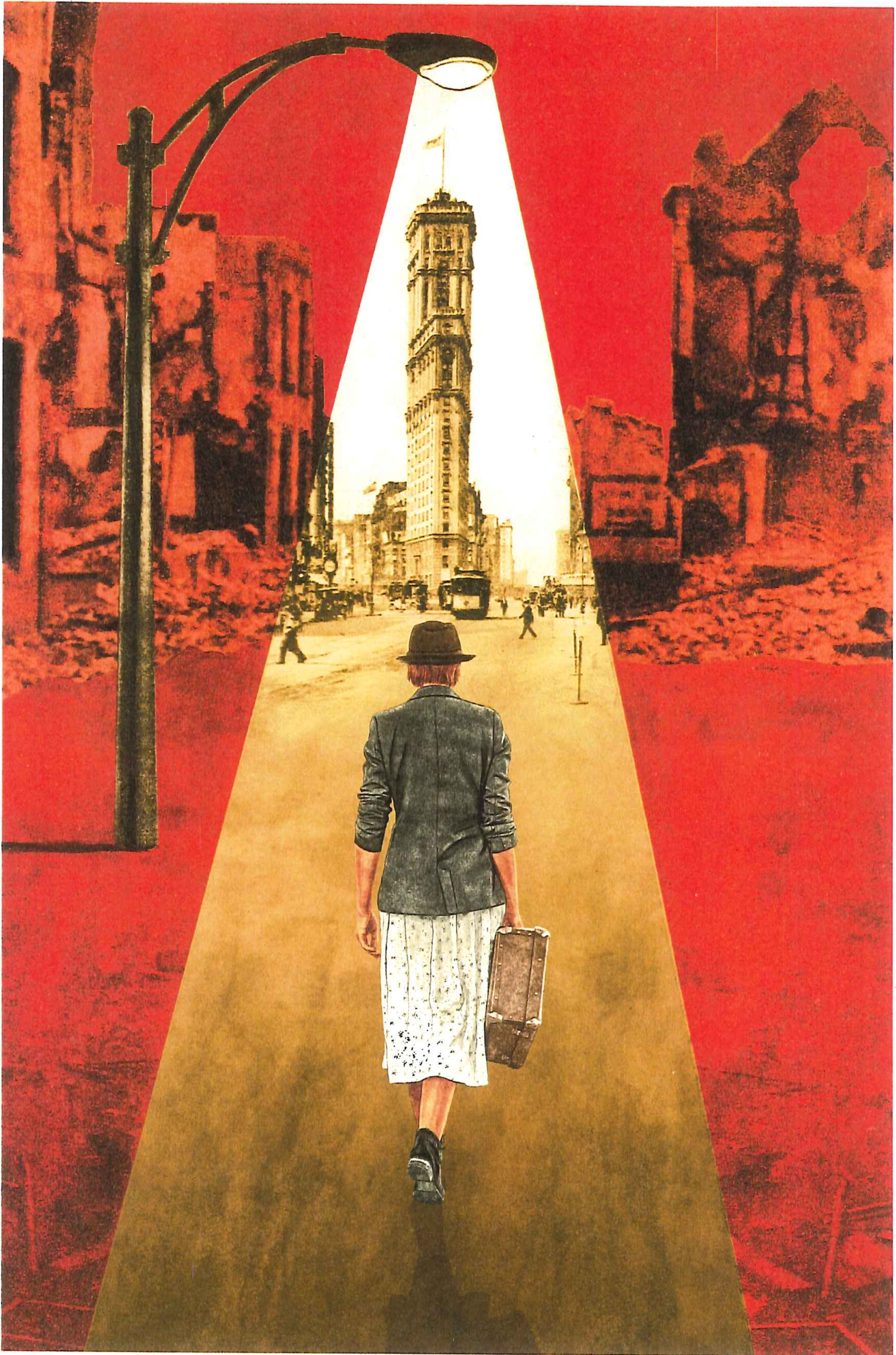

Zach Meyer

Rod Davis

Mother Courage

A masterful chronicle of German émigrés in Manhattan in 1967-1968

Ten a.m. in the lobby of the Texas Department of Public Safety district office in Bryan, and I'm far down the digital queue for a driver's license renewal. Most of the hundred or so seats in the room are filled. The empty ones exist because nobody wants to sit next to a person who may be coughing, sneezing, arguing on a cell phone, or holding a crying child. A couple dozen people prefer to lean dead eyed against the walls. Mounted TVs intended to soften the boredom are too boring to watch. Nothing really matters except seeing your number flash and advance on the big waiting screen.

I find a seat in the back row and pull from my bag a copy of *Anniversaries: Froma Year in the Life of Gesine Cresspahl* by the late German author Uwe Johnson (1934–1984). I usually read books to pass time in bureaucratic tar pits, and this newly translated, 1,720-page masterpiece could fill the bill for hours. I'm only three

hundred pages in and I already wish I'd come across it back in the early seventies, when the first three of its four parts were published, or perhaps in 1983, when the final segment was completed. That was a year before Johnson, only forty-nine but a hard drinker with a failed marriage, died alone, bitter, holed up in a small village in England. His body was not discovered for nearly three weeks.

But only portions of the tetralogy had been translated into English in those days, and not very well. It got little attention, and some it didn't need, such as a snarky review in 1975 in the *New York Times* from Christopher Lehmann-Haupt. Which figures, considering the role given the Gray Lady throughout *Anniversaries*. Each chapter, one per calendar day, leads with or includes an item—almost always with comment—from that morning's edition of the *Times*. The sequence begins August 20, 1967, an ordinary Sunday, and ends August 20, 1968, the last dawn of the Prague Spring before Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia.

