

Review of Günter Grass's Novel *Dog Years* (1963)

Abstract

This lengthy review of Günter Grass's novel *Dog Years* describes the literary efforts made by Grass and other postwar writers to combat the legacy of the Nazi dictatorship. By exposing the dictatorship's full absurdity in picaresque detail, these critical writers helped foster a generation of anti-fascist intellectuals in West Germany.

Source

A "tough hunk of meat that reviewers and philologists will chew on for at least a decade"—this is what Hans Magnus Enzensberger called *The Tin Drum* [*Die Blechtrommel*] in 1959.

That decade is not yet over and now *Tin Drum* author Günter Grass is giving the literary world a new, no less monstrous hunk to chew on: the 684-page novel *Dog Years* [*Hundejahre*].

Since the completion of *The Tin Drum*, Grass, a thirty-five-year-old storyteller, dramatist, poet, and graphic artist, has spent nearly four years working on his second novel. Along the way, when he lacked momentum, he wrote the novella *Cat and Mouse* [*Katz und Maus*]*—*it could hardly enhance or diminish his reputation. Now *Dog Years* will put the unusual success of the Danzig-born Berlin resident to the test: with *The Tin Drum*, Günter Grass gave postwar German literature one of its few international successes.

The Tin Drum is the realistic-fantastical 734-page epic of the German-Kashubian Oskar Matzerath (with his glass-shattering scream), who stops growing as a three-year-old so that he can see the world, which he recognizes as a complete mess, only from the perspective of a spiteful dwarf. In 1959, [when it first appeared], it eclipsed the work of most young German writers.

Grotesque and obscene, blasphemous and non-tendentious, vibrant though by no means naïve, *The Tin Drum* prompted furor and scandal, evoked disgust and enthusiasm. Lastly, it also taught non-Germans that, once again, they could expect more from contemporary German literature than stodgy critiques of our times or empty experiments, more than seriousness of mind and a paucity of ideas, more than dutiful morality and stylistic dullness. With his "wild and bizarre song," as the Parisian *Express* put it, Grass had "restored resonance to a tamed German literature."

The Grass novel achieved what no other German book of high literature had been able to do after 1945: [the French translation] *Le tambour* became a bestseller in France in 1961; *The Tin Drum* did the same in the US in 1963. To date, the French edition has sold 60,000 copies, the American more than 90,000. Next spring, a paperback version of *The Tin Drum* will hit the US market; initial print run: 100,000. The total German print run (including paperback and book club editions) is around 300,000. In France, a jury headed by Raymond Queneau, author of *Zazie*, voted it the "best foreign language book of the year"; four US book clubs put in on their lists.

Critics chewed through the epic hunk of meat with effort and persistence. What the *Saturday Review* called "the nightmare of twentieth-century Germany" as conveyed by the "memories of a picaresque dwarf" was interpreted as an allegory or satire, an avant-garde *Heimatroman*, a modern picaresque novel or a parodied *Bildungsroman*. Grimmelshausen, Rabelais, Sterne, Jean Paul, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Melville, Joyce, Döblin (especially his *Berlin Alexanderplatz*), and the Brothers Grimm were said to be the young author's role models. Tin drummer Oskar was compared to Simplicius Simplicissimus and Tristram

Shandy, to Max and Moritz and the Pied Piper of Hamelin; he is seen in relation to Parsifal, Wilhelm Meister, and Felix Krull.

Grass, as *Time* magazine summed it up, “is probably the most creative talent anywhere since the end of the war.”

When it comes to invention and imagination, to humor and precision (“The elastic of Amsel’s knee socks cut into his plump calves below the knee, leaving a bulge of doll-like pink flesh”^[1]), the new Grass work *Dog Years* does not fall short of *The Tin Drum*. It is likewise comparable to his debut book in terms of excessive length and excessive precision, overheated imagination and radical lack of deference.

