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Christa Wolf's *What Remains* – One Document or a Document Unit?

Marking the end of the East German state and a turning point in German history, the events of 1989 and 1990 have provided an opportunity for taking a critical look at research results in literature scholarship and other disciplines. During the '90s, most scholars, both East and West German, agreed that typical approaches to East German literature needed reconsideration and that new methods and criteria had to be established in order to transition from a one-sided, political approach to a more literary one.

However – in my opinion – these considerations most often lead to a one-sided accentuation of aesthetics and, subsequently, a neglect of all other factors, as I would like to demonstrate using the example of Christa Wolf.

Christa Wolf – born in 1929 and one of the most famous East German writers - published a short narrative story called *Was bleibt* (*What Remains*) in the summer of 1990. Written in the late seventies under the East German regime, *What Remains* was not published until after the fall of the Berlin Wall and caused an upheaval known as the Christa-Wolf-Debate in not-yet-reunified Germany. For years, German intellectuals discussed the moral responsibilities of the writer and the politics of literature and literary criticism, using both smaller local papers and major German newspapers such as *Die Zeit* or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as a forum for debate.

To demonstrate that factors other than the purely literary ones had an influence on the interpretation of the text in Christa Wolf's case, I will attempt to analyze *What Remains* with the aid of the concept of complementarity used in Documentation Studies. Niels Windfeld Lund describes complementarity as follows:

So, depending on the choice of concepts, a book can be a material as well as a social and a mental phenomenon. Instead of discussing whether a book is more a material phenomenon than a social or a mental phenomenon, one can talk like Bohr about three complementary, but exclusive features of the description of the book. One is not making a synthesis, but three complementary closures around the book, making a joint completion of the description. This means that the book does not partly carry one of these three features: it is 100 percent a material phenomenon, 100 percent a social phenomenon, and 100 percent a mental phenomenon, making a complete asynthesis. There is not one single overarching synthesis, but three ways of closing or bordering the phenomenon. (Lund: 2004, 96f.)

Although scholarship in German literature after 1989-1990 brought aesthetic aspects to the fore and – claimed at least – to be focusing exclusively on the literary text, there are literature scholars like Gérard Genette who take material and social factors into consideration and demonstrate their relevance to the interpretation of the texts. In his study, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (which appeared in French with the

title *Seuils* in 1987), he uses numerous examples to show what role the title, subtitle, forewords and cover blurbs play in interpreting a text, as well as the degree of an author's celebrity, his age and gender, awards, honorary degrees, on so on. Genette divides the paratext into a peritext and an epitext: the former being aspects that are relatively closely associated with the book itself, such as the dustcover, the title, genre indication, foreword and epilogue or even various themes, while the latter consists of statements about the book beyond the boundaries of the book, such as interviews, correspondences and journals. In so doing, Genette explores non-textual elements such as format and cover design:

Most often, then, the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not the text, it is already some text. But we must at least bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestation: these may be iconic (illustrations), material (for example, everything that originates in the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go into the making of a book), or purely factual. By factual I mean the paratext that consists not of an explicit message (verbal or other) but of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received. (Genette: 1997, 7)

The so-called "literature argument" began on June 1, 1990, with articles by Ulrich Greiner and Volker Hage in the weekly national newspaper, *Die Zeit*, and on June 2, 1990, with Frank Schirrmacher's page-long review in the widely read newspaper *Die Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Between June 1990 and December 1992, the various regional and extra-regional Eastern and Western German newspapers and magazines published approximately 190 articles that treated different themes with varying emphases over the course of time yet are all connected to Christa Wolf and her story as well as the initial articles of the literature argument.

In the literature argument, it is important to note that the critics clearly do not differentiate between editions – everyone is reviewing the one text. Yet they do not explore possible variances related to the publisher, such as layout, indication of genre, cover blurb, etc. – although Genette makes it clear that

this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (Genette: 1997, 2)

By June 1990, the text *What Remains* was already available in different versions and different media:

1) On November 25, 1989, Christa Wolf gives a reading in the Berliner Ensemble from her as yet-unpublished story. East German television records the reading, but does not air the program until March 4, 1990. In East German radio, a conversation with Christa Wolf is aired prior to the reading in the Berliner Ensemble, titled “Representatives of Art and Cultural Life in East Germany on Today’s Changes in East Germany”. As far as I know, there was no substantial reaction in the press to these programs, and as such, no ‘advanced warning’ of the actual literature argument.

