AN EXTREMELY LOUD TIN DRUM:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER’S
EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE AND GÜNTER
GRASS’S THE TIN DRUM

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Introduction

“To speak of [Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close] in the same breath as . . . The Tin Drum—the chilling Günter Grass novel from which Oskar derives his name—is the stuff of marketing, not serious critical assessment.” This is how a reviewer of the Boston Globe debunked in advance any scholarly attempt at establishing an intertextual link between Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Günter Grass’s The Tin Drum, castigating Foer’s novel for its cheap and unwarranted references to Grass’s work.1 Indeed, gratuitousness and a lack of inventiveness are among the friendlier tags that have been appended to Foer.2 This paper shows that the parallels between the two novels reach beyond the superficial analogies picked up by the critics, who see in Foer’s Oskar Schell nothing more than an unimaginative, smaller brother of Grass’s Oskar Matzerath. It is obvious that Foer’s and Grass’s protagonists are disconcertingly similar to each other. On the surface, their most conspicuous similarities are their shared first name and a penchant for percussion instruments, a tambourine and a tin drum respectively. These superficialities aside, The Tin Drum and Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close both deal with life in the wake of manmade cataclysm. Both boys acutely experience the threat and evils of war: Oskar Schell’s family falls victim to September 11, and Oskar Matzerath is the seemingly...
impassive eyewitness of several World War II–related acts of terror, ranging from the atrocities on the Night of Broken Glass to the siege of the Polish Post Office and the subsequent annexation of the free city Danzig—his hometown—into the Third Reich. And with “th[at] mind of [his] which persists in excreting syllables,” Oskar Matzerath’s cognitive activities display a striking resemblance to Oskar Schell’s overactive imagination, in both cases presumably a by-product of trauma. The intertextual link between the two novels, however, is by no means confined to superficial resemblances in the respective plots. Rather, similarities on the plot and thematic level are complemented by a set of characteristics typical of both trauma fiction and magical realism.

Comparing Oskars

_Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close_ tells the story of nine-year-old Oskar Schell, a precocious New Yorker of German-American descent, whose father perished in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. A year after these events, we find Oskar in a state of hyperactivity and hypervigilance, about to embark on what appears to be a wild goose chase across the five boroughs of New York City. The boy’s quest begins when he comes across a mysterious key in an envelope labeled “Black” among his father’s possessions. With only a tambourine for company, Oskar travels to all corners of the city in search of the matching lock to his key. The ensuing treasure hunt is driven by the boy’s need to soothe his painfully lively imagination and quell an insatiable desire to recreate his father’s image as accurately as possible, a necessary step in the process of gaining mastery over his trauma. At the same time, however, the child grows apart from his surviving loved ones, his mother and his paternal grandmother. Whenever he feels frustrated, Oskar lashes out at them. He throws violent, albeit imagined, tantrums in front of his classmates and his psychiatrist and finally also turns his anger toward himself in the form of self-chastisement. In addition, Oskar suffers from trauma-induced existential anxieties, which he tries to assuage by thinking up several ways to stunt his growth and by inventing all sorts of curious gadgets.

Oskar’s trauma narrative is enacted against the fragmented life story of his grandparents, both survivors of the Dresden air raids at the end of World War II. Thomas Schell and his future wife—who turns out to be the sister of his deceased girlfriend, Anna—come to New York independently of each other, carrying with them the heavy emotional burden of being the
only survivors of their respective families. A chance encounter at a bakery results in a union based on their mutual longing to reforge severed family ties and recreate the ideal of lost loved ones. Predictably, the marriage does not work. Thomas abandons his wife and unborn child because he “can’t live, [he has] tried and [he] can’t” (135). It is only forty years later, after learning of his son’s demise, that Thomas returns to New York and meets his grandson, Oskar. The novel, in short, conjures up three characters in different stages of “try[ing] to negotiate some sort of peace with non-negotiable tragedies.”

