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Title:

'Headbirths: Or The Germans Are Dying Out,' by Gunther Grass [book review]

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Stily Desaja . ^{Head births} ~~Advertis Adelaide~~ ^{The} 510421,

Since the reclame which greeted The Tin
Doom Gunther Grass has been the most prestigious
of ~~contemporary~~ contemporary German novelists. Since
he is also a committed social democrat I, not
unnaturally, am predisposed ~~towards his work~~
to look well on his works. But "Headbirths,
with the Germans Are Dying (I)" appears to me
the least of them. The Pirandello gimmick

Grass had
gimmick

presenting the problems of the author in
delimiting character & story, as well as the
character & elements of the story itself is
~~but~~ ~~overworked~~ ~~by~~ now, and is here ~~overworked~~
worked over to poor effect. Grass
recounts some of his own trip to China, and
proposes a film ^{script} about a social-democratic
couple, both German teachers, who take
a trip to India, Thailand, & Bali to find
out at first hand about the third world,
~~and~~ ~~haunted~~ ~~at~~ the same time by the question
of whether they should have a child themselves,
a question each of them has at times answered
positively & at times negatively, but without
either coming up with a positive simultaneously
with the other. ~~They~~ They go on

the tour with an organization called "Sisyphus
Tour," which allows the author to talk about
Comms and present the problems, ~~of~~ not only
those of ^{mis}distribution of world income, but indeed
all problems facing social democrats, as being
like the task of Sisyphus. A wordily-~~heavy~~
but philosophic tour manager, Wertheim,
is sketched but ill-dealt with. A piece
of liver-sausage, taken as a present to the
relative of friends baby-sitting their cat is
introduced, and becomes a nuisance factor,
frequently put aside as generating proposals
for scenes either irrelevant or too expensive
to shoot as a film. The whole is
formless to a degree which detracts from
what Gross is trying to say - and he
explains this -

The explanation does not remedy the
fault. What a pity. Gross is a
writer of great brilliance, and while he
tends to scorn its results at times, the
book could have been much better with
the exercise of ~~greater~~ self-discipline.

"Headbirths, Or The Germans Are Dying Out," by Gunther Grass.

Since the reclame which resulted from the publication of "The Tin Drum" Gunther Grass has been the most prestigious of contemporary German novelists. He is a committed social-democrat. Admiring him as I do I am predisposed to look well on his works. But sadly I am constrained to say that "Headbirths" appears to me the least of them.

One can usually expect in Grass's writings that he will use a fanciful gimmick to allow him a means of commentary outside the dramatic action, to recount history, or to create tension and conflict. This was so not only in "The Tin Drum", with the central character's failure to grow physically, his obsession with the drum, and his powers to wreck anything at which he screamed, but also in "Local Anaesthetic", "From The Diary Of A Snail," and "The Flounder." The gimmick in this novel, (piece?- essay?- fantasy?- no doubt Grass would reject its being categorised,) is the Pirandello one of presenting the problems of the author in delineating character and story, as well as the characters themselves and elements of the story itself. Its a gimmick which I find over-worked by now, and here it is worked over to poor effect.

Grass recounts something of his own trip to China, and proposes a film script about a social-democratic couple, both German teachers who take a trip to India Thailand and Bali to find out at first hand about the third world. Grass himself poses the question "What if the positions of the Chinese and the Germans were reversed? What would be the effect on the world of 950 million Germans with projected growth in numbers, rather than the present population with less than zero population growth?" Instead of real births, the Germans have "headbirths" creations of the mind rather than the body.

So Grass's two teachers - this particular "headbirth", are

haunted by a problem both in general and in particular form. How do they cope with their pupils' rejection of their anti-racist teaching, the pupils' insistence that they resent the fact that there are few German babies being born in their town but plenty of babies of Turkish guest workers? What is the answer they give to the students who reject a further mixing of races and who demand the retention of what Grass derisively (and rightly) refers to as the racial purity of "Germanic- Slavic Celtic hybrids?" As to themselves, each of them has wanted a child - but always at different times from the other. They are worried about bringing a child into the kind of world they foresee.

The two go on a trip with an organisation called "Sisyphus Tours" which allows the author to not only to discuss Camus but to present the problems facing social democrats - the maldistribution of world income and indeed all problems - as being like the task of ~~Sx~~ Sisyphus. A worldly-wise and philosophic tour - manager, Wentien, is sketched but the purpose of his introduction to the plot left unclear. A piece of liver sausage, taken as a present to a relative of friends who are baby-sitting the teachers' cat is introduced, becomes a nuisance to the plot, is frequently put aside as generating scenes which are either irrelevant or too expensive to shoot on film. The whole is formless to a degree which detracts from what Grass is trying to say, and he explains this-

"We've learned in school that the present comes after the past and is followed by the future. But I work with a fourth tense, the paspresenture. That's why my form gets untidy. On my paper more is possible. Here only chaos foments order. Here even holes are contents. And loose threads are threads that have been left radically untied. Here everything doesn't have to come out even. That's why the Wentien phenomenon has not been clarified. The liver sausage lives on as luggage without revealing its deeper meaning."