

# The Rat Short Guide

## The Rat by Günter Grass

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# Characters

A first-person narrator is a principal persona in a Grass fiction, but in no major work before *The Rat* has the authorial Grass been so fully explicit.

Grass tells us quite directly how he is constructing his story. This omniscient, persistently self-intrusive character is joined by a second one, nearly as richly developed — the She-Rat — whom Grass has wished for and received for Christmas. The two thereafter join in a novel-long dialogue. The She-Rat's function is to tell the story of the nuclear holocaust and its aftermath, which may or may not have already occurred. But it is clear that it will.

Another important character is Oskar Matzerath, now almost sixty years old, the jaded and self-absorbed protagonist of *The Tin Drum* (1959) who, in Grass's first and greatest novel possessed a charismatically weird elementalness that is now lost. Another major character is Oskar's 106-year-old grandmother, Anna Koljaiczek, who dies the day before her long-awaited birthday party. Another is Malskat, the twentieth-century "Gothic" painter already described.

Minor characters include the brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, who appear as minister and under-secretary of the forests but are clearly recognizable as the folklore scholars who collected the fairy tales whose characters are also here: and age-old fairy-tale characters: Merlin (of Arthurian legend), Hansel and Gretel, the Pied Piper, Snow-White and the (now lascivious) dwarves, Rapunzel, Rumpelstiltskin, the Prince and Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Hat (Riding Hood), and, superimposed from the twentieth century, the Smurfs.

Other minor figures include the five-woman crew of the ship *The New Islebill*, which searches for the legendary sunken city Vineta only to find it inhabited by rats. The captain of the crew is Damroka, for whom the author has an intermittently strong affection. She metamorphoses into the She-Rat as the novel nears its end.



## Social Concerns/Themes

In the agenda of The Rat human civilization since the late 1950s has moved inexorably toward catastrophe.

The national culture of early 1980s Germany is representative of the whole world as it moves towards doomsday.

Grass does not predict the recent unification of Germany; instead, he predicts the continued growth of an inherent and tragic fascism, which not only was not defeated in World War II, but also actually survived and flourished as the subtextual political principle of the victorious allies who, in turn, nurtured it in the rebuilding of modern Germany. Fascists were never out of power, much less repentant. Because it is inherently perverted and self-killing, fascism will destroy the world.

A civilization made by rats — a skewed but obvious allegorical representation of humanity — emerges in a postholocaust period. The surviving rats miss mankind. In fact, they imitate mankind in the mezzanines of civilization that were left intact where neutron bombs destroyed only people. The rats survive; they split into different races and nations; they make war. A superrat species called Watson-cricks — named for the Nobel Prize-winning genetic scientists — is ultimately developed through genetic manipulation.

These obscene super-rats, with humanoid bodies and rat heads, are the macabre nadir of Grass's parody of psychotic Nazi Aryanism.

Hitler simply lacked the science to produce supermen. But in Grass's horrific vision postcatastrophe ratkind succeeds. That horror, however, must make room for other horrors and monstrosities. These, because of endless enumeration and analysis, have become familiar and almost domesticated. Even so, nothing is done to combat them.

They include overpopulation and famine in Third World countries, demonically encouraged by a Roman Catholic theology that forbids birth control; petty wars in the name of preventing world war; pollution of the seas, which produces toxic fish; and pollution of the air, which produces toxic rain. This acid rain kills fauna and flora, and most notably for Grass, the forests of German fairy tales. Symbolically, because of the destruction of forests, the archetypal acts of fear, love, hate, pain, and redemption embodied in fairy tales no longer have a "place" to happen.

This is equal to the annihilation of myth, without which there is no meaning.

More subtle horrors reside in the proliferation of technology that can sensationally record and transmit myth and, in the process, pervert it. Among these, Grass includes polaroid film, videocassette recorders, television news, and, maniacally, the fraudulent medieval Gothic paintings of one Malskat, an hourly-paid painter whose "restorations" have fooled a generation of medieval scholars who refuse to admit their inability to tell



real from fake. Their incompetence is finally revealed when Malskat goes to court and himself exposes his forgeries.