That other Oskar, Günter Grass’s clairvoyant, child(like) narrator, is irreparably damaged by what he has witnessed during World War II. When the reader first encounters him, Oskar Matzerath is an inmate of a lunatic asylum. From the safe haven of his white-enameled hospital bed, he expounds his family history by means of a tin drum. His account straddles four generations—from the rather unusual circumstances of his mother’s conception to the birth of his putative son Kurt and beyond. Oskar’s family history is punctuated with references to important historical events, every incident coinciding with a major change on the world stage. Thus, Oskar evokes causal relationships between personal and geopolitical occurrences. The most eye-catching of these causalities is his decision to stop growing at the age of three—a resolve that can be seen as a total repudiation of the increasingly absurd reality of prewar Germany and the rising threat of Nazism. Oskar decides to resume his physical development at his supposed father’s burial, the symbolic end of Nazism and the Second World War. Instead of gaining “normal” height, however, Oskar grows a hump. Apart from reflecting “the ugliness with which German society emerges from the war years” and Oskar’s disappointment with it, his deformity also tellingly predicts his eventual failure to reintegrate into that society.

In the last chapters of the novel, Oskar finally offers an explanation as to why he is interned: he has been accused and found guilty of a murder he did not commit. As with so many important events in his life, however, he admits to having orchestrated the concurrence of circumstances leading up to his arrest and subsequent incarceration. The grounds for his actions are a self-diagnosed inability to function in society, after being disappointed by its workings one time too many. The asylum shelters him from the inhospitable outside world. It is therefore not surprising that his acquittal comes as unwelcome news to him. As the novel draws to a close, and Oskar faces reintegration into society, he is seized by an irrational fear of the spectral figure of the Black Witch lurking in the shadows of his future. Oskar’s existential terrors—embodied by that specter—that have relentlessly driven
him to the point of no return, can no longer be kept at bay and have now effectively permeated his future: “Don’t ask Oskar who she is! Words fail me. First she was behind me, later she kissed my hump, but now, now and forever, she is in front of me, coming closer” (589).

An Unimaginative Smaller Brother?

Magical Reality and Ex-centricity

Spectral apparitions like Grass’s ill-boding Black Witch, or the haunting (non)presence of Thomas Schell’s deceased childhood love, Anna, are a returning feature of trauma fiction, appearing to literally give shape to the possessive power the traumatic past has over a victim’s present. Such a merging of conventional realist fiction with “unrealistic” or fantastic elements clearly manifests itself in both Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and The Tin Drum. Although the novels evoke easily recognizable narrative worlds, consisting of situations and peopled by characters that are ordinary enough at first sight, they simultaneously undermine their readers’ unconditional immersion into those worlds by subtly arousing alienation. Narrative reality in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, for instance, has a certain storybook quality. On his solitary wanderings through post–September 11 New York City, the precocious Oskar Schell never once gets in harm’s way. The boy’s precocity alone is almost beyond belief: his favorite book is Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time, he is a fluent speaker of French, and he harbors a profound admiration for Sir Laurence Olivier. He crosses the path of a motley assortment of characters, each more extravagant than the next, all of whom are benevolent and well disposed toward his undertaking. Among them is the 103-year-old war correspondent A. R. Black, who has lived every day of the twentieth century and who was once engaged to Francis Scott Fitzgerald’s sister (152–53). As an overly knowledgeable child, and as a sufferer of trauma, Oskar Schell obviously is an ex-centric and liminal character: his classmates think he is a freak (189–90, 192), and, grief-stricken as he is, he wards off his mother’s every attempt to get close to him.

The figure of Oskar Matzerath, too, is a curiosum in and by himself. He comes into the world as “one of those clairaudient infants whose mental development is completed at birth” and immediately takes “a very critical attitude toward the first utterances to slip from [his] parents” (47). Oskar
invokes these statements as an ultimate justification for his decision to stop growing at the age of three. To mask this conscious decision from the outside world, he devises an elaborate ruse: “And so with a single fall, not exactly without gravity but its degree of gravity calculated by myself in advance, I . . . supplied a reason—repeatedly confirmed by the doctors and in general satisfactory to the grownups who simply have to have their explanations for things—my failure to grow” (63). Oskar’s uncommon insight into life behind the scenes—granted to him by his outward underdevelopment and harmlessness—allows Grass to “uncover the grotesque in everyday life, surreality in normality.” The deplorable state of post-war German reality is beautifully reflected in the chapter “In the Onion Cellar” (519–34). In the eponymous establishment in Düsseldorf, “a cross-section of the world which nowadays calls itself intellectuals” (523) gathers together to receive “a chopping board—pig or fish—a paring knife for eighty pfennings, and for twelve marks an ordinary field-, garden-, and kitchen-variety onion” (525) because they are no longer capable of crying without the inducement of onion juice. A similar episode in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close describes New York City’s post–September 11 reality as seen through the eyes of Oskar Schell. He contemplates inventing “a special drain that would be underneath every pillow in New York, and would connect to the reservoir [in Central Park]. Whenever people cried themselves to sleep, the tears would all go to the same place, and in the morning the weatherman could report if the water level of the Reservoir of Tears had gone up or down, and you could know if New York was in heavy boots” (38).