The core fable is the story of a complicated blood brotherhood: the Cain-and-Abel variant of the teeth-grinding Walter Matern, a miller’s son, student, Communist Party man, SA man, actor, anti-fascist, and veteran, and his clever half-Jewish friend Eduard Amsel, a grocer’s son, student, artist, SA victim, ballet master, and maker of scarecrows.

The strong boy Walter protects the chubby Eddi from his peers, who tease him by calling him “Itzig.” Later on, the SA man Matern beats up his boyhood friend and “rolls” him in the snow. Out of the melting snowman emerges a slim Amsel, who survives the Nazi regime and the war under an assumed name. After the war, Walter, now a veteran and anti-Nazi, tries to suppress the memory of his mistreated friend, but in the end he cannot escape Amsel, cannot escape the ironic affection of the blood brother he betrayed.

Amsel bestows “insidious praise” and “cynical laurels” on the people “among whom he was doomed to suffer before and after the snowman”: “No, my dear Walter, you may still feel bitterness toward your great fatherland—but I love the Germans. Ah, how mysterious they are, how full of the forgetfulness which is pleasing to God! Not giving it a thought, they cook their pea soup on blue gas flames. And another thing: what other country in the world can boast such brown, velvety gravies?” Interwoven into this German “fairy tale” are the peculiar allegory of art as scarecrow-making (“the scarecrow was created in man’s image”) and the chronicle of the German shepherd Prince, who “made history” as Hitler’s favorite dog, outlived the *Führer*, swam across the Elbe on May 8, 1945, and looked “for a new master on the western shore of the river.”

Already with *The Tin Drum* Grass had, by his own admission, “sought to de-demonize the Third Reich.” He pursues the same goal in *Dog Years*. Against the bombast of ideologies and the pathos of historians, against the claptrap of myths and theories, Grass prescribes the caustic comedy of the trivial. The story is bloody but ridiculous; it is primarily viewed from below and grasped in its banal details.

In *The Tin Drum*, ants crawled around Oskar Matzerath’s father, who had swallowed his [Nazi] party insignia before being shot by a Red Army soldier, toward a burst sack of sugar: “for the sugar that trickled out of the burst sack had lost none of its sweetness while Marshal Rokossovski was occupying the city of Danzig.” In *Cat and Mouse*, Joachim Mahlke became a hero and bearer of the *Ritterkreuz* only because of his monstrous Adam’s apple. The “great time” of Hitler’s Germany, the past that cannot be overcome, and the prosperity-obsessed present are “dog years” and nothing more. Grass, the aggressive infantilist, sticks his tongue out at all pretense—as does the dog on the book’s cover, which Grass drew himself.

In his new novel, too, the author has woven fiction and contemporary history together into a crazy pattern. Dog-hero Prince, given to the *Führer* on his forty-sixth birthday by Danzig’s district chief Forster (Grass found mention of the dog in the memoirs of [Hermann] Rauschnig, the former president of the Danzig senate), is present at Obersalzberg [Hitler’s mountain retreat] when Hitler speaks “of branch and root, of Strasser, Schleicher, Röhm, root and branch” while eating the apple tart that “Frau Raubal [his lover] had baked.” Prince snuck away on July 20, 1944, when Stauffenberg, who “in his inexperience . . .

neglected to go the whole hog . . . and tried to save himself for great tasks after a successful assassination,” placed his bomb [in the wrong place].

[...]

Dog Years includes expert digressions about ball games, ballet exercises, and *Freibankfleisch* [lower quality meat made fit for consumption], stories of grandmothers, gypsies, nuns, knights, and pupils: they are brilliant stories, but in most cases too long. There are choice abominations—for example, a copulation in the confessional—and poetic word plays, such as the description of a dog’s fur: “his hair glistened black, umbrella-black, priest-black, widow-black, SS-black, blackboard-black, Falange-black, blackbird-black, Othello-black, dysentery-black, violet-black, tomato-black, lemon-black, flour-black, milk-black, snow-black.”

Grass, whom Marcel Reich-Ranicki has called the “Gypsy virtuoso among young German storytellers,” delivers a bravura piece with a chapter in which the so-called Economic Miracle is, for once, not lamented in a socio-critical vein but rather, grotesquely ridiculed.

