

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

These Romantics Celebrated the Self, to a Fault

"Magnificent Rebels," by Andrea Wulf, paints a vivid portrait of the 18th-century German Romantics: brilliant intellectuals and poets who could also be petty, thin-skinned and self-involved.

By Jennifer Szalai

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MAGNIFICENT REBELS**The First Romantics and the Invention of the Self**

By Andrea Wulf

494 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.

The grand title of Andrea Wulf's new book is wonderfully sneaky — at least that's how I chose to read it, considering that "Magnificent Rebels" happens to recount plenty of unmagnificent squabbling among a coterie of extremely fallible humans.

Wulf's exuberant narrative spans a little more than a decade, when a group of poets and intellectuals clustered in the German university town of Jena in the last years of the 18th century and became known as the "Young Romantics." This "Jena Set" undoubtedly saw themselves as magnificent rebels — gloriously free spirits bent on centering the self, in all of its sublime subjectivity, and throwing off the shackles of a stultifying, mechanistic order. But what gives Wulf's book its heft and intrigue is how such lofty ideals could run aground on the stubborn persistence of petty rivalry and self-regard.

"The story of their tiptoeing between the power of free will and the danger of becoming self-absorbed is significant on a universal level," Wulf writes in her prologue. But she goes on to show that these Romantics weren't all that interested in tiptoeing, preferring instead to stomp about. They took inspiration from the French Revolution, and venerated Napoleon as a genius while his army advanced through Europe. "We do not march," one of his officers said, "we fly."

Suitably enough, there are a number of colorful characters in this book who compete for our attention. (Wulf's previous books include a biography of the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who, along with his brother, makes a cameo appearance in "Magnificent Rebels" as a peripheral member of the Jena Set.)

The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte emphasized the *Ich*, or the I, as "the source of all reality." The poet Novalis ascribed so much power to the *Ich* that after the death of his young fiancée he thought he could will himself to die. The playwright Friedrich Schiller was beset by chronic ailments and complained that "imagination disturbs my abstract thinking, and cold reason my poetry." Fastidious August Wilhelm Schlegel wasted inordinate amounts of time and paper writing long letters to his editor, strenuously enumerating his many objections to a tiny editorial change. August Wilhelm's hotheaded younger brother, Friedrich, hoped that "aesthetic anarchy" would lead to a "happy catastrophe" like the French Revolution.

Wulf offers vibrant portraits of them all, but there are two people whom she places at the center. One is the brilliant and charismatic Caroline Michaelis-Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling; she hosted gatherings of the Jena Set at her home and was married to August Wilhelm, collaborating on (and sometimes ghostwriting) his essays, before she left him for the philosopher Friedrich Schelling. The other is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose first novel, "The Sorrows of Young Werther," with its celebration of emotional extremes, anticipated the Young Romantics by a couple of decades. Goethe was the elder statesman of the group, and he wasn't much of a Romantic himself, identifying more as a realist. As Schiller put it to a friend, Goethe "gets too much from the world of the senses," whereas Schiller would "get things from the soul."

Andrea Wulf, the author of
"Magnificent Rebels."
Antonina Gern

Goethe was a stabilizing presence for the Jena Set, many of whom were a perilous combination of combative and thin-skinned. Unsurprisingly, his efforts to play the role of peacemaker often came to naught. Friedrich Schlegel made a name for himself by writing a scathing review of Horen, Schiller's journal — even though August Wilhelm, Friedrich's brother, was one of Horen's contributors and was fired as a result. Later, when Schiller moved to nearby Weimar, he said he could never finish anything the Schlegels had published: "I find all that individuality shimmering on every page so repulsive."

Journals were key to the dissemination of the Jena Set's ideas, but trying to fill their pages with good writing presented a logistical challenge, demanding a methodical pragmatism that didn't always come naturally to the labile Romantics. Schiller struggled incessantly with almost every issue of Horen, frustrated that "there were never enough good pieces, and what was good was clearly too sophisticated for readers." For the first issue of *Athenaeum* — which would publish the latest literary experiments alongside essays and reviews — Friedrich Schlegel began requesting so much material from August Wilhelm and Caroline that the couple started to bicker. And of course the grumpy Schiller wasn't impressed by the result. "This know-it-all, cutting, implacable, one-sided tome," he said, "makes me physically sick."

Yet *Athenaeum* proved to be enormously influential in the long term, Wulf says, and helped to elevate the deliberately constructed fragment (as distinct from, say, surviving lines of ancient poetry) into "a favored expression of art and literature." As short as a line or as long as several paragraphs, a fragment could be potent and pointed, delivering a punch of sentiment without the persuasive padding required of more discursive forms. Fragments also needed "little research and could be composed over a glass of wine or a meal," Wulf writes, making them perfect for young Friedrich Schlegel and his friend Novalis. "So-called religion functions merely as an opiate," Novalis wrote, half a century before Marx: "stimulating — sedating — stilling the pain of weakness."

Wulf says that Romanticism is difficult to define because it emphasized not an absolute truth but "the *process* of understanding" — a fuzziness that pleased the Romantics themselves, who refused to be hemmed in by any rules. But there was still a core to their movement, which emphasized the limits of rationality and extolled the imagination. Science wasn't something to be resisted; it was to be integrated, because everything was connected. Romanticizing the world meant grasping it as a resonant whole.

As much as the Romantics loved the fragment, in the end it was fragmentation that did them in. "Listen," Caroline wrote to August Wilhelm in 1801, "this good old Jena really is a den of murderers after all." Fichte turned on the Schlegel brothers. Schelling turned on Fichte. Everyone turned on Caroline. Schiller had long before turned on nearly everyone. Only Goethe

seemed determined to stay above it all, even to the point of ignoring the relentless advance of Napoleon's army. On the evening of Oct. 13, 1806, the day before the Battle of Jena, Goethe arranged for the performance of "Fanchon, the Hurdy-Gurdy Girl," which Wulf describes as a "lighthearted operetta."

"Magnificent Rebels" isn't the only book about the Jena Set to be published in English this year. "Jena: 1800," by the German journalist Peter Neumann, is significantly shorter, focusing more on the roiling intellectual atmosphere than striving, as Wulf does, to make a case for the Romantic fixation on the self. But as Wulf's nimble storytelling vividly shows, part of what made the Romantics so fascinating and maddening was their refusal to be pinned down. As Caroline once put it, "I am definitely happier the freer I am."