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The Tin Drum by Günter Grass

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A TEACHER'S GUIDE

TO THE TEACHER

The Tin Drum, without question one of the landmark novels of the twentieth century, was originally published in English in Ralph Manheim's outstanding translation. It was a huge bestseller; it almost instantly made its young author a major figure in world literature. This fiftieth anniversary edition, newly translated by Breon Mitchell, is more faithful to Günter Grass's style and rhythm, restores many omissions, and reflects more fully the complexity of the original work.

As he relates in his thorough Translator's Afterword, Mitchell has created this new *Tin Drum* under the careful guidance, and with the close and willing cooperation, of Grass himself. "It is precisely the mark of a great work of art that it demands to be retranslated," notes Mitchell. "We translate great works because they deserve it — because the power and depth of the text can never be fully realized by a single translation, no matter how inspired."

Now, after half a century, and in Mitchell's capable hands, *The Tin Drum* has lost none of its original "power and depth," its strength and relevance, its epic majesty. The vast, sweeping account of Oskar Matzerath, whose life story also functions as the story of modern Germany itself, is as rich and evocative as ever before.

And while this novel remains a great work of literature — as a commentary on twentieth-century history, an unflinching exploration of German identity, and an absurdist, poetic, yet grotesque example of magical realism — it also remains a great read. For all its symbolic import and postwar sociopolitical candor, what makes *The Tin Drum* speak to today's students is what makes any book relevant to those who sit down, duly engrossed, and read it: the novel brims with well-drawn, vividly detailed characters and powerful, universal themes. It's rife with imaginative scenes and settings, surprising twists and turns, philosophical ideas, bawdy jokes, diverting asides, tragic losses, stunning revelations, Joycean wordplay, spot-on descriptions, rhythmic riffs, and a voice that's simply unforgettable.

ACCLAIM FOR THIS NOVEL (AND THIS NEW TRANSLATION)

"*The Tin Drum* has now been studied and interpreted in classrooms for half a century . . . [It] remains a very great novel, as daring and imaginative as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*."
— *Washington Post*

"It's Grass's dazzling use of language that sets *The Tin Drum* apart, as he spins a dense verbal web alive with wordplay and innovation . . . Breon Mitchell has reinstated much of the rhythm of the German original, as well as restoring some overtly sexual references thought too shocking for [readers] half a century ago. Given Grass's close involvement with this new translation, it is fair to call this the definitive version of arguably the most important German novel of the postwar era."
— *Observer*

"[Mitchell's] new version . . . hews closer to the original's syntax and sentence structure and rhythm, breaking rules in English that Grass breaks in German."
— *Boston Phoenix*

"Mitchell sticks much more closely to the original . . . and emulates some of the German linguistic traits that Grass uses. Manheim had a tendency to break up the author's long, complex segments — some of which go on for a page or more — into shorter, simpler sentences. Although this made the text more accessible, it lost something of the rhythm of the original . . . Equally significantly, Mitchell aims to convey the way the language of the original text mimics Oskar's drum. In one case, Manheim simply left out an apparently incoherent series of words at the beginning of a chapter in which Oskar describes his ability to 'zurücktrommeln,' or 'drum up the past.' Mitchell restores these words, translated as 'Built up, chopped down,

wiped out, hauled back, dismembered, remembered,' which suggest the manipulation of memory and convey the percussive effect of the original . . . [This new] *Tin Drum* thus retains more of the strangeness of the original text. Mitchell does particularly well in the poetic passages in which Oskar plays with words or components of words . . . Grass retains his huge stature as a novelist."
— *New Statesman*

USING THIS GUIDE

This teacher's guide consists of two sections, "Reading and Understanding the Novel" and "Questions and Exercises for the Class." The first section will help students closely follow along with, and comprehend the plot of, *The Tin Drum*, while the second section will help them conceive of the novel in more associative, reflective, and exploratory ways. Thus the questions in the first section call upon students to read the text especially carefully, and those in the second section refer to the work's larger themes, trends, ideas, or historical backgrounds.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE NOVEL

