

My century?

A review of Günter Grass' latest novel, *Mein Jahrhundert* (My Century)

By Wolfgang Weber
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The 1999 Nobel prize for literature was given to 72-year-old Günter Grass. Prior to the award being announced, the author conducted well-attended public readings in a number of German cities. He read from his latest work—My Century—a fictional review of the last hundred years. The book has been translated by Michael Henry Heim and is published in English by Harcourt and Brace, ISBN 015100496X, \$25.

“Recollecting means selecting”—this remark by Günter Grass is also valid for his own reminiscences in *My Century*. For each of the past hundred years the author has chosen an episode or theme important to him and worth recalling. And as the title says, it is also Günter Grass's century, his own personal, artistically portrayed view of the last hundred years. The book is therefore instructive, not only in respect to its author, but more generally with regard to the outlook and state of mind to be found in literary circles at the turn of the millennium. This is precisely why the book should provoke some thought, and also some criticism.

As far as the narrative technique and the structure of the book are concerned, the work must be counted amongst the writer's best. At a public reading during a history conference in Essen last year, Grass said that he had wanted to write “history from below”, history from the point of view of those who are hardly ever referred to in history books: the victims of history, the little people—not state rulers, generals and business tycoons. Although only fictional, he argued, his stories often contained more truth than authenticated historical documents. His message was greeted with enthusiastic approbation from the assembled audience of historians.

To be able to do justice to these intentions and claims, Grass allows his protagonists to tell their own stories from their own points of view. He virtually assumes the identity of his heroes: the participants in the 1900 colonial war against China; a working class child sitting on his father's shoulders as he hears Karl Liebknecht speaking out against World War One; a Dachau concentration camp executioner in 1934; a Nazi war correspondent who made a career in post-war Germany as an editor-in-chief and magazine publisher; a woman in Berlin rummaging through the bombed-out ruins in 1946; a policeman during the arson attack on refugee hostels in Rostock, etc.

This is Grass's way of challenging the conventional view of history. Instead of an event being presented abstractly and in a familiar form, in connection with “great politics”, it is viewed as through a prism “from below” and “from close up” ... from changing, unexpected viewpoints. The stories about the first half of the century are also linguistically colourful and multifaceted, allowing history to be re-lived and re-considered.

One example is an unforgettable, hideous scene where a woman is picking through the bombed ruins in Berlin. Suddenly she uncovers a shoe and in pulling it out from the rubble finds a corpse attached. The woman is unconcerned with the corpse, with its fate. She doesn't give a

thought to the possible dreams and hopes of the man prematurely buried under the rubble. The woman is just as little concerned about the depression suffered by her son-in-law, just back from the war. At most she must be somewhat surprised. No, she snatches at the dead man's coat, his scarf is of the pre-war sort, the buttons are still all there. In war time death is everywhere, but good buttons are scarce. Rebuilding is what matters. “Somehow, one has to go on .”

Many similar scenes, in which definite social relations and forms of behaviour are laid bare in a concise and striking manner, are to be found in the book. Underpinning such episodes is a concept of a literary form that Günter Grass discovered very early, and whose origin he ascribes to sculpture and the graphic arts. He referred to it in an interview: “You will not find in my books a sentence which begins ... ‘he thought this and that ... or he deluded himself with the hope ...’, nothing like that. My characters are seen from the outside, are explained from the point of view of their deeds—of their actions, or lack of action.” This method of writing, combined with his detail-obsessed powers of observation and his mastery of linguistic expression, enables Grass to grasp reality in a vivid manner, inspiring the reader's imagination.

This literary method revolves around the how, and not the why. As a result, unfortunately, precisely those questions are omitted which are of the greatest interest when dealing with history: questions concerning the relationship between people's ideas and their actions or non-actions, questions that take as their theme the influence of conscious action on external social relations, and vice versa.

Why did the revolution in Germany fail? Why was the Russian Revolution strangled by a process that consumed decades? What goals and interests did the participants express? Could history have taken a different turn? Could man have avoided war, Hitler and the Holocaust?

These and similar questions concern the reader precisely at the turn of the century—or, at least, those readers who are not satisfied with leafing through the past as through a picture book, who want to discover the roots of the present problems and answers for the future.

Such questions are only seldom thrown up in *My Century*, and then only indirectly, leaving the reader to contemplate an unarticulated idea. But precisely these episodes provoke the most reflection.

