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'Where is the child I used to be?' Childhood remembered - Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Christa Wolf's *A Model Childhood* and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

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**'Where is the child I used to be?' Childhood remembered —  
Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Christa Wolf's *A Model  
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Julia Baker**

## **Introduction**

In this paper I compare three texts whose authors – Christa Wolf, Günter Grass, and W.G. Sebald – were all born between 1930 and 1950. They thus belong to a generation of writers who confront and critically question their own and their parents' involvement with National Socialism, and who attempt to clarify their own position during and after the war.

In my analysis of the texts, I focus on the fact that these literary depictions of childhood are not based on feelings of harmony between children and parents. The children do not appear to be thankful towards their parents and their memories do not reflect a happy childhood. Instead, these texts reflect a painful ambivalence: doubt (about the parents and their values), accusation, hostility, and even hatred.

All three texts deal with the question of the individual and his or her development from child to adult. The stories take place during and after World War II. Place, time, and plot are determined by the experiences of National Socialism, the war and the destruction caused by it, and the occupation and reconstruction of Germany. The narrators suffer through the change of times. The world is depicted as confusing, abominable, and inapprehensible. The war is mirrored in the dreadful circumstances within the family home in particular and society in general. Grass, Wolf, and Sebald portray the lives of three children who, by telling about and rediscovering their own childhood, only partly succeed at freeing themselves from the memory of the war. These three authors tell the stories of children through the filter of the individual who remembers what it was like to grow up during the war.

Grass, Wolf, and Sebald also share the motivation to write. In their literary work, they attempt to come to terms with the parent generation which was either actively involved in the war or died as a consequence of it. They thus intend to process the estrangement between the generations and at the same time question their own experience, repression, and participation in the events of the war. To question the guilt of one's own parents is, what Christa Wolf has termed, a cross-examination with oneself. Dealing with National Socialism can be seen as the attempt to clarify the difficult and disturbed relationship between parent and child in order to recognise and get over the Nazi past. The authors not only judge their parents but also reflect on how anti-Semitism affected them as children. The weakness of the child who cannot resist the adult world is thus not only shown but also questioned. How much and what kind of guilt does an adult feel who as a child identified with Hitler and the ideals of National Socialism? And why does a child who survived the Holocaust feel guilty as well?

This paper intends to show how childhood is constructed and by what means the narrators remember their childhood. According to Werner Brettschneider, the metamorphosis of the world of the child into the language of the adult is not a question of memory but one depending on the author's capability.[1] Can the language of an author who is no longer a child present the world of a child convincingly? The authors whose work I am going to discuss use a variety of means, such as realistic description, inner monologues, letters, documents, photos, fictitious conversations, and meditations to render the childhood of their narrators. Furthermore, they often change perspective or leave it up to the reader to find out who is narrating the story.

The protagonists, Jacques Austerlitz (the child of Jewish parents), Nelly Jordan (the BDM-member), and Oskar Matzerath (the resistance fighter), represent three modes of existence during the war. Each offers, in his or her own way, insights into how National Socialism influenced and determined the lives of children during World War II.

***Austerlitz* – ‘Since my childhood and youth, I have never known who I really was.’[2]**

According to W.G. Sebald, his generation are descendants of the war: ‘A feeling of identity, of origin arises in oneself, an origin from which one writes about oneself.’[3]

I was born in May 1944 in a place the war did not get to. Then you find out that it was the same month when Kafka's sister was deported to Auschwitz. It is the chronological contiguity that makes you think it is something to do with you.[4]

Sebald's father Georg joined the army and later the National Socialist Party. He was a prisoner of war in France and returned home in 1947 when Sebald was three years old. Like many of his generation, Sebald grew up without discussing the war. The silence about it which he experienced within the family and at school caused him to ‘begin a kind of private archaeology’.[5] If one could be at home in a certain time, Sebald thinks he would be at home between 1944 and 1950.[6] In order to reproduce the terror of the war, the writer must, in Sebald's eyes, walk the path of memory. To reproduce the terrors of war, one must practise archaeology, go to the archives, and interview witnesses. In Carol Bere's view, this is what makes it difficult to assign Sebald's work to a particular category:

Sebald's writing defies easy genre classification, but is rather a mosaic of several forms – prose fiction, which straddles the edges between fiction and fact; essay; autobiography or memoir; and travel writing.[7]

In all of Sebald's texts, we encounter more or less obsessed narrators and their doppelgängers who do not have a home. They all move through the world and try to make connections. Each is burdened by his subconscious, by history in general, and

by his memory in particular. Carol Bere describes Sebald's narrators as wanderers who, due to their pasts, are often incapable of living fulfilled lives.[8] They are driven by their personal memories and mysteries.

