**Book Club Zukunftskolleg Konstanz 29.04.2015 (*Mendel's Dwarf*)**

This Book Club brought together several natural scientists (neurobiology, zoology, physics and astrophysics), mathematicians, one archaeologist, one law scholar, one literary scholar. The below is an account of the topics raised and the things remarked upon in discussion.

* People read the novel very differently 🡪 very much so because of different backgrounds, you can take a look at the work from many different angles.
  + Here, natural scientists might perceive it very differently than scholars.
* This novel offers answers to questions we have about science: How do we as scholars do science, all people can somehow relate to this novel.
* Readers remarked on the history of biology, Mendel, on the garden piece
  + shows how he worked in obscurity (abbey, monk) not embedded in any scientific community, testimony to the whole discovery of science.
* Novel is also about coincidence, accident, inheritance, lots of things happen by chance. High level of authenticity (Benedict's lecture). 🡪 Incredible how fiction and non-fiction are intertwined in this novel.
* Complex work (built on tensions/oppositions) – Mendel's practice and Benedict's practice; opposition of science and love; good practice and bad practice of eugenics. Contains a very strong criticism of eugenics/eugenic usage in our society.
* Main character is not a nice person🡪 moody/grumpy.
  + You do want to slap Benedict (bitter individual; there are only two girls he really fancies) 🡪 the protagonist as a dwarf shapes the plot
* Science is really poorly explained (apparently) or simply too difficult. We don't really learn anything about biology. Characters are poor (not only with regards to their characteristics). As people they are very superficial – no love, only sex.
  + Reader found it hard to relate to the characters.
  + Also, an interesting problem of science occurs: Nobody checks what can be done, how ethics can be applied to science, hard to observe that.
* Research as a way to escape from people; book combines many different things.
* Do we need different kinds of criteria to work/access the book
  + You should include the author's background in order to get access to the book: Characters are not well-depicted, caricatures – raise the question whether one ought to be less of a good human to become a good scientist.
  + Shows also that it is very important to use the right instrument to work in science.
  + From a specific point, this is a bit richer 🡪 not sure about how crucial Benedict’s bitterness might be
* From a modern day's point of few, they are unappealing characters, very different in style. Superficiality: reader had a problem with how things were written; she dislikes to be hit on the head, some thoughts are simply dropped in without contextualisation. The question then is: does Ben really not make any friends or does he simply believe that he does not care?
* Mendel's story is partly told by Ben 🡪 so it is filtered in the context of a lecture (whether he consciously marginalizes things or doesn't really know about things isn’t clear)   
  🡪 Unreliable narration. Literary perspective: 1. perception; 2. Perspective
* the filtering is imported, as it characterizes people.
* We can perceive Benedict as incapable of forming relationships, because he perceives himself as an object, not an individual. As an object, he can't find a relationship with himself. Lacking one gene to change himself 🡪 he hunts for it like Ahab hunts the white Whale in Melville's work.
* Some readers believe that he chooses his embryos (the healthy ones); others believe that he does not choose the embryos. In their perception, the culprit is the chance mutation.
* One of the readers remarks on how mutation is seen as a very negative thing, modern biology would not perceive it that way 🡪 It is crucial for diversity.
* Reader remarks on the trickster figures, circus person/jester (being the sentimental) 🡪 Ben is playing people, unreliable narrator. Perhaps he tells the truth though it is hard to understand.
* Reader remarks on how in the German edition, footnotes are added, content is changed. Science has become business, not a profession. Whatever Ben tells us doesn't have to be true, very monolateral behaviour/description
  + Extremely hard to judge Jean, she is only filtered through Ben's eyes.
* It is written in 1997 🡪 much of what we do today was deemed inconceivable in the 1990s. Things have become technically impossible as opposed to before.
* Many novels that tackle science are read/can be perceived as poorly researched. Quality of the novel: based on the correctness of science, does the author have to be engaged?
* Is the novel missing elaboration on the question “why is doing science interesting”?
  + Not enthusiastic about science – just something that can get things done (personally very much involved). He does not enjoy being a scientist. He became a scientist because he liked biology.
  + Protagonist looks at his own sperm, something is out of place with his body. He would like to find out what is wrong with him and develops at the same time as a biologist/as the biology.
  + Science is conveyed as a means of power. When he talks, he knows that he is scientifically interesting.
* He is compensating something, doesn't perceive himself as a full human being; probably that is why he can't perceive others as human beings either.
  + Switching of embryos 🡪 science as a means to gain power.
* Lecture at the beginning/end as an envelope; no evidences that they have done all the research.
  + The novel is framed by two lectures 🡪 format of the lecture. Way of quoting/addressing the reader. 3 Lectures: Envelope, centre, end as an entity. He is manipulating a lot, acts like a circus director/jester. Presents the whole lecture as a manipulation 🡪 brilliant, very successful lecture.
* Narrative 🡪 Whatever (like personal relationships) doesn't fit the lecture is left out of the narrative 🡪 Only one break of the narrative (near the end) 🡪 unconscious narration; intrusive narration
* Very postmodern because he directly addresses the readers