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2018

Simon Brenner: Wolf Haas (1960—)

Heike Henderson

Boise State University

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Death at the Opera (1934)
Dead Men's Morris (1936)
St Peter's Finger (1938)
When Last I Died (1941)
Laurels Are Poison (1942)
Tom Brown's Body (1949)

—Samantha Walton

SIMON BRENNER

Wolf Haas
 (1960–)

Conceived in defiance of a literary establishment that had for fifteen years refused to publish Haas's novels, the quirky ex-policeman turned private investigator Simon Brenner is now celebrated by literary critics and readers alike. Cranky, ambitionless, and often underestimated, Brenner (whose name translates as "Burner") is a reluctant hero who embodies many stereotypical Austrian traits while at the same time undermining traditional images of Austria as an unspoiled tourist destination with a rich cultural heritage, traditional values, and wholesome inhabitants.

At the beginning of the series, the forty-four-year-old Brenner has just quit the police force after nineteen years of service. Without any real prospects, he begins freelancing for an insurance agency that asks him to investigate an unsolved case from his police career. This is the first of many temporary jobs that take him all over Austria. Investigating crime in ski resorts, beautiful provincial towns, and the capital Vienna, Brenner uncovers the ugly underbelly of idyllic tourist destinations. He not only implicates many of Austria's institutions and traditions, such as the police force, the Catholic Church, and the Salzburg Festival, but also challenges conventional images of Austria as a safe and orderly place.

Haas conceived the underdog sleuth with a wry sense of humor as a poor relative of respectable society. Although he often rebels against authority, Brenner is a normal man. There is nothing special about his physical appearance, and he is not particularly gifted in any way (he has no talent for music, languages, math, or even sports). He is often grumpy, and he tries to use the system to his advantage—for example, trying to stay in his government-subsidized flat even after quitting his government job. Needless to say, the system usually proves even more corrupt than he is, thwarting his attempts at subterfuge and trickery. Brenner thus embodies independence and, despite his unsuccessful attempts to game the system, by refusing to be beholden to anybody, a sort of stubborn integrity. His general lack of ambition allows him to expose people and institutions without regard for personal consequences. The price he pays is perpetual financial instability and a lack of permanent relationships.

Brenner's cases quite often turn out to be about something different than initial appearances suggest. They include a variety of subplots and supporting characters and tend to draw Brenner in, even when he is working in seemingly unre-

lated jobs as, for instance, an ambulance driver or chauffeur. Typically, having just found an ordinary job, a routine, a salary, an apartment, and a pension, he is reluctant to take on the investigation. This is true of the most recent novel in the series, *Brennerova* (2014), in which he declares himself officially retired before once again getting sucked into a case and a fake marriage with a Russian client, neither of which he is eager to pursue.

One of Brenner's most distinctive features is his tendency to ruminate instead of concentrate. While he gets frustrated by his inability to tell the essential from the inessential, this method allows him to solve cases by unconsciously noticing minor details and making mental leaps that defy linear reasoning: "Because that's the advantage that brooding has over thinking. That you can brood over everything simultaneously."³⁷ Clearly not the fastest approach—brooding offers no control over outcomes—it nevertheless permits him to make associations between seemingly unrelated events and ideas. Brenner's investigative detours are mirrored by the novels' digressive storytelling that exposes readers to more details than are strictly necessary for the solution of the crime. This allows for a wider examination of Austrian culture and mores.

A defining characteristic of the Brenner novels is the unusual perspective from which they are told. A nameless narrator speaks in a distinct Austrian German full of idiomatic expressions, grammatically incorrect sentences, fillers, and other attributes of speech. The irreverent narrator often addresses readers directly, urging them to pay attention and alluding to events about to happen. He not only knows Brenner's thoughts, feelings, and motives but also comments on them and evaluates them from his perspective—one that often proves sexist and ethnocentric. In *Das ewige Leben* (2003; *Eternal life*), originally planned as the last installment in the series, the narrator is killed—but defying the inherent realism of the genre, this does not stop him from relating the subsequent installments of Brenner's adventures. This ploy allows for a further exploration of Austrian identity as the deceased narrator's darkly witty comments and wry observations accentuate the series' scathing critique.

Brenner has some similarities to the lonely hero of the hard-boiled novel. He occasionally drinks too much (which causes his migraines to flare up) and, despite his reluctance to engage in physical altercations, gets repeatedly beaten up. At times he is willing to bend the law and cover for perpetrators whose crimes he considers justified or insignificant, following his own sense of justice rather than laws and social norms. Determined to protect the innocent, Brenner's cranky demeanor belies a soft spot for all of humanity.

Selected Bibliography

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Wie die Tiere (*Like animals*; 2001)
Das ewige Leben (*Eternal life*; 2003)
Brenner and God (2009 [2012])
Brennerova (2014)

—Heike Henderson