In *Austerlitz*, an anonymous narrator tells the story of his acquaintance with the historian Jacques Austerlitz, whom he repeatedly meets in different European cities. Their friendship begins in 1967 when the narrator encounters Austerlitz at the train station in Antwerp. Austerlitz's research deals with nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture. Although he cannot express why, he feels that buildings of this period exude a certain power, arrogance, and even brutality. In Austerlitz's view, the buildings are like troubled ghosts who bear testimony to the past. According to Sebald, 'places seem to me to have some kind of memory, in that they activate memory in those who look at them'.[9] Thus, the first part of the book describes Austerlitz's awkward feelings in train stations and his inexplicable foreboding in different places.

During the twenty years in which both men repeatedly lose touch with each other, both feel a particular uncertainty which in Austerlitz's case results in a threatening condition. Sebald describes this state as the consequence of a serious traumatising which erases painful experiences through a psychological mechanism and blocks it from the human brain. As soon as such traumatised people find themselves in a societal vacuum, as when they retire after a long working life, the memories and images return.[10] 'The hell of not knowing his [Austerlitz's] past has given way to the purgatorial torture of discovering it.'[11]

When the narrator meets Austerlitz again by chance in the mid-nineties, Austerlitz tells him the story of his long-repressed childhood which he himself has just discovered shortly before, and which he now feels he must tell to somebody:

Since my childhood and youth [...] I have never known who I really was. From where I stand now, of course, I can see that my name alone, and the fact that it was kept from me until my fifteenth year, ought to have put me on the track of my origins, but it has also become clear to me of late why an agency greater than or superior to my own capacity for thought, which circumspectly directs operations somewhere in the brain, has always preserved me from my own secret, systematically preventing me from drawing the obvious conclusions and embarking on the inquiries they would have suggested to me.[12]

While the first part of the book deals with the forebodings of the adult Austerlitz, the second part focuses on his childhood and adolescence. Having grown up as Dafydd Elias in a small Welsh town in the house of a fundamentalist priest and his depressed, lifeless wife, he learned about his real name, Jacques Austerlitz, from one of his teachers. Only in his fifties does Austerlitz begin the private archaeology of his own life. He is driven by a condition that threatens to drive him mad. Travelling to Prague where he finds his old nanny who knew his parents, he learns that his

father was able to flee to Paris while his mother was transported to Terezín. Finally he knows why he 'had always found himself in the grip of dangerous and entirely incomprehensible currents of emotion in the Parisian railway stations', which he regarded as 'places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune'.<sup>[13]</sup> He learns that he was one of many Jewish children who, unaccompanied, came to England between 1938 and 1939 on a Kinder-transport train. Eventually, Austerlitz remembers the circumstances of his childhood. Particularly in his conversations with his former nanny Vera, these memories emerge.

As in his other texts, Sebald uses photos and documents to emphasise or underline the story, or to cause the readers to believe that what they are reading is actually a true story. Memory and history are the main ingredients in Sebald's writing. Memory causes vertigo among those who escaped a horrible fate such as the Holocaust. According to Sebald, as a writer he cannot concentrate on the Holocaust itself. Instead he pays attention to those who survived it. The details of Susie Bechhofer's life, which he learned about from British TV, together with the life story of a friend who was overwhelmed by his memories after he retired, served as models for Jacques Austerlitz's childhood in Wales.

The discovery of the details of his childhood does not release Austerlitz from his tormented life. He still suffers from nightmares and panic attacks at night:

It was obviously of little use that I had discovered the sources of my distress and, looking back over all the past years, could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar surroundings: reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation which I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement.<sup>[14]</sup>

Austerlitz finally collapses after experiencing a panic attack in the middle of the street. He is taken to a hospital where he slowly regains consciousness. After spending a few months in the institution and working at a garden centre, he finds the strength to research his parents' ordeals.

For Carol Bere, Austerlitz is one of Sebald's damaged characters who almost die because they have suppressed their pasts. Bere points out that even as an adult, Austerlitz acts with a kind of suppression in both his career and private life:<sup>[15]</sup> for him, the world ends in the nineteenth century, even though he is aware that his research interests – architecture and history – point in the direction of the catastrophic events of the Holocaust. For a long time he ignores the Holocaust until he realises that he was affected by it himself. His research and its results lead him to a point where he, who never felt he belonged, develops a sense of identity. However, the psychological damage he experienced as a child proves to be too intense. Austerlitz will never feel at home in reality because he feels guilty as the only survivor of a family which died in the Holocaust.