Some five decades later, all four parts have been transformed into pitch-perfect English by the noted translator Damion Searls and collected into two volumes chronicling the life and times—to the fullest extent of that familiar term—of the protagonist, thirty-four-year-old German émigré Gesine (guh-ZEE-neh), and her precocious ten-year-old daughter, Marie, both of whom arrived in New York from Düsseldorf in 1961, before the story begins. It is, Searls wrote in *The Paris Review*, "the slowest and hardest book I've ever translated." But the reward, he noted later, is that "now I know the book is recognizable to English-language readers as a novel of a lifetime."

The extraordinary story of Gesine and Marie—intense, tragic, playful, painful, healing—is one of three full-blown narratives that form the elaborate plot architecture of *Anniversaries*. The second story line is the global upheaval of 1967 and 1968. Johnson uses Gesine's obsessive yet skeptical reliance on the paper of record to set temporal buoys for what will likely be her last year in New York. The third of these intertwining narratives consists of meticulously detailed flashbacks from the dark turbulence of Germany before, during, and after "the twelve swastika years" that began in 1933, the year Hitler came to power.

It was also the year Gesine was born, in the fictional rural town of Jerichow in the actual, and poor, northeastern German region of Mecklenburg, adjacent to Poland and the Baltic. The war and the Reich enveloped Gesine and her traditional landed gentry family, the Papenbrocks, as it did everyone around them. Johnson presents the horror of the era in micro, not the usual macro. It is fitting that Hannah Arendt, who gave us the phrase "the banality of evil," was a strong admirer of this granular approach to worldwide catastrophe. "You have actually made this past tangible and—perhaps a much harder task—you have made it convincing," she wrote Johnson in 1972.

Daze of Our Lives

Johnson's tour-de-force variously reads like a witty, flinty New York diary, a definitive history, and a Cold War intrigue worthy of John le Carré. The parts overlap and mix together in clouds of time and existence as thoroughly and naturally as in human consciousness, creating a sense of imaginative immersion found only in the highest levels of literature. *Anniversaries* feels like lived experience. It is an entry pass to a world you thought you already knew, but didn't.

