



My Century

Günter Grass

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A collection of one hundred inter-linked stories celebrating the twentieth century, by Germany's most eminent contemporary writer. As the sequence of stories unfolds, a lively and rich picture emerges, an historical portrait of our century in all its grandeur and in all its horror.

My Century Details

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Author : Günter Grass

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Yanela says

Un gran repaso de historia alemana aunque por momentos hay temas demasiado "locales". Gran juego de narraciones y narradores que enriquecen y animan a seguir leyendo. Tuve que recurrir a Internet para ubicar ciertos acontecimientos. Si uno se quiere acercar a la cultura alemana por cualquier razón (un viaje por ejemplo) es un buen libro para hacerlo, de otra forma yo no lo leería.

Greg Brozeit says

Mein Jahrhundert (My Century) is difficult to pigeonhole. Grass writes short pieces about episodes in German history for each year of the 20th Century. What really makes it special, though, is how Grass creates a "history from below" montage. Most of the pieces are about how regular people see and experience the events around them. Grass writes from the viewpoints of males, females, old, young, and in-between representing virtually every German dialect, region, social class and political persuasion in ways that give the reader a feeling of actually being in the room with each character as they tell their stories.

The book leaves many lasting images. The first entry of 1900 is told by a former German soldier who served in China. He returns with a ponytail taken as a souvenir from a Chinese head that has been chopped off by British soldiers and thinks nothing of it.

Grass brings back to life many forgotten or seemingly minor episodes of Germany history. These include the advent of radio and the phonograph, the delivery of a Zeppelin to the U.S. as part of war reparations, a servant tells about the exiled Kaiser Wilhelm chopping more than a thousand trees using only his right arm (his left being withered since birth) at his estate in the Netherlands, a former boxer who is proud to have lost to Max Schmeling because it provided him with the capital to open a pub, a political prisoner detailed to work with Nazi laborers to build an addition to Oranienburg concentration camp while listening to radio broadcasts of the Berlin Olympics (and he sees Erich Mühsam, a writer and leader of the 1919 revolution who was brutally murdered there), and children playing war games simulating the Spanish Civil War, not knowing that in a few short years that their games will be all too real.

Some yearly entries are from the point of view of a contemporary, others are retrospective. As an example of the latter, the years 1914-1918 are accounts drawn by a mid-1960s meeting between Erich Maria Remarque and Ernst Jünger, writers whose successful novels depicted very different visions of soldiers' experiences in World War I. For the years 1940-1945, Grass recounts a reunion of journalists on the island of Sylt in 1962 as they reminisce about their war years. One loudmouth former Nazi who later became an executive for a news magazine laments how he never received royalties for the photographs he took in the war. He's especially bitter about not profiting from his most famous photograph, one showing prisoners of Treblinka that was printed throughout the world. The narrator and the others can only show their disgust by remaining silent.

In Grass's post-WWII years, images of average people dominate. A young girl describes how her father's obsession to build an atomic fallout bunker costs him his life when the cement ceiling falls on him, and how, when she becomes a mother, she marches against the installation of Pershing missiles. A number of the stories are insights into the Wirtschaftswunder, the German economic miracle. The Eichmann Trial is seen

bieži san?ca las?t sabiedriskaj? transport?, bet tas jau ir cits st?sts.

Jorge says

Aunque este no parece ser un libro sustantivo en la obra del recientemente fallecido y ganador del Nobel de Literatura en 1999, Günter Grass, no podemos permanecer indiferentes ante la elegancia, meticulosidad y lucidez de su prosa.

Este libro está formado por una serie de viñetas o cápsulas o relatos en miniatura (¿o serán mini ensayos novelados?) que recogen algún momento acontecido en Alemania durante el siglo XX. La obra incluye una viñeta o relato por cada año que conformó el siglo XX, contados por diferentes voces que pueden ser narradores masculinos o femeninos o bien puede ser el mismo escritor o su propia madre. Curiosa estructura. Digamos que es una extraña afluyente de su estilo narrativo que le permite lanzar una mirada a veces cáustica, a veces llena de donaire y a veces un tanto dramática.

