



## **Mutmassungen über Jakob**

*Uwe Johnson*

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Uwe Johnsons erster veröffentlichter Roman ist wegen seiner komplexen Erzählkonstruktion ein schwieriges Buch, das durch seine Thematik (die deutsche Teilung) den jungen Nachkriegsautor und Grenzgänger aus Ostdeutschland sogleich bekannt machte.

Entstehung: Johnsons Mutter arbeitete bei der Reichsbahn als Schaffnerin, dann beim Gütertransport. Nach ihrer Flucht konnte der Sohn weiter in der Güstrower Bahnkantine essen. So lernte er die Arbeitswelt kennen. Nach Schwierigkeiten, erste Romanskripte drucken zu lassen, schrieb Johnson zwischen dem 6.2. und dem 4.12.1958 an dem Buch, das zunächst »Guten Tag, Jakob« heißen und unter dem Pseudonym Joachim Catt erscheinen sollte.

Inhalt: Jakob Abs, 28 Jahre alt, stammt aus Mecklenburg und ist Beamter bei der DDR-Reichsbahn in Dresden. Im November 1956 wird er auf dem Rangiergelände von einer Lok überfahren. Ob sein Tod ein Unfall im Nebel, Selbstmord oder gar von den Behörden geplant war, kann nur Gegenstand von »Mutmaßungen« sein, welche die Vorgeschichte erhellen.

Der fleißige, ruhige, kollegiale, loyale, gegenüber der DDR-Politik vorsichtige und gegenüber Westdeutschland eher skeptische Abs wird von der Spionageabwehr überwacht, seit seine Mutter und seine Freundin Gesine Cresspahl, die nun für die NATO arbeitet, sich in den Westen abgesetzt haben.

Die Handlung ist geprägt von der Halbdurchlässigkeit des Eisernen Vorhangs in der kurzen Tauwetter-Periode, die nach dem Ungarn-Aufstand 1956 – Jakob muss als Eisenbahner die sowjetischen Militärtransporte bemerken – wieder endet: Gesine besucht ihren Vater Heinrich und Jakob, wobei sie vom Abwehr-Hauptmann Rohlfs unter Druck gesetzt wird. Während er den regimekritischen, in Gesine verliebten Hochschulassistenten Dr. Blach verhaftet, lässt Rohlfs das Paar Cresspahl-Abs an der langen Leine, um beide möglichst ohne Gewalt zu gewinnen (Aktion »Taube auf dem Dach«), so dass Jakob sogar in den Westen reisen kann, von wo er trotz Gesines Liebe freiwillig zurückkehrt und am selben Tag stirbt.

Aufbau: Die mysteriöse, aber unspektakuläre, für die Schwierigkeiten der innerdeutschen Beziehungen, seien sie privat oder politisch, typische Geschichte aus dem gut beobachteten und durch Fachsprache lebendig gemachten Eisenbahneralltag verfährt analytisch und ist keinesfalls linear erzählt. Ähnlich Max R. Frischs Figur Stiller muss Jakob Abs von anderen rekonstruiert werden. Daher besteht der größte Teil der fünf Kapitel aus Bruchstücken von Gesprächen zwischen dem Kollegen Jöche und Jonas Blach, zwischen diesem und Gesine, zwischen dieser und Rohlfs sowie aus kursiv gesetzten inneren Monologen, die der Leser in einem Rekonstruktionsspiel Jakobs Kontaktfiguren zuweisen muss. Hinzu kommen Passagen, in denen ein Erzähler den Zusammenhang herstellt, jedoch nicht so, dass am Schluss eine Lösung für den Anfang stünde: »Aber Jakob ist doch immer quer über die Gleise gegangen.« Der Zwang zu »Mutmaßungen« überträgt sich von den beteiligten Personen, die ihre Rolle oder Schuld mitreflektieren, auf die Leser. Die Sprache mit ihren Anklängen plattdeutscher Mündlichkeit charakterisiert in Satzbau und Grammatik die Figuren. Bibelanklänge durchziehen, bei Jakobs Namen beginnend, das Buch und verleihen ihm eine überzeitliche Dimension. Für den Autor war das komplizierte Erzählen kein Formalismus, sondern adäquater Ausdruck der deutschen Verhältnisse

Wirkung: Das Buch, als kritischer Beitrag zur eigenständigen DDR-Literatur konzipiert, erregte Aufsehen, da Johnson bald nach der Veröffentlichung durch den Frankfurter Suhrkamp Verlag in den Westen übersiedelte. Die DDR ignorierte es 20 Jahre lang; allerdings kann man den Roman Der geteilte Himmel (1963) von Christa R. Wolf als gezielten Gegenentwurf lesen. Johnson erhielt 1960 für die Mutmaßungen über Jakob den Fontane-Preis.