My reveries in the DPS lobby are interrupted so often I find another seat,

under a TV monitor showing sports highlights. I look around. What chance, I wonder, would I have if someone were to come up to me and try to make conversation by asking what I'm reading? Could I hold up the hefty first volume and manage even the most fundamental elevator brief? Could I in any way suggest that my inquirer should take the time to read this treasure so recently liberated from linguistic confinement?

Wake up! I would shout. History repeats itself! It transplants itself!

Honestly, I would try, because if Johnson, once hailed as "the voice of divided Germany," wrote about anything, it was the so-called ordinary people whose lives, disrupted in extremis, become the stuff of epics. His Mecklenburg could be compared to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, not least because of Johnson's intense interest in the American icon. I would say to my fellow denizens in the DPS lobby, if they would look up from their cell phones, that this book would explain the darkest layers of human reality and terrify them. And it should, because it is so close to what is happening here right now. Wake up! I would shout. History repeats itself! It transplants itself!

No one asks me anything.

My number lights up on the board. I get my license. The clerk tells me I can also use it for my voter ID, which is a thing in Texas these days. Gesine's father, World War I veteran Heinrich Cresspahl, would have approved the practicality of multiple use. A master carpenter, shrewd merchant, and stubborn independent, he multiplies his roles and guises many times to survive the war years with Gesine. He cons the local Nazis, becomes a part-time British spy, and is named mayor of his hometown when the war ends. But he falls out of favor with the new Soviet occupiers and is nearly beaten to death by German kapos in a Russian-run prison, where, he remembers, "the Soviets had ample time to observe what Germans are capable of doing to one another."

Altered Egos

Johnson's decision to devote himself to delivering a modernist, even minimalist, Homeric epic of such length, depth, and complexity was an outcome of early successes on the German literary scene. Born in the same area as Gesine, and at about the same time, Johnson grew up and attended college in northern Germany, which became East Germany while he was an adolescent. He lived with his mother; his father, who joined the Nazi Party in 1940, died in a Soviet camp. His mother moved to West Germany in 1956 and he followed in 1959, by simply taking a streetcar to West Berlin. Like Gesine, Johnson was an idealistic but tough-minded socialist and refused the term "escape," although he had little choice but to move due to revocation of his work permit and restrictions on his writing in the East. His breakout 1959 novel, *Speculations About Jakob*, published the same year as Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* and later translated into English, led to early celebrity on the continent; he won the International Publishers' Prize in 1962. He ascended to the highest ranks of contemporary German authors, as well as membership in the prestigious literary political Gruppe 47.

By the mid-sixties, according to biographical sketches, Johnson, a prolific

writer and editor, was looking for a change and considering translating the work of Faulkner. He had accepted a mundane job in New York working on a school textbook. He and his wife, Elisabeth, and their daughter, Katharina, lived there from 1966 through 1968 in the apartment that became the model for Gesine's; in fact, Johnson gave Gesine his former New York address. There are so many similarities to the lives of Gesine and Johnson that it would be fair to describe her as his alter ego. For example, he had helped Elisabeth escape from the East, much as friends later did for Gesine. Gesine had also appeared in an earlier work, as had Jakob, Marie's late father, and various other characters in *Anniversaries*. Gesine's starring role materialized when, according to Johnson's famous recounting, he spotted her on Tuesday, April, 18, 1967, at 5:30 p.m. as she walked in her usual forceful manner on the south side of Forty-Second Street from Fifth Avenue to Sixth Avenue alongside Bryant Park. She gave her permission for the book, which starts with an entry dated four months later. It is entirely consistent with Johnson's literary style that his characters become so real that no one doubts he actually saw her and spoke to her. But more accurately, he was speaking to himself.

'68 Tears

This blurring of lines between reality and imagination becomes the narrative strategy for the entire work. From the opening scene, in which a vacationing Gesine emerges from a long swim along the New Jersey coast—immediately linked to a similar memory of the Baltic Sea—until the final chapter, which postulates a dual world of soul-healing serenity and violent danger, *Anniversaries* makes a case for infinity and indeterminacy—while pinioned to earthly precision by hard facts such as plane crashes, beatings, rapes, executions, mass drownings, and genocide.

