Dog Years Short Guide

Dog Years by Günter Grass

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Characters

D og Years, returned to the enormous length and complexity of The Tin Drum, but abandoned Grass's use of a deformed character as the protagonist.

Instead, there are three main characters: Amsel (artist, ballet master, scarecrow maker, and half-Jew), Matern (an actor, former storm trooper, anti-Fascist, and Amsel's blood brother), and Harry Liebenau. Instead of having one narrator, as in his earlier fiction, each of the three narrates one part of the book. Some have argued that Dog Years is thereby a more powerful work than the previous two works [Cat and Mouse (1961), and The Tin Drum (1959)], in what is called the "Danzig trilogy," especially in its dealing with the relationship between Amsel and Matern.

The latter journeys through West Germany taking revenge on all the exNazis he can find in an attempt to deal with the guilt for his role in the Nazi years and his betrayal of Amsel.

Social Concerns/Themes

Dog Years was considered by some a technical advance over Grass's earlier works. The conscience of Germany can be seen as the major subject of the novel, so, thematically, Dog Years is not very different from the earlier two works of the "Danzig Trilogy" although there are differences in emphasis. By eliminating Oskar's omniscience, argues Keith Miles, Grass gets closer to reality with its shifting perspectives and unclear gestures. By splitting up the single point-of-view he used in The Tin Drum, Grass can have his characters interpret, refine, restate, and reinterpret events. Ironically, then, the reader gets a more unified view of reality. Miles likens Dog Years to Dostoevski's The Possessed (1871) and states that the essential concern of both books is the politics of salvation. When Walter Matern goes on his journey of vengeance for his former friend Eduard Amsel, he is trying to redeem himself for his own guilt in the treatment of his friend during World War II. Once again, as in so many of his works, Grass is asking difficult questions of the Germans, questions that many Germans (and other culpable nations) would rather were never asked. Once one admits one's role in the brutalities of World War II, how does one "make up for it?" Matern's journey cannot ultimately be seen as anything other than futility. Matern can never be freed from his guilt, no matter how many former Nazis he punishes. His giving himself over to the Nazis can never be undone. Further, Grass asks how a race, or nation, can free itself from its collective guilt, and disturbingly seems to imply that such things as the trials of war criminals are analogous to Matern's journey. No matter how many war criminals are punished, the dead will not be brought back and the punishers cannot be purified from the taint of their own passivity. Grass questions what redemption is possible years later, whether the guilt passes to their children, and how a nation frees itself.

The tone of the novel is dark and suggests there is little anyone can do except confess his part in the crimes.

The symbol of the scarecrow is particularly significant in pointing out the roles people played during the "Dog Years." Amsel has a hobby of constructing grotesque scarecrows. Parts of his life are depicted in them, including the incident when his anti-Semitic classmates beat him. As Henry Hatfield points out, Amsel's most important constructs are of SA men, so that these scarecrows (which are also very effective at scaring birds) are both representations and symbols of the Nazis. The Nazis are scarecrows, distortions of mankind, who frighten ordinary people (likened to dogs throughout the book) into horrific acts. Ironically, of course, scarecrows frighten because of their appearance, not their substance. Scarecrows are effective because of a perception in birds; the Nazis were effective because of some element in the character of the people who collaborated with them. Otherwise, they were powerless.

Furthermore, Amsel, the outsider, can be likened to the artist, as Oskar has.

Amsel's scarecrows (like Grass's novel), remind the nation of its complicity, a complicity often forgotten in the postwar economic recovery. Furthermore, in Amsel's project to

create a giant bird which will burn, give off sparks, yet never be consumed, Grass gives a symbol of Amsel himself, who survives despite the persecutions, and of all artists, who fling out sparks and cannot be consumed.

Techniques

Because of the triple narrative mentioned above, some critics argue Dog Years has a deeper density of detail in playing one point of view against the other, although it lacks the cohesiveness brought about by a single narrator. More noticeably than in The Tin Drum, however, the author lards the text with numerous instances of linguistic playfulness, which have received differing reactions. Some critics argue that the passages are self-indulgent, that perhaps Grass's phenomenal early success has interfered with his discipline as a storyteller. On the other hand, critics with a more Postmodernist inclination have praised these same passages as revealing greater dimensions of Grass's skill. The puns and particularly the parodies of style, such as that of Martin Heidegger's, have been highly praised and likened to the linguistic concerns in Joyce's works.

Time and narrative shift skillfully and the fantastic blends with the realistic, as when Amsel produces magic spectacles through which younger Germans can see what the older generation did during the Third Reich.