Genette views radio and television shows as epitext, since they are situated outside of the text itself, and therefore does not take the media events into consideration. Still, given the status of media today, it is surprising that the publication of a book would lead to a more intense public reaction than a television show, even though it largely consisted of literature critics, that is, a professional audience.

2) In April 1990, Christa Wolf signs a contract with the East German publishing house, Aufbau. This edition and one licensed to the West German publisher, Luchterhand, appear almost simultaneously in early June 1990.

Aufbau published *What Remains* as a 76-page paperback edition without indicating genre or information about the author and without any sort of a blurb on the cover (illustration 1). Obviously, the publisher assumed that this additional information is already well-known. The appearance of the Aufbau edition in paperback is not to suggest that this is a “simply the republication at a low price of old or recent works that have first undergone the commercial test of the trade edition” (Genette: 1997, 20), but rather a conscious choice of the publisher.

The cover illustration and the placement of the text are conspicuous. In contrast to the 108-page hardcover Luchterhand edition, which includes a cover blurb with a short description of the story, a few quotes from the text, and at the end, some biographical notes on Christa Wolf and an overview of her work published by Luchterhand, the Aufbau edition also emphasizes the piece, but it is distinctly smaller and thus perhaps accorded less significance. Besides, of particular importance to the reception of the text is genre indication of “Erzählung” or narrative story emphasizing the fictionality of the text, even if the parallels between the first-person narrator and Christa Wolf are hinted at in the blurb on the book’s cover (illustration 2).

Both editions have a quote by Christa Wolf on the back cover. However, while the Aufbau edition uses a quote from *What Remains* and identifies it with the author’s name, the Luchterhand edition uses a quote without a reference. This quote – “The story was written in 1979 and describes a period at the end of the seventies when national security officers were stationed in front of our house for weeks.” – comes from a conversation that Christa Wolf had with Aafke Steenhuis in December 1989, which was published in the collection *Reden im Herbst* (Discussions in Autumn, Aufbau 1990) as well as in the book *Im Dialog* (In dialogue, Luchterhand 1990). This is an example of how public authorial epitext can become part of the peritext. However it disappeared from later editions: In the 1994 paperback edition, this quote is replaced by one from *What Remains*.

The most distinct differences between the East and West German editions obviously lie in the peritext, particularly since “modern publishing tends to neutralize these

choices [typesetting and choice of paper, R.S.] by a perhaps irreversible tendency toward standardization (Genette: 1997, 34). Within the ‘actual’ text, there is only one difference: the placement of the date of writing at the end of the text:

- 1) Aufbau: Juni/Juli 1979 November 1989
2) Luchterhand:
Juni-Juli 1979/November 1989

These are certainly minor details, but hardly irrelevant, as it can be demonstrated through archival material that the first form was the one Christa Wolf preferred, while the change in the Luchterhand edition was a late editorial correction. Also, this detail makes it possible to recognize whether later editions are based on Luchterhand or Aufbau.

- 3) Between June 7 and June 22, 1990, the *Neue Zürcher* newspaper prints the story as a serialized novel in 14 parts.

Copyright is accorded to Luchterhand, and thus, the text is largely identical with the edition that appeared in Luchterhand. The orthography is merely changed somewhat to conform to Swiss German, and the passages are segmented in a way that sustains suspense until the next installment. A few of the differences are probably nothing more than typographical errors, or corrections made at Luchterhand after the *Neue Zürcher* had received the text.

