

Victims

By [J. M. Coetzee](#)

Crabwalk

by Günter Grass, translated from the German by Krishna Winston
Harcourt, 234 pp., \$25.00

1.

Günter Grass burst on the literary scene in 1959 with *The Tin Drum*, a novel which, with its mix of the fabulous—a hero who in protest against the world around him refuses to grow—and the realistic—a densely textured realization of pre-war Danzig—announced the advent of magic realism.



Gunther Grass
(click for larger image)

Made financially independent by the success of *The Tin Drum*, Grass threw himself into campaigning for Willy Brandt's Social Democrats. After the Social Democrats came to power in 1969, however, and particularly after Brandt resigned in 1974, Grass grew estranged from mainstream politics, occupying himself more and more with feminist and ecological issues. Throughout this evolution he nevertheless remained a believer in reasoned debate and in deliberate if cautious social progress. His chosen totem was the snail.

Having been among the first to attack the consensus of silence about the complicity of ordinary Germans in Nazi rule—a silence whose causes and consequences have been explored by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their groundbreaking work of psychohistory *The Inability to Mourn*^[*]—Grass is freer than most to enter the debate in progress in Germany about silence and silencing, taking up, in a characteristically cautious and nuanced way, a position that until recently only the radical right has dared to champion in public: that ordinary Germans—not just those who perished

in the camps or died opposing Hitler—have a claim to be numbered among the victims of World War II.

Questions about victimhood, about silence, and about the rewriting of history are at the heart of Grass's latest novel, *Crabwalk*, which is narrated by a character named Paul Pokriefke (Pokriefke is Grass's mother's name; his father's identity is unknown even to his mother).

Paul's birthday is January 30, a date with symbolic resonance in German history. On January 30, 1933, the Nazis took power. And on the same day in 1945 Germany suffered its worst maritime disaster ever, a real-life disaster in the midst of which the fictional Paul was born. Paul is thus a kind of midnight's child in Salman Rushdie's sense, a child fingered by fate to give voice to his times.

Paul, however, would prefer to shirk his destiny. Sliding through life unnoticed suits his taste. A journalist by trade, he has always trimmed his sails to the political wind blowing strongest. In the 1960s he wrote for the conservative Springer press. When the Social Democrats came to power he became a rather halfhearted left liberal; later he took up ecological issues.

There are, however, two powerful people behind him, both nagging him to write the story of the night on which he was born: his mother and a shadowy figure so like Günter Grass that I will call him "Grass."

From his mother Paul learns that he is connected in a roundabout way with an important Nazi, Landesgruppenleiter Wilhelm Gustloff. Gustloff—a real-life person—was in the 1930s stationed in Switzerland, with the task of recruiting expatriate Germans and Austrians and gathering intelligence. In 1936 a Jewish student of Balkan background named David Frankfurter called at Gustloff's home in Davos and shot him dead, after which he gave himself up to the police. "I fired the shots because I am a Jew. I...have no regrets," Frankfurter reportedly said. Tried by a Swiss court and sentenced to eighteen years, Frankfurter was expelled from the country after serving half his time. He went to Palestine and subsequently worked in the Israeli defense department.

Back in Germany the death of Gustloff was seized upon as a chance to create a Nazi martyr and stir up anti-Jewish feeling. The body was ceremonially brought back from Switzerland and the ashes buried in a memorial grove on the shore of Lake Schwerin, with a memorial stone

twelve feet high. Streets and schools were named after Gustloff, even a ship.

The cruise ship *Wilhelm Gustloff* was launched in 1937 as part of the National Socialist program of recreation for the working class, a program known as *Kraft durch Freude*, strength through happiness. It carried 1,500 passengers at a time in classless accommodations on trips to the Norwegian fjords, Madeira, and the Mediterranean. Soon, however, more pressing uses were found for the *Gustloff*. In 1939 it was sent to bring back the Condor Legion from Spain. When war broke out it was outfitted as a hospital ship. Later it became a training ship for the German navy, and finally a refugee transport.

