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The Tin Drum



Synopsis

The Tin Drum, one of the great novels of the twentieth century, was published in Ralph Manheim's outstanding translation in 1959. It became a runaway bestseller and catapulted its young author to the forefront of world literature. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the original publication, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, along with Grass's publishers all over the world, is bringing out a new translation of this classic novel. Breon Mitchell, acclaimed translator and scholar, has drawn from many sources: from a wealth of detailed scholarship; from a wide range of newly-available reference works; and from the author himself. The result is a translation that is more faithful to Grass's style and rhythm, restores omissions, and reflects more fully the complexity of the original work. After fifty years, THE TIN DRUM has, if anything, gained in power and relevance. All of Grass's amazing evocations are still there, and still amazing: Oskar Matzerath, the indomitable drummer; his grandmother, Anna Koljaiczek; his mother, Agnes; Alfred Matzerath and Jan Bronski, his presumptive fathers; Oskar's midget friends "Bebra, the great circus master and Roswitha Raguna, the famous somnambulist; Sister Scholastica and Sister Agatha, the Right Reverend Father Wiehnke; the Greffs, the Schefflers, Herr Fajngold, all Kashubians, Poles, Germans, and Jews "waiting to be discovered and re-discovered.

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Customer Reviews

Western literature is full of what Germans call "bildungsroman", that is, the story of a young man's (or woman's) intellectual and emotional growth, often told from the main character's own voice. This kind of novel has adopted innumerable shapes and styles through history, and certainly this one is,

so far for me, the strangest and one of the best. It is hard to summarize the plot, as it is mainly the diverse and extreme experiences of Oskar Matzerath's life. Born in 1924 in Danzig, itself a unique and troubled city, Oskar decides at age three not to grow up anymore. Or does he simply have an illness of the thyroid gland, as he hints at some point? It doesn't matter, precisely because that moment starts the style of the whole book: all the time, terrible things are happening to Oskar, to his family, to his city, to his nation and to his century, but we see everything only through the distorted glass of this unique character's view. First he tells us about his ancestors and the life they led in pre-war German Poland. Then we know the story of his parents, the infidelity of his mother and other disturbing and often sordid events. His community starts to fall apart as the Nazis rise to power. Then the Nazis come and destroy the city, physically and spiritually. Oskar spends the whole war in Danzig as well as wandering through France and Belgium as part of a grotesque midget-troupe. After the war, they flee Poland for Düsseldorf, where he is employed in very different jobs: as a tomb engraver, painters' model, jazz drum player. The chapter which describes the journey by train is simply horrible and scaring, as the chapter on his emotional disappointing is sad. The end is strange, confusing but full of hope.

I have been meaning to read this book since it came out in 1959, but only did so now. My reason for delaying was that the reviews I had read of the book made it sound unappealing to me. Why did I want to read the unrealistic ramblings of an insane dwarf? Having been impressed with Mr. Grass's recent work, *Crabwalk*, I finally decided to give *The Tin Drum* a try. I'm glad I did. Let me explain why. In my studies of the Nazi era, I was always struck by comments that observers from that time made about how banal the evil of it all was. Yet much of the propaganda from that period (such as *The Triumph of the Will*) that we can see today makes the Nazis seem like mythic figures. What were the observers trying to say? I finally felt like I understood the point through reading *The Tin Drum*. Reading about distant battles while living in Germany before the bombing became great seems a lot like reading about attacks on coalition troops in Iraq now. Going to party meetings seems a lot like how people here go to lodge meetings now. In the first 100 pages, I kept wondering why Mr. Grass had chosen to write the novel in the form of an autobiography of an insane dwarf pretending to have a mental age of 3 who had been convicted of a murder he did not commit. Eventually, it hit me. He needed a narrator who could not be considered complicit in what the Nazis did, or we could not trust his voice. In addition, how can you portray banal evils as insane unless you see them through the eyes of an "insane" person who makes all too much sense? Once I accepted the brilliance (perhaps even the inevitability of his choice), I settled back and really began

to enjoy the story.

"Tin Drum" was the album where Japan finally hit their stride-- the two strongest forces in the band had found their own voices-- David Sylvian's compositions combined drastically separated influences like Roxy Music, Erik Satie, and Eastern Asian traditional musics to form something wholly other, supported in large part by the unique, rubbery fretless bass playing of Mick Karn. Even at this early point in his career, no one sounded like Karn. And with the departure of Rob Dean, there was little concession for guitar playing-- when its present, its more atmospheric and tasteful-- a radical departure from the N.Y. Dolls glam of their first album, which came out just three years prior. But taste and atmosphere and arrangements are really the key here-- consider the album's standout-- "Ghosts". Steve Jansen (a master of understatement at the percussion chair) plays a simple marimba line, under which Sylvian and synth man Richard Barbieri play simple hazes. While Sylvian's voice had not yet finished developing, his passionate croon is emotional and effecting. Contrast this piece with the traditional Chinese sounds of "Canton"-- which could have been written (and for that matter performed) centuries before were it not for the squeaky presence of Karn's bass. Much of the rest of the album is dancey rhythmically, with Jansen maintaining understated pumped up beats and Karn digging way deep into a groove and producing several stunning bass lines ("Talking Drum", "Still Life in Mobile Homes", "Visions of China"). But to my ears, the other standout on the record is "Sons of Pioneers"-- similar in mood and feel to "Ghosts", cowritten by Karn and Sylvian, this one is driven by a haunting bass line and tribal percussion and again shows the band has mastered this dark mood.

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