Of great importance, however, is that the reprint in the *Neue Zürcher* starts out with an article titled “A Day in the Life of Christa Wolf”, in which the author, Hanno Helbling, discusses a report that “increases awareness of Christa Wolf’s living conditions in the summer of 1979.” Using Genette’s terminology, this is a metatext that functions simultaneously as a paratext for the readers of the serial and steers the reception of the text in the direction of authenticity and autobiography. The extent to which Christa Wolf was informed of the article’s contents cannot be established. After the *Neue Zürcher* received the rights to the text, the editorial staff decided on the setting for the text. The article by Hanno Helbling, who was also editor-in-chief of the literary supplement at the time, can be regarded therefore as a conscious introduction and preparation of the readership.

By definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it, although the degree of responsibility may vary. (Genette: 1997, 10)

In the following months, four further articles dealing with Christa Wolf’s story and the so-called literature argument appear in the *Neue Zürcher*.

- 4) In 1994, the text appears as a pocketbook edition by Luchterhand after the Aufbau paperback edition and the Luchterhand hardcover had sold out.

As in the hardcover edition, alongside Christa Wolf’s name and the title of the story, the genre indication “Erzählung” is given on the title page (illustration 3). Beyond that, there is an illustration by Angela Hampel. Since the Luchterhand archives are not

accessible, the role that Christa Wolf played in this decision cannot be stated conclusively. It is certain, however, that she knows Angela Hampel. Elsewhere, she refers to a “close friendship with Angela Hampel.” The illustration is not titled in the book, and presumably it was prepared especially for this edition and particularly since it seems to be a portrait of Christa Wolf. Beyond a few biographical statements on Christa Wolf, there are also a few comments on the first page on interpreting the text and an overview of other texts by Christa Wolf in the same series.

- 5) In 2001, Christa Wolf’s collected works in 13 volumes are published. Volume 10 contains the narrative *What Remains* as well as *Sommerstück* (Summer Piece).

All 13 volumes have the identical cover design – Christa Wolf’s signature on a gray background – and are about identical in length (illustration 4). Each of the 13 volumes include a commentary and an epilogue by the editor, Sonja Hilzinger, which should inform the reader on origins, publication and reception. Of particular interest in this context is that this edition obviously used the Aufbau edition as a model, even though it was a Luchterhand production. Accordingly, there is no indication of genre – as in the Aufbau edition – and the time-frame given at the end of the text also corresponds with the Aufbau edition. The extent to which Christa Wolf took part in these decisions can only be supposed. Nonetheless, the editor had access to documents that were publicly available, but at that time required Christa Wolf’s permission for publication. So it must be assumed that Sonja Hilzinger was in contact with Christa Wolf and discussed the edition with her. The appendix is an example of the fact that

a paratextual element may appear at any time, it may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or by virtue of the eroding effect of time. (Genette: 1997, 6)

- 6) In 2002, Christa Wolf’s collected works are published in paperback, again by Luchterhand, with a new cover design and still identifiable as a series (illustration 5). Only the upper third of the cover is illustrated, two thirds are white, and the author’s name, title of the book, indication of genre and the publisher’s name and logo are given at the very bottom of the cover.

With the exception of the collected works, all of the editions contain the genre indication “Erzählung” or narrative story. For Luchterhand’s pocketbook editions, Genette’s comments on choice of format are obviously valid:

The contrast between “trade edition” and “pocket edition” is, as we know, based on technical and commercial features, the most important of which is certainly not size [...] The contrast between trade and pocket, as a matter of fact, has much more to do with the old distinction between books bound in a stiff material and books bound in a flexible material (Genette: 1997, 19f.)

Furthermore:

For undoubtedly the pocket edition will long be synonymous with canonization. On that account alone, pocket format is a formidable (although

ambiguous – indeed, because ambiguous) paratextual message. (Genette: 1997, 21f.)

- 6) The preliminary writings and various drafts of *What Remains* have been accessible in the archives of the Academy of the Arts in Berlin since the summer of 2002. The contract for *What Remains* is available in the Aufbau archives, which offers some insight into the date of publication as well as the length of the production process.

