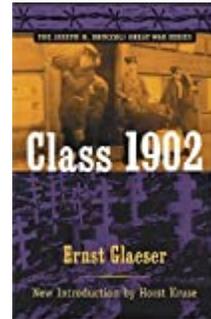




Ernst Glaeser. *Class 1902*. Joseph M. Brucoli Great War Series. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. xviii + 326 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57003-712-2.



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Published on H-German (June, 2008)

All Quiet on the Home Front

In Ernst Glaeser's *Class 1902*, E., the autobiographical protagonist, celebrated the August Days of 1914 by drinking and cavorting with the adults in his small town, many of whom he previously feared and despised: "Everybody drinking together—The world had grown young. The war made everybody good. 'Oh mother, I stammered, sinking blissfully against her, 'how lovely war is'" (p. 185). E. experienced the entirety of the war as a teenager too young to serve, but too old to be ignorant of its impact on those around him. This perspective is atypical of the subject matter found in most of the German war literature of the late 1920s. The front soldier experience, understandably, appealed to German readers more so than the critical observations of a sexually curious youth who never went further than Darmstadt during the war. As we learn in the valuable introduction to this new edition of *Class 1902*, this unique outlook partially explains why the book was never as popular as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) or *Storm of Steel* (1920).

Horst Kruse's introductory essay does an excellent job of placing the novel in the context of post-First World War literature. Kruse identifies Glaeser's primary tech-

niques of using ironic innuendo and subtle symbolism to depict the ebb and flow of life on the home front. An antiwar novel, *Class 1902* cleverly recreates the false hopes and ambitions of different segments of the German population. No one is spared criticism, from the petty civil servants with their incendiary hypernationalism or the Social Democrats with their grand illusions. Originally published in 1928, the novel's biting social commentary and strong sexual overtones made it unpopular with German audiences that sought pristine memories of the war, whether positive or negative.

E.'s coming of age begins in early 1914, when he came into contact with the different archetypes inhabiting his small Hessian town. The serious world of adults is omnipresent, but hardly the concern of a boy increasingly consumed by the "mystery" of sex and in the company of a handful of friends who could only be described as social outcasts. The most interesting chapters of this section revolve around a sickly Jewish boy named Leo Silberstein. Glaeser's depiction of Silberstein is meant to be an indictment of antisemitism, but the caricature is itself antisemitic. Silberstein eschews physical labor and any-

thing approaching military service; plays chess instead of football; and is the object of constant ridicule by children and adults alike. Leo's father, a small business man desperate for respectability, is all too willing to abandon any trace of Jewishness to satisfy his critics. Rather than being grateful to E. for befriending him, Leo puts E. in his place when he relates what it is like to be a Jew: "You with your blue eyes and yellow hair will never know what it is like to be trampled on or protected. You'll be either loved or hated. But we are never loved, not even by those who stand up for us. Can you understand that?" (p. 65). E. also befriends a confident, worldly youth named Ferd. Ferd is the son of the "Red Major," a reserve officer who derides war fever and is known to be an Anglophile. Ferd is the voice of reason and embodies everything E. aspires to be, but falls short. For Glaeser, Ferd and the Red Major represent the road not taken—Germany's conscience.

When E. is not learning important life lessons from his more astute friends, he explores his sexuality. E. loves Ferd deeply and sometimes this love is expressed with a kiss, but E. comes closest to unraveling the mystery with Hilde, a precocious girl who turns out to be as ignorant about sex as E. As the fateful summer of 1914 progresses, E. travels with his mother to a sanatorium in Switzerland. In a clear homage to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), published four years earlier, Glaeser uses this chapter to demonstrate the relative innocence of youth compared to the pettiness and illogic of the older generation. In the sanatorium and under one roof, Europeans from all nationalities mingle with each other as their governments approach the abyss. E. falls in with a French youth named Gaston. Unable to understand each other, they play together happily for weeks until the July Crisis interferes with the vacation. Friendly meals and group nature walks cease as guests form alliances and snub each other based on nationality. Gaston assures E. that the war is not about them, but when the vacation is suspended and the train crosses the German frontier, E. and his mother are swept away by the wave of unrestrained nationalism accompanying the imminent dec-

larations of war. Glaeser is at his best when observing the festive atmosphere surrounding the war's outbreak. Each scene is heavily laced with symbolism, especially when the sickly Leo Silberstein finally dies at the exact moment Germany declares war. Leo's father's only regret is that Leo did not get to experience the joy of being accepted by the town, even if only for a moment. "Leo, my son, the Jews are Germans too," he says to his son's corpse (p. 195). E. is enraged when Ferd refuses to participate in the town's patriotic fervor. Always the voice of true wisdom, Ferd discerns the underlying cause of this false unity: "Because they need their hatred for the other peoples" (p. 187).

The remainder of the book reveals the slow disintegration of the *Burgfrieden* and the town's optimism. Letters from the town's men reflect hardship, suffering, fatalism, and most prominently, hunger. E.'s town changes from a prosperous village into a starving hamlet that turns citizens against one another and E. into a skilled smuggler. The adults are even more removed and become more like strangers. As the war limps into its fourth year, E. resumes his quest for sexual enlightenment and finally meets Anna on his daily train ride to school in Darmstadt. One of the interesting themes of the novel is the relationship between sex and violence. Glaeser links E.'s sexual curiosity to the growing threat of violence. Every time E. comes close to understanding the so-called mystery, an act of violence derails his efforts. In contrast to previous attempts, E. genuinely falls in love with Anna at this juncture. At the moment they are about to consummate their relationship, however, Anna is killed in an air raid and E. is left to stare blankly at the rubble.

Class 1902 truly stands apart from the bulk of war fiction that became so popular in Weimar Germany. As Kruse notes, it is both an excellent work of literature and a valuable historical document. Depictions of the home front are rarely so layered and authentic. *Class 1902* would make an excellent reading for a variety of upper-level German history courses.

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Citation: Brian Crim. Review of Glaeser, Ernst, *Class 1902*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

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