New York, mostly Manhattan, provides the fast-paced, diverse baseline around which all the moving parts flow, and enables the interactions in Gesine's life needed to juxtapose American and German personalities, histories, and cultures—one of Johnson's goals. The blunt, ever-inquisitive brunette who can never quite master "the American smile" works as a translator at an international bank. Skinny Marie, who wears her blond hair in braids, attends a private school; rides the subway by herself; adjusts to an unlikely friendship with Francine, a homeless black girl who lives with them briefly; and falls in love with her new country:

> German is for her a foreign language, which she uses with her mother to be polite. . . . When she speaks English the way she does naturally, Gesine doesn't always understand her. She wants to be baptized when she turns fifteen, and she has managed to make the nuns in the private school farther uptown on Riverside Drive call her M'ri instead of Mary. She was supposed to be expelled from that school anyway, for refusing to take off her GET OUT OF VIETNAM button in class.

With their accents and striking looks, the two Germans are always noticed as they explore and absorb the city, from Gesine's love of swimming and Marie's weekly rides on the Staten Island ferry, to dive cafés, elegant social gatherings, protests in the streets, and summer vacations with friends. As the tales of their childhoods clash and intertwine, Marie strives for maturity and understanding of her German roots. Tough, smart, and independent, she can also be deeply

sensitive. The assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy pushes her into a deep depression that leads her to skip school and wander the streets, to her mother's alarm. She rents her own TV ($19.50)—because Gesine won't have such a mindless device in the home.

> - Where *were* you, Marie? Tell me where you were. . . .
> - I was mad at you, Gesine! Because you told me that this was normal for America—John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King—and now you were right again. Robert Francis Kennedy.

The turbulence of the city and world around them pulses at an ever-faster beat—politically, racially, economically, personally, and socially. Johnson was lucky for the years his job brought him to New York and that bracketed a portion of Gesine's life. They both had box seats to hell breaking loose. Almost anything could dominate the headlines: civil rights protests, the Vietnam War, racial unrest, endless shootings, the assassinations of King and two Kennedys, upheaval in Europe, the shooting of German student leader Rudi Dutschke. The last bears directly on Gesine, who also opposed the deep bench of former Nazis still in power in both East Germany and West Germany. From the first pages of the novel, she has drawn the ire of party bureaucrats in East Germany by calling them out for anti-Semitism. They try repeatedly, if clumsily, to lure her and her fierce childhood friend Anita back to the East, where they would face certain arrest.

Gesine's obsession with the *Times*—she goes to great effort to find a copy any time she might have missed delivery—leads her to talk to it and anthropomorphize it as a frumpy, straight-laced aunt with insufferable arrogance and bias. Any readers of the paper today will understand the love-hate relationship and feel warm kinship for Gesine's perceptive critiques and rapier-like snarls. Johnson, it is said, had a similar obsession, and maintained a thick collection of heavily annotated clips.

What Happened in Germany

Nothing in the world or the newspaper, though, overrides Gesine's primary mission to deliver unto Marie the complete confession of what happened in Germany. How she survived as a child and adolescent, often starving, sick, abandoned, or under political suspicion. Why she doesn't want to omit anything, good or bad, lest it be lost. How, like her father, she understates the pain of survival. Marie, meanwhile, learns to model her mom's insistence on truth:

> - Gesine, you lived like a dog.
> - I had it good.
> - Gesine, why aren't there photos of you as a child?
> - Marie, your grandfather was a tradesman! . . . And Cresspahl didn't need any pictures to help him remember. He could count on his own recollections. I was the first one to take pictures; I was the first in the family to be afraid of forgetting.