There are 3 preliminary writings, designated by Genette as pre-text:

- a) *Today. Memory* from May 24, 1979 – less than 1 1/2 pages, already containing passages that were included in the published text almost word for word
- b) *Observation* from May 29, 1979 – 10-page document that clearly is a continuation of *Today. Memory*.
- c) *Metaphor* from June 22, 1979 – third-person narrative, just a few pages of manuscript

The first version with the title *What Remains* consists of 85 typewritten pages, in which the first page is dated June 23, 1979, and the last one with Thursday, July 26, 1979. These preliminary writings show that Christa Wolf started working on this material in May 1979 and that the final narrative was written within the space of a month, which corresponds with the dates given, “June-July 1979”, in the print version. The typewritten manuscript also verifies that the text underwent only a few smaller changes, some deletions and corrections, in November 1989.

Examining other files in the Christa Wolf Archive also reveals that Christa Wolf frequently worked on a text very intensively over a relatively short period of time, or even on several texts simultaneously, and that the texts could lie in wait for quite a while before being finalized for publication. It is hard to say to what extent this is indicative of Christa Wolf’s individual style of work or whether political factors were involved, but one can probably assume that it was a combination of the two. Since the title *What Remains* was often referred to in the literature argument and modified forms of it popped up again and again, a comparison with the titles of the preliminary writings would be particularly interesting.

Now, it is not at all unusual for several months to pass between the completion of a manuscript, initial readings, signing contracts and finally the publication of a book, and that in the years after that, other editions follow – be they translations or because the first printing sold out. In Christa Wolf’s case, the social changes that took place during this period (from November 1989 to June 1990) were tremendous. Allow me to briefly remind you that the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989; the dominant discussion in the weeks and months that followed revolved around the future of a reformed East Germany; the first free elections in East Germany took place in March 1990; and the date of the German reunification was set for October 3, 1990. Accordingly, Christa Wolf had decided to publish at a point at which no one could have predicted the speed of reunification, while by the time the book was in publication, the date for reunification had already been set and with it, the publishing industry and the conditions for authors and publishing houses had changed entirely. Social change is not insignificant for the reception of a text, particularly as

The ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition, with varying degrees of pressure, sometimes widely varying (Genette: 1997, 3)

Furthermore, Christa Wolf's position had changed completely during the course of these months. Up until the fall of 1989, many of her readers thought of her as a contact and adviser among other critical authors and socialist reformers. But when she signed the appeal "For Our Country" on November 29, 1989, she - along with many East German intellectuals - suddenly held a completely different position than the majority of the population, which was pushing for a speedy reunification. In the summer of 1990 these factual manifestations, as Genette calls them, played a role in the reception of *What Remains*, if not explicitly then certainly implicitly, as did the knowledge of Christa Wolf's privileged standing in East Germany in comparison with the average citizen, her numerous prizes and awards, and the like.

The social changes were also a reason why Aufbau chose the paperback format. Christa Wolf's Aufbau editor, Angela Drescher, informed me that the paperback edition was a conscious choice on the part of the publishing house. They did not want the short text to be given too much meaning, and they also wanted to offer the book at a relatively low price, since many East German citizens were already facing an uncertain economic future, even at this early date. Nonetheless – or maybe for this very reason – the cover design was important to the publisher, as it would distinguish the Aufbau edition the most from the simultaneous edition by Luchterhand, as well as all the later editions, particularly as the various later paperback editions have to count among what Genette calls the publisher's peritext:

the zone that exists merely by the fact that a book is published and possibly republished and offered to the public in one or several more or less varied presentations. (Genette: 1997, 16)

Furthermore, the pocketbook editions by Luchterhand clearly fit into series in which all texts by the same author are published in the same format. Genette's comment is applicable to these pocketbook editions, that "'pocket size' is basically no longer a format but a vast set of nebula of series – for 'pocket' still means 'series'" (Genette: 1997, 21).

Thus, Aufbau not only consciously chose the pocketbook format, but the house also took into consideration Christa Wolf's wishes regarding cover design. There is a line in the contract between Christa Wolf and Aufbau indicating that Christa Wolf wanted to have an illustration by her son-in-law Martin Hoffmann on the cover page. Hoffmann had already been responsible for the cover design of earlier books such as *Cassandra* and *Accident*, and one can assume that the illustration was created in close collaboration between the author and the artist, and that it at the very least had her approval.