1. *The Tin Drum* is packed with repeated images, recurring metaphors, ongoing puns, and reiterated ideas or expressions — techniques often used in literature. One example is Anna Bronski and "her skirts." Why do her skirts matter so much to Oskar and others? What are some other examples, and why does the author choose to incorporate them?
2. In "Under the Raft," Oskar says that his drum "recalls all the little details that I need to get the essentials down on paper" (p. 13). What does drumming mean to Oskar? What does it do for him, and to him? Is he obsessed with drumming?
3. Near the end of the book's fourth chapter, Oskar sees himself at his third birthday: "There I am . . . in a stance I found no reason to abandon. There and then I decided . . . that I would never be a politician and most certainly not a grocer, that I would make a point instead of remaining as I was — and so I did, remained that size, kept that attire, for years to come" (p. 48). What is Oskar telling us? Describe that "stance" he's referring to. In this scene, how is Grass able to break with reality in this way —and make it so convincing that the reader never questions it?

4. Explain the relationship shared by Oskar's beloved Mama, his uncle Jan Bronski, and the man known as Matzerath. Whom does Mama really love? And who is Oskar's actual father? How is this question of paternity echoed — several chapters later — by the arrival of the boy called Kurt?

5. One aspect of Breon Mitchell's translation that's been celebrated by critics and scholars alike is its faithful adherence to the poetry and rhythm of the original German text. Take, for example, the infinitive in this sentence (from the novel's fifth chapter): "I was able to singshatter glass" (p. 52). What does this mean? What power is being described here? Who wields it? Where else do rhythmic passages jump out at you? What do you think Grass is trying to achieve with this type of language?

6. What is the Stockturm? Why does Oskar climb to the top of it? What did you learn from *The Tin Drum* about the city of Danzig, Germany (now Gdańsk, Poland) — from its roots in the Middle Ages, to its architecture, to its citizens and its politics?

7. Describe Bebra, who is first encountered in "The Grandstand." How does Oskar feel about him? In what ways is he like Oskar, and in what ways is he different? Explain what Bebra means when he says: "They're coming! They will take over the festival grounds. They will stage torchlight parades. They will build grandstands . . . Always try to be sitting on the grandstands, and never standing in front of them" (p. 102).

8. Look at the chapter called "No Miracle." Why do you think this chapter was given that title? In the Manheim translation, the chapter was called "No Wonder." Why do you think Breon Mitchell might have made this change?

9. Who is Crazy Leo? What, if anything, might this character stand for symbolically? Why does he keep crossing paths with Oskar time and again?

10. What pivotal events happen at the end of Book One? And where does Book Two begin, in terms of the overall tale Oskar is telling us — and in terms of the history of World War II?

11. Review the "Fizz Powder" chapter and the beach-cabin scene immediately preceding it and explain why some readers might deem the novel controversial (especially half a century ago, when it first appeared). Did these scenes offend you?

12. What does Oskar think of the marriage of Maria and Matzerath? Does their union — eventually, or in the long run — change the way our protagonist feels about either of these people?

13. What is Bebra up to when Oskar reconnects with him in Book Two? Who is Bebra working for? And who is Roswitha Raguna? Why does Oskar join them on the road?

14. Much of the “Inspecting Concrete” chapter is presented as a work of drama — with stage directions, lines of theatrical dialogue, etc. Why is this done? What is the “Atlantic Wall”? And why do you suppose Grass is juxtaposing the world of D-day with the world of show business, pageantry, and art?

15. Why does Oskar prefer to be likened to the Prodigal Son — rather than to Ulysses — at the outset of the “Imitation of Christ” chapter? What happens, later in this chapter, when Oskar tries to pray at the Church of the Sacred Heart? How does this chapter echo “No Miracle” from Book One — especially in regard to Oskar’s drum?

16. Who are the so-called Dusters, and what do they stand for? Why do they accept Oskar as their leader? And what’s the “miracle weapon” that Oskar and his followers are said to possess at the beginning of “The Christmas Play”?

17. Why, as we witness in the “Ant Trail” chapter and elsewhere, is Oskar so afraid of the girl named Luzie?

18. Who murders Matzerath? How is his death related to the fall of Danzig? Why does Oskar see himself as responsible for the deaths of people around him? In what ways does Oskar influence the world around him?

19. After an intense debate with himself, Oskar decides to toss something into the grave alongside the body of Matzerath. What is this object? Why has Oskar decided to get rid of it? And what happens to him almost immediately after he does so?