They do agree to certain rules, certain things not to be repeated. In particular, Marie asks to never again hear how Gesine's mother, the beautiful but

damaged Lisbeth, nearly drowned her only child in a rain barrel. Or nearly starved her to death as the intensity of the Nazi takeover spread through Jerichow. Or how Lisbeth's rage at the murder of a young Jewish girl led her to attack a local Nazi functionary with her small fists, only to be found dead shortly thereafter in a suspicious house fire, which left Heinrich and Gesine on their own.

As the tales of their childhoods clash and intertwine, Marie strives to understand her roots.

As the year of revelation continues, the dimensions of Gesine's ordeal become more thorough, agonizing—what today might be described as traumatic recovered memory, very much like PTSD. She struggles to understand why she has so many conversations with people from her past, especially the dead. She struggles with her attitude about work, about friends and neighbors, about her own choices. She sends a secret letter to a psychiatrist in Germany asking if she sounds crazy. He says no, probably.

She pushes down her fears, as she learned to do as a young girl. There is another story that Marie must hear, at least once. It was 1957, the year of her birth in Düsseldorf. Her father, Jakob Abs, Gesine's greatest love, has disappeared:

> – You know the drill, Gesine. Say it.
> – He goes back east, across the Elbe; in the morning mist he crossed a railyard he's been in charge of for two years and a shunting train gets him; he dies under the knife. Cresspahl arranged the funeral. Only told Mrs. Abs and his daughter after Jakob was in the ground. That was good for one of the women, bad for the other. The first one missed her chance to kill herself—she wanted to tidy everything up first, put her house in order. That's how life arranges things so people will live. Later, by the time someone came along to prevent me from killing myself, I'd almost forgotten about it.
> – Who can stop you from doing anything, Gesine!
> – It was a very strong person. When I struck my finger into her palm, she made a fist. . . .
> – It almost sounds like you liked me.
> – When it came to you, the difference between good and bad had been wiped out—that's why in North German mothers call their children: my heartbeat.

With her own money, Marie had paid to have a photograph of Jakob copied. Gesine does her best to share his memory, all the way back to their original bond:

> Marie spoke to this woman in a way she never spoke to anyone else—not the teachers, not the babysitters, certainly not the cohort of others learning the job of being a child in their own ways. No one else even noticed the wordless understanding between her and this woman. And there was no one else around to make things easier, to whom it was even worth running—just this one partner, both there to help and no help at all.

Converging on Prague

Insofar as possible, conditions worsened after the defeat of Hitler's Reich. Post-war British control of Mecklenburg shifted to Soviet occupation. The province, redrawn, fell within the boundaries of the new German Democratic Republic. Virtually everyone Gesine grew up with met death or a worse fate. Her childhood girlfriends were kidnapped, raped, exiled, as well as murdered. Only Anita managed to get away, though not unharmed. All the men Gesine was close to, from high school sweethearts to Marie's father, were killed or beaten into unrecognizable throwaways. It was no surprise that she found herself incapable of personal intimacy. Not until 1952, when she was nineteen, was she able to leave home and embark on the path that ultimately took her to New York.

The violent downward trajectory of her family and friends, whether at the hands of Nazis or Russians or Stasi, takes on an increasingly disturbing presence, especially in the second volume. "Where I come from it's not there anymore," Gesine says of Jerichow, in one of the terse summaries, almost a throwaway line, that Johnson employs throughout the novel. The massive truth behind the remark—what happened to Jerichow, and Germany, and the danger of America repeating it—might arguably be seen today as the most powerful, insistent message in Johnson's sweeping saga. As Searls noted in the literary magazine *n+1*:

> It is one of the richest, densest, truest accounts ever written of the rise of Nazi Germany as experienced on the ground. Packed with brilliantly fleshed-out characters from every walk of life, from thuggish mayor to butcher overheard in the wrong place at the wrong time and beaten into brain damage at an early concentration camp, to the countless little acts of resistance, both by those who know it is not enough and those who hope it might be, this tranche of the novel is realism at its best: a re-created world and complete understanding of everyone in it, without any loss of moral perspective.

