

number is eight. Seven 'ud be better.'

Mum frowned at her mother-in-law.

'Don't make that face, Dolly. I know my numbers and what they should be. They're bad luck this lot. Bringing it with them.'

'Don't start, Gladys, please.'

'Now girls.' Dad put up a freckled hand. I was the only one of us who was freckle, wax and marmalade like Dad; our red hair didn't grow, it *sprouted*.

'Our Halo sees it,' Nana muttered. 'Just look at her. Fretting.'

'You want the loo, Halo?' Mum asked.

They were both right – something was fizzing in my stomach sure as Nana's nine-day-old stew. I had to put a hand between my legs.

The courtyard was suddenly still. It was anticipation. Beyond the west stone wall our green fields were caught midsparkle, bright as light on a dragonfly's back. There, Nana's curly-horned sheep froze, mid-munch. I took a breath of the still quiet.

It was then we heard the bus rumble closer.

'It's them!' Nana growled.

We watched the bus glide under the red-brick arch: it was big, and it was silver.

'Expensive,' Nana Lew said, pointing. 'American.'

It turned, popping gravel. As it did, we waved. We waved hard and we stared at our stretching

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reflections on its shining silver surface: on the blacked-out windows. We were flag-wavers at a homecoming parade, cheering on the cavalcade, and for a moment we were frozen like that.

The bus shuddered to a stop.

I could feel the heat off it, like it had driven all the way from America. I wiggled on the spot, my stomach burning, and tried to imagine who was inside: what rock star might be puzzled at the sight of a wholesome family, waving. I knew that soon a band would stumble out; soon they'd jump at the whinny of Ziggy and Stardust, our Welsh cobs. Maybe they'd be frightened by the chickens or too stoned to cope with ducks, but by day three they'd be asking to borrow saddles and feeding the pig chocolate.

'It brings out the child in them,' Mum once told us, 'because even to the greatest rock musicians in the world, a lamb is a lamb and a horse is a horse.' It was true, and so I wondered if I could depend upon this band, *Te-quee-la*, to run down to our house to ask where the tack room was, where the horse brushes were kept, and was it wrong to feed the chickens chicken crisps? Maybe it was as inevitable as me coming out arse-wise. Maybe it was as predictable as the shiver that now trembled in my stomach like a frightened hound, telling me that change was on her way.

As the bus hummed and my family drew a collective breath, its silver concertina doors sprung open.

It was a girl who waddled out first. She smiled at us as she held on to the chrome rails, and when she jumped from the last step, dust blew up. I put up a hand and she waved back.

'Hey kiddo,' she said to me.

She stood against the hot metal of the bus, one foot flat on its silver surface and one knee out. She wore a long red dress and I could just see the poke of black cowboy boots beneath the hem. The dress was tight across her tummy, though, and she couldn't close her sheepskin waistcoat. The thing was, her stomach was enormous. This girl looked like the sheep I saw blow up in Nana Lew's field: it blew up and up and groaned, until Dad had to stab it through the belly with an ice pick.

Bloat, our dad said.

I stared and wondered if he'd have to do the same here, then Mum pinched me and whispered how it was rude to stare, that it was a baby in the girl's stomach. But she wasn't much more than a baby herself. I poked out my own tummy and puffed out my cheeks. I stared down, trying to spot my feet. Vincent twitched beside me, electric.

The eight brothers were jumping out, one by one.

Vincent gasped.

Their smell wafted to us: it was cheesecake, smoke, and peanuts. They stretched out the cramp of the

bus and we saw these brothers had honey-brown faces and beards of gold that glistened in the setting sun. Eight suddenly seemed a large number as they stood around the girl, protective as wolves on a kill, their blue eyes somehow the same. These brothers were huge.

The most remarkable thing about them, though, was their clothes. They all wore white suits, but these suits were embroidered with pictures as colourful as the pictures in Molly's books. On their lapels were pink and naked girls; on their arms and thighs were great, green cactus trees, silver stars, and big white pills. The stars sparkled and the naked girls seemed to be dancing as the brothers fidgeted. My family, for a small moment, was speechless. One brother turned to gaze out at the courtyard, and I saw a big red cross and a running black horse sewn onto his wide back. I was sure I could hear cantering hooves. These men were wearing stories, and both the brothers and the stories were beautiful.

'This is it, huh?' one brother said.

'Guess so.'

END OF BOOK EXTRACT
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New Releases

The Tin Drum

Günter Grass
New translation by
Breon Mitchell
Harvill Secker



To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Günter Grass' gloriously unforgettable novel, *The Tin Drum*, Breon Mitchell presents us with a new translation of this classic. Mitchell's meticulously crafted translation captures the full exuberance of Grass' writing, pounding along the non-linear path of the narrator's life story with all the rhythm of the drumbeats that he uses to recount it. Oskar, more astute than the adults around him, stunts his growth at the age of three, and using the twin weapons of his drum and his glass-shattering voice, proceeds to beat his way through Nazi Germany.

Told retrospectively from Oskar's ward in a mental institution, where he uses his drum to recall lost memories, Grass' novel weaves its way between the past and the present and the narrative is littered with wry observations of human deception. Perhaps the greatest success of Mitchell's translation is his preservation of Grass' subtle humour; he carefully retains the author's playful manipulation of language and the tight choreography of his words makes this a hugely enjoyable read.

Bryony Byrne

The Blue Manuscript

Sabiha Al Khemir
Verso



Al Khemir's novel weaves archaeology, modernity and East/West dialogue within well-established territory. The pivotal search for the fated Blue Manuscript – a unique 10th century rendering of the Qur'an – in 1980s Egypt is certainly valuable. The narratives surrounding the commission of the manuscript and the otherworldly Amm Gaber – blind, with his eyes turned inward upon himself – are almost worthy of Bulgakov.

Yet, such taut explorations are regularly undermined, frustratingly, by poor metaphor and uncritical approaches. Zohra, a translator, is both Tunisian and English. She feels torn between her two halves. Similar separations have been too well interrogated to plausibly allow such a static consideration of an individual's cultural psychology. A metaphor of "memory bringing emotion to the surface" should be profound, but is unfortunately rendered as an analogy to the layers of an onion.

At its highest moments, however, this is a profound work. Al Khemir's love of both Arabic and English offers a discoverable humanity among the ruins of violence between their associated cultures.

Tim Lawrence