Esta obra, en teoría, debería de leerse de manera fluida y ágil dada su aparente accesibilidad pero no siempre se cumple con esta facilidad, ya que la forma en que el autor aborda cada tema supone un conocimiento previo, por parte del lector, ya sea del entorno, ya sea de los personajes históricos o de hechos locales poco conocidos u olvidados por quienes no vivieron de cerca en la Alemania del siglo XX. Por momentos cuesta trabajo entender a cabalidad el sentido que Grass quiso poner de manifiesto en sus miniaturas literarias.

Aunque en apariencia pudiera tratarse de cien relatos independientes, la verdad es que entre ellos se establece alguna conexión, ya sea de manera explícita a través de la aparición de algunos personajes en varios relatos o bien por la continuidad que se establece entre algunas de las historietas; pero también esta conexión se da de manera implícita ya que podemos decir que todos los pequeños relatos van encaminadas a describir al gran protagonista de la obra: la azarosa Alemania del siglo XX; y, en ese sentido, los macro-personajes se encuentran contenidos en las miniaturas históricas y éstos son: la Alemania de antes de la Primera Guerra Mundial, la Alemania de la República de Weimar, la Alemania Nazi de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la Alemania dividida en Este y Oeste y por fin la Alemania reunificada.

A través de esta lectura podemos darnos cuenta como Günter Grass fue un ser profundamente comprometido con su sociedad y una persona muy participativa en la política.

Como las hojas de un calendario en gigante, Grass va deshojando año con año algún acontecimiento trascendental o trivial sucedido en aquellos años de tremendas tormentas para el pueblo alemán. Algunas veces puede abordar un hecho trascendental como el asesinato de Walter Ratheneau o la caída del Muro de Berlín. En otras ocasiones sólo recrea el ambiente de aquellos años a través de algún hecho relativamente trivial para Alemania y para el mundo como puede ser una pelea de Box entre el norteamericano Joe Louis y el alemán Max Schmelling o refiriendo cómo se escindió la compañía fabricante de zapatos tenis Adidas.

Esta obra nos pone de manifiesto, entre otras características, la versatilidad de Günter Grass ya que a través de su prosa agradable y lúcida, aunque tal vez podría llamarla deliciosa, despliega varios estilos y formatos de narración, aprovechando los múltiples temas. Los formatos de que echa mano pueden darse como una carta escrita por un ciudadano inconforme o puede ser a través de un narrador que permanece desconocido para nosotros; también se expresa a través de una acerada ironía que roza lo cómico, o bien se puede expresar a través de un retroceso en el tiempo o a través de pensamientos densos y largos, pero también utiliza frases cortas que hacen muy accesible su lectura. Versatilidad pura.

“Todos, todos nosotros recibimos su mirada en el alma...”

“Todos nos llevamos el fuego que la mirada del Führer había encendido para que siguiera ardiendo, ardiendo ...”

La traducción de Miguel Sáenz presenta extrañamente algunas oquedades y digo extrañamente ya que este excelente traductor es especialista en obras de idioma alemán y ha ganado al menos un premio por sus trabajos. He tenido la oportunidad de leer algunas otras obras traducidas por él de autores como Thomas Bernhard o Arthur Schnitzler las cuales he podido disfrutar mucho.

Frank O'connor says

This is a book about the individual in and through time. It is a staggering technical achievement. Each year is represented as a beautiful Flash piece, with an authentic voice, layered themes, a pertinent subject (such as technology, social events, politics, sport) and a strong story. The cumulative impact of the approach is to demonstrate time both from the perspective of the situated individual and the omniscient god simultaneously. As time passes, the nature of this book changes. Reading it will differ depending on when it is read and on when the reader was born. An extraordinary work of art.