Literary Precedents

Ulysses is frequently mentioned by critics as a precedent for Dog Years, because of the narrative structure and linguistic invention. Sterne, Melville, and others have also been compared with the work in ways similar to their relation to The Tin Drum.

Related Titles

Local Anesthetic (1969) was a departure from the style and length of the earlier works. Danzig is no longer the central location of the action and some critics criticized an insensitivity to the new locale. This departure possibly indicates a shift from Grass's exploring the problems of the Nazi heritage to the problems of newer generations of Germans. Many critics saw the novel as a commentary on the war in Vietnam, others as a criticism of liberalism, yet others as Grass's comment on the tiredness of middle age or the television age. In Local Anesthetic, Grass returns to the single narrator. It begins with Eberhard Starusch visiting an unnamed, philosophical dentist, who uses a television to distract patients from the pains of dentistry. Starusch comes to this dentist for advice, and the dentist's philosophies seem to be Grass's own.

Starusch also has a vivid fantasy life, which obscures the reality of his accounts. He is trying to find a way to persuade his student Scherbaum not to douse a dachshund with gasoline and immolate it as a Vietnam war protest on the Kurfurstendamm in front of the pastry-eating ladies in cafes. The proposed sacrifice seems to be symbolic of a younger generation's insistence upon bringing about a better society instantly, violently, instead of letting it evolve naturally. Grass seems to imply, however, that such insistence upon immediate action usually results in unspeakable and pointless cruelties. In other writings Grass compares societal progress with the snail, which moves forward, but very slowly. Yet, Starusch seems to be aware there is part of him which sympathizes with such dramatic acts. If he were younger, he might be encouraging such a thing. In this respect, one perceives an allusion to Nazism (and all other Utopian schemes) and the inherent dangers in the appeal of radical, revolutionary change.

The Flounder (1978; Der Butt, 1977) is a large, complex book dealing with women and their relationships with men throughout history, particularly as affected by the digestive tract. Styles alternate; poems are part of the text.

Fantasy mingles with naturalism; time shifts abruptly. Anthony Burgess compared Grass in The Flounder to Rabelais with his pleasure in food, but with a beer and dill emphasis. Other critics have likened it to Moby Dick, Ulysses (1922), and Tristram Shandy. Comic and ribald, The Flounder makes both men and women ludicrous in their fanaticisms and includes such playful fantasies as a neolithic woman with six breasts. It further engages in the wordplay, parody, and other linguistic invention which is characteristic of many of his earlier works. In this novel, Grass has the opportunity to use forms of language from Gothic to contemporary slang. He uses the Grimm story of "The Fisherman and His Wife," for example, in which there is a talking fish, as a basis for the novel and brings out many subtle and sophisticated views about the women's movement.

Simultaneously feminist and antifeminist, particular parts of the novel have been highly praised by critics, including one in which a neat schoolgirl walks by the misery in Calcutta. The Flounder also caused considerable outrage at its coarse humor, brutal language, and such incidents as three lesbians on a picnic raping a fourth.

Such a complex book with so many unconventional aspects is difficult to assess. It is perhaps too ambitious a work, falling between the monstrosity some critics called it and the great achievement asserted by others.

The Meeting at Telgte (1981; Das Treffen in Telgte, 1979) has few of the narrative complexities of earlier works. It tells of an imaginary gathering of writers at the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1647. There is plainly an analogy drawn to the meeting of the Gruppe 47 in 1947. In both circumstances the writers' world had been destroyed and, out of the rubble, they tried to create a new world. Their efforts, however, dissolve into chaos, as younger poets bed wenches, drink, and argue literary matters at great length. Christoffel Gelnhausen is plainly Grimmelshausen, author of Simplicissimus. Guy Davenport further argues that Grass is present in the novel in the form of Gelnhausen, seeing himself in a role corresponding to that of Grimmelshausen.

After The Flounder, critics were surprised by the restraint Grass had exhibited in The Meeting at Telgte. It remained controversial, however. Some adjudged it to be his finest work, while others accused it of "Olympian boredom," and being of interest mainly to German literati. Headbirths: or The Germans Are Dying Out (1982; Kopfgeburten oder Die Deustchen sterben aus, 1980), did not receive a very favorable reception outside of Germany. John Leonard, in the New York Times, called it a "wise, sad, witty mess," and asserted it was definitely "minor Grass, which would be major for almost any other writer."

The novel (despite its skilled translation by Ralph Manheim, who had masterfully brought Grass's other works into English) was generally thought too self-indulgent and dependent upon the German language to be fully enjoyed by those who were not reading it in German.

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