Jeanette R. Clausen, associate professor of German and assistant vice chancellor for academic affairs at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne, has just published a translation of a novel written by German author Irmtraud Morgner, which was originally published in 1974 in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR).

According to Clausen, Morgner is of great interest to readers interested in Germany as well as in feminism. Set in the GDR of the early 1970s, The Life and Adventures of Trobadora Beatrice as Chronicled by Her Minstrel Laura: A Novel in Thirteen Books and Seven Intermezzos (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), is an entertaining adventure story as well as a feminist critique of GDR socialism, science, history, and aesthetic theory. The following excerpt from the publisher’s promotional flyer provides the setting of the novel:

In May 1968, after an eight-hundred-year sleep, Beatrice awakens in her Provence chateau. Looking for work, she makes her way to Paris in the aftermath of the student uprisings, then to the GDR (recommended to her as the “promised land for women”), where she meets Laura Salman, socialist trolley driver, writer, and single mother, who becomes her minstrel and alter ego. Their exploits—Beatrice on a quest to find the unicorn, Laura on maternity leave in Berlin—often require black-magic interventions by the Beautiful Melusine, who is half-dragon and half-woman.

Several years later, Clausen ran across a tape from the ‘84 conference, then contacted a friend and associate, IU Bloomington alumna Silke von der Emde, to discuss the possibility of a translation project. Morgner was one of the most talented and controversial authors of the GDR, unique in her use of humor and fantasy, says Clausen, yet none of her longer works had ever been translated. Von der Emde, who had written her dissertation on Morgner, agreed to coauthor the introduction.

The translation project lasted three years and presented Clausen with considerable challenges. She had never translated a full-length novel, especially one of this length—almost 500 pages in translation. In addition, there was the difficulty of interpreting the sociopolitical contexts in which the events took place. But she says she was fortunate to have a consultant, Otto Emersleben, who had grown up in the GDR during that period. He clarified meanings and allusions that are obvious to an “insider,” but can easily be misread by others.

In addition to translating this novel, Clausen co-edited German Feminism: Readings in Politics and Literature (1984) and edited, from 1987 to 1994, Women in German Yearbook, a yearly publication of feminist studies.

Clausen says she had met Morgner at a conference she attended in 1984 in Boston. At the time, she was conducting research on other GDR authors, but hadn’t begun researching Morgner.

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