Lenny Wick says

A brilliant idea I wish we could commission writers in other countries to do before much of the feel of the 20th Century disappears, yet it comes off as slightly less than the sum of its parts. I have a good grasp of German history and studied there a bit some years ago, but was helpless in the face of many of his references. The density of the stories and their immediacy - in that he rarely stops to explain who is speaking or what the subject is - adds to the difficulty. But I appreciate the style, and it's not a difficult read once you assume a good bit will run away from you, as it did with me -- the Cold War era, in particular. I knew Willi Brandt genuflecting before the monument in Poland, the bad blood fraternal saga of Adidas and Puma, a bit about the Baader-Meinhof gang... but a lot blows past. (Other faults: Grass begins speaking a lot about himself and his life, turning an objective account into less interesting biography; and, he seems to fail to write in a woman's voice every time he tries, maybe, but unlikely, a translation problem.)

The overall effect, however, gives a hint of how much changes over 100 years. And what a monumentally eventful, world changing century it was. The agony of WWI, the dread of the Weimar years, knowing WWII is approaching, those demonic years of the war, and then this weird space once the country is divided: the sense is strong that the nation's history had been written at that point, and once the wall falls it's basic prosperity and lesser concerns. Much of the history in the last 40-50 years of the book wind up bleeding in from other countries, mostly America.

Amir says

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Mikä ajoitus: Grassin Minun Vuosisatani on sopivaa luettavaa nimenomaan Suomen 100-juhlavuonna.

Grass kirjoitti tarinan viime vuosisadan jokaiselle vuodelle. Minämuotoon kirjoitetuissa katkelmissa kohtaavat kirjailija itse, hänen henkilöhahmonsaa, 1900-luvun merkkipaalu ja ilmiöt. Tarjolla lyhyt kertaus Saksan, osin myös Euroopan historiasta, ja kirjailijan itsensä tuotannossa. En keksi aiheelle ketään sopivampaa kirjoittajaa kuin Grass, joka oli historiafriikki itsekin.

Monet Grassin viimeisistä kirjoista ovat olleet ikävän kärtyisiä ja mutkikkaita. Mistään sellaisesta ei tässä kirjassa ole tietokaan. Kirja on inhimillinen, nokkela, sympaattinen - onnistunut kokonaisuus kaikin tavoin.

Nautin ja tykkäsin! Ja GR:stä en muuten löytänyt suomenkielistä painosta. Sinänsä harmi, sillä kirjan kannen oli maalannut kirjailija itse!

Judith says

Ein wirklich faszinierendes Buch über deutsche Geschichte. Jedes Kapitel ist eine Kurzgeschichte oder ein Meinungsbild aus einem anderen Jahr. Ein paar Kapitel sind dabei, die weniger aussagekräftig waren oder zu denen mir der Bezug fehlte, dafür waren andere so stark, dass ich sie direkt mehrmals lesen musste.

Ein vergnüglicher Grass. Nicht-Deutschen nicht unbedingt zu empfehlen, weil einerseits die Sprache verzwackt sein kann und andererseits doch sehr viel Geschichtskennntnisse von Nöten sind, um den geschichtlichen Kontext, der oft nicht explizit genannt wird, zu erkennen.

Lisa says

Some of my favourite books are almost impossible to review.

Dante's The Divine Comedy, Goethe's Faust, and other classics: what can I possibly add to the long run of sentences they have inspired since their publication? And yet, they mean so much to me, I share the urge to write about my relationship to them.

Other favourites, and almost all Günter Grass' novels fall into this category, defy objective evaluation on my part, as they are too closely linked to my own experience of growing up in Western Europe, between different countries and school systems, seeing European history unfold during my childhood, studying it at university later, always divided between different interpretations of historical processes, as I lacked a unique focal point in a defined home country.

Günter Grass writes about the ambivalence of European identity in the 20th century, and every word resonates with me. He is not a hero, a perfect citizen, quite the contrary. His storytelling shows different angles and perspectives, and the characters in his novels change over the course of time, even their memories change to fit their shifting world view.