The West German literature scholar Heinz-Peter Preusser – to my knowledge the only scholar who takes cover design into consideration in text analysis - describes the illustration as follows:

Auf dem Umschlag der Aufbau-Ausgabe von *Was bleibt* sieht man die Tristesse einer neblig grau in grau gehaltenen Häuserzeile, durch die sich – wie durch einen Schleier – eine pastellfarbene Buntheit leise ankündigt. Die Straßenflucht selbst bringt kaum Aufhellung, auch der Himmel ist in dem gleichen Ton gehalten. Aber er ist eine freie Fläche, ein Projektionsrahmen, wenn man so will, ein Trichter ins Freie und Offene. Dort steht, auch das kein Zufall, der Titel: *Was bleibt*. (Preusser: 2000, 404)¹

I can endorse this description. The resulting interpretation, however, can only be explained – in my opinion – primarily by Preusser's knowledge of Christa Wolf's political views:

The illustration could be seen as an allegory. Only on the basis of East German reality can a vision arise that elevates the brute present. Hope lives. It penetrates the gray as lively growth fights the seal, bursting it. (Preusser: 2000, 404)

Looking at Christa Wolf's work as a whole more closely, it becomes apparent that several of her titles at Aufbau lack a genre indication. On the other hand, a peritext in the form of an explanation by Christa Wolf is often entered into the piece, that it is about fictitious persons and events. This, however, is missing in *What Remains*, and because of this, the autobiographical style is not completely surprising. Since neither the author nor the publisher have commented on this circumstance, it is not clear to what extent it was assumed that the text would be read as fiction or more as an autobiographical piece. Nonetheless it is astonishing that most West German critics apparently took the West German edition with its genre indication "Erzählung" or narrative story as the point of departure for their interpretation, yet they read it as an autobiography. Obviously, the influence of the peritext and especially the epitext, as well as the critics' knowledge of Christa Wolf's principle of subjective authenticity was greater and more influential than the indication of genre itself.

Christa Wolf's *What Remains* is a good example of the fact that a literary text need not be one and the same document, but rather that one can advantageously refer to a document complex that can incorporate other means of expression beyond the purely textual. In my opinion, Genette's terminology illustrates this fact very well. However, other media such as radio and television should be taken into consideration, as well as electronic texts, as there are plenty of internet sites on Christa Wolf and *What Remains* that have appeared in the interim, but this would be the topic for another paper.

¹ On the cover of the Aufbau edition of *What Remains*, one sees a drab row of houses, a hazy gray on gray, a veil through which pastel colorfulness quietly announces itself. Not even escaping to the streets brings relief from the dreariness, for the same gray tone reaches to the sky itself. But, the sky is a blank surface, a projection area, if you will, a passage into wide open spaces. It is no coincidence that the title is placed here: *What Remains*.

