



The Box: Tales from the Darkroom

Günter Grass , Krishna Winston (Translator)

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“Once upon a time there was a father who, because he had grown old, called together his sons and daughters—four, five, six, eight in number—and finally convinced them, after long hesitation, to do as he wished. Now they are sitting around a table and begin to talk . . .”

In an audacious literary experiment, Günter Grass writes in the voices of his eight children as they record memories of their childhoods, of growing up, of their father, who was always at work on a new book, always at the margins of their lives. Memories contradictory, critical, loving, accusatory—they piece together an intimate picture of this most public of men. To say nothing of Marie, Grass’s assistant, a family friend of many years, perhaps even a lover, whose snapshots taken with an old-fashioned Agfa box camera provide the author with ideas for his work. But her images offer much more. They reveal a truth beyond the ordinary detail of life, depict the future, tell what might have been, grant the wishes in visual form of those photographed. The children speculate on the nature of this magic: was the enchanted camera a source of inspiration for their father? Did it represent the power of art itself? Was it the eye of God?

Recalling J. M. Coetzee’s *Summertime* and Umberto Eco’s *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, *The Box* is an inspired and daring work of fiction. In its candor, wit, and earthiness, it is Grass at his best.

The Box: Tales from the Darkroom Details

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From Reader Review *The Box: Tales from the Darkroom* for online ebook

Hugo David says

I really liked this book.

It's a story about memory and imagination, family and the visual impact of an image and it's representation. This was the first book that my wife gave me. It was on the 30th of November 2009.

She passed on February 2015. The book has a special meaning to me. She dedicated the book and wrote "For all the images and memories that we already created and that we are going to create. Memories of a time, a temple, our being together, our love." It's also a book about family. G. Grass had 8 children. We also wanted to have children. Well, our child was our love. I recommend the reading of the book to everyone.

Aaron says

Knowing of Grass through the classic film adaptation of *THE TIN DRUM* only by reputation, this is admittedly an odd introduction to his literary body of work - the second installment in his current series of metafictional memoirs. Thankfully, I found it accessible and delightful after a fashion, and felt rewarded in working through several of its challenges.

Besides my non-familiarity with Grass's oeuvre, the foremost barrier I encountered was the style of this novel, related entirely anecdotally by the author's take on his real-life children, as they gather repeatedly at each other's homes and watering holes (at his request) to break bread and share/record their recollections of their father, and inescapably, his numerous relations with women, most notably his perhaps non-so-platonic friendship and collaboration with one Marie, a rare constant presence in the lives of all eight of the now-grown children, born of three different mothers, many of whom did not not about each other for much of their lives. Marie is the key invention of the piece, a tongue-in-cheek standin for what Grass might consider a muse, inspiring each of his previous novels via the magic of her Agfa camera (to which the title refers), which captures imagery that reveals truths and predicts events, usually somehow appearing in the background of the family photos she snaps for Grass, when such elements were definitely not present at the time. Likewise, Grass himself is very much an absent father in the eyes of his offspring characters, never quite committing to anything, despite half-baked dalliances into politics, and of course his relatively frequent swings in choice of romantic partner, of which they are the result. Somehow, through such flakiness, the Grass character manages a fairly steady output of novels, perhaps connecting with his family as best he can, by honoring them as the genesis of most ideas he has put to paper.

Marie is also depicted as a surrogate mentor to each of the children; her continual clucking, disapproval, and accusations of underappreciation never hiding her affection for their family and her role in forever chronicling their shared story. One of the children even becomes a photographer in his own right, having been privy to the details of her process, and apprenticing in her darkroom, though neither can or should quite understand the mystical abilities of that wonderful Agfa.

Back to the singular style - though the proceedings of the book are staged conversationally between the children, there are no quotation marks whatsoever, making it very difficult to know at any given time who is speaking - quite a muddle when there are at least five participants in any given scene. The resolution, of course, is that the specificity largely doesn't quite matter, and each character's voice does emerge however

slightly over time, with frequent-enough recalls to previous events and imagery that one can closely associate with each character. And the effect of this manner of dialogue intrigues me - at first blush, I can only describe it as a collective stream of consciousness, or perhaps it's Grass's way of reaffirming that he does not purport to speak for his children here. This is perhaps both the most frustrating and exciting element I experienced while reading this book, and while it's a technique I don't see myself employing, it is enchanting enough to file into a writer's bag of tricks and continue studying and experimenting with as a reader.