"Yes, we have so many resistance fighters that you wonder how Hitler could rise to power (Ja, wir haben bis heute so viele Widerstandskämpfer, daß man sich wundert, wie Hitler an die Macht hat kommen können)", said Günter Grass in an interview, indicating the need for modified memories in order to live with the brutal

reality of the crimes of the Second World War. He waited 60 years himself to tell the story of his participation in the war as a teenager, thus demonstrating the deeply rooted shame of a whole generation of people who grew up and formed their values before the war, and had to readjust not only their living conditions, but their way of thinking and remembering after 1945.

With "My Century", Günter Grass creates a chorus of voices spanning from 1900 until 1999, each chapter representing an individual's experience of one year.

It starts with a young man talking about his perception of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, and moves forward through history, but jumping back and forth between chronological framework and later memories, changing narrator and perspective incessantly.

Opening the novel at the chapter "1938", for example, we encounter a post Cold War school class and their history teacher, who gets into trouble with parents for teaching the fall of the Berlin Wall and the significance of the 9th November in German history by making connections and explaining the horrors of the Reichskristallnacht in 1938. There are so many layers in that short chapter. The question of how to teach the horrors of history (I have taught both Berlin Wall and Reichskristallnacht myself, and know of the pitfalls), of the pressure teachers experience from parents and administration to teach history "objectively, relying on the facts", as if that were possible. Just choosing the facts to talk about is a bias in itself. Another layer is the reaction that the young students display, being outside that part of German history, but witnessing correlating events in their own time (the chapter is told through their voices), which forces them to make links between different moments in history, ...

The last chapter, "1999", is incredibly touching and personal. It is told by the author's mother, who is resurrected by the power of the writer's imagination, to get to know the world at the closing of the century, and to celebrate her 103rd birthday with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She is not impressed with the modern world, and not thrilled to be introduced to the Euro, but she has adopted a resigned position towards her son's fabrications:

"So ist er nun mal. Denkt sich die unmöglichsten Sachen aus. Muss immer übertreiben. Mag man gar nicht glauben, wenn man das liest..."

But in his polyphonic fabrications, Grass masterfully conducts an orchestra of 20th century voices, and plays a sad, horrifying, occasionally funny, truthful piece of music that goes straight to the heart.

The music of his time! Part of it is a solo for a tin drum!

Sovotchka says

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to think about this book.

It sure wasn't what I expected - a collection of short stories, all taking place in one year of the last century and describing something fitting that time - but rather an odd combination of memoir-like texts, none of which makes any sense on its own.

But I have to say that even seeing the whole picture, I failed to get the point.

It might be because I am too young, or because the authors' style isn't "my cup of tea" or maybe I'm just not the right audience. Whatever it was, I didn't get a rewarding reading experience at all.

Some of the points that bugged me:

- The style is set up for one single text per year. On three separate occasions, several occasions were described using the same vehicle. That threw me off balance, not at least because the continued texts were the least entertaining of all the none-entertaining ones.
- Call me a nuisance, but the fact that between the years 1940 and 1990 no East German point of view is considered, even though there are such instances before and after that time doesn't help this book at all.
- I don't think the style of using memoirs was a good idea. Sure enough, thoughts are chaotic. But there's no reason for the reader to go through all that chaos as well. There's a point to the job of an editor! Also, as is the case with recounting memories, things are left out. Which makes the stories feel hugely edited instead of authentic. Since that is what I read in the newspaper all the time, I'd hoped for something else here.

Enough ranting on my part, try this book for yourself, but I as a German did not enjoy that. At all.

Lorenzo Berardi says

One hundred short stories with a very high average level.

The short format of these miniatures helps. In this case, being concise avoiding digressions makes Grass' way of writing even better.

Each narration you will find here is related to one of the years between 1900 and 2000. Different point of views and many interesting perspectives on the main events happened in Germany and worldwide in the last century.

The author is able to put himself in the shoes of schoolboys, old women, sport reporters, politicians, soldiers, tycoons, professors and so on in many cases resuscitating famous characters or giving new life and speech to those common people who not only made history but lived their personal stories in that frame.

This book is an excellent idea that just Günter Grass could have turned from theory into reality thanks to his encyclopedic knowledge and dedication. I am glad he did it.