## **Mutmassungen über Jakob Details**

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### Ralf says

amazingly prescient about the GDR. And a fabulous book. And of course the Faulknerian influence of multiple perspectives.

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### Alik says

Obviously I'll have to reread this. Some parts will only make sense at the third pass. Some will never do. If there is a "beginning", a "middle" and whatever else belongs to a narrative, it is not linearly arrangeable, and I do not even mean chronology. It is a dense wad of strands, which, when thrown even at the most reasonable of readers, may produce a bout of dyslexia sublimated by commonplace expectorations and blame-it-on-the-author kind of criticism.

So, if you expect a "tale well told" and a page-turner, turn away. If, on the other hand, you want to see the ripped backside of language (German!) and succumb to a reader's PTSD, and tie a knot into your reading list, go ahead.

Johnson is one of the few truly accursed fiction writers who combines astonishing technique, inconceivable structural solutions and the bleeding truth of history, which he is able to see with a clear perspective as if he were generations away, even as it is smothering him. It is a mystery much more disturbing than the fact that one has to dig deep into the text to excavate the chronology and aetiology of events.

Johnson tells the tale of a meticulous, brilliant train dispatcher who gets hit by a train - if you get the irony and the allegorical meaning of the plot (revealing the works of the evolving GDR socialism), you will not follow the blurb's guesswork advice: is it a suicide? is it a murder? is it an accident? There is nothing solid about the case: all is speculation, ideology turns everyone into a spy, whatever you know reaches you through the grapevine, any person is a dossier, a paper trail of disparate font faces and handwriting samples (which is, thankfully, not played out in the book's typography). And a whole range of strikingly variegated personalities naturally disrupt the flow of the text, incorporate the inevitable conflict of the individual with the ideological, convert the book into a kind of chaotic explosion diagram of the time and place that expelled and eventually destroyed the writer.

While I wasn't even always sure whose words I was reading and what exactly happened in terms of the plot and why, I know now that I have never read anything as convincingly clear, truthful and personal as "Mutmaßungen über Jakob" about the ambitions and conflicts of the post-war socialism.

And yes, it is very autobiographical, and, yes, some characters even have close prototypes with similar fates.

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### Juliane says

Quite difficult reading. Johnson's very modern narrative style is making high demands on his readers. There is no all knowing narrator, the reader has to gather insight from dialogues, monologues, snippets of a

conversation, mental leaps, speculations.

It makes it easier to know the proceedings before reading, otherwise it's hard to follow.

Although this book is hard to read, it is an interesting book. It was not published in German Democratic Republic because of its view on the secret police. Johnson's work presents a realistic scenario of the early German Democratic Republic.

If you don't be afraid of the efforts, "Speculations about Jakob", published 1959 by a Western German publisher, is a gainful reading which provides a meaningful insight into the issues in times of separation of East and West Germany after World War II.

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### **Barbara says**

Auf Seite 80 abgebrochen. Lesen sollte keine reine Qual sein und genau das passiert mir hier. Kaum verständliche Sätze von Personen, die im Ungewissen bleiben und der Inhalt, also die Geschichte selbst, kommt hinter diesen Hürden kaum durch. Solange ich noch andere Bücher zu lesen habe, tu ich mir sowas nicht weiter an. (Evtl. noch die letzten 20 Seiten für die Leserunde morgen, das war's dann aber.)

Nachtrag nach der Diskussion in der Literaturrende:

Ein Buch, dessen Inhalt nur mit ausführlichem Lektüreschlüssel zu verstehen ist (wenn überhaupt!), empfand nicht nur ich als Zumutung. Freude am Lesen kommt so beim besten Willen nicht auf, höchstens der Ehrgeiz, sich durchzubeißen - und auch das nur bei einer von sechs anwesenden Personen.