Illustrations

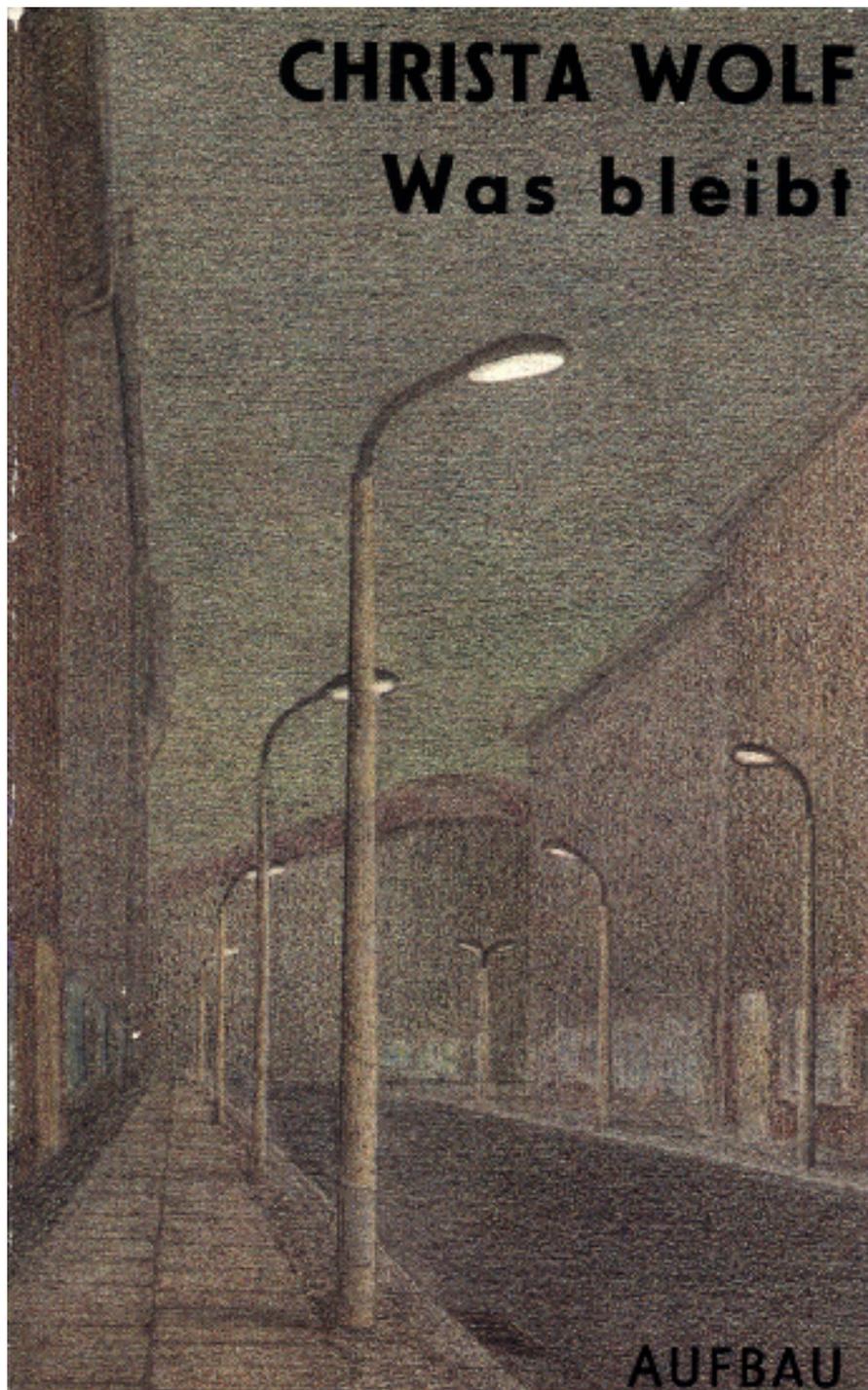


Illustration 1

Christa Wolf

Was
bleibt

Erzählung
Luchterhand
Literaturverlag

Christa Wolf:
Was bleibt
Erzählung
Sammlung Luchterhand
dtv



Illustration 3