Steve Petherbridge says

Not the best Günter Grass novel. In the blurb it is described as a work of fiction, but, seems to be a record of his eight children as they recall their complex childhood. Perhaps, this allows Mr. Grass to exercise a degree of censorship! Am I being cynical? Maybe. Let's just say that Mr Grass fulfilled the instinct of nature and dispersed his seed widely, entering into numerous relationships resulting in the eight children. The structure of the book is original and can be entertaining.

This is a sequel to his novel of 2007, "Peeling the Onion", which I gave not read, but, is quite acclaimed. In it he confesses to his controversial, though youthful, membership of the Nazi Waffen SS.

In this sequel, Grass examines himself through the recollections of his eight children, who were apparently tape-recorded on various occasions talking about their childhoods and their father. Voices cut in and out, or overlap one another, or engage in arguing of facts, understandably differing in details as they would have been of different ages. A picture emerges of Grass as a fond, but, frequently disconnected father, tolerated by his partners, yet, someone who was always more interested in writing his books than in conversing with his children. As we readers know, one doesn't get those years back! Children grow up and leave. 'You could never be sure whether he's really listening or just pretending,' an unidentified voice says at one point.

To quote from a professional review:

"At the heart of the book is a mysterious woman called Marie, the possessor of an old-fashioned box camera, an Agfa, who takes photographs that stoke Grass's imagination and enable him to write his novels. Marie's Agfa is also a kind of time-travelling machine that allows her to summon up the past or foretell the future. As for Marie herself, she may or may not be Grass's mistress, but she's clearly his muse.

Meanwhile reality goes on around them: the Berlin Wall is built, and eventually demolished, while the children are left picking up emotional crumbs from their father's table. In part, *The Box* is about something that writers very seldom write about, namely what goes on around them while they are writing. Although Grass doesn't lambast himself for his behaviour, there's a strain of guilt running through the novel, a sense that he should have been more attentive to his family. Yet he's helplessly in thrall to the creative process, riding Marie's Agfa to wherever it will take him next.

The Box is not an easy book to read – at times, it's a bit like being stuck in a telephone exchange listening to a tangle of crossed lines. But it hums with vivacity, boldness and unflagging curiosity. As Grass writes of himself at the end, 'Something is still ticking inside him that has to be worked through, as long as he is still there?... '..."

A good book. A good translation. An easy read - two days in my case. A decent man. A loved man. An insight into the Grass family, perhaps, informing his large body of work.

Chad Post says

I like the premise of this book: All 8 of Gunter Grass's kids sit around in various locations and arrangements talking about their childhood and their father. They also spend a lot of time talking about Marie, Grass's close companion who was always around taking pictures with her Agfa camera. The thing about Marie's pictures though--as repeated ad infinitum until I nearly puked in my brain--is that when developed, the pictures showed images from the past, the future, dreams, wishes, etc. Fine, whatever. My main objection really is that this is all the kids ever talk about. Every time they start to get to something maybe interesting about growing up in Germany or living with their father or whatever, they get into this insipid shit about Marie's camera, and was it the Agfa Special or the box or whatever.

Maybe I'm just missing something. Or everything. But on page 150 when they're talk about the box and say, for basically the bajillionth time: "Maybe what made the box special was not only that it fulfilled wishes but also that it could save the past like a computer, before any such thing as hard drives or diskettes," I wanted to throw the damn book out of the airplane window.

It's too bad. I really wanted to like this, but instead found it insufferable. Especially after reading Heartbreak Hotel, which is so, so good.

Ana says

Didn't enjoy it that much. There isn't anything setting this book apart, except maybe for the way in which the autobiography is presented, as a dialogue between the author's eight children. Even so, there's a lack of a "natural" feeling, given how much dialogue there is. The story of someone can be much more than the stories that their children can say about them, and I felt like I was missing on the author's *actual* thoughts, even if it was written by him.

Linh Hoang says

This book is the story of a man and his life told through the perspective of his eight children. The children are all grown up now and they gather every week to discuss their past and share things never shared before. They talk about the secrets only a few were able to see and experience. Mostly, they talk about a Magic Box.

This book emphasizes the importance of dreams and wishes. The author wants the reader to learn that dreams and wishes can come true. I thought this was a very nice lesson and it contrast very well with the tone of the book. The book itself is a bit tragic but the lesson gives the characters and the readers hope.

I like this book. I thought it was nice that the children, even though full grown, still remember their past. They remember all the good and bad memories and it was fun reading about those memories. I started to lose interest in the book when I got half way. The book just got repetitive because it's the same pattern of occurrence that the children remember. It was fun reading about it the first time but then it got boring.

Kim Zinkowski says

B. Family reminiscences.

John M. says

Only read one chapter. Not my cup of tea. It was like reading a stranger's diary or being a voyeur at a party of strangers.