Grass lets the prominent representatives of postwar German press, politics, and industry parade by—as the clientele of the prophetically gifted mealworms of the displaced miller Matern. [The entrepreneurs] Springer, Bucerius, Augstein, Flick, Mannesmann, Phoenix-Rheinrohr, Hoesch, Krupp, Beitz, Nordhoff, von Bülow-Schwante, Münemann, Neckermann, Grundig, Schlieker, Reemtsma, Pferdmeniges, Ruhrgas, Abs, Mercedes, Bayer, Feldmühle, and Hertie get tips from the mealworms about new businesses and break-ups, about investments, transactions, and mergers, about divestitures, distributions, scaling up, and outvoting: “*Tu, felix* Portland Cement, *nube!*” Erhard is allowed to swallow a mealworm, which turns him into a prophet of prosperity: “From the very first the worm’s been inside the father of the economic miracle, miraculously miracle-working.”

Another highlight in Grass’s novel-circus is the story of Walter Matern’s lurid-comical de-Nazification tour.

Returning home from an English anti-Fascist camp, the war veteran crisscrosses postwar Germany with the Führer’s former dog Prince, now called Pluto, to take revenge on former Nazis. Matern hits Göttingen, Munich, Stade, Witzenhausen, Cleves, Freudenstadt, and Rendsburg, as well as Oldenburg, Detmold, Passau, and Bielefeld, “where underwear blooms and a children’s choir sings.” In a hideout in the heath he encounters Uli Göpfert, former leader of the *Pimpfe* [the youngest members of the Hitler Youth], who later, after a detour, will “join the Liberals and carve out a career for himself in North Rhine Westphalia as a so-called Free Democrat.”

But Matern’s attempt at a private de-Nazification tribunal yields only half-measures: he burns the valuable stamp collection of one former Nazi and deflowers the daughter of another. The veteran bumps up against his countrymen’s thick skin: they cannot be morally unsettled. Captain Hufnagel in Altena, who had once brought Matern before a military court, has already tackled [the playwright] Borchert: “if not for me you wouldn’t be standing here playing the raving Beckmann. Excellent play, incidentally. Took the whole family to see it in Hagen, pathetic little theater. The story really gets to you . . .”

The revenge-traveler Matern finally succumbs to the ever-new erotic pleasures with which he is appeased during his tour de force through the old fighters’ terrain. In Saarbrücken, he contracts an ailment for which Grass has a vernacular euphemism (among other such paraphrases) at the ready: “his lordship’s cold” [*Edelschnupfen*], or the clap.

Dog Years is what the novel about the tin drummer Oskar already was to the *New York Times*: “a Teutonic nightmare.”

And once again, it all begins where Grass's first novel was already rooted, where he also set *Cat and Mouse*. Boy drummer Oskar appears again on the margins, and his fathers, the German grocer Matzerath and the Polish mail clerk Bronski, are also mentioned. Tulla Pokriefke, the horrid brat from *Cat and Mouse*, has grown into a main character in *Dog Years*. The Stäuber gang from *The Tin Drum*, the schoolteachers Brunies and Mallenbrandt from *Cat and Mouse* make an appearance, and the eels, too, are back—this time they hang, sucking milk, from cow udders.

With *The Tin Drum* and *Cat and Mouse*, Grass put his native city of Danzig onto the map of world literature—or more precisely, Danzig-Langfuhr—its German and Polish population and the tenacious Slavic tribe of Kashubians, the landscape of the Vistula estuary, and the “broad river island idiom. . . which will soon die out with the refugees’ associations.”

The new novel makes clear that Grass, unconcerned about the possible limits on readers’ interests, continues to write—and this time, deliberately and methodically—in search of the lost homeland. Grass: “I’m afraid I’m still a long way from being done with this topic.”

NOTES

[1] This and other quotes from Grass’s novels are taken from Ralph Mannheim’s English translations.

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