

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1972**



**Heinrich Böll**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1972 was awarded to Heinrich Böll "for his writing which through its combination of a broad perspective on his time and a sensitive skill in characterization has contributed to a renewal of German literature".**

This year's winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature made his debut in 1949. A selective bibliography from January 1972 on works by, and about, **Heinrich Böll** lists some forty volumes from his own hand, disregarding reprints and new editions. Last in line comes his most grandly conceived work - and that not only in size - the novel published last year, *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. This teeming production has proved an attractive spoil for commentators - few contemporary writers have been scrutinized from so many angles and so methodically as Heinrich Böll. It need hardly be said that opinions differ not so much over his position in modern German literature as, in particular, over where to find the lasting characteristics of his writing and whither its lines of development lead. The reason for this lies perhaps in Böll's method. Every time one or two new works have been completed he has altered his approach and changed his viewpoint. The constant stream of his writings is full of surprises.

It is not, however, chiefly this capacity for continuous variation that is meant when the [Swedish Academy](#), in motivating this year's award, states that Böll's writing has contributed to a renewal of German literature. Nor is this a reference to the type of literary innovation by which old forms are abandoned in a search for untried means of expression. Böll has seldom moved any distance from the established landmarks of realistic narrative. He has shown less aptitude and interest in experiments with form than many another writer who is leaving his mark on modern literature in Germany and elsewhere.

Yet he has declared "Ich brauche wenig Wirklichkeit", a word to note, coming from one who is regarded, and who, perhaps, regards himself as a realistic narrator. The reality he needs so little is that of the classic 19th century novel, the reality that, after a meticulous study of detail, is faithfully reproduced. Böll is highly proficient at the method but employs it ironically; there is no moderation in the superfluity of detail and the comedy may erupt into a feat of endurance, at times even for a reader without his stamina.

But the jesting with this conscientious form of registration is itself a demonstration of how little Böll needs such a reality. His mastery includes the ability to bring his setting and its figures to life with scanty, sometimes barely suggested, lines.

But there is another reality which Böll's writing continually requires: the background to his existence, the air his generation breathed, the heritage into which it came. That reality is the recurrent, intrusively observed subject of Heinrich Böll's writing, from the start up to the magnum opus already mentioned, *Gruppenbild mit Dame*, which so far crowns his work. Böll's real breakthrough came in the years 1953, 1954, and 1955, with three novels published one after the other - *Und sagte kein einziges Wort*; *Haus ohne Hüter*; and *Das Brot der frühen Jahre*. Although it was presumably not the author's intention, these three titles serve to indicate the reality which he so persistently and forcefully depicts. His background was Germany's years of famine, it was "das Brot der frühen Jahre", the bread that never sufficed, and often was not there, the bread that had to be begged for, or stolen, if one was to survive, and that diet is an indelible memory. The heritage which he and his contemporaries had to administer was *Haus ohne Hüter*, "house without caretaker", an

existence in ruins, with time, a widow, and the future, fatherless. The air he and his contemporaries breathed was inhaled with the heavy hand of dictatorship on their throats, *und sagte kein einziges Wort*, because the hand smothered every sound.

It is not the smallest German miracle that after such years of destitution a new generation of writers, thinkers and researchers was ready so soon to shoulder their country's and their own essential task in the spiritual life of our time. The renewal of German literature, to which Heinrich Böll's achievements witness, and of which they are a significant part, is not an experiment with form - a drowning man scorns the butterfly stroke. Instead it is a rebirth out of annihilation, a resurrection, a culture which, ravaged by icy nights and condemned to extinction, sends up new shoots, blossoms, and matures to the joy and benefit of us all. Such was the kind of work Alfred Nobel wished his Prize to reward.

***For more details please visit:***

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