

BERLINALE 2022 Encounters Review: *Mutzenbacher*

by [JAN LUMHOLDT](#)

14/02/2022 - BERLINALE 2022: For Ruth Beckermann, a century-old erotic classic proves an effective catalyst when exploring contemporary male morals



In *Mutzenbacher* [+], one of the more curious Encounters at the 72nd [Berlin International Film Festival](#), renowned Austrian documentarian **Ruth Beckermann** digs out one of the more scandalous literary works from her native country (or indeed any country) from the last century and checks it off against contemporary moral(ism)s. Enlisting a group of men of various ages, she has them share their reflections on the matter at hand. No women are ever in view, but they are certainly talked about.

Probably the most outlandish peculiarity about the anonymously published *Josefine Mutzenbacher, or the Life Story of a Viennese Whore, as Told by Herself* is the insistent rumour that it was written by **Felix Salten**, the author of *Bambi*. In recent times, however, the Salten theory has more or less been ruled out, with no other

culpable scribe in sight. It first appeared in 1906 and has been in circulation ever since, first under the counter and eventually more legally available.

The story deals with a poor but pretty Viennese girl who sorts the poor part out via the pretty one. A parade of lecherous men crosses her path, accordingly accounted for in juicy detail. A sequel called *My 365 Lovers* has more of the same. As classic erotic literature goes, probably only *Fanny Hill* and the writings of de Sade are more famous or notorious. Some two dozen film adaptations have also been made over the years. *Mutzenbacher* isn't one of them.

"I'm not supposed to play her, am I?" a fellow in his sixties enquires.
"Would you like to?"

A light-hearted exchange between the director and the interviewee plays out, worthy of not ending up on the cutting-room floor. In an old factory location adorned with a tattered pink couch with gilded flower patterns, Beckermann (always off screen) receives her subjects – sometimes just one, sometimes in groups, most often paired up. Several are given passages (mainly steamy ones) to read out loud and then react to. The book and its characters are discussed from a number of perspectives, including the alarmingly young age of the protagonist and the permissiveness of then versus now. "They seemed to still have fun in those days," laments a middle-aged man before going into current debates on toxic masculinity and the cancellation of flirting. His Millennial "couch-mate" assures him there's still fun to be had out there.

The socio-political aspects of the period are confronted and dissected. Several accounts go into personal sexuality and its fantasies. There are aesthetic evaluations on vulgarity versus stylistics. Some show disgust, while others can't help but be mildly amused by quotes like: "My bum danced a czardas on the desk." In her quest for reactions, Beckermann has found a highly effective catalyst in this novel.

Distinctly COVID-era in look and execution, *Mutzenbacher* comes across as a happy accident for a filmmaker temporarily restrained from regular activities. Future film scholars may want to look into this era of "pandemic dogma" creativity one day, showing imaginative methods to overcome the limitations.

Mutzenbacher was produced by Austria's [Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion](#).

more about: Mutzenbacher



Interview: Ruth Beckermann • Director of *Mutzenbacher*

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