As *Anniversaries* reaches its final months, the tempo speeds up—just as Johnson's own life, finishing the book, was winding down. International espionage and intrigue push the pace; Gesine's bank wants to become the financier for Czechoslovakia as it struggles to adapt to its Soviet overlords. Despite anxieties about returning to Europe, she consents to go to Prague on bank business, under threat that refusal will get her fired. She takes Marie with her as far as Denmark. Anita, now running a black-market travel service in West Berlin, will take custody if necessary. The mounting uncertainty also inspires Gesine to open up her shuttered feelings for her longtime lover, D. E., a clandestine military consultant who worshipped her and doted on Marie, but who lived dangerously. On August 20, 1968, the final entry date in the novel, Gesine waits on her flight to Prague, unaware that the Spring is over and the Soviet tanks will arrive the next day.

Found in Translation

It took Searls two full years, over a five-year span beginning in 2013, to complete the transformation of *Jahrestage: Aus dem Leben von Gesine Cresspahl* into the English version we now know as *Anniversaries*, which in German can also mean "days of the year." The assignment, from publisher NYRB Classics, with assistance from various

grants, was daunting. "All this," he wrote in *The Paris Review*, "while dense and rich, is easy to read but not easy to translate. . . . The challenges are to keep it moving—keep it light, so that it doesn't bog down—while honoring and reproducing Johnson's nearly maniacal commitment to seeing everything, understanding everything (from his character Gesine's perspective), getting everything right."

For Searls, who has translated works by Rainer Maria Rilke, Marcel Proust, Hermann Hesse, Christa Wolf, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others, the goal is to capture not just the meanings of words but also the meanings of cultures. Only that level of understanding, he believes, can deliver the accuracy as well as the nuance that truly brings one language to another. To complicate the task, he had to distinguish numerous narratives and sub-narratives, even shifting point of view, within a single voice, a sentence, a paragraph, and often spread over a half-dozen pages. Searls also was dealing with a writer whose Standard/High German could be "idiosyncratic and odd" even to German readers. And the characters spoke in different German dialects, especially the Low German or Plattdeutsch (Platt) of Mecklenburg. How to convert that to equivalent English? Aware of Johnson's admiration of Faulkner, Searls, seeking a "different language texture," rendered the Platt passages as a kind of Southern vernacular.

These process anecdotes speak to more than tools of the trade. The first translator's run at converting Johnson into English was such a bust, so harmful to the initial reception of *Anniversaries*, that what became an international classic was essentially lost to a generation or two of American readers. Had a proper translation been available in the early seventies, doubtless Johnson would have had an effect on the then-nascent new journalism and the evolution of the long form. Through him, many writers, especially those who embrace the mix of art and politics, would have found an inspiration, guide, and kindred spirit. Losing him again today would be nobody's fault but our own. It would be a defeat.

They had box seats to hell breaking loose.

But it could happen. This time the issue is not quality, but engagement. I have yet to see a copy of *Anniversaries* for sale anywhere. An inquiry to an honorary literary group to which I belong yielded zero responses as to whether anyone had read or heard of Uwe Johnson. I have exactly one friend who knows his name—an author whose own German family was all but destroyed by Hitler's Reich.

What, then, is the likelihood of finding an audience for a 1,700-page master class in writing in this time of anti-intellectualism, disinformation, and 24/7 distractions? At a rate of fifty pages per day, it would take just over thirty-four days to finish. If the appetite for long reads among younger, digitally inclined audiences has diminished, the attention spans of older readers have waned, too, or have been displaced by binge-watching on Netflix.

I have yet to find a box set of *Anniversaries* on display at a bookstore, but I know it's out there. I want to stare at it, as I often do at the thousands of titles on the shelves in these lonely, valiant, vanishing shops. Of late, my eyes occasionally moisten, and I pretend it's allergies. Who are these writers that try to reach us? What have they sacrificed to be famous, or even to be read by one other human being? What do they want to tell us? What do we want to hear? Why?

Uwe Johnson knew. It was his gift to us. The Great American Novel that came from Germany. ⧗