One example is the story of the working class boy at a mass rally led by Karl Liebknecht. The boy is sitting on the shoulders of his anti-war father. From there the boy has a good view of the proceedings, but gets terribly scared at talk of an imminent war and the enemy from within. Out of fear he urinates down his father's neck. Later he is beaten and “only out of spite” voluntarily reports six years later for the army, even though he knows, as he says, that Liebknecht was correct a hundred times over.

The graphic story is wittily constructed. As so often happens in the works of Grass, the thoughtful reader, his laughter sticking in his throat, is unexpectedly impelled by the grotesque and its shrill contradictions to

grapple with serious questions: certainly, millions of men did not shout “hooray” and enlist in the war “out of spite” because they were thrashed as children. What then drove them to it? Why, when Liebknecht was right, didn't they follow him?

In a similar vein, if not half as memorable, are his stories about the student movement of the 1960s. An ageing veteran of 1968, now a comfortable, established university lecturer, asks himself in a number of stories why he, as a radicalised student, took part in demonstrations, what he was thinking at the time and why he subsequently retreated. Here the tales are more like the lecturer's own Wednesday seminars—more irritating than humorous. The possible answers to his questions are not investigated any further. In the end, the last student leaves his seminar with the observation, “In any case, you have nothing more to offer,” thus delivering her verdict on the former protester.

Such episodes are the exception, however. All in all, *My Century* illuminates many events with its colourful mosaic of themes, motifs and forms, but avoids key historical questions of the century. Grass doesn't address these, because he himself, as he noted in his Essen lecture, “has no key to the twentieth century”. One detects this uncertainty. Such, in any case, was my experience, the more I read his *Century* and the closer I came to the end.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his uncertainty Grass has developed a very definite view of the world and its history. Through all the variety of protagonists and events, through the choice, combination and tendency of occurrences and points of view, his personal world view is expressed.

The author sees the twentieth century as a century of horrors, marked by two world wars, fascism and the Holocaust. These world historical catastrophes and inhuman crimes are omnipresent even in the period after 1945, in the years of economic boom. Stories on this theme, both in regard to content and artistic form, are the book's centre of gravity. The author's own illustrations in the book, their content and predominately gloomy colours, underscore this point. Stories about the post-war period are among the best and most perceptive: lowering under the bright skies of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois everyday life fester the unconquered dangers of fascism and war.

Grass allows a bride to make this point on the day of her wedding in 1964 in the Frankfurt Town Hall (the Roemer). Instead of the office of the marriage registrar, the pair suddenly find themselves in a courtroom during the Auschwitz trial proceedings. Totally unexpectedly, the bride is herself confronted not only with the crimes of history, but with their perpetrators and their traces in post-war Germany.

One of the concentration camp torturers in the courtroom looks terribly like her Uncle Kurt—Uncle Kurt who “always looks so good natured.” The bride, with a certain amount of shock, admits to herself that her own family could very well have had something to do with the Nazi-barbarism.

Uncle Kurt participated in the invasion of Russia and did not oppose the murderous crimes committed by the German army. At any rate, 20 years later he showed little understanding during the Auschwitz trial. Referring to the terror of the Americans and British against the Germans, he dismisses the “fuss” about the crimes of the Nazis, “about which we knew nothing.”

The timely examination of that society, the “drummer's” look back at history, tearing away the veil of forgetfulness and secrecy to reveal the unsolved problems of the present in the past, was the subject of his first and most important novel, *The Tin Drum*, a work which was crucial in the artistic development of Günter Grass.

Grass's greatest abilities and his best side politically are demonstrated again when he returns to this theme in *My Century*. There he is an artist in his element. But still, in the end, is there not some doubt lingering in the background? Was that all that took place in the century? Isn't there something at its end that allows us to look toward the future? Throughout

the entire hundred years was there no social movement strong enough, or at least worthy of support, that was capable of vanquishing the horrors of the century?

Grass obviously does not acknowledge any such movement. This is clearly shown in his choice of events, or, more exactly, those which he does not recall.

The October 1917 Revolution in Russia. The ideals of the Russian Revolution, social equality and international solidarity, found their response in the oppressed masses of the whole world, as well as in the thoughts and actions of intellectuals and artists. Grass, however, doesn't consider it worth recalling, even though in Germany it brought about the end of World War One and determined the path of world history for the rest of the century.

