

Last Dances

By Günter Grass (with translations by Hans-Christian Oeser and Gabriel Rosenstock) (Coiscéim)

GERMAN AUTHOR Günter Grass – winner of a Nobel Prize and most famous for his novel *The Tin Drum* – has always been both an artist and the moral conscience of German memory. A very vocal supporter of the political left, he has often dealt with the effect of the Holocaust in his work.

But his late revelation about a short stint in his youth as a member of Hitler's SS has resulted in a huge political as well as artistic scandal in Germany, questioning the integrity of his entire body of work.

Last Dances presents Grass' lesser-known poetry in a tri-lingual edition containing selections from his previous collections *Letzte Tänze* and *Dummer August* – the former dating from a time before his SS confession, the latter from after. As such, the selection falls into two distinct parts.

Whereas *Letzte Tänze* conveys a sense of lightness and playfulness, the collection's second half is a lot darker, the irony often



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verging on bitterness. Could this be Grass' *Trauerarbeit* – the artist coming to terms with traumatic events? An artist's defence against public moral criticism? Or a defence against his bashing by the so-called moral authorities, who were only too happy that he had an Achilles heel?

Grass' poems often show an obvious autobiographic link, a self-commentary with an ironic distance towards his body of work. But far more than castaways, these poems all stand for themselves, in their sometimes naked, sometimes repellent beauty.

Oeser's and Rosenstock's respective English and Irish translations are sympathetic and at the same time as neutral as possible, showing Grass neither as the literary genius on a pedestal, nor the fallen saint he's been presented as in German media, but as what he is – human, a character full of life, maybe larger than life, with all its edges and faults, but a creator of great beauty.



Isabel Roleff has written articles and reviews for various magazines in her native Germany. More information about her work can be found at irishwritersexchange.com