In January of 1945 the *Gustloff* sailed from the German port of Gotenhafen (now Polish Gdynia), heading westward and crammed with some 10,000 passengers, for the most part German civilians fleeing the advancing Red Army, but also wounded soldiers, trainee U-boat sailors, and members of the Women's Auxiliary. Its mission was therefore not without a military component. In the icy waters of the Baltic it was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine under the command of Captain Aleksandr Marinesko. Some 1,200 survivors were picked up; everyone else died. The death toll makes it the worst maritime disaster in history.

Among the survivors is a girl (fictional) named Ursula ("Tulla") Pokriefke in an advanced state of pregnancy. In the boat that rescues her while the *Gustloff* suffers its death throes, Tulla gives birth to a son, Paul. Put ashore with her baby, she tries to make her way west through the Russian lines but ends up in Schwerin in the Russian zone, site of the Gustloff memorial.

By birth, then, Paul is tenuously linked to Wilhelm Gustloff. A more disturbing link emerges decades later, in 1996, when, idly browsing the Internet, he comes across a Web site called www.blutzeuge.de, where the "Comrades of Schwerin" keep Gustloff's memory alive. (A *Blutzeuge* is a blood oath. Blutzeuge Day, November 9, was a sacred date on the Nazi calendar, the day on which the SS reaffirmed their oath.) From familiar turns of phrase he begins to suspect that the so-called Comrades are none other than his son Konrad, a high school student, whom he rarely sees now that the boy has elected to live with his grandmother Tulla in Schwerin.

Konrad, it emerges, has become obsessed with the Gustloff affair. For his history class he has written a paper on the *Kraft durch Freude* program, which his teachers have banned him from reading on the grounds that the

topic is "inappropriate" and the paper "severely infected with Nationalist Socialist thinking." He has tried to present the paper at a meeting of the local neo-Nazis, but it is too scholarly for his shaven-headed, beer-swilling audience. Since then he has restricted himself to his Web site, where under the code-name "Wilhelm" he proposes Gustloff to the world as an authentic German hero and martyr, and repeats his grandmother's claim that the classless *Kraft durch Freude* cruise ships demonstrated true socialism at work.

"Wilhelm" soon meets with a hostile response. Writing back to the Web site under the name "David," a respondent asserts that David Frankfurter was the true hero of the episode, a hero of Jewish resistance. On his computer screen Paul watches his son and the putative Jew argue back and forth.

A contest of words in virtual space does not satisfy Konrad. He invites "David"—who turns out to be of his own age—to Schwerin, and on the site of the demolished Gustloff monument shoots him as Frankfurter had shot Gustloff. Soon it emerges that his victim's real name was Wolfgang, and that he was not a Jew at all but had been so possessed by feelings of guilt over the Holocaust that he had tried to live as a Jew in his German household, wearing a yarmulke and demanding that his mother keep a kosher kitchen.

Konrad is unmoved by the revelation. "I shot because I am a German," he says at his trial, "and because the eternal Jew spoke through David." Cross-examined, he admits he has never met a real Jew, but denies that this is relevant. While he has nothing against Jews in the abstract, he says, Jews belong in Israel, not in Germany. Let Jews honor Frankfurter if they wish, and Russians Marinesko; it is time for Germans to honor Gustloff.

The court bends over backward to see Konrad as the puppet of forces beyond his ken. Tulla makes a dramatic appearance on the witness stand to defend her grandson and denounce his parents for neglecting him. She does not tell the court that it was she who gave him the murder weapon.

Surveying the proceedings, Paul is convinced that Konrad is the only participant not afraid to speak his mind. Among the lawyers and judges he senses a smothering blanket of repression. Worst are the dead boy's parents, impeccable liberal intellectuals who blame no one but themselves and deny any desire for revenge. Their son craved to be a Jew, Paul discovers, precisely because of his father's habit of seeing two sides to every question, including the question of the Holocaust.

Given a seven-year sentence in juvenile detention, Konrad proves a model prisoner, using his time to study for his university entrance examinations. The only friction comes when he asks to have a picture of Landesgruppenleiter Gustloff in his cell, and is refused.