## ***A Model Childhood* – ‘Where is the child I used to be,/still within, or far away?’ [16]**

The main topic of *A Model Childhood* is, in Christa Wolf's own words, not fascism alone but the 'structure of my generation's attitude towards the past. By dealing with the past in a historically concrete way, one gains access to the present'. [17] Based on three different levels of narration, past and present are thus connected in a rather complicated way. The past, which deals with the period of Nelly Jordan's childhood between 1933 and 1946, is interrupted continuously by two levels of the present: the narrator's visit to her hometown in 1971, and the extraneous memoranda -- reflections, experiences, newspaper articles, radio reports -- the author/narrator collects while working on the manuscript between 1972 and 1975.

Like Sebald's protagonist Austerlitz who, by confronting his childhood, comes to understand how he has become the adult he is, the narrator in *A Model Childhood* also confronts the child within. Like Austerlitz, the events and experiences of Nelly's childhood live on in the grown Nelly. During the two days in her hometown, she reflects on the problem of identity of the person who remembers and thus 'encounters' the child she used to be during National Socialism. How is it possible to write about one's own childhood, about oneself as a child? The constant change in how the narrator addresses herself can be interpreted as a linguistic expression of the problematic relationship between the author/narrator and the child. 'Therefore the child in the novel is sometimes referred to as you, sometimes as she and never as I.' [18] The narrator expresses her present self by using 'you'. When she talks about the child Nelly, she uses the third form, 'she'. The total absence of the perspective of the first-person narrator indicates a certain uneasiness with talking about herself.

As Chris Weedon has shown, Wolf, born in 1929, belongs to a generation that, although it was not directly responsible for the Third Reich and its actions, did not know any other life up to the end of the war but the one shaped, controlled, and influenced by National Socialism. [19] In *A Model Childhood* Wolf attempts to reconstruct the positive and negative impressions and feelings she had as a child in connection with National Socialism in order to find an answer to the central question: How was it possible to be present without being a part of it?

*A Model Childhood* shows how a value system was instilled in the children who went to schools and became members of various youth organisations which were set up and managed by the Nazis. Parents, even if they opposed aspects of the Nazi ideology, often found that they no longer had an impact on their children. Nelly's mother is no exception. Although she tries to show Nelly that it is important to treat Jews, communists, and other people who are not tolerated by the system with respect, Nelly becomes a convinced party member and active supporter of her idol Adolf Hitler.

*A Model Childhood* suggests that children brought up under Nazism could only begin to question its value system in extreme situations, for example, when called upon to hate whole groups of people.[20]

The morning after the *Kristallnacht*, Nelly feels sad but negates this feeling because she is not allowed to feel sadness. She has learned to deny her feelings. When another member of the BDM is punished for stealing, Nelly feels compassion instead of disgust. Yet again she cannot admit to herself what she truly feels. This time, her body reacts and she becomes ill for three months. The more active Nelly becomes in the movement, the more confused she appears. She develops a split personality and an incapability to react spontaneously. After reading an article in a forbidden newspaper about the institution 'Lebensborn', to which tall, blond, blue-eyed SS-men are brought together with brides of similar background for the purpose of producing racially pure children whom the mothers then offer to the Führer as a gift, Nelly puts the newspaper aside and thinks: 'No, not that!'[21]

It was one of those rare, precious, and inexplicable instances when Nelly found herself in conscious opposition to the required convictions she would have liked to share. As so often, it was a feeling of guilt that engraved the incident in her memory. How could she have known that bearing guilt was, under the prevailing conditions, a necessary requirement for inner freedom?[22]

Even Nelly's understanding of courage is influenced by the system. In her eyes, courage means to endure pain as one's duty instead of speaking the truth. She learns that survival, as well as the degree of popularity, are dependent on how convincingly somebody is able to lie.

*A Model Childhood* lasts well into the months after the end of the war. Nelly's first reaction is to stay loyal to the Führer. However, when she learns from a soldier that Hitler is dead, she has a new idea. The end of the (Nazi) world does not mean her own end. She is alive. She is ashamed at first, but at the same time greets this new life with curiosity. Her new existence as a refugee teaches her to see the world with different eyes.

Like *Austerlitz*, *A Model Childhood* deals with memory and the social and political conditions which enable and complicate its processes, with remembering and forgetting.