Both novels not only manifest a relatively absurd narrative reality but also reveal a bidimensionality of time. The characters of Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and The Tin Drum move on at least two different temporal planes: an antetraumatic past and a post-traumatic present. These layers of time are interwoven to such a degree that the latter is continually subject to erratic and uncontrollable interferences from the former. Oskar Matzerath’s position is firmly anchored in the narrative present, a position that, in all likelihood, is permanent. In fact, his ultimate goal in life is regress—that is, a return to the safety of his mother’s womb—not progress. On this regressive journey, he is assisted by his tin drum:

Lonely and misunderstood, Oskar . . . lost his enthusiasm even before this life . . . had begun. It was only the prospect of the drum that prevented me then from expressing more forcefully my desire to return to the womb. Besides, the midwife had already cut my umbilical cord. There was nothing more to be done. (49)
Establishing the prospect of receiving a tin drum as his principal raison d’être is justified, according to Gertrude Cepl-Kaufmann, since it will prove to be a most vital tool in his retrospective process. Oskar’s meticulous recreation of his personal history on the drum testifies to his desire to keep alive the past in the present. At the same time, however, he endeavors at dispelling the ghosts of the past by getting rid of his drum and recording his experiences in writing instead. A resolve taken at his father’s freshly dug grave to forever abstain from drumming, however, fails miserably. His vain struggle to free himself from the influence of the drum, and by extension the past, confirms Oskar’s immutable status of eccentricity. Eventually, his fixation with the past will interfere with his attempt to successfully integrate into society.

Oskar Matzerath’s striving for timelessness, his desire to unravel the fabric of time itself, is echoed in all three of Foer’s main characters, most noticeably so in Grandpa and Grandma Schell. As a survivor of the Dresden bombing, Thomas is unable to reconcile himself to the new, posttraumatic reality. After emigrating to New York, he becomes an ex-centric character in every sense of the word. He does not belong anywhere, except in a past that is irretrievably lost to him. In a feeble effort to reinvoke his memories of Anna, Thomas marries her younger sister. But even that marriage cannot help him to reintegrate into society. A similar rationale can be found in Grandma’s attempt to cope with her childhood trauma. When that trauma is reinforced by Thomas’s leaving her, she tries to recreate her husband’s image in her son by naming him after his father. With this act of naming, Grandma fulfils the ritual of memorial candles, designating her child as a “lifesaver for the confused souls of [its] parents.” After the death of Thomas Jr. on 9/11, the memorial candle is passed on to his son, Oskar. Oskar’s mother and grandmother repeatedly tell the boy how much he reminds them of his father and grandfather. Both women turn the child into “a compensation and a substitute for their relatives who [have] perished . . . and even for their own previous lives.” In so doing, they expose the boy to the danger of losing his identity as an autonomous individual, and of becoming, as it were, a living memory of their lost loved ones.

At first, it does indeed seem that becoming a memorial candle is a fate likely to befall Oskar and that he will become as transfixed by the past as his grandparents. Many of his actions suggest he has a similar inclination as they have to not let go of the past. His “odd” posttraumatic behavior combined with his unusual precocity make him into a misfit. Part of that trauma-induced...
behavior is the boy’s obsession with reconstructing his father’s last days. In every Black he visits, Oskar hopes to find someone who will contribute a piece to the puzzle of his father’s death. In that, he is not unlike his grandfather, who literally wants to remodel his wife into a mirror image of Anna, or his grandmother, who looks for signs of her son in Oskar. In addition, the boy’s frequent need to hide from the outside world and “zip up the sleeping bag of [him]self” (6) point toward the posttraumatic process of “acting out.”  