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### **Susu says**

Nicht einfach zu lesen - das Gesamtbild baut sich für den Leser aus kleinen Bauteilen zusammen. Wort- und Satzspiele sind extrem spannend. Dieses Sittengemälde der DDR kann man häufiger lesen.

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### **Mj says**

While in college, I was granted the opportunity to create an independent study on German literature. I was able to create my own curriculum, and as part of that I knew that I needed an East German writer, to represent the turmoil of the country's split. That led me to Uwe Johnson, who I added to the list because (and I kid you not) his name sounded cool.

What I was given is probably one of the best spy novels that I have ever read. It is just fantastic.

At first, Speculations is a little hard to follow. The threads don't seem to connect. I feel that I something of a point to make, however, because of the crisis of identity at the time. Even after the story starts to click, we are never given the full story. I love that Johnson doesn't just lay out the truth here. The whole point of intrigue is mystery, so clearing everything up would remove the magic.

I feel completely justified in considering Speculations About Jakob a post-modern masterpiece, and one that

is in desperate need for a resurgence. The Cold War is such an interesting time for the world, and Johnson was likely overlooked due to his allegiances.

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### Noah says

Wirr und langweilig. Habe nicht die Nerven, dieses Buch zu Ende zu lesen, da auch nach der Hälfte weder Sinn, noch Plott oder gar Interssantes einsetzen.

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### Matthew says

Speculations About Jakob may be my favorite book that I have ever read. It is definitely up there, at any rate.

The plot of Johnson's novel is very twisted and convoluted, and therefore it is difficult to follow for a while. I believe that this is actually part of the plan, since it was written in a time when no one was really sure how anything would work in society. From the confusion of a divided Germany to the speculations about international spies, the novel is shrouded in mystery.

About halfway through, passages start clearing up, and the reader is let in on a few secrets. You're not told everything (even in the end of the novel, there is no pretty packaged product here), but you are given some key details to start putting names to passages.

Speculations About Jakob is a postmodern masterpiece that bridges East and West Germany, and it is a prime example of literature. This one definitely warrants a second read, in fact it deserves it.

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### Mariel says

*The world is full of opinions about freedom, it hasn't been waiting just for me, I act as though I had something to contribute that nobody knows, as though everybody would perish without this revelation out of my brain, do I want to be indispensable? Can't even make a fire with it. And Jakob was holding his hand out to her from the other side of the brook so she wouldn't skid on the smooth slimy gnarled logs and she said, so, on her toes bent forward for balance and, no, Jakob said. Even if they had something, it couldn't be told.*

But Jakob always cut across the tracks. It's true that he knew the train schedules. Was his friendly face, open with a greeting or goodnight to everyone holding his patience for nothing. There was the coal shortage, stranded hope. Watchtowers wrong all along. I don't know if Jakob wanted to die. I could argue for either intention and still feel like I never knew Jakob. 'Speculations About Jakob' is designed this way. The GDR agent Herr Rohlfs began his intent in Jakob from a file of a former citizen, now a NATO employee in the West. His mother is frightened by his interrogations and flees to West Berlin. Jakob was young Gesine