The November 1918 Revolution in Germany. Alfred Döblin, one of Grass's literary models, was powerfully moved by the revolution. He comes to terms with it in a four-volume epic, *November, 1918*—with the fate of its Marxist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and with the politics of their Social Democratic executioners. That thousands of workers lost their lives and that the overture for Nazi fascism was sounded by the combined terror which the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the military and the Freikorps unleashed against the revolution—on these events Grass barely touches in just two or three passages.

Germany, October 1923. To this year Grass dedicates a story about poverty during the period of hyperinflation. The mass reaction and the ideas that impelled popular revolt again fail to find their reflection in his “history from below”. On the contrary, they are denounced by means of innuendo: the figure of a “Communist” is only referred to as “someone who established himself later in East Germany”. In this way it is suggested that the East German Stalinist rulers of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) three decades later had something to do with the goals of the communist movement of the early 1920s.

The 1929 collapse of the world economy. The fatal division of the working class between the SPD and the German Communist Party (KPD) in the face of the Nazi NSDAP is presented through a conflict in a Hamburg working class family, with a social democratic, a Communist and a national socialist son. It is quite correct to make these key historical questions a theme. But why has Grass not included those who defended the ideas of the Russian Revolution and fought against the division? After all, the struggle of Leon Trotsky and his adherents dominated the political arguments in the workers movement. Their suppression by Stalin and the KPD leadership smoothed Hitler's road to power.

The impression forces itself on me that, not only in the field of politics, but also in no less important social domains, Grass is barely able to detect a single progressive idea or development that could point to a better future.

The revolutions in technology remain largely beyond the author's horizon, even though they stamp social developments at the end of the twentieth century. The few stories on this theme, for example, on gene technology and the destruction of forests by pollution, only superficially touch on the problems. The dangers facing mankind are seen to reside in technology and science itself, not in a social order whose rulers subordinate scientists' activities and findings to profit.

What a contrast to the intelligentsia's prevailing mood of confident optimism at the last turn of the century, i.e., a hundred years ago!

At that time cultural life, the struggle of tendencies, goals and experiments within artistic circles were dominated by two issues: one concerned the latest developments in natural science and technology and their effects on society and the individual; the second concerned the growing strength of the socialist movement.

It was not that a significant number of artists were socialists in a political sense. But the growth of mass Marxist parties, their aims and conceptions acted as catalysts on cultural life as a whole. That the world

as it existed had to be changed, that the lives of individuals had to be freed from economic want, from social and state compulsion—these convictions were generally in the air.

The natural sciences and psychology were considered to be decisive ways of influencing such matters, pioneering a new epoch in the history of man. Art and literature considered themselves experimental fields and mediums for the creation of this new era. Not a few artists regarded themselves as citizens of the world, not citizens of this or that nation.

In an 1890 essay titled “The Modern,” the literary critic Heinrich Hart summed up the forward-looking attitude that dominated at the time in the following words: “A century ends. That doesn't mean much. I see bigger things ending ... a human reality.... A new spiritual era is surfacing. For centuries the twilight has lingered, the early morning glow wrestles with the night's shadows ... but the hour is no longer far when the mist and fog are rent apart and something bursts like lightning through the storm clouds. The ancient writhes in its death agonies, the modern rises up with all the vigour of youth.”

When one compares this enthusiastic and spirited atmosphere with that of the present intelligentsia, as expressed in *My Century*, it is impossible to ignore the decline in perspective, the palpitations and weakness of modern cultural life.

This crisis is not an individual, but rather a general social phenomenon. It has its roots in the decades-long rule of Stalinism, with its devastating consequences for the cultural and spiritual life of the entire world. The artistic and intellectual development of the generation of Günter Grass was particularly affected, something which is very evident when one studies his development as a writer.

Born in Danzig in 1927, Grass spent his school days and youth under Hitler's rule. From his early years he was obviously endowed with an exceptionally sharp and critical view of his fellow human beings, of their weaknesses and dishonesty, and so his artistic talents came to light. But growing up in the narrow, petty-bourgeois environment of a shopkeeper's family, he was unable, as he recalls in *My Century*, to throw off the enthusiasm which prevailed during the early successes of the war for everything military.

Disillusionment set in during the war—as a 17-year-old he only narrowly and accidentally avoided death. Then he was forced to confront the horror of the Nazi crimes in the concentration camps, and the fact that he himself had been taken in by Nazi ideology.

In searching for a new orientation in the world, he remained cut off from the ideas and traditions of the socialist workers movement. Its best representatives had been murdered by Stalin. Those who survived the bureaucratic regimes in the Soviet Union and later in the GDR [East Germany] were morally broken or corrupted.