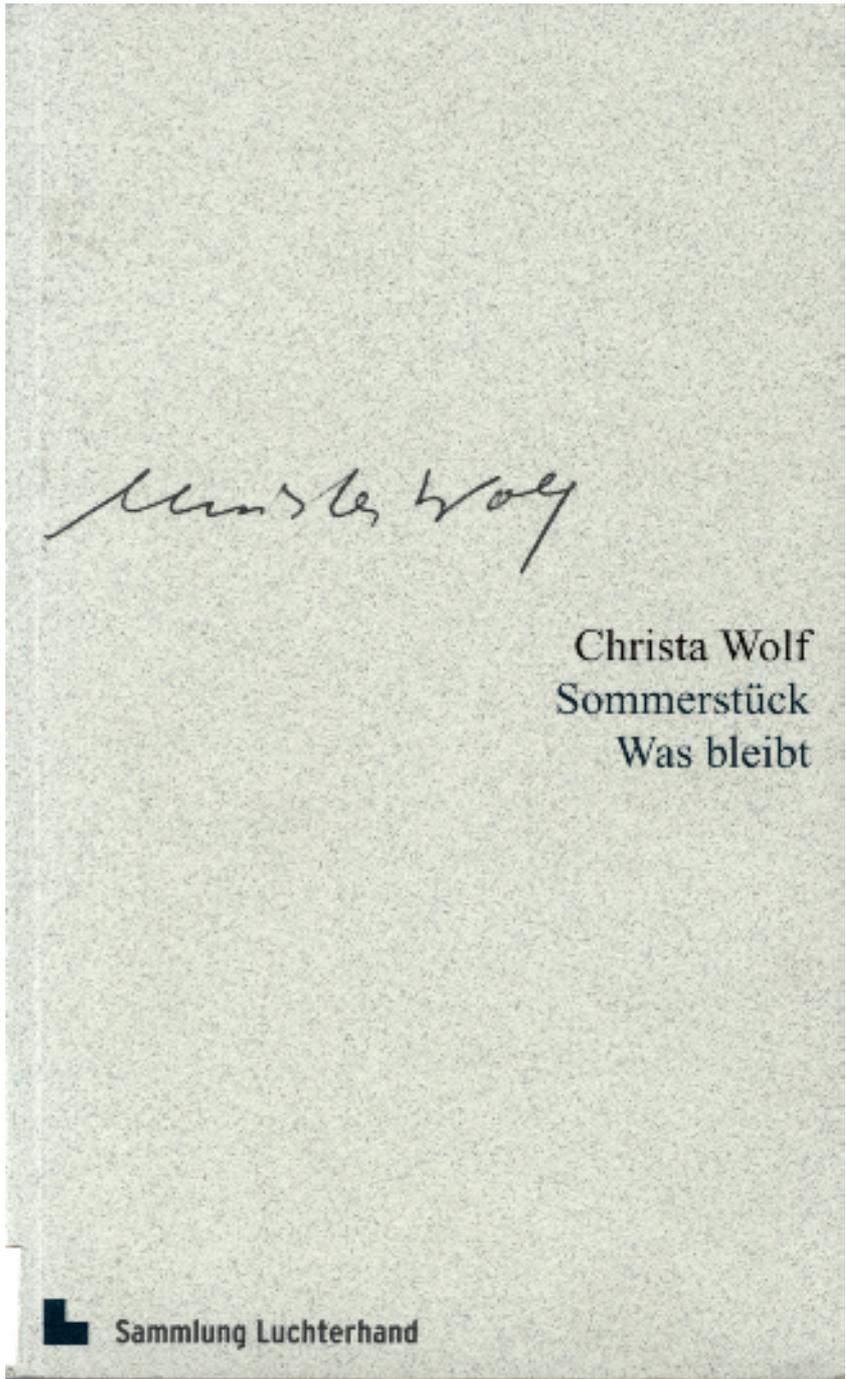


Illustration 4

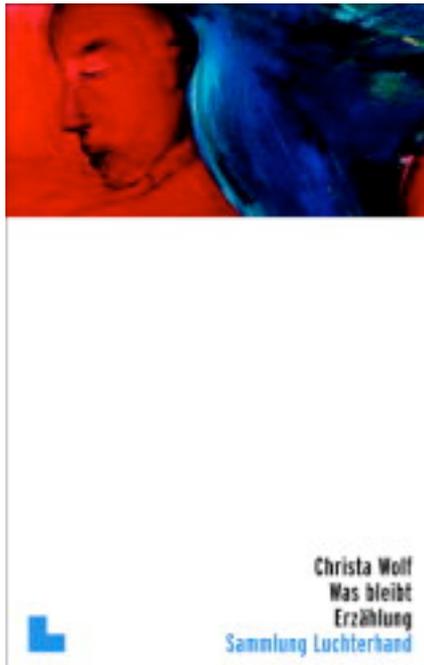


Illustration 5

Literature

Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press 1997.

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