

Ansichten eines Clowns  
or The Clown  
Heinrich Boell  
Penguin Classics

Forget Guenther Grass – the uncrowned king of German literature is definitely Heinrich Boell. A master at evoking complex emotions and trains of logic through astoundingly simple language, Boell's off-beat observations entice both with their eccentricity and his enviable ability to reflect the macro- in the microcosm. Stemming from a pacifist Catholic family persecuted by the Nazis himself, the author tells *The Clown* from the first-person perspective of Hans Schnier, scion of a wealthy, industrialist family, who were, at the very least, *Mitlaeufer* ("those who went along with it") under Hitler. Through Hans' voice Boell delivers a scathing criticism, not so much of Nazism (which, after all, is pretty easy to criticize), but of German Catholicism, and in fact of any system that supports any sort of authoritatively-endorsed, formalistic discrimination whatsoever. Such as the distinction between married and not-married, for example.

According to the Bible, "What God has put together, let no man put asunder", but just what has God put together?

After sleeping with Marie, a poverty-stricken, devoutly Catholic girl, Hans breaks with his family and begins his career as a clown to support himself and "his wife", because to Hans, Marie is his wife. Being, as he makes clear, of a strictly monogamous character, he simply has no need of something as mundane, repressive and ultimately futile as a marriage ceremony. But to Marie, ironically, marriage is more a worldly and less a spiritual affair than it is to Hans, and she is ultimately lured back to the church and marriage with an equally devout Catholic. Thus, the anguish of the clown begins.

Pro-feminist and anti-authoritarian, much of *The Clown* is reminiscent of *The Catcher in the Rye*, yet even more well-constructed. Boell effortlessly weaves Hans' present affliction with his memories of childhood and his early years with Marie, while at the same time faintly paralleling Hans' personal battle against religious conformism with the intellectual battle many Germans who had been children during the war felt in trying to come to terms with the very personal legacy of Nazism, the traditional, conformity-centered way of life that had promoted it, and the hypocrisy that followed the war, as many older Germans who had thrown their children's lives away for the Fatherland, now founded multicultural clubs and organized interfaith religious dialogues, denying their own responsibility for the conflict and in doing so, exchanging only one form of conventionality for another.

Most impressive of all are the scenes in which Boell pans out from Hans' numb depression to abstractly strip away the happy white picket-fence myth that Marie has bought into with a vicious acidity that well-executed juxtaposition renders even more intense. Throughout the book a depth of implied emotion glides below the remarkably plain language, never sliding into overt sentimentalism, but remaining taut just below the surface.

On many levels *Ansichten eines Clowns* is a work of art – and even better if you get the chance to read it in the original.