20. Explain why Oskar, at the end of the “Disinfectant” chapter, says, “Lysol is more

important than life” (p. 399). Is he being satirical here? Or ironic, or sarcastic, or what?

21. Why is Bruno, rather than our hero, young Herr Matzerath, the narrator of the final chapter of Book Two?

22. Why does Maria turn down Oskar’s marriage proposal at the end of “Fortuna North”? Do we actually know why? Explain.

23. Looking again at the “Madonna 49” chapter, who are Lankes and Ulla? Where have we met Lankes previously? And why does Oskar keep referring to Ulla as “the Muse”?

24. Why does the character known as Raskolnikov insist that Oskar once more take up the drum?

25. Explain why the landlord character, Zeidler, is likened to a hedgehog.

26. Consider Oskar’s fixation on Sister Dorothea — the way he stalks her and breaks into her apartment in the “In the Wardrobe” chapter. What connections might you make between this fixation and the prolonged flashback Oskar has in this chapter, vis-à-vis “the harbor jetty at Neufahrwasser”?

27. Klepp is a character whom we first encounter early in *The Tin Drum*, but we get to know him only in the novel’s final chapters. What is it about Klepp that enables Oskar to renew (and even rekindle) his efforts to “drum up” the past? Why do the two of them decide to form a jazz band?

28. In “On the Coco Rug,” Oskar refers to the “Satan who had dwelt within me since baptism” (p. 494). Is Oskar actually driven or defined by this creature? Or does Satan seem to show up only when and where Oskar bids him to do so? Why do you think Sister Dorothea seems more interested in Satan than in Oskar?

29. In the “Onion Cellar” chapter, Oskar discusses the “tearless century” (p. 503). What does he mean by this? What age or historical time frame is he referring to, and

why?

30. What is “Rommel asparagus” (p. 520)? What other battle- or war-related expressions did you encounter when reading the novel, and why do you think the author chose to use them? (Feel free to consult the book’s useful Glossary.)

31. Identify the “green hats” (p. 547) who show up in the “Last Tram” chapter. Who are these men? Where did they come from? And why, in 1951, are they bent on carrying out a “tattered execution order” (p. 549) from 1939?

32. Does the long-dreaded Black Cook — in the book’s final chapter — finally catch up to Oskar, either literally or figuratively?

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR THE CLASS

1. Early in the book Oskar announces: “Or you can start by declaring that novels can no longer be written, and then, behind your own back as it were, produce a mighty blockbuster that establishes you as the last of the great novelists” (p. 5). (This remark is also cited at the beginning of Breon Mitchell’s Translator’s Afterword.) Is this what Oskar has done in *The Tin Drum*? Is this what — as we look back over the years with the benefit of historical perspective — Grass did?

2. What do we learn of Oskar’s family in the years before he was born — of his relatives and their stories, of his background and its particulars? What are the facts, and what are the might-have-been possibilities?

3. In “Moth and Light Bulb,” Oskar not only describes his own birth, he describes witnessing it: “I was one of those clairaudient infants whose mental development is complete at birth and thereafter simply confirmed . . . What my ear took in, my tiniest of brains immediately evaluated” (p. 35). Where else in the book do we find events or depictions that suggest the sort of storytelling known as magical realism?

4. Talk about the role that jazz music plays in the novel. How do the tone, plot, and/or language of *The Tin Drum* echo or mimic the specifics of jazz itself — for example, its emphasis on soloing and improvisation and dancing, its basis in complex or relentless rhythms, and its origins as a “wild” music of barrooms and

brothels?

5. In “The Photo Album,” Oskar states, “The worst pictures are never taken, but only dreamed of, or if taken, never developed” (p. 39). Given all the grotesque imagery readers are exposed to in the novel — the depictions of death, the decomposing animal corpses, the nightmarish war crimes — does Oskar’s remark ring true?

6. The phrase “clear to party cloudy” appears many times throughout Oskar’s account (pp. 58, 98, 123, 134, 214, 399, 552). Discuss why the author chose to repeat this phrase. Identify a few instances where it is employed, and then note how this seemingly harmless phrase might be commenting ironically on the mood or action at hand. Identify and discuss other instances in which Grass uses irony or satire in the book. Why do you think he chose this literary device to get his point across?