In short, the ideas of socialism—falsified and perverted by Stalinism—rapidly and permanently repelled the young Grass, filling him with the prevailing anticommunist prejudices. He was drawn instead toward the “realistic” politics of the social democrats, the politics of “small steps” and making the best of a bad world.

From Stalinism's distorted and debased caricature of Marxism, used to justify the Soviet bureaucracy's crimes, Grass concluded that Marxism itself had to be discarded, along with any idea of changing the world through revolution.

Grass once remarked on how his world view was formed, when he worked in a mine for some weeks with petty Nazi functionaries, embittered German Communist Party members and old Social Democrats: “In the potash works I learned to live without ideology. I still had the morning ceremonies of the Hitler youth in my ears, those Sunday attestations to the flag, swearing on blood and soil of course, and then there were the communists attempting to entice me with similar relics dragged out of the lumber room of their ideology. As a child who had already been burnt, I stuck carefully to my taciturn social democrats, who

neither babbled of a thousand year Reich nor world revolution, who in 1946 had already hurled the remaining ideological ballast into the dustbin (*Works*, vol. x, Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1987, p. 441).

Equating communism with Stalinism and rejecting any scientifically elaborated social theory as “ideology”, the essence of Grass's world view has ever since been limited to a form of pragmatism, informed by “what is possible under the given circumstances”.

In the sphere of aesthetics, the young artist felt strengthened by this conception. He always stood firmly against the Stalinist artistic dogma of “socialist realism” and other pseudo-radical concepts of “committed literature” favoured by many West German intellectuals of the 60s and 70s.

“Socialist realism” was ex cathedra state policy in the GDR. It demanded that writers differentiate clearly between the baddies—those advocating reactionary, capitalist ideas—and the goodies—positive heroes, “fighters for peace and socialism”, who naturally prevailed in the end. These ideas were as incompatible with Grass's own artistic conceptions as fire is to water.

In a conversation with Günter Gaus in 1965, Grass declared in a reference to “committed literature” that the characters in his novels were not “bearers of ideas, but figures contradictory in themselves, often difficult to understand, containing both flaws and dross” (*Works*, vol. x, Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1987 p. 30).

From a purely aesthetic standpoint, both models—man as representative of great ideas and principles, and flesh-and-blood man with all his contradictions—have been brought together in great literary works. Grass's conception, that these models are mutually exclusive, is an outcome of his deep scepticism toward great ideas as guiding principles for both individuals and society. While Grass's rejection of “socialist realism” was refreshing and entirely justified, his identification of it with Marxism and communism was fundamentally false.

Grass never overcame these political prejudices. The stabilisation of post-war society in the West and the continued suppression of any independent political and intellectual movement by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the East both contributed to anchoring his preconceptions. His sharp social commentaries of the 50s and 60s, such as *The Tin Drum* and the other Danzig novels, were due less to his political insights than his acute artist's eyes and pointed pen.

However, in the course of time his artistic acuity has, I believe, been blunted by his political views.

This is related to the change in the social position and political views of the social layers with which intellectuals and artists in our society are overwhelmingly associated. In the 1960s they had to attack the old structures and abuses of society in order to attain their own standing. This they achieved over subsequent decades.

The social reforms of the 1970s, then the stock market boom of the 80s and 90s arising from globalisation and German reunification offered a wide layer of the middle class sufficient opportunities to rise socially. Social maxims which they frowned upon 30 years before—“enrich yourself”, “each man for himself”—are now accepted by many of them as the most obvious things in the world. They are not bothered, nothing ruffles them. In their opinion, the emergence of a socialist movement as it existed a century ago is inconceivable. They do not feel challenged, threatened or inspired by such a thing.

Brimming with self-satisfaction and complacency, they contemplate themselves and the world.

Even though he does not share many of these views, Grass has no means with which to combat the social and political pressures exerted by these layers. This is reflected in *My Century*, above all in the choice and organisation of the themes to which Grass dedicated the last 20 to 25 years.

In Essen, Grass acknowledged frankly that it had been hard for him to

find interesting themes for “these dull years”. My feeling is that it was not possible for him, unfortunately, to break through the dullness and narrowness of this period. Instead, he appears to get a certain comfort in bathing in the banalities of “the little man” and his everyday pleasures.

That the pulse of cultural life of wide social layers in the last 50 years should be dominated by television soaps and the fate of the perennial fugitive Dr. Richard Kimble is sad enough. But why pore over this again?

