

Nobel Prize in Literature 1999



Günter Grass

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1999 was awarded to Günter Grass "*whose frolicsome black fables portray the forgotten face of history*".

"Whose frolicsome black fables portray the forgotten face of history"

When Günter Grass published "The Tin Drum" in 1959 it was as if German literature had been granted a new beginning after decades of linguistic and moral destruction. Within the pages of this, his first novel, Grass recreated the lost world from which his creativity sprang, Danzig, his home town, as he remembered it from the years of his infancy before the catastrophe of war. Here he comes to grips with the enormous task of reviewing contemporary history by recalling the disavowed and the forgotten: the victims, losers and lies that people wanted to forget because they had once believed in them. At the same time the novel breaks the bounds of realism by having as its protagonist and narrator an infernal intelligence in the body of a three-year-old, a monster who overpowers the fellow human beings he approaches with the help of a toy drum. The unforgettable Oskar Matzerath is an intellectual whose critical approach is childishness, a one-man carnival, dadaism in action in everyday German provincial life just when this small world becomes

involved in the insanity of the great world surrounding it. It is not too audacious to assume that "The Tin Drum" will become one of the enduring literary works of the 20th century.

Günter Grass has described himself as a "Spätaufklärer", a belated apostle of enlightenment in an era that has grown tired of reason. He is a fabulist and a scholarly lecturer, recorder of voices and presumptuous monologist, pasticheur and at the same time creator of an ironic idiom that he alone commands. In his mastery of German syntax and his readiness to exploit its labyrinthine subtleties he recalls Thomas Mann. His writing constitutes a dialogue with the great traditions of German culture, conducted with punctilious affection.

After "The Tin Drum", Grass returned to the theme of Danzig in two very different works. "Cat and Mouse" is an austere narrative that shows how the magical friendship of boyhood comes to grief when war games encounter the reality of combat. "Dog Years" is Grass's most modernist work, a text with no determinable centre, an arena for voices and a meeting place for fevered dreams that turn out to coincide with life.

In other novels Grass adopted a discursive approach, pleading for doubt and the will to do good. In public debate in Germany he is a source of strength and of irritation, but for major literary figures in the world at large such as García Márquez, Rushdie, Gordimer, Lobo Antunes and Kenzaburo Oe he is an admired predecessor.

His novel "The Flounder" involves a return to the grand style in his writing, taking the form of a global history crammed with truthful yarns and hot-tempered ideological discussions. Grass portrays the development of civilisation as a struggle between men's destructive dreams of grandeur and female accomplishment. The outcome is uncertain. As the counsellor of the women, the talking flounder, recruited from the Grimm brothers, constitutes an Absolute Idea that would have been inconceivable to Hegel. The narrator himself, on the other hand, remains a notoriously unreliable male individual, preserving the margin of mischief without which art dies.

Both of the protagonists in "Ein weites Feld", the eternal humanist and the eternal informer, enact the relationship of artistic imagination to political power against the background of Wilhelmine Germany and today's Federal Republic. The novel has been a

source of contention for German literary critics, but it confirms the author's position as the great prober of the history of this century. His most recent work, "My Century", is a running commentary on the 20th century with a particularly keen eye for stupefying enthusiasms. In his excavation of the past Günter Grass goes deeper than most and he unearths the intertwined roots of good and evil. As "Dog Years" puts it: "While God was still at school, in the heavenly playground he came up with the idea of creating the world, together with his schoolmate, the talented little Devil."

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