Tulla Pokriefke, born in 1927, the same year as Günter Grass, first makes her appearance in *Cat and Mouse* (1961), though Lucy Rennwand of *The Tin Drum* can be regarded as a forerunner. In *Cat and Mouse* she is "a spindly little [ten-year-old] with legs like toothpicks" who goes swimming with the boys in Kaisershafen harbor and is permitted to watch their masturbation contests. In *Dog Years* (1963), now a high school student, she maliciously denounces one of her teachers to the police: he is sent to the Stutthof labor camp and dies there. On the other hand, when a malodorous pall descends over Kaisershafen, it is Tulla alone who utters what everyone privately knows: that the smell comes from truckloads of human bones from Stutthof.

By the last year of the war Tulla is working as a streetcar conductor and doing her best to get pregnant. Thereafter she disappears from view: in *The Rat* (1986) the ex-drummer boy Oskar Matzerath, now going on sixty, remembers her as "a very special kind of bitch" who, to the best of his knowledge, went down with the *Gustloff*.

Tulla's politics are hard to reduce to any coherent system. A trained carpenter and impeccable proletarian, she has thrown herself into Party affairs in the new East German state and been recognized and rewarded for her activism. An unquestioning follower of the Moscow line, she weeps when Stalin dies in 1953 and lights candles for him. Yet while in one breath she can hail the crew of the submarine that nearly killed her as "heroes of the Soviet Union allied to us workers in friendship," in the next she can describe Wilhelm Gustloff as "the tragically murdered son of our beautiful city of Schwerin" and put forward the *Kraft durch Freude* movement as a model for Communists to follow.

Despite her incorrectness, she retains her position in the collective, held in affection by her comrades but also feared. When, after the collapse of the regime in 1989, what Grass calls "die Berliner Treuhand" and his translator ingeniously calls "the Berlin Handover Trust" moves into the old East to buy up state enterprises, she makes sure that she gets her cut. By the end of the book she has managed to work Catholicism into her eclectic belief system: in her home on Gagarin Street not far from the Lenin monument

she has a shrine in which Uncle Joe smokes his pipe side by side with the Virgin Mary.

Paul sees his mother as the last true Stalinist. What exactly he means by that he does not spell out; but Tulla emerges from his account as unprincipled, canny, scheming, tenacious, impatient of theory, unforgiving, hard to kill, a nationalist first and last, and an anti-Semite, which is not a bad profile of a Stalinist. She also gave birth to a child at sea on the night she witnessed thousands of dead children floating head down in their ineffectual lifejackets, and heard the collective last cry of the doomed passengers of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* as they slid overboard. "A cry like that—you won't ever get it out of your ear," she says. As if to prove it, her hair turned white that night.

Besides being a Stalinist, Tulla is thus also a stricken soul: stricken by what she saw and heard, and unable to get over her grief until the taboo on representing what happened on January 30, 1945, is broken and the dead can be mourned as they deserve.

Tulla Pokriefke is the most interesting character in *Crabwalk*, and perhaps, after Oskar, the boy with the tin drum, in Grass's whole oeuvre—interesting not only at a human level but also for what she stands for in greater German society: an ethnic populism that survived better in the East than in the West but evaded capture by the right as by the left; that has its own account of what happened in Germany and the world in the twentieth century, an account that may be slanted, self-interested, and chaotic, but is deeply felt nonetheless; that resents being banned from polite discourse and generally repressed by the *bien-pensants*; and that will not go away.

Ugly though we may consider the populism of Tulla Pokriefke to be, *Crabwalk* presents for scrutiny a considered argument for allowing the Tullas and Konrads of Germany to have their heroes and martyrs and memorials and ceremonies of remembrance. The case against repression, the case for an all-inclusive national history, is one that Paul, faced with the fate of his son, comes to appreciate more and more deeply, namely that if passions that run deep are repressed they emerge elsewhere in new, unpredictable forms. Refuse to allow Konrad to read his paper to the class and he becomes a killer; lock him away and a new Web site pops up on the Internet: www.kameradschaft-konrad-pokriefke.de with its blood oath, "We believe in you, we will wait for you, we will follow you."

