as “very much a product of our system” and she remembers thinking that he “betrayed our country. He betrayed our beliefs” (p. 139). She also remembers bristling when U.S. figure skater Brian Boitano criticized East Germany as not “free.” She said she knew he spoke some truth but nonetheless defended her country, emphasizing the many poor and homeless people who lived in the United States and contrasting such poverty with East German guarantees of employment and housing (p. 58).

Witt remembers the *Wende* as a positive, but at the same time unsettling experience: “Everything was new, unsettled, in transition. I used to have to get the permission of the government if I wanted to travel or perform in a show or get an apartment. Suddenly I was the only one who had to decide what I wanted to do” (p. 34). Witt’s career as a skater, entertainer, and businesswoman has flourished since German reunification, and yet she acknowledges that she has sometimes felt that, as a former East German, she has to work harder to gain respect, particularly in her business endeavors (p. 75).

Witt’s objectives include not only narrating her own autobiography, but also analyzing her experiences as a woman and presenting her insights to teenage girls

like the fictitious Jasmine. Here, the autobiography is less successful. Witt often emphasizes her strength as a woman. She traces her independence back to her East German roots, noting that “[i]n our system, we grew up believing, and seeing, that men and women were equal. Totally equal. Women did the same jobs as men in many fields, and they got paid the same for the work” (pp. xii-xiii). She rejects the question of how she balances an athletic career with being a woman, stating, “I am all the time a woman” (p. xi). She acknowledges that the fact that she, a 39-year-old woman, is not married and has no children would have been radical in the past, but that she can now live such a life proudly. Witt also presents herself as a tenacious competitor and hard worker. She expresses irritation at how people often overlooked these attributes. She writes, “people were always talking about how flirtatious I was with the audiences and judges. They never mentioned my toughness and athleticism” (p. 115).

Despite such statements of strength, Witt often displays defensiveness about her decision not to marry and have children. When Jasmine asks her if it had been worth it to her to sacrifice those traditional female pursuits on behalf of her career, she answers yes. However, she then goes out of her way to emphasize the relationships she has had with men and the marriage proposals she has turned down. She also emphasizes that she is “open” to marriage. She also takes pains to describe herself as a traditional woman, despite her independence and professional success: “Men find me attractive, and I’m attracted to men. I’m very emotional, like a woman. When something goes wrong, I can burst into tears. I appreciate it when a man takes care of me. And I can easily imagine getting married if the right man comes into my life” (p. xii).

Although Witt also proclaims that she is comfortable with her decision not to have children, the book’s fictitious Jasmine comments at the end that “You’d be a wonderful mom” (p. 143). Considering that there is no Jasmine, this inclusion either represents the publisher’s desire to present Witt as traditional through emphasizing her maternal nature, or it represents Witt’s own insecurity, despite her strong rhetoric, about the choices she has made.

Witt also discusses her struggles maintaining her weight, particularly in the summer, when she often went from her competitive weight of 112 pounds up to 120 pounds. Instead of going on required runs, she would eat cake, rub her cheeks to make them red, and return to her coach panting (p. 30). She also remembers that

her coach “did not like seeing my more womanly form emerge, and the truth is I was never comfortable in my own body for many years” (p. 41). She describes her celebrated nude spread in *Playboy* in 1998 as a demonstration of the comfort she finally found with her own body, and claimed that she posed nude not only, as she freely admits, to cultivate controversy, but also “to show a woman celebrating her own body, comfortable with her femininity. Pure. Not lustful. And it worked. It was so tastefully done” (p. 91).

Yet, Witt’s discussion of her struggles to maintain her competitive weight includes many contradictions that could be particularly damaging to the teenage girls who are the book’s intended readers. On the one hand, she worries that the fictitious Jasmine does not eat breakfast, and she bemoans the tragedy of anorexia and bulimia in young athletes. She also describes the extremes to which Frau Muller forced her to go to maintain her competitive weight, forcing her to weigh-in every morning, giving her only apples and rice for lunch despite hours of intense training, and encouraging Witt’s parents not to feed her dinner. Jasmine, hearing Witt’s descriptions, describes Frau Muller as somebody from a scary Brothers Grimm fairy tale. Completely contradicting the positive

message she was trying to send about the importance of health and nutrition for young athletes, Witt then thinks, “I began to wonder if Jasmine had a strong enough mentality to be an athlete” (p. 43). Paradoxically, at end of this exchange, Jasmine eats a banana that Witt has given her, and Witt is pleased to see her eat (p. 44). That “Jasmine” is a stand-in for Witt’s audience of young girls makes these mixed signals about health, nutrition, and weight problematic, particularly considering the many young athletes who struggle with eating disorders.

Ultimately, such contradictions in tone reflect the problems with Witt’s self-representation. The autobiography would have been far more successful had it focused primarily on her own life and career and ignored the temptation to provide profound nuggets of wisdom to fictitious teenage girls in an effort to maintain respect and relevance. Witt ends her autobiography with encouraging yet trite pronouncements about finding one’s passion: “When you’re young and you’re fortunate to have found your passion, go for it. Don’t be stifled by the fear of failure. Don’t worry that there are no guarantees. Make the first step. Embrace the future. Embrace the possibilities that the future holds” (p. 164).

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