

Tea with R.E.

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Shawn C. Jarvis was the second student to finish a PhD (1990) with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres. During her graduate studies she worked in East and West German archives and published two editions of writings by Gisela von Arnim. Her continued work with nineteenth-century German women's fairy tales produced two anthologies, *The Queen's Mirror* (U of Nebraska P, 1999 with Jeannine Blackwell) and *Im Reich der Wünsche* (Beck, 2012). Other publications have also been in fairytale studies. She retired in 2018 from St. Cloud State University after thirty years of teaching all levels of German. Her retirement energies are devoted to three grandchildren, who all speak German!

It was early April and I had just arrived for tea. I expected it to be a lovely, indulgently inconsequential morning of giggles and reminiscences, like so many previous get-togethers. As she pattered around the kitchen, starting the kettle and offering me various tea options, Ruth-Ellen was effusive and energized by recent events. I, on the other hand, was worried and had been mulling for days about a topic for this collection that would be a fitting tribute to her. But then, she began to talk about her life as a feminist scholar and I suddenly realized her reflections would be the stuff of my contribution. Below you find my reconstruction of her comments that morning and see what the conversation led to, as I reflect here on the arc of Ruth-Ellen's career, her impact on the academy and feminist scholarship, and our very own *Werdegänge*.

Ruth-Ellen had just returned from a luncheon the day before, celebrating the history of the Women's Studies program at the University of Minnesota and the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, where she was the first director (1984–87). She had given a talk about the inception of the Center and the ideas and goals behind it, along with a brief overview of her time in the world of feminist thought, theorizing, and political action. That led to the recounting of her co-editorship of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* from 1990–1995, which she called the best academic experience and the most important thing she had done in her career. It had been a heady time, both literally and figuratively.

As she described it to me that morning, the *Signs* experience was so exciting “it made you sick.” The goals Ruth-Ellen (a literary critic and Germanist) and her co-editor Barbara Laslett (a sociologist) had for their five-year stint as editors were to make the journal interdisciplinary, international, and inclusive. Ruth-Ellen also had a broader agenda: to challenge feminist writing itself. Despite Laslett's reservations, she penned a 1992 editorial “On Writing Feminist Academic Prose,” where she called for feminists to consider the forms and language they use to communicate and warned about the paradoxical potential of becoming, instead of insurgent, just another part of the academic establishment. The piece caused something of an academic kerfuffle (East Coast elites vs. Midwestern wanna-be's) and the ensuing “snide, gossipy *Verriss*” of her ideas as “anti-intellectualism” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (McMillan sec. A) was something she said she never really got over (although somebody got a dissertation topic out of it!).

I asked her why she wrote the editorial, when she knew it was certain to cause a stir: she said it was because she had a platform to discuss something she felt strongly about. She wanted to talk about feminism and “rituals of degradation.” (If you read her other editorials from that period, you'll find her frequently revisiting this topic.)

I asked her how she came to feminism: it was a “rescue” of sorts, she said, while she was taking care of kids, working on her dissertation (with a broken arm and a microphone) and leading the life of the wife of an established academic. She found refuge with a group of women engaging in “consciousness raising” (quaint-sounding today, but revolutionary in the 1970s). She said it was good to be with women who were nice to each other and collegial. She also talked about others who were not.

Over the course of the afternoon, I realized how little I actually knew about the scope of Ruth-Ellen's academic life and scholarly output, her intellectual life as a specialist in German women's literary, social, and cultural history, and her influence as a feminist theorist. I had finished my Master's in 1980, was in Germany for two years, and then worked off campus on my PhD—so I missed most of the developments I describe here. Sure, we'd had lots of conversations over breakfasts and lunches and afternoon teas, years later, but none of those focused on strictly academic issues or feminist scholarship. I had never considered all the things Ruth-Ellen had done, was doing, and continues to do, to inform my thinking and enable my own work as a feminist and *Germanistin*.

This conversation led me to track down everything Ruth-Ellen has produced over four decades: I discovered over forty articles, thirty book reviews, and twelve books; there are certainly additionally innumerable uncatalogued talks, conference presentations and manuscript reviews. The fascinating aspect of reviewing her scholarly production is to see the evolution of her thought: the first works reflect the parochial interests and constraints of male-dominated *Germanistik*: her MA on Horvath's female characters and her dissertation on Karl Gutzkow's *Wally, die Zweiflerin* explored how male writers viewed and portrayed women. In the 1980s, she did what early *Germanistik* feminist work did: she *recovered* women's voices not in the German canon and published (in chronological order) on Johanna Kinkel; Luise Büchner; Louise Otto; Hedwig Dohm; Marie Luise Kaschnitz; Sophie von La Roche; Louise Dittmar; and Gisela von Arnim. She began embracing interdisciplinarity and was taking broader views by editing or contributing to collections like *Gestaltet und gestaltet: Frauen in der deutschen Literatur* (1980); *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: A Social and Literary History* (1983) and *Frauen in der Geschichte: Interdisziplinäre Studien VI* (1985). By the end of the decade, she was exploring the paradox of marginality in the writing of nineteenth-century German women and informing the German-reading audience about new trends in US academic feminism in articles in *Feministische Studien*.