The most personal parts of *Crabwalk* are those in which Grass or "Grass" looms over Paul Pokriefke's shoulder and we learn how Paul's narrative, namely *Crabwalk*, comes to be written. As a student in West Berlin thirty years ago, Paul attended a course in creative writing taught by "Grass." Now "Grass" contacts him again, urging him to write the *Gustloff* book, arguing that as the offspring of that tragic night he is peculiarly fitted for the task. Years ago "Grass" collected materials for a *Gustloff* book of his own, but then decided "he'd had it with the past" and did not write it, and now it is too late.

People of his generation kept a discreet silence about the war years, "Grass" confides, because their personal sense of guilt was overwhelming and because "the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence." But now he realizes that was a mistake: the historical memory of Germany's sufferings was thereby surrendered to the radical right.

"Grass" has working sessions with Paul in which he presses him to find words to describe the horrors of the last months of the war, as fleeing Germans perished by the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. For Paul's guidance "Grass" even produces a specimen passage (deceptive guidance, however, for the passage describes not what really happened but what he saw in a film about the end of the *Gustloff*).

Paul is not inclined to accept "Grass's" pleas at face value. The reason why "Grass" has not written the book is, he suspects, that his energies have dried up. Furthermore, he suspects, the real pressure comes from the obsessed Tulla behind "Grass," twisting his arm. "Grass" claims to be a mere casual acquaintance of Tulla's from the old days in Danzig. The truth, he suspects, is that "Grass" was her lover and may be his father. His suspicions are strengthened by a comment that "Grass" makes on his drafts: that Tulla should be given more mystery, more of a "diffuse glow." "Grass" is still under the spell of the witch-woman with the white hair.

2.

"Who sows the wind will reap the storm," runs the German proverb. It is not so much in the storm—the atrocities committed upon ethnic Germans in their flight from the east, the *Schrecklichkeit* of the firebombing of German cities, the coldhearted indifference of the Allies to the sufferings of the German population after the war—that the German radical right has found wellsprings of enduring resentment to exploit, as in the silence demanded of those who see themselves as victims or heirs of victims—a silence first imposed by outsiders, then adopted as a considered political act by Germans themselves.

This taboo is today being reexamined in an extended national debate. *Crabwalk* has been a best seller since it came out in Germany in early 2002. This is not because the Gustloff/*Gustloff* story had never been tackled before. On the contrary, barely a year after Wilhelm Gustloff's death the popular writer Emil Ludwig published, in German though not in Germany, a novel about the affair in which Frankfurter is the hero, a man who by striking down a prominent Nazi hopes to inspire Jews to resistance. In 1975 the Swiss director Rolf Lyssy made a film, *Konfrontation*, on the same theme.

The last voyage of the *Gustloff* was the basis for the film *Night Fell Over Gotenhafen* (1959) by the German- American director Frank Wisbar. A survivor of that voyage, Heinz Schön, has year after year been publishing his researches into the fateful event and the identities of those who died. In English there has been *The Cruellest Night: Germany's Dunkirk and the Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff* (1979) by Christopher Dobson, John Miller, and Thomas Payne. Grass himself has referred to the *Gustloff* in several of his books, starting with *The Tin Drum*, as well as to the sinking by British planes of another erstwhile cruise ship, the *Cap Arcona*, carrying concentration camp survivors.

Thus neither Gustloff nor the *Gustloff* is forgotten in the sense of having been cut or allowed to fall out of the record. But there is a difference between being part of the record and being part of collective memory. The anger and resentment of people like Tulla Pokriefke grows out of a sense that their suffering has not been given its due, that an event catastrophic enough to be a cause of public mourning has been forced to remain a source of private grief. Her plight, and the plight of thousands like her, is captured most poignantly when, wanting to commemorate the dead, she can find nowhere to put her flowers but on the site of the old Gustloff memorial. The question she asks, in its most emotive form, is: Is the reason why we are not allowed to lament, together and in public, the deaths of those thousands of drowned children simply that they were German children?