The fact that the post-war order in Europe, in the absence of a mass socialist movement, was considered merely from the narrow-minded standpoint of “divided Germans” was bad enough—this was the line of government propaganda. But why now, after German reunification, is it necessary to regurgitate the whole thing, always with the same national blinkers, in the most varied ways: at an East-versus-West German soccer game, at the Olympic games, East-West German border crossings, numerous East-West writers' meetings etc.? In the end, it is neither enlightening nor edifying.

Many things occurred beyond German borders, world-shattering enough to influence the sluggish course of political and spiritual development in German lands, or even direct them into new paths. One only has to think of the Hungarian revolution and Khrushchev's disclosure of the crimes of Stalin in the 1950s, then later the uprising of workers and students in France in 1968.

One would also expect that the far-reaching consequences of the collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Union for international politics and the social position of the population would have deserved an examination “from below”. Instead, readers have to kill time waiting on one or another election result on one or another election day before and after reunification. We have to make do with the woes of a West German family in 1973 on a car-free Sunday [when private car travel was banned by law due to the oil crisis], and in 1989 [the year of German unification], the difficulties an East German petty-bourgeois experiences in obtaining winter tires for his Wartburg car. Some of the episodes may themselves be witty and pertinent, but why so many, and nothing else? Here the last traces of irony vanish.

In any case, towards the end, I turned the pages more and more quickly, searching for Grass's penetrating glance, finally to conclude that the greatest pressures bearing down upon the “people below” at the end of the century have been almost completely forgotten: the growing poverty of families, pensioners and children. This is dealt with on only one occasion—and then as an exception in the entire book—not from below, but from above, from the point of view of Birgit Breuel, boss of German EXPO 2000 and former head of the Treuhand (the organisation responsible for liquidating industry in the former GDR). At her “family seat with a view of the Elbe”, Grass allows her to complain: “No one has given me anything. I had to get everything for myself.”

In the end, I found the retreat into the contemplation of family and country in the last story quite embarrassing. Who would not expect Grass to end the century as he began it in the book—with occurrences from real life? With the colonial war by German soldiers against a foreign people.

His first story, in the year 1900, revealed an historical truth and is artistically splendid. A Bavarian village youth, summoned by the Kaiser's call, volunteers to take part in the suppression of the Chinese Boxer rebellion. On his return home he takes the pigtail of one of the murdered Chinese “to enliven” a local carnival procession. Only a short episode, but one that throws a light on the following decade, when such social dregs rose to prominence.

Had Grass considered the ideas and arguments used to justify the Chinese war—a war which Grass rejected—then it would probably have occurred to him that the same ideas and arguments were used at the end of the century to justify sending the German army into Kosovo in the war against Serbia [a war which Grass supported]: German bayonets should teach other peoples some manners, and teach them culture and respect for

human rights.

A century previously, what serious artist would have dealt with these conceptions in any other way than through satire or caricature? Does it not call for Oskar Matzerath to pick up his drum again? Indeed, the “terrier”, as the critical writer was dubbed in the 60s by Chancellor Ludwig Erhard, appears to have lost his teeth.

Grass appears blind and deaf to the fact that the very militarism that he repeatedly censures in *The Tin Drum*, as in the rest of his works, has once again pulled on its boots and set itself the task of shaping the home front and the world as a whole, according to its own conception. The danger of new war is indicated only in a very vague and general sense in the concluding sentence: “first down there, and then everywhere ...” Names are not named. Instead, he resurrects his Kashub mother, telling of her life during and after the war. She gushes over her son, a budding writer of some genius.

An audible sigh of satisfaction arises from this final story, a light intake of breath at having survived the shocks and confusions of the last century. It seems to me that the author closes his eyes to the possible dangers posed by the present and future. Where no questions are posed, then no answers are sought.

My Century commenced with a refreshing and sharp tone, continued over wide stretches with an interesting and unusual conception, but the last section is unmistakably stamped by the current intellectual crisis.

A renewed upturn in the rich literary traditions of Germany does not have to lie so very far away. It is only possible, however, when artists of the calibre of Günter Grass decide to break free from the combined intellectual prejudices of the social democrats and Stalinism, national narrow mindedness and social apathy. Then, as in the first quarter of the twentieth century, art and literature will again play its part in accelerating a world-wide social movement—and vice versa!

This is because, contrary to the sceptical views of Günter Grass, it remains a fact that ideas do change the world—but only if they are sufficiently great and true enough to move people and engage the masses.

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