Despite those symptoms, however, Foer’s protagonist shows promising signs of a growing ability to recover from and work through his trauma. While Oskar is greatly disturbed by his mother’s and grandmother’s constant references to his likeness to his father (252), for instance, he himself refers to this likeness on meeting his grandmother’s mysterious lodger. More important still is his conscious imitation, toward the end of the novel, of the way his father used to shrug his shoulders (302), because it indicates a realization on the boy’s part that, after all, there is nothing wrong with looking like his father.  

Although Oskar’s full recovery from his trauma must always remain pure conjecture, there are nevertheless ample indicators to justify the speculation. As he becomes more considerate of the people around him, the child’s obsession with his own grief slowly seems to dissipate. For example, he asks Gerald, the limousine driver who helps him execute the final phase of his quest, about his children, a newfound solicitude that testifies to a growing understanding of and respect for the feelings of others (316). Even when his quest comes to a conclusion different from the one he had in mind, Oskar, though disappointed at first, is capable of putting things into perspective. In a scene reminiscent of The Tin Drum, he considers “bury[ing] things [he is] ashamed of” (322), like his tambourine, in his father’s empty coffin. Oskar’s eventual deciding against it because “just because you bury something, you don’t really bury it” (322, emphasis in original) establishes a significant difference with his German namesake. Whereas the evolution of Grass’s narrator has been termed a case of Antbildung, quite the reverse is true for Oskar Schell. Unlike Oskar Matzerath, Oskar Schell realizes the pointlessness of trying to bury things he cannot cope with, and in that, he reveals himself to be more susceptible to recovery. Ultimately, in an instance of remarkable self-knowledge, Oskar confesses to his mother that he is well aware of his problems and promises her to do his best to recover (322–23). The symbolic search for the matching lock to his key that was meant to bring him closer to his father, therefore, is not entirely disappointing, because it results in a renewed attachment to his mother.
Things Wonderful and Horrific

“The world contains things more wonderful, but also vastly more horrific, than the human imagination will allow for.” This is how Anne C. Hegerfeldt justifies magical realism's underlying narrative mechanism of supernaturalizing extratextual reality. It is usually achieved by means of two opposite strategies, the rhetoric of banality and the rhetoric of fantasy or—as is the case in Grass's and Foer's novels—a combination of both. A striking example is Grass's famous chapter entitled “Faith, Hope, Love,” in which he records the extraordinary cruelty of the Crystal Night. Oskar, who in the previous chapter has been admonished for drumming too exuberantly, “dictate[s] a quieter chapter to [his] drum, even though the subject of [his] next chapter calls for an orchestra of ravenous wild men” (196). Oskar's quieter drum playing translates itself onto the page in the form of a fairy tale, in which every new character—be it the musician Meyn, the Jewish toy-store owner Sigismund Markus, or the drummer Oskar—merits his own introduction by means of the typical storybook phrase “there once was.” At the same time, Grass presents the events with disconcerting casualness and detachment. With his curious choice of narrative mode, Grass imbues Oskar's account of the Nazi atrocities with a heightened sense of horror, the underlying message being that a more realistic representation would not quite have been up to the task. The obvious unconcern and sarcasm with which Oskar infuses his rendition of the events gives the account an even greater shock value.

There once was an SA man [called Meyn] who did four cats in with a poker. But because the cats were not all-the-way dead, they gave him away and a watchmaker reported him. The case came up for trial and the SA man had to pay a fine. But the matter was also discussed in the SA and the SA man was expelled from the SA for conduct unbecoming a storm trooper. Even his conspicuous bravery on the night of November 8, which later became known as Crystal Night, when he helped set fire to the Langfuhr synagogue in Michaelisweg, even his meritorious activity the following morning when a number of stores, carefully designated in advance, were closed down for the good of the nation, could not halt his expulsion from the Mounted SA. For inhuman cruelty to animals he was stricken from the membership list. (201)

The fact that Meyn is brought into line for slaughtering his tomcats and that even his “meritorious activities” during Crystal Night cannot extenuate his
guilt testifies to the outrageous reversal of moral standards in Nazi Germany. The events so violently irreconcilable with all notions of human decency are all the more shocking because they are historically true. By relating these occurrences impassively and in a seemingly undisturbed way, Grass points out the rupture between humanist ideals and the actual state of the world.\textsuperscript{28}