Hamed Khatiz says

I think that this book has the makings of an outstanding short story, any segment whatsoever. That said, spread it out over five hours, and you have the makings of a very boring novel indeed. The characters are also somewhat difficult to follow, changes in time, and age, about six different people who the children call their mother, and a difficult-to-identify narrator across the chapters. The novel is OK, but by no means streamlined.

Lori says

Just ok. A little confusing to read.

Allison says

It could have been a much better book with consistent revelation. Too trailer-y.

Alex says

The children of an eccentric German author tell the stories of their upbringing together in this translated novel that strikes me as a German flavor of magic realism. Throughout the novel there is Marie, the father's muse in many ways with her old camera that can describe the past or tell the future.

I appreciated the idea, and the writing style of several people talking in turn as on a tape recording was certainly interesting. At the end of the novel, though, I was left without a clear experience, or sense of purpose in the work, or strong emotional response, or really much of anything. Maybe on rereading it might be useful to take notes on and devote more time to learning about each of the children, or maybe it's more impactful after having read more of Grass's work, but for me it mostly fell flat beyond the novelty of ideas and presentation revealed in the first few pages.

Ahad says

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Carol says

Um livro lindo. A história é contada por meio da gravação de vários diálogos entre oito irmãos, nos quais eles contam e debatem algumas memórias da infância. O objetivo do livro é mostrar como cada irmão teve sua personalidade moldada pela forma com a qual interpretou e, conseqüentemente, lidou com esses acontecimentos. A história é ambientada na Alemanha Ocidental durante a Guerra Fria e, para não fugir do formato de transcrição, o autor retratou o cenário turbulento da época inserindo pequenas referências na fala ora de um personagem, ora de outro. A princípio, o livro pode parecer confuso, pois o narrador não deixa claro quem está falando o quê, mas com o passar das páginas e o aprofundamento das personagens, a identificação explícita de cada uma se torna desnecessária.

Friederike Knabe says

“Once upon a time a father, because he was getting old, gathered his children...”

Thus opens Günter Grass's venture into the genre of quasi-memoir. Imaginatively blending family chronicle with fairy tale, Grass moves constantly along the fine line between the real and the magical worlds. Taking the innovative approach of imagining his life being "critically assessed" from his children's perspectives, he is free to reveal some intimate insights into his private life, his work in progress, and his relationships, while keeping others hidden from view. While the reminiscences of the adult children are focusing on the father and their ever-changing family lives, Grass has them weave into their individual or group recollections numerous flashbacks into historical and contemporary societal events or developments - linking them to his research and book writing processes or his active engagement in public policy in post-war Germany.

For the writing of *The Box*, Grass had asked his reluctant grown-up children, eight in all, not all his own offspring, to come together from time to time and in different groupings in the course of a summer to record

their honest views of their father. While he stays in the background, he admits that he has his own ideas of directing the discussions, tinkering with the various accounts. We, as readers, are flies on the respective kitchen wall in one of the children's homes, listening in on a medley of overlapping, interrupting, contradicting dialogs and accounts, full of fun, love and teasing, with detailed or fleetingly passing insights into the complicated childhoods within the "Kuddelmuddel" (hodgepodge) of the father's families.

There wouldn't have been much magic in the stories, however, without the "old Marie", or "Knips-doch-mal, Mariechen" (take another snap, Mariechen). Marie, a photographer and close and longstanding family friend (the book is dedicated to her memory), was like a fixture in the daily life of the older children, and "clinging" to "Väterchen" wherever he went, capturing the family members and anything of minor or major importance for "Vatti's" next book project. Maybe, it was that she had a special talent to master the "Box", an apparently simple pre-war Agfa box camera that, having been clobbered and knocked about during the war, had apparently developed a mind of its own, or it was that she could imprint visions onto the photos once they passed through her darkroom... In any event, "Mariechen with her Box could not only see into the past but also into the future." And she shared what she saw... The novel's subtitle "Tales from the Darkroom" suggests upfront that we can expect some surprises when photos emerged from processing in the darkroom. The "children", moving back in time, recall many of Marie's stories and her photos from the Box.