7. In “The Schedule,” Oskar mentions a prayer “that was normally only spoken between Offering and Transubstantiation” (p. 63). Define these two terms as used by the author. Keeping in mind that Oskar, at various points, refers to himself as Satan and as Jesus Christ, how do you think the novel is asking the reader to regard Catholicism? And religion in general?

8. Two world-class writers, Valentin Rasputin and Goethe, stand as the twin pillars — two equal yet opposite influences — of Oskar’s self-styled literary education. What did you learn about each of these writers from *The Tin Drum*? What does Oskar, over the course of the novel, seem to take from each of them? On your own, locate and read a short work by Rasputin and a short work by Goethe, then write a short paper in which you compare and contrast these works.

9. Why — especially in the “Shop Windows” chapter — does Oskar repeatedly, and secretly, “singshatter” theft-sized holes into storefront windows? And why does he, likewise secretly, break up Nazi rallies with his drumming?

10. In terms of narrative action as well as powerful description, one of the most memorable scenes in *The Tin Drum* is the “Good Friday Fare” chapter. As a class, discuss this episode. What happens here, and why is it so disturbing? What is it about the writing in this chapter that makes it so effective? And how are the various plot lines of the novel advanced (both separately and collectively) in this chapter? What other scenes in the novel did you find disturbing?

11. Does Oskar's mother, knowing that she is pregnant, decide to take her own life? Explain why you do or don't think so, and provide a quotation or two from the novel in support of your viewpoint.

12. Near the beginning of "Herbert Truczinski's Back," the Battle of the Skagerrak is mentioned. This actual battle is mentioned at different points in *The Tin Drum*. When was it fought? What was the outcome? Why do you think Oskar repeatedly refers to it? Do some historical research on this battle if you are unsure.

13. As a class, discuss the bitterly ironic language employed throughout the "Faith Hope Love" chapter, and consider the three words of the chapter's title. Why does the phrase "Once upon a time" appear over and over again? Who (or what) are the "Santa Claus" and "Gasman" named?

14. "A gentle schadenfreude ran through me," reports Oskar in the "Polish Post Office" chapter, "as I imagined how painful it must have been for the postmaster general's little rascal to bid farewell to his childhood paradise" (p. 211). What does "schadenfreude" mean? Where else in Grass's novel do we find this word — or, where else do we find the idea behind this word?

15. Maria first appears in the chapter that bears her name. How does her relationship with Oskar change over the course of the novel? How and why do Oskar's feelings for her change? Is Maria the great love of his life? Or is that love Roswitha, or someone else? Explain your views. Considering *The Tin Drum* as a coming-of-age novel, discuss Oskar's sexual awakening through his relationship with women. What metaphors does Grass use? Discuss his choice of uncomfortable language in these scenes.

16. Talk about the points that the novel makes, both real and symbolic, on the subject of aging. What are we to make of the fact that Oskar wills himself to remain a toddler? Or that he spends much of the narrative never appearing to grow older? What might Grass be telling us about the difference between childhood and adulthood? Or is the symbolic man-child at the center of the book meant to be read allegorically?

17. Do some independent reading or outside research on the topic of "the German

economic miracle.” As a class, define and discuss this phenomenon. How is it illustrated within the novel? By way of explanation, provide citations from the text.

18. In the pages of the *New York Times Book Review*, John Irving once wrote: “Dickens made me want to be a writer — but it was reading *The Tin Drum* at nineteen and twenty that showed me how . . . Grass wrote with fury, love, derision, slapstick, pathos — all with an unforgiving conscience.” Discuss *The Tin Drum* more broadly, as a work of literature, as a novel of enormous scope, interwoven plots and themes, sharply defined characters, overlapping events, and important ideas. What are the book’s strengths, in your view, and what are its weaknesses? Where does it fit in the larger canon of world literature? Did it remind you of other books you’ve read? How is it different?

19. Discuss the various comments and insights the novel brings to bear on art and creativity. In “Seventy-five Kilos,” for example, we read that Oskar, “though satisfied, remained dissatisfied, like any true artist.” Or consider the characters Bebra the performer and Lankes and Ulla, the painter and his muse. Or Oskar himself — who, like Bebra, is viewed as something of a “freak,” and who works for a while as a well-paid male model and famous jazz drummer. How does art function in the world of *The Tin Drum*? How is it juxtaposed with war? Why does art matter? What, if anything, does it do for humanity?