Reporting the air raids in which Thomas Schell loses his entire family and his pregnant girlfriend, Anna, Foer employs a strategy akin to the one Grass uses to portray the \textit{Reichskristallnacht}. Instead of playing down the horrendous events by rendering them with impersonal matter-of-factness, Thomas relates them as if they were no part of extratextual reality at all. Clearly, there is a vast discrepancy between what he thinks is going on (viz., the false alarm) and what is about to happen. The long sentences strung together by a series of commas, the imaginative language used to portray the approaching bombers, and his self-proclaimed joy attest to the (almost giddy) anticipation with which Thomas describes the prologue to the bombing of Dresden:

> At 9:30 that night, the air-raid sirens sounded, everyone went to the shelters, but no one hurried, we were use [sic] to the alarms, we assumed they were false, why would anyone want to bomb Dresden? . . . I was thinking of Anna. . . . One hundred planes flew overhead, massive, heavy planes, pushing through the night like one hundred whales through water. . . . I was alone on the street, the red flares fell around me, I knew something unimaginable was about to happen, I was thinking of Anna, I was overjoyed. (210)

The air raids themselves are recorded in only a slightly altered tone, which altogether jars with the horrific reality. Thomas’s account is coated with a sheen of bewilderment and surrealism, and the new reality of the ongoing bombardments is utterly incompatible with Thomas’s pretraumatic worldview (211–12). Instances of fantastic rhetoric are also reflected in Oskar Schell’s inexhaustible repertoire of daft inventions and proposals to keep himself and his loved ones safe. Oskar creates and relates elements that are clearly no part of extratextual reality at all. His post–September 11 reality, like “the magic realist world,” does not “function according to rational-empirical laws, but adheres to other standards of what is credible, natural, or possible.”\textsuperscript{29} The boy’s screwball inventions stem from an obviously overactive imagination. The gadgets he dreams up are mostly trauma-related in the sense that they are meant to rescue people from all sorts of dire straits. Most fervently, he wishes he could have thought of something that might have prevented
his father from dying, and thus, unsurprisingly, a number of his inventions would especially come in handy in the event of being trapped in a burning skyscraper (2–3). In an effort to cheer up people he encounters on his quest, not to mention himself, Oskar carries a “portfolio” that contains feel-good inventions, like “mattresses with spaces for your arms [that] would make snuggling easier [because] making snuggling easier is very important” (170), the pendant with the compass he makes for Mr. Black (193), and a chemical that allows people to gauge each other’s moods (163). Oskar’s fantastic inventions are a conscious effort to divert his overactive imagination from more pessimistic and even self-tormenting imaginings. Prompted by a series of pictures of a man falling from one of the WTC towers, Oskar fancies recognizing his father because “if I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn’t have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors [or] . . . trying to crawl down the outside of the building . . . or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute” (257). At the end of the novel, the boy indulges in an ultimate (melancholic) fantasy: a flipbook of those pictures glued into his scrapbook in reverse sequence redeems the falling man—and his father—from his horrific fate, reflecting Oskar’s childish yet understandable desire to undo time (325–26).

An Extremely Loud Tin Drum: Intertextuality as a Road Toward Recovery?

According to Anne Whitehead, the relation between a text and its intertexts, the way traces of the literary canon resurface and are repeated in the textual present, resembles trauma symptomatology. By employing the device of repetition, intertextuality—a revenant in and by itself—makes for an appropriate instrument by which to translate traumatic experiences into literature. This repetition, and by extension intertextuality itself, is inherently equivocal: it can exert either a positive or a negative influence on the target text. The literary precedent established by the source text can, for instance, be so strongly felt in the target text that the protagonist of the latter is stunted in his development as an independent character. In that case, Whitehead speaks of an act of preservation, a process similar to acting out. If, on the other hand, the source text is treated merely as a point of departure, the characters in the target text can shed themselves of intertextuality’s deterministic influence and work toward a reformulation of the past, a process in turn reminiscent of working through. Intertextuality’s two-sided influence provides an interesting insight into the fascination that
both Oskars share for the Shakespearean characters Hamlet and Yorick. When Oskar Matzerath confesses that “cemeteries have always had a lure on him” because they are places where “you can summon up courage and arrive at decisions, [where] life takes on distinct contours . . . and if you will, a meaning” (438), the association with Hamlet is obvious.

The discovery of a bone of a finger triggers a reenactment of the famous grave-digger scene from the play. The finger standing in for Yorick’s skull, it would have been logical for Oskar to take over the part of Hamlet. However, he reverses the roles by turning into a Yorick addressing Hamlet’s skull. The rest of the chapter is permeated with intrusive Shakespearean allusions, bringing into effect an unsettling discontinuity of narrative linearity (459–60). The scene in the cemetery is further developed in the following chapter during which the Shrove Monday festivities take place, when Oskar literally becomes Yorick:

Now, Oskar, you are Yorick, the fool. But where is the king for you to play the fool to? . . . Thoughts plagued me, I began to worry about the political situation; . . . I despaired of the reunification of Germany and did something that was very unlike me. Oskar, in the role of Yorick, began to look for the meaning of life. (468–69)

According to Robert Leroy, Oskar’s inclination toward the ex-centric personage of the court jester instead of the prince royal points to his abandoning the wish to integrate into society. Whereas in books 1 and 2 of *The Tin Drum* Oskar maintains a firm one-man protest campaign against the world of adults around him, his resolve peters out as the novel draws to its end. When he recognizes himself as Yorick is the exact moment a disillusioned Oskar decides to give up his struggle to become a “normal” member of society. In Oskar’s estimation, history consists of an endless repetition of war, violence, and pointless reconstruction. The absurdity of this revenant process is reflected in the motif of the merry-go-round (cf. 411–12), which Oskar and the entire humanity is not allowed to get off of.

He justifiably suspects postwar German society of being as rotten at the core as was Nazi Germany. This suspicion is substantiated when Oskar witnesses the rough-handed arrest of “poor Viktor” by the “green hats” (572–75). It is with utter resignation, therefore, that he witnesses Germany’s war history repeating itself in the days of the Economic Miracle. In this light, Oskar’s self-identification with Yorick already is a fateful sign of his defeatism at the end of the novel, when he faces his impending discharge from the asylum.
A hint of Grass’s defeatism momentarily finds its way into *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* when Oskar Schell is assigned the nonspeaking role of Yorick in a school adaptation of *Hamlet*. The part of Hamlet is performed by his “nemesis,” playground bully Jimmy Snyder. From underneath an enormous papier-mâché skull, Oskar gives in to contemplating the meaning of life and death: “What’s so horrible about being dead forever, and not feeling anything, and not even dreaming?” (145). Typical of the child’s posttraumatic state of mind is the struggle to find a balance between the attempted departure from and fateful return to traumatic memories. Oskar’s musings climax in an imagined sequence between Hamlet and Yorick during which the boy rouses from his lethargy. He abandons his nonspeaking part and in the name of all “nerds” (i.e., marginal characters) he avenges himself on Jimmy—Hamlet—Snyder (145–46). Although the scene is laden with aggressiveness and negativity, it can be seen as ushering in Oskar’s long-term healing process. Eventually, Oskar sheds his gloomy thoughts in favor of the realization that “feeling pain is better than not feeling, isn’t it?” (245). This change of heart is a promising beginning for the boy’s projected recovery. Oskar’s involuntary affiliation with the part of the jester, therefore, does not have the same long-lasting consequences as does Matzerath’s conscious choice “to look for the meaning of life” as a Yorick figure.

The distinct ways the Oskars deal with their Yorick association can be seen as foreboding the degree to which *The Tin Drum* will hold intertextual power over *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Despite some undeniable correspondences between the two narrators, Oskar Schell and Oskar Matzerath differ in one very important aspect, an aspect that allows them to each fulfill one side of Whitehead’s double-edged view on the influence of intertextuality. Patricia Merivale states that “year by year, event by event, the times build up [Matzerath’s self] as well as [his story],” a view in line with Whitehead’s sense of predestination. Grass’s protagonist experiences an oscillation similar to that of Oskar Schell—symbolized by his alternately reading the “luminous poet prince” Goethe and “the dark spirit” Rasputin:

The conflicting harmony between these two was to shape or influence my whole life. . . . To this very day . . . I . . . fluctuate between Rasputin and Goethe, between the faith healer and the man of Enlightenment, between the dark spirit . . . and the luminous poet prince. . . . If for a time I inclined toward Rasputin and feared Goethe’s intolerance, it was because of a faint suspicion that if you, Oskar, had lived and drummed at his time, Goethe would have thought you . . . an incarnation of anti-nature. (91)
Although his leanings remain undecided, and despite his own assertion that his inclination toward Rasputin was a temporary one, Oskar condemns himself to the status of ex-centricity. The fallacious supposition that Goethe would be intolerant toward creatures like himself confirms Oskar’s status as fringe character. Under the influence of Yorick, Goethe, and Rasputin, Oskar becomes “hand-cuffed to [literary] history.” His bleak prospects are symbolized by the impalpable yet domineering threat of the Black Witch at the end of the novel. Her threatening presence hinders every possibility of positive development for him. Progress is out of the question: “And so Yorick [does] not become a good citizen, but a Hamlet, a fool” (460). Oskar Schell, on the other hand, seems psychologically better equipped to evolve toward “sound” postliminality.