Ever since 1945 the question of collective guilt has been a divisive one in Germany, and Grass is at pains to confront it not directly but sideways, crabwise. *Crabwalk* is billed as *eine Novelle*, a novella or short fiction; its subject is not the sinking of the *Gustloff* but the need to write and the coming to be written of the story of the sinking of the *Gustloff*.

It is here that Günter Grass and the sketchy "Grass" figure come closest to merging: through "Grass," Grass presents his apology for not having written and, sadly, for no longer having it in his power to write the great German novel in which the multitude of Germans who perished in the death throes of the Third Reich are brought back to life so that they can be buried and mourned fittingly, and, the work of mourning having been completed, a new page in history can at last be turned, in an act of remembrance that will still the inarticulate, smoldering resentment of the Tulla Pokriefkes of Germany and liberate their grandchildren from the burden of the past.

But what does it in fact mean for the story of the *Gustloff* to be written by Paul Pokriefke? It is one thing to relive the terrible last hours in the imagination and then render them in words that will bring their terrors home to readers, which is the task that "Grass" seems to set before Paul. But the writing project before which Paul wavers is larger and more taxing: to become the writer who at this moment in history—the early years of the twenty-first century—chooses to make the loss of the *Gustloff* his subject, that is to say, who chooses to break the taboo on asserting that a war crime or at least an atrocity was visited on Germans that night.

Paul's reluctance to write the greater story, and the crabwise dance he performs in telling the story of his reluctance—a dance during which, by sideways motion, the greater story somehow gets told—is justified. For an obscure journalist named Pokriefke who by lucky or unlucky accident happened to be born on the scene to retell the story means nothing. For the present, stories about the sufferings of Germans during the war remain inseparable from who tells them and for what motive. The best person to tell how nine thousand innocent or "innocent" Germans died is not Pokriefke or even "Grass" but Günter Grass, doyen of German letters, winner of the Nobel Prize, steadiest practitioner and most enduring exemplar of democratic values in German public life. For Grass to tell the story at the opening of the new century means something. It may even signal that it is acceptable, appropriate for all the stories of what happened in those terrible years to enter the public arena.

Günter Grass has never been a great prose stylist or a pioneer of fictional form. His strengths lie elsewhere: in the acuteness of his observation of German society at all levels, his sense of the deeper currents of the national psyche, and his ethical steadiness. The narrative of *Crabwalk* is put together from bits and pieces that work efficiently in their present order though without any great feel of aesthetic inevitability. The authorial device of tracking the submarine and its prey step by step as they converge on the

fatal crossroads as though directed by a higher destiny is a particularly creaky one. As a piece of writing *Crabwalk* suffers by comparison with some of Grass's other forays into the *Novelle* form, notably *Cat and Mouse* and, most recently, *The Call of the Toad* (1992), an elegantly constructed fiction hovering between the satiric and the elegiac, in which a decent, elderly couple found an association to allow German expellees from Danzig (now Polish Gdansk) to be interred in the city of their birth, only to have their enterprise swept away from under their feet and turned into a money-spinning racket.

Ralph Manheim was Grass's first and best English translator, admirably attuned to Grass's language. After Manheim's death in 1992 the mantle was taken over first by Michael Henry Heim and then by Krishna Winston. Though there are one of two points one might quibble over—Tulla owns a master craftsman's certificate (*Meisterbrief*), not a "master's diploma," which sounds too academic; Captain Marinesko is not "degraded" (*degradiert*) on his return to port but reduced in rank—Winston's version of *Crabwalk* is a faithful one, down to the occasional clumsy, Grassian turn of phrase.

The main challenge to Winston's ingenuity is provided by Tulla Po-kriefke. Tulla speaks a demotic East German German with echoes of the working-class suburbs of pre-war Danzig. Finding an equivalent in American English is a thankless task. Locutions like "Ain't it good enough that I'm out here breaking my back for them no-goods?" have a quaintly dated feel; but perhaps Germans from the West find Tulla's speech quaintly dated too.

Notes

^[1] *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, translated by Beverley R. Placzek (Grove, 1975).

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