As she became more invested in her feminist work, her comfort with things German was often tinged with skepticism. She opined in numerous articles and editorials over the next decade about *Germanistik* and feminism as the marriage of strange bedfellows, an unlikely, possibly impossible union for both historical and social reasons. Her essays on that topic included “‘Language is Also a Place of Struggle’: The Language of Feminism and the Language of American *Germanistik*”; “Some Thoughts on the Tenuous and Precarious Relationship between Feminism and German Studies”; and “Scattered Thoughts on Current Feminist Literary Critical Work in Nineteenth-Century German Studies.” For a fuller accounting of Ruth-Ellen's struggles with these concerns, the preface to her lauded book at the end of the decade, *Respectability and Deviance: Nineteenth-Century German Women Writers and the Ambiguity of Representation*,² presented a culmination of years of research and inquiry that she situated “somewhere between German and feminist studies,” still suggests, in her own words, her feeling of “ambivalence about what [she] was doing” as a theorist, literary critic, and historian. Within the preface is a fascinating five-page description about her journey to feminism. You will want to read it, because Ruth-Ellen suggests it be read “as the product of a long process of growth ..., as a journey, but not necessarily an arrival” (xxx).

Perhaps her skepticism and desire to join German studies with feminist thought led her to become the co-editor of the premier feminist journal in our field, the *Women in German Yearbook* (2002–2004); in her editorial with Marjorie Gelus, “Musing Together at Year Twenty,” she revisited many of the themes she outlined in her *Signs* editorials and called for the *Yearbook* to be more interdisciplinary, more international, and more inclusive.

Somehow, I had always imagined R.E. came into the world a fully-formed feminist—perhaps she was in earlier days and simply didn't have the vocabulary to describe what decades of feminist work later made possible. To my surprise, it was not until 1993 that the word “feminist” regularly appeared in titles of books she co-edited: *Revising the Word and the World: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, and, in the same year, *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. From that point on, her writings and ruminations focused almost exclusively on feminist scholarship, and here is where her iconoclastic bent (and maybe frustration with the confines of *Germanistik*) becomes most evident: she advocated for inclusionism vs. elitism, plain language vs. jargon and insider language. She puzzled about “the paradox of a feminist academic journal” (1997), and wondered if editing *Signs* was “elusive theory and illusive practice” (2003)? “Feminism and the Word Wars” (2000) warned that feminism as an academic subject was threatening to become institutionalized in the academy and just as prone to exclusionary forces.

Of course, many more things were written and discussed in the ensuing years and Ruth-Ellen has continued to wrestle with these issues. *The Future of Scholarly Writing: Critical Interventions* (2015) is her most recent co-edited endeavor, bringing together eminent scholars from various disciplines to discuss the premise that *matters of form are matters of content*. This collection is the culmination of her ruminations on the future of scholarship itself. I leave it to you to explore the volume, especially Ruth-Ellen's “Found in the Details: Essaying the Particular.” In the copy she gifted to me, Ruth-Ellen wrote: “Hurrah for good (i.e., mostly non-academic) writing!” And now, in what is probably a logical consequence, she professes to have abandoned academic prose in favor of constructing a volume of essays. Stay tuned!



FIGURE 11.1

As graduate students and doctoral candidates, we may or may not have known about all these activities, or even appreciated how important Ruth-Ellen was to us and the academy. I certainly saw and knew Ruth-Ellen mostly as our teacher and mentor. She nurtured us to have a voice, whether we were writing about fairy tales or the Holocaust. She nurtured and nudged us along as we struggled with our theses, encouraged our first conference presentations and our first academic articles, and wrote the dreaded letters of recommendation for our various job applications. We were prepared for all of these endeavors because of her teaching.

As I reflect on my own academic training with Ruth-Ellen, I recall (with some vague terror) the first Proseminar on *Junges Deutschland* during my master's program. I picked (or maybe was assigned?) Karl Gutzkow's *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (only later to discover, as my paper was presented, that that book was the subject of Ruth-Ellen's Johns Hopkins PhD). In those proseminars we learned to critique others' work constructively and to produce and discuss literary criticism. For many of us, that was our first foray into true scholarship—and our first encounter with removing *seminal* from our descriptor of the research we read. Those research and critical tools eventually served us well for the dissertations we wrote with her: looking at the titles of the eighteen she advised (starting in 1981 with Dorothea Diver-Stuecher), we all combined the social sciences with literary analysis (even though I never consciously recognized that this was what I was doing). Just as Ruth-Ellen had taught us, we focused on women and challenged the canon. Our titles harkened back to our training: “techniques of ambiguity”; “negotiating borders”; “narration of deviance”; “encounters with the institutions”; “identities in flux”; “appropriation and critique”; “narrative”; “women and *Wissenschaft*”; “literary *legerdemain*.” A whole host of graduate students whose lives she touched has gone on to make important contributions, some within the academy and some outside of it. Whatever path we took, Ruth-Ellen encouraged us all to become agents for change.



So, what did I take away from this storytelling at teatime and my subsequent dive into all things Ruth-Ellen? I gained a deeper understanding of the contributions she made to feminist scholarship and became more aware of her call to action on the part of feminists, academics, and members of the academy. For Ruth-Ellen, revising the word *can* revise the world we all inhabit in the various societies to which we belong. We have her to thank for what we and many others have become. If I could read the tea leaves, Ruth-Ellen's legacy will be our successes in leading feminist lives.

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NEXT CHAPTER

Chapter 12 A Personal and Intellectual Feminist Journey over Four Decades with Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres