Tribute

The setting is Danzig during World War II. The narrator recalls a boyhood scene in which a black cat pounces on his friend Mahlke’s “mouse”-his prominent Adam’s apple. This incident sets off a wild series of events that ultimately leads to Mahlke’s becoming a national hero. Translated by Ralph Manheim. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

Okay, I’ll admit freely: “Katz und Maus” was required reading in school, which obviously biased me against it immediately. What’s worse, it was German postwar literature, which never fails to be depressing and downbeat. I knew I was in for a greuling read.

And then, suddenly, it wasn’t. In fact, I started liking it from the first line, and carried on until the end, which I’d give away if I said wasn’t an end, so I’ll let you read it yourself. The story is complicated and non-linear. It is told from a first person narrative, the exact reliability of which is constantly brought into question, either by the fog of the years or deliberate misconstruction due to feelings of guilt, the narrator never seems too sure about what happened, often offering several different versions of the same story at the same time, and even going so far as to admit his own fictitiousness. The story that serves as a Leitmotiv, as well as title of the book, is the cat that attacked Mahlke’s adam’s apple, and exactly how it got there. What I found most striking about the book on first glance was the descriptions of the places and characters that the novella is centered on. At the same time, you have a feeling that it’s merely a part of a greater whole. It fits in with the other two books in the so-called Danzig Trilogy seamlessly, yet still sets itself apart. I have another confession to make: I attend a German high school, and so I read it in German. In my opinion, though what I’ve read of the excerpts seems like a decent translation, Günter Grass is an author who uses the German language to its full extent, employing every manner of grammatical and syntactical tricks to underline the story. These, unfortunately, are completely lost in the translation. If you understand German decently, I would strongly encourage you to seek out an original language text.

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