

# Book Review

## Rome to Cologne

WHAT'S TO BECOME OF THE BOY? OR, SOMETHING TO DO WITH  
BOOKS

A memoir by Heinrich Böll, translated by Leila Vennewitz  
New York, Penguin Books,  
1985, 82 pp., \$4.95

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Some years ago, while walking along Rome's *Via del Corso*, I saw a sign: "Red Lion Bookshop—English Titles." I was learning my way around town—during my first year as a medical student in Italy—and feeling a bit out of sorts in that old culture that was so new to me. Finding a book to read in English was a welcome proposition. Nestled amidst the spy novels and murder mysteries was a slim volume entitled *The Clown* by Heinrich Böll. Scanning the cover, I learned that Böll had received the 1972 Nobel Prize for Literature. As I opened it and began reading, I found that the book had a remarkably evocative quality. Written in the first person narrative style, the story of an aging postwar West German clown unfolded. Alienated and increasingly cynical about his nation's Nazi past, the clown sought to hold together his marriage, his religious faith, his political identity, and his act. In telling his story, the clown elicited strong emotions because Böll was so effective at interweaving political and historical themes with the plainest events of everyday life, such as smelling and tasting a cup of freshly brewed coffee on a cold, damp night in a dreary, sleepy German city. Great landmarks and world events were made meaningful in the context of an individual's life, more by means of slowing down time to permit careful observation than by means of the drama used by so many authors. In a foreign city myself, I could understand the clown's sense of isolation and loneliness. I did not, fortunately, have to be funny to have a few coins in my pocket.

Böll's clown has stayed with me, and thus, I suppose, Böll has done the same. I was saddened to learn that Böll died in July 1985 at his son's home near Bonn. He was 67 years old. Böll had won acclaim as an international activist for writer's freedom, and provided Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn with his first shelter in the West after his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974. Widely read from East to West Germany, from the Soviet Union to Sweden, Böll never received much attention in the United States. His books, though hard to find here, are worth the effort.

Most recently published in the United States, from Böll's recent work, is *What's to Become of the Boy? Or, Something to Do with Books*. This work should be of interest for several reasons. Most importantly, it is a remembrance of late adolescence by a man in his sixties, a man who lived in Cologne as a boy when the Nazis were rising to power. The book addresses the development of the individual's political, philosophical, and moral sense. Here was a boy who was among very few peers in not joining Hitler's Youth Movement. He was, it seemed, more at home with books than with flags. Before his graduation, or "Certificate of Maturity," from secondary school in 1937, Böll, the youngest of eight children, worried his mother. "What's to become of the boy?" she asked aloud; she fretted about his introspective nature and propensity for writing poems. The basis for the Clown's alienation might perhaps lie in Böll's own character; the man, as a clown, borrowed the nature of a child, but Böll, as a child, very much acted the part of a man.

Böll's adolescent stance, in differing from his peers', as well as his parents' expectations, might have been difficult for many, but does not appear to have been so for Böll, and I wondered, was it the presence, or the absence, of certain qualities that would permit a person to develop so? Böll devoted his life to books—writing them, and defending others' rights to do the same. He has, thus, answered his mother's question that starts the title of the present volume, by providing a *raison d'être* that is also linked to the question, why is this book reviewed in this journal? It is precisely because this section of this journal has to do with books.

Böll offers, on many fronts, unique perspectives. He tells us, in his first paragraph, of the two errors on his Certificate of Maturity: his date of birth, and his profession. Böll had specified "book trade" for his diploma, but the school principal, without consulting Böll, changed this to "publishing." Böll wrote: "These two errors, which I cherish, justify me in regarding all the other particulars, including my grades, with some skepticism" (p. 3). Referring to the incorrect birth date: "that error permits me to entertain a certain doubt as to whether I am really the person who is certified thereon as mature" (p. 3).

This skepticism, of which Böll was conscious at the beginning of his adult life, persisted through his life, and through this book. Böll noted that he acquired his education not so much in school, but on the way to school. The grammar schools of the era, he wrote, "prepared us not for life, but for death" (p. 36). The realization (p. 53) that "material survival took priority over political survival" had its adaptive function for this man who fought for Germany on the East and West fronts, was wounded many times, and eventually captured by the Americans.

As in *The Clown*, this book is written in the first person narrative style, and paints a vivid portrait of a schoolboy's life. Böll provides us with a richly textured account of both his internal world and his external world, and in so doing, enables us to practically touch the intensity of the times, as this quotation should

illustrate: (p. 7)

Long before I knew Anouilh's play *Traveller Without Luggage*, that was what I enjoyed being, and I still dream of being one. Hands in pockets, eyes open, street hawkers, peddlers, markets, churches, museums (yes, I loved the museums, I was hungry for education, even if not very assiduous in its pursuit), prostitutes (in Cologne there was hardly a street without them)—dogs and cats, nuns and priests, monks—and the Rhine, that great gray river, alive and lively, beside which I could sit for hours at a time. . . .”