In Grass's view, by the late twentieth century technology has made falsehood so undetectable that any belief in the possibility of knowledge is impossible.

In moral knowledge as well mankind has become autistic. Although Grass's relentlessly gloomy message is somewhat relieved by the virtuosity of his comedic narrative techniques, his message is profoundly pessimistic. The only positive element in *The Rat*, as in all Grass's work, is his compassion for all the earth's species. And for rats most certainly.

## Techniques

The Rat, like Grass's other novels, is rigorously organized. It has twelve chapters, each beginning with a summarizing paragraph that details the episodes in the several stories and motifs that unfold in that particular chapter. Fictional artifice in its most exhibitionist sense has never been more overt in Grass's fiction. He pointedly tells the reader about his negotiations with his characters, attempting to control them to act his story out. About a quarter of the narrative is provided by the She-Rat, with the rest consisting of narration by Grass and the stories of Oskar, Damroka, and the Grimm brothers' fairy-tale characters. There is no conventional suspense in the novel. We know that the novel will end where it began because it deliberately blurs its "present," despite its particularity about dates of birthdays and historical events. Withheld is the simple declaration that the nuclear catastrophe described has actually happened, or, that it has not happened. The patches of poetry interpolated in the narrative are not logically connected to it, further blurring the elusive chronology of the story.

This blurring is appropriate to the major thematic tension of the novel: Will mankind destroy itself? Has mankind already destroyed itself? Simultaneously, the indeterminateness of time in the novel is counterbalanced by the elaborately employed, reality-fixing tactic of repetition. The principal events of the novel are reviewed and repeated in chapter after chapter. This includes the nuclear war, the rat evolution, the ecological disaster, The New Islebill expedition to the Baltic Sea, the Oskar Matzerath and Grandmother Koljaiczek parties, and the bizarre company of fairy-tale characters. Significantly, a fairy tale or its macroform, myth, arises and persists as "reality" by virtue of repetition.

Finally, the magic mirror of Snow White's wicked queen, the polaroid camera and the videocassette recorder, whose function is to reflect, photograph, film, or "repeat" the scenes and objects before them, are themselves repeatedly named in the novel's narrative. These are only the most important of the stylistic tactics that Grass employs in The Rat.

# Adaptations

Very soon after the publication of *The Rat*, a parody of it appeared by "Ratte, Gunter" titled *Der Grass* (Frankfort-am-Main: Eichborn, 1986). In essence, it is a parody of a parody, and at least one major Grass critic calls it unreadable.

## Literary Precedents

It is hard to read the repeating chapters of *The Rat* without recalling the nursery rhyme round song, "Three Blind Mice." At least seven other authors and works are clearly precedents for the novel. The reappearance of Oskar Matzerath is indirectly a reference to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767), which Grass has acknowledged as an influence. The erudite assembly of scientific, behavioral, and legendary information about rats mirrors Herman Melville's elaboration of whale lore in *Moby Dick* (1851), another acknowledged influence. The humor and ironically playful personality is clearly imitative of Henry Fielding's eighteenth-century comic novels.

The combined phantasmagoria of the postcatastrophe setting and the frenetic and manic behavior of the fairy-tale characters are marvelously reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). The classic epic twelve-chapter structure of the novel, along with its biblical echoes, concerted anti-Catholicism, and doomsday dialectic, suggest affinities with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). In the undersea city of "Vineta" there is a virtually explicit debt to the "Atlantis" legend. Finally, the postapocalyptic scenario employed in *The Rat* is not original. By now it has been the setting of hundreds of works of science fiction novels. Two such works which are considered significant are Aldous Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1948) and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Liebowitz* (1959).



## Related Titles

With the appearance of *The Rat* it might be necessary to revise Grass's "Danzig Trilogy" to "Tetralogy." This is the fourth novel set in the Danzig environment, and it embodies the same themes as the earlier works. Oskar Matzerath has made cameo appearances in a number of works since *The Tin Drum*, but only in *The Rat* is he again a substantial character. In Grass's 1963 play, *Flood*, he used rats as a metaphor for mankind. *The Flounder* (1977) is also explicitly referred to in the description of the Baltic Sea jelly-fish/Vineta expedition.



# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994