Cresspahl's brother. Not her brother by blood, her family savior. Her father has been hauling in and out black market furniture. They have secrets from them and They. She squirreled newspapers and indignation. Jakob is everything and she pines for him when the freedom isn't a light switched on. Her father misses her, they are fascinated with the ghost of Gesine's memory. She lives in cold these weren't all the answers. Maybe if she haunted the past, or took it with her. The Pomeranian refugees had boarded in her father's house. Jakob's mother became her mother. Gesine and Rohlfs's admire their honorable Jakob. Jonas is a assistant professor of philology, in love with Gesine. A dissident wanting to change from the inside. He is afraid of the teaching future he hasn't stepped out of the way. Gesine returns to East Berlin, it's amazing she isn't seen. Is that a camera in her bag. Rohlfs has her passport photo from her file. He sees her with Jakob and determines that she is not that pretty, inaccessible and stuck up. People watching Jakob with his ex-girlfriend Sabine judge her for accessibility too. I really wondered about that. Why they needed their young women to be theirs in alternate events. The possessiveness hangs about Jakob too. Herr Rohlfs especially idealizes his Jakob. He somehow lives in a GDR where their system is unfailing and right. I don't know about Jakob. Did he stop his coworker from preventing trains to stop the uprising in Hungary because it was futile anyway? I keep thinking about how Jakob didn't think about the black market during the war. Rumors of rapes in the woods that didn't affect him. He tells Rohlfs that he has his own mind because he was lucky to have been born too late for the war, and a dead Nazi father too far in past's memory to make him different. I never knew how much Jakob was telling Rohlfs what he wanted to hear. Did he truly think the shit was theirs and not Theirs. I keep thinking about Jakob going to sleep with the flow. Jakob had a friend from his schooldays he is already saying goodbye to when he learns about his mother's disappearance. He doesn't lift his hand to Joche in the window as he did every day. When they have their let's-not-admit-just-yet-this-is-the-last-time lunch he doesn't want to say goodbye. When he does it is as it was when he didn't lift his hand. Joche had been the makes life easy breezy lemon squeezey. I don't want to say he is Jakob what Jakob is to the others. The lucky one untouched by the sword. I keep thinking about Jakob's days separated into before work, work and after work. Jakob is their good old boy socialist. When he visits Gesine in the West (Rohlfs allows him to go, still hoping for his agent. Jealously watching his back) she imagines him fused with the phone, apart of everything. See Jakob livid with how they live. Decadent air conditioning and waited on. She doesn't mind when he minds. I'm curious about how their feelings are pronounced based off of others. The right or wrong about socialism (and I don't believe that what they had in the GDR was what Rohlfs or Jakob would admit they had) didn't interest me that much. I wanted to know if Jakob thought what I did that he lost the life he thought he had when his comely neighbor fled to the West. He didn't know why his mother left as the reader does. He has to prepare answers. What does he really feel? Does he miss her? Herr Rohlfs doesn't think about his part when he's interrogating Gesine about Jakob. Gesine says stay here. He says come back and it is described as sounding mimicking that he doesn't feel. If Gesine had told Jakob she loved him maybe they would have gotten together. If she had never left to know that she had built him into everything. But he couldn't live there and if he crossed the tracks on purpose or not he couldn't have lived as before. Different things about Jakob keep coming back to me. Was it just how Gesine, Rohlfs and Jonas saw him? Maybe he knew there wasn't anything left for him as he accepted them and then he took to the tracks. The missing part of Jakob was perfect. It's better than some no one really knows anybody thing. I liked a lot how Johnson did this. No one can get away from their politics to really live. It's better than their fanaticism, though. It's something elusive private thing and it's intruded on. Something to defend. Maybe he didn't even think about it on a conscious level.

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### Astrid says

A lot of people here have criticized the writing style of Johnson. This is no book where the omniscient author tells you the story. It is told by different voices and from different perspectives. But the style is just necessary

for what Johnson wants to tell and show. It's not there to discourage or create barriers.

There are a lot of things we all can't know. If you don't always understand everything in this book, it is just because that's life. Don't try. This is a different reading experience, just let the text touch and affect you. And see what this does to you. It creates a very delicate intimacy with the persons in the book, and with the author. There is a deep respect in there for human beings and their stories and for the fact that they all have their own dignity. And that not understanding everything AND accepting that you don't understand, is part of this respect. Maybe that's what I found the most astounding and touching in this lecture.

Then, this is again a book which made me "see" scenes, persons, landscapes; and it made me reflect a lot about the role and influence that politics have in the lives of us human beings. This is a very personal and at the same time very political book. It shows how politics writes into the bodies of people.

It made me reflect a lot about capitalism and the alternatives we may have or not have to this economical and political system. This was a subject dear to Johnson.

Then, you think: These people he describes, they are not pragmatic enough. Too exact, too honest, want to be too much themselves without too many contradictions. Because we all make compromises with our values, in order to make a living.

But this Jakob is very real, like all persons in the book. The choices he had to make were not easy and he didn't make them easily or light-hearted. Maybe this is a very German approach to life, though. So earnest.

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### **Arne Krueger says**

Eines der besten Bücher, die ich je gelesen habe!

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