The children's narratives, constantly interrupting each other, meander back and forward in time, reminding me of a jigsaw or, even better, a crossword puzzle, the only chronology being established by Grass's work in progress on one of his novels. Words are often triggers to associations and insinuations, not only for the others in the groups around the table, but also for the reader familiar with Grass's writing and/or life and the German context in which the life stories are set. The recounting is full of humour and ironies, mixed in with tidbits of wisdom and serious reflections. Grass's language deserves highlighting (having read the book in German). It is a jumble of direct voices (never indicated by quotes, except for Mariechen), half or incomplete sentences literally falling over each other; jokes and colloquialisms, jumping from one speaker to another, creating a vividly evoked intimacy and an immediacy of a lively debate that one would feel tempted to jump into to ask questions, or just to join in the laughter and fun with the rest of them... I would think that the author's language here is almost impossible to translate without losing much in the process. Grass is never easy to translate as he invents words as he goes and creates images and associations with unusual usages of words that have to be transposed rather than translated into other languages.

Publicized as the second volume of his three-volume memoir, THE BOX could not be different in style, tone and author's perspective from the first, Peeling the Onion, which was written with hindsight of age and critical reflection on Günter's youth and younger years. The third volume, now published in German, "Grimms' Wörter", melds the biography of the Grimm brothers with his own life, continuing roughly the chronology in his life's works. Grass demonstrates with this fictionalized memoir that he is, at 83, still innovative, experimental and avant-garde in his writing and thinking. A visual artist, a poet as well as a fiction and non-fiction writer, he shows himself here again as an exquisite storyteller with rich imagination that is, despite the magical visions he creates, nevertheless solidly grounded in the realities of his time.

António Barreto says

Extraordinária forma de efabular uma realidade que foi a sua vida e a da sua família, supostamente contada pelos oito filhos, sempre com humor e algum surrealismo literário.

Bill Forbes says

We listened to the audio book during our road trip to San Francisco. It is an autobiography, written as a fanciful transcription of recordings of Guenter Grass's 8 grown children (by 4 women) discussing their memories of their father. The central theme of the book is the photographs taken with an Agfa box camera by "Mariechen" - a family friend. Mariechen's snapshots magically show the scenes she photographs as they would have appeared according to the subjects' secret desires. This bit of hocus-pocus is discussed matter-of-factly among the siblings, as though it were odd, but nothing to get excited about. In the end, you feel you have gotten an honest and somewhat unflattering look into the author's relationships with his wives/lovers and children. The audio format didn't work very well for me, since the narrator, who has a deep baritone voice, was called upon to voice both the female and male characters.

Kris McCracken says

I like a lot of Günter Grass's novels very much. Indeed, some of them rank among my absolute favourites. However, I do find Grass the public figure a little bit tiresome, so it was with some trepidation that I began reading the autobiographical *The Box*. Tracking his life from the early-1960s to the early-1990s, Grass (with some creative sleight of hand) reconstructs events using the memories and viewpoints of his eight children – across a number of mothers – to give insight into his life.

It's a novel way of going about the job, but understandably one that drifts along inconsistently, as voices emerge and depart, overlap one another, become confused and bicker about the details. Credit to Grass for allowing an image of a loving, but disconnected father who was always more interested in himself, his writing and his role of public provocateur than he is in engaging with his children.

Structurally, *The Box* is at times a tricky read. Imagine being stuck in a room of squabbling siblings with a grumpy old German snapping at them to "talk about me!" For the strong of will, why not? For anybody else, it might be worth giving it a miss.

Hermien says

It really felt like siblings getting together sharing childhood memories. It was just that I had to keep reminding myself that it were the writer's own words describing a life in which he played a pivotal role, not the children's version of events.

J.R. says

The copyright page lists it as fiction, though the book is clearly a mix of fact and fiction with a bit of fantasy thrown in for good measure.

How could it be Gunter Grass otherwise? The man has always had a knack for skillfully blending. *The Box* was advertised as a sequel to the earlier *Peeling The Onion*, which was more straight-on autobiography. This briefer volume is an altogether different creature.

That is not to say it lacks charm. Could it be Grass otherwise?

Here the maestro is examined through the memories of his children—eight in all and by different wives and/or mistresses. Sometimes the speaker isn't clearly identified or gets cut off in mid-sentence, which can be confusing. They recall incidents from their childhoods and provide a sort-of portrait of the famous author.

In fact, Grass has confirmed the recollections are his own and not those of the children. In seeing himself through their eyes he gives us a portrait of a man who appears to have some regrets of not being a better father than he believes himself to have been. Several times he is described as not being a “play-father” and of being too busy to provide his full attention to his progeny.

The fantasy is mainly provided through the character of Marie (presumably modeled on the photographer Maria Rama to whom the book is dedicated) who with a cheap box camera provides insight into historical events for the writer and sometimes for the children.

Despite its emphasis on the past, Grass hints in the end, “...something is still ticking inside him that has to be worked through, as long as he is still here...”

I look forward to seeing what it might be.