20. Describe the character of Korneff. Why does he hire Oskar as an apprentice? What does Oskar do for him, and learn from him? And how, if at all, does Korneff himself suggest the novel’s key theme of death, death as a part of life?

21. On several occasions, various characters in the novel convene in groups of three to play a card game called skat. As an outside project, learn more about this game — where it comes from, how it’s played, when it was invented, etc. Then play a few rounds of skat with some of your classmates. What significance does skat hold in the novel? Does knowing more about it affect your understanding of its inclusion in the story?

22. The grassroots rise of the Nazi Party, the waking nightmare of *Kristallnacht*, Germany’s initial invasion of Poland, the Soviets’ seizure of the city of Danzig, the eve of D-day at Normandy — there are many World War II-related events portrayed in the pages of *The Tin Drum*. How did reading Grass’s localized / personalized / fictionalized accounts of these historical events affect your own understanding of them? What did reading this novel teach you about that war and what it might really

have been like?

23. Translator Breon Mitchell has said: “How much have things really changed in fifty years? War and its aftermath are constant human concerns, and Oskar’s story seems to me amazingly relevant. Do we choose to mature as a nation, or do we remain willfully stunted in our moral and political growth? How do we fight evil, inside ourselves and in those around us?” The novel grew out of a certain sequence of political, social, and historical realities. When *The Tin Drum* first appeared in 1959 it was called blasphemous and pornographic. Would you consider the book as offensive today as it was to its first readers? Do the novel’s points about politics, history, and society carry the same weight now as they did then?

24. Discuss Oskar as a narrator. What makes him unreliable? Why does he switch between the first and third person? How does he view himself? How did your own view of Oskar change over the course of reading the book? Why is he sometimes described as a mythical character?

25. As a classwide exercise, view the 1979 film version of *The Tin Drum*. Compare and contrast this award-winning movie — among other prizes, it received the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film — with the novel that you’ve just finished reading. What did you think of the performances by the film’s leading actors? Why could it be said that the film version presents Books One and Two of Grass’s narrative but not Book Three?

26. Did Oskar murder Sister Dorothea? Can we ever know for sure whether he committed this act? Explore these questions with your classmates, keeping in mind the first-person narration by Vittlar in the book’s final chapters. Also keep in mind the following, which comes from a critic who reviewed this new translation: “The lesson Grass would have us all learn from *The Tin Drum* isn’t that Oskar is an unreliable narrator — it’s that narration itself is inherently unreliable” (Jeffrey Gantz, *Boston Phoenix*). What does the critic mean by this?

27. How and why does Grass employ humor and satire in *The Tin Drum*? In several passages, two framed portraits that hang next to each other in the Matzerath apartment — one of Beethoven, the other of Hitler — are conversationally (or else comparatively) juxtaposed for comic effect. In each of these passages, the humorous tone of the book shines through. Where else did *The Tin Drum* strike you as particularly funny? Find a few such examples and share them with your fellow students.

28. Talking about the novel on the occasion of its new, fiftieth-anniversary translation, one critic noted: “Food in *The Tin Drum* is life *and* death” (Jeffrey Gantz, *Boston Phoenix*). Having read the book, write a short essay in which you describe what this critic’s assertion means to you personally — whether and how you think the critic is correct to say this.

29. As recently as 2006, Günter Grass attracted international headlines when he admitted that he had, at the age of seventeen, been a Nazi soldier in Hitler’s Waffen-SS. As a Wikipedia entry has noted: “As Grass has for many decades been an outspoken left-leaning critic of Germany’s treatment of its Nazi past, his statement caused a great stir in the press.” Does this admission on the part of the author change in any way how you feel about *The Tin Drum*? Or about Grass himself? Why or why not?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND TRANSLATOR

Günter Grass was born in Danzig, Germany (now Gdańsk, Poland), in 1927. He is the widely acclaimed author of numerous books, including *The Tin Drum*, *Dog Years*, *My Century*, *Crabwalk*, and *Peeling the Onion*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1999.

Breon Mitchell is a professor of Germanic studies and comparative literature at Indiana University, where he is also director of the Lilly Library. He has been awarded the Kurt and Helen Wolff Prize for his work as a translator.

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Discussion questions written by Scott Pitcock

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