Clare says

What an incredible way to learn about the happenings that our history books don't touch on. Each chapter covers one year--and one event or sentiment--of the 20th century. Loved it.

Wally Beddoe says

The book *My Century* was written by Günter Grass and is a mostly-fictional account of events covering a one-hundred year period (1900 through 1999). The setting for the stories is primarily Germany.

Initially reluctant, as I'm not a big fan of fictional writing, I ended up really enjoying Grass' storytelling through characters that he either respected or who were significant to him in some way at one time or another. It became clear to me that whether fiction or not, Grass was telling the history of the German people in ways that one could never obtain through a traditional history book. The more I read, the more I gained an

appreciation for the book. I think the idea and concept of the book as a whole (the lives and tribulations of normal folks), is much more powerful than the individual short stories within.

To an American, many of the locations, names, and phrases Grass uses in *My Century* might require a quick look up, but I can imagine that the elder Germans who have read the book probably appreciate it as a very good reflection of the lives and moods of the times.

Several stories were technology-focused such as the very interesting tale of the 'magic mirror', the name they called television in the early days. "On Christmas Day, 1952, groups of people crowded in front of the radio-shop windows to watch the first bona-fide TV broadcast." (Grass & Heim, 2000, p.132). Some became regular window-side viewers and the story turns quite warm as relationships are created and the purchase of a single TV makes a huge difference to the owners of a small restaurant as curious customers gather to watch TV and eat their food.

I did like the story from 1969 (Grass & Heim, 2000, p.132) where the German kid in the story named Carmen was intrigued by the moon landing and she knew the astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin by name and could identify the lunar module "The Eagle." In school, Carmen had painted a wall with the Stars and Stripes; It was just as she remembered it from TV, firmly planted on the moon. This upset the other students and "super-leftists" who tried to convince Carmen to replace the American flag with a red flag but she would have nothing to do with that. Probably resulting from this incident, Carmen gained a reputation as a problem child.

In 1989, the fact that the Berlin Wall was being torn down on the television in one household seemed to take a back seat to two laymen as they discussed snow tires and flooring. Perhaps they did not comprehend what was happening on the border between the East and the West.

Since I travel to Switzerland quite frequently and have been to Germany, I do have a basic understanding of Germans, their food, culture, work ethics, humor, and gorgeous countryside. *My Century* really opened my eyes to what it meant to be German in the 20th Century. I believe my exposure to Europe assisted in my understanding or comprehending of many of the stories that might have otherwise gone by the wayside. For example, the chapter "1914" talks about booking a quiet room in the Hotel Zum Storchen in Zurich, with its view of the Limmat (River). I have eaten dinner on the outside balcony at that hotel facing the river and can attest to the beautiful views.

Further research on Günther Grass via links on our syllabus, helped me to understand who Grass is. I read his recent controversial poem (5 April 2012) titled "What Must Be Said," Grass breaks his silence about the relationship between Israel and Iran and causes a heated moral debate in Germany. As I understand it, the Germans still live with much guilt from their history of murdering so many Jews and they don't support Grass' accusations that Israel is a threat to peace. As for the Israelis, Grass' so-called poem resulted in Israel banning Grass from traveling to that country; an action which many think is a bit eccentric. I agree. For me, I came away with a deeper perspective on the German people. The following quote by Grass reflects their spirit:

We dance for the pure joy of it. In the kitchen to the record player. Because we've got it in us. All over ... it's not just in the legs. It comes from inside and runs all through you. In waves. From down below to up above. All the way to the scalp. ~Günter Grass

Through Grass' memories and stories, I get a real sense that the Germans experienced tough times, horrific and unthinkable social communism, dictatorship, racism, and death. They did however, also dream, keep the

faith with one another, and ultimately depended on each other for survival much like people in other countries during the early 20th century. *My Century* is 'their' history; the people of Germany.

Grass, G., & Heim, M. H. (2000). *My Century*. Mariner Books.

Gunter, G. (2012, 04 05). The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/...>