Memory, according to today's interpretation: The preservation of previous experience, and the faculty to do so. Not an organ then, but a process, and the capacity for carrying it out, expressed in one word. An unused memory gets lost, ceases to exist, dissolves into nothing – an alarming thought. Consequently, the faculty to preserve, to remember, must be developed.[23]



Wolf differentiates between the following types of memory: mechanical, gestalt, logical, verbal, material, and action. But she notes that the absence of one other category is acutely felt: moral memory.[24] In Wolf's opinion, the Germans developed strategies to avoid memory of that which they would rather forget. Just as Nelly learned as a child to avoid asking questions, the Germans learned to suppress their knowledge of the Nazi practices after the war.

For Wolf, memory is not a static process but one that changes over the course of time. Wolf tells the story of her childhood because she sees it as her and her generation's duty. By rediscovering Germany's political history and reinvestigating her childhood under National Socialism, she gains insight in her own past.

### ***The Tin Drum* – 'But does that make me [...] a resistance fighter?'**[25]

Like Christa Wolf, Günter Grass returned to his hometown Gdańsk in order to do research for his novel *The Tin Drum*. Although he felt like a stranger, he rediscovered bits and pieces of his childhood and youth. *The Tin Drum* and the two other novels of his Danzig Trilogy (*Cat and Mouse* and *Dog Years*) are attempts to 'immortalize the lost homeland'. [26] Unlike other authors, Grass did not intend to add another strong exhibit prize to German post-war literature.

I could not fulfil the postulation to overcome the German past because my attempts to map the (lost) place and to slowly remove the so-called middle layer, remained without consolation and catharsis.[27]

Nevertheless, Grass, who was born in 1927, does confront his own past. He imagines what it would have been like to have been born ten years earlier and realises that he very likely would have become a convinced National Socialist.[28] As a writer, his own life story only interests him when understood in the context of 'periods, upheaval and change'. [29] As far as autobiographies and memory are concerned, Grass reflects:

I could not really remember. I remember at once when I confront myself with a fiction, in a particular time frame. But the pure me, my pure me, if I had to follow that, I would get bored before I even started.[30]

*The Tin Drum* can thus be seen in the context of the author's memory of the time of his childhood and youth. In order to create the parameters of his own memory, Grass needs a protagonist like Oskar Matzerath. And even if Oskar has been called many things – impossible, scary, pitiful, scandalous, obscene, disgusting – Oskar is definitely not boring.

In the introductory chapter, Oskar is referred to as a resistance fighter, but what does he fight against? He certainly opposes more than merely his own family



environment or the Nazi society around him. As Marcel Reich-Ranicki argues, he fights 'physiologically and psychologically against the human existence'.<sup>[31]</sup>

He accuses his fellow man by turning himself into a caricature of that man. His responses involve a total infantilism. He becomes inhumanity beyond all ethical laws and guidelines.<sup>[32]</sup>

He is fed up with life as soon as he is born and wants to go back into his mother's womb; later he wants to hide under his grandmother's skirts. On his third birthday, 'when adults begin to distort their childhood',<sup>[33]</sup> Oskar deliberately refuses to grow. He sees the adult world with 'the merciless eyes of a child'.<sup>[34]</sup> He hides in cabinets and under tables to observe the love triangle between Matzerath, Bronski, and his mother. Although he refers to his mother as 'my poor Mama', he also accuses her of not being able to bear him, the dwarf, any longer, and to have escaped him by dying. Only Bebra looks through Oskar's exaggerated depiction of his emotions:

You are exaggerating, my good friend. Out of sheer jealousy you are angry with your dead mama. You feel humiliated because it wasn't you but those wearisome lovers that sent her to her grave. You are vain and wicked – as a genius should be.<sup>[35]</sup>

Oskar knows how to hide his true feelings from the adults; having the appearance of a three-year-old, he moves in a kind of 'free zone between childhood and adulthood', and wears a magic hood which gains him access to a world that he otherwise observes from the outside.<sup>[36]</sup> Grass plays with different perspectives and has Oskar change from the first person singular to the second and the third person singular in a single sentence. In his own words, Grass was looking for a 'remote perspective',<sup>[37]</sup> and found it in a narrator who acts like a child on the outside but who, at the same time, looks through and manipulates the adult world around him. The seemingly sincere innocence of the protagonist is used as a satirical means to uncover and ridicule the Nazi society. With the help of his drum, Oskar exercises power over people. In the chapter 'The Rostrum', Oskar takes control of the Hitler youth and the people who have come together for a rally. 'SA men and SS men did not find Oskar, because they were no match for him.'<sup>[38]</sup> From his bed in the mental hospital, Oskar, now thirty years old, questions whether or not his behaviour under the rostrum could be seen as resistance against National Socialism:

I must answer in the negative, and I hope that you too, you who are not inmates of mental hospitals, will regard me as nothing more than an eccentric who, for private and what is more aesthetic reasons [...] rejected the cut and colour of uniforms, the rhythm and tone of the music normally played on rostrums, and therefore drummed up a bit of protest on an instrument that was a mere toy.<sup>[39]</sup>

Furthermore, Oskar indicates that he not only interrupted Nazi rallies but also attacked other groups with his drumming:

Reds and Blacks, Boy Scouts and Spinach Shirts, Jehova's Witnesses, the Kyffhäuser Bund, Vegetarians, and the Young Polish Fresh Air Movement. Whatever they might have to sing, trumpet, or proclaim, my drum knew better. *Was sie auch zu verkünden hatten: Meine Trommel wusste es besser.*[40]

Does Oskar Matzerath's resistance end in itself? Does he resist because he enjoys destruction? Does he resist out of childish defiance? Or can his drumming be interpreted as his reaction to what the people around him consider art? Oskar is certainly more than a peculiar character who wants to indulge in life's aesthetic pleasures. Time and again he finds himself in un-aesthetic situations, such as being the secret voyeur of the love triangle between his mother with Jan Bronski, or Frau Greff's lover. He feels attracted to ugly people and situations because he has been surrounded by them all his life. His decision to stop growing and to protest against the chaos around him with his drum must then be seen as a form of resistance after all. As a self-proclaimed outsider, Oskar resists what is considered the norm of the adult world at the time.

Volker Schlöndorff's film version of the book only deals with the first book of *The Tin Drum* and thus concentrates on Oskar's childhood.

The idea was never to make a film with a dwarf because people would have said, those are a dwarf's problems, they don't interest me. But everybody has a childhood that one longs for and that one would have liked to prolong, in retrospect, that is. And one can, above all, identify with the child.[41]

In Schlöndorff's film, Oskar's perspective is indicated by consistently positioning the camera at a height of 90 cm. In addition, throughout the film, a high-pitched childish voice reminds the viewer that the story is told by a narrator who, on his third birthday, chose to maintain the appearance of a child. According to Schlöndorff, this is not an optical but an intellectual perspective which causes a child, and those who see the environment of a child from its point of view, to perceive the adults differently from how they perceive themselves.[42]

## **Conclusion**

Sebald, Wolf, and Grass all process parts of their own memory of growing up during World War II. They use a variety of means and texts and interrupt the fictitious world of their texts with real facts to indicate to the reader that the texts deal with history in general, and with the German past in particular.

These authors make guilt and innocence their theme by choosing a child as the narrator and protagonist of their stories. Their characters show the reader what it was like to grow up during National Socialism and thus also share parts of the authors' personal stories since Sebald, Wolf, and Grass were children and

adolescents who witnessed the Second World War, as well as its consequences, and are thus part of the war generation.

While Sebald's narrator in *Austerlitz* tells the story of a child whose Jewish parents died in the Holocaust and how his fate affects him as an adult, Wolf's novel *A Model Childhood* is a former BDM-member's confrontation with her past, and the adult author's attempt to make peace with the child she was during the war. And Oskar? In him, Grass creates an artificial child, a monster, a child of its time. He describes a childhood which has the reader sigh with relief that s/he was not born at the same time into the same environment.

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[22] Wolf, p. 223.

[23] Wolf, p. 10.

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[28] Neuhaus, p. 79.

[29] Neuhaus, p. 69.

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[32] Reich-Ranicki, p. 22 (my translation).

[33] Werner Wien, 'Trauermarsch auf der Blechtrommel', *Christ und Welt*, 17 December 1959. Cited in *Die Blechtrommel. Attraktion und Ärgernis. Ein Kapitel deutscher Literaturkritik*, ed. by Franz Josef Götz (Darmstadt und Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1984), p. 104 (my translation).

[34] Joachim Kaiser, 'Oskars getrommelte Bekenntnisse', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 31 Oktober/1 November 1959. Cited in *Die Blechtrommel. Attraktion und Ärgernis. Ein Kapitel deutscher Literaturkritik*, ed. by Franz Josef Götz (Darmstadt und Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1984), p. 55 (my translation).

[35] Grass, p. 171.

[36] Neuhaus, p. 126.

[37] Neuhaus, p. 61.

[38] Grass, p. 122.

[39] Grass, p. 124.

[40] Grass, p. 124.

[41] Cited in Neuhaus, p. 183.

[42] Cited in Neuhaus, p. 184.