The references to Grass in Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close must be seen in the light of Whitehead’s technique of reformulation of the literary and/or traumatic past and as having a therapeutic effect on Oskar. Intertextuality thus becomes an adequate means for reflecting the mechanisms of posttraumatic memory, because like trauma, “intertextuality is caught in a curious and undecidable wavering between departure and return.” In the form of this oscillation, intertextuality translates into literature the struggle of the human mind with traumatic memories, caught in a balancing act between the simultaneous desire and inability to forget. In different ways, this psychological dilemma is embodied by both Oskar Matzerath and Oskar Schell.

**Conclusion: And the Oskar Goes to . . .**

Even though intertextuality uncovers a number of striking similarities in theme as well as in form, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close does not merely exist by the grace of Günter Grass’s The Tin Drum. Both protagonists live in a posttraumatic (magical) reality, and as a consequence, they are undeniably ex-centric in every sense of the word. In The Tin Drum, Oskar Matzerath categorically refuses to grow so as to distance himself from his parents and their budding National Socialist sympathies. In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Oskar Schell’s precocity and trauma-induced behavioral “oddities” are responsible for his ex-centricity. At the same time, however, intertextuality can also account for the most crucial difference between the two novels, namely the way in which the two Oskars are influenced by the literary canon. It is precisely this difference that allows for Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close...
Close’s independence as a novel. Although it remains undecided in the end, a strong case can be made that Oskar Matzerath’s status of marginality endures, a status that can be seen as a reenactment of the (literary) past symbolized by the Shakespearean jester Yorick and the dualism between Goethe and Rasputin. In Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, on the other hand, there are promising signs of Oskar Schell’s maturation. Unlike his namesake, he will in all likelihood be able to shed the deterministic influence of his past.

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Notes


4. Later in the novel, Oskar befriends his upstairs neighbor, the elderly Mr. Black, and enlists his help in the quest. Eventually, Mr. Black steps down in favor of the mysterious figure of “the renter,” who will turn out to be Thomas Schell, Oskar’s long-lost grandfather.

5. He drinks coffee instead of tea, the underlying logic being that stunting his growth will prevent him from growing older and therefore, from dying, and he invents a talking teakettle that can recite Shakespeare and sing Beatles songs, jewelry in which he encodes his father’s last messages on the answering machine, portable pockets, and birdseed shirts (Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close [New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005], 154, 1, 35, 71. Hereafter cited by page number).


7. The conception of Oskar’s mother, for instance, is linked to the Boer War in South Africa (25). Similarly, Herbert Truczinski’s death is seen as an omen portending the Reichskristallnacht (197).


11. To mirror in literary scope the distortion and devastation brought about by traumatic experiences, authors of trauma fiction and of magical realist fiction employ a set of literary techniques (e.g., fantastic elements, childlike narrators, intertextuality) to instigate reader alienation. For comprehensive works on magical realism, see Anne C. Hegerfeldt, Lies That Tell the Truth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), and Maggie Ann Bowers, Magic(al) Realism (London: Routledge, 2004). For trauma fiction, see Whitehead, Trauma Fiction.

12. When a person’s perception of reality is skewed in such a way that every sense of meaning and reference is lost to him or her, he or she runs the risk of becoming isolated from society, of effectively becoming a liminal (Kali Tal, Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature...

13. Reich–Ranicki, Deutsche Literatur in West und Ost 221; my translation. The original reads "Grass macht die Skurrilität des Alltäglichen sichtbar, das Absurde im Gewöhnlichen."


20. Ibid., 27.

21. Ibid., 27.

22. Acting out is one of two states of mind identified by Dominick LaCapra as typical of a trauma survivor. It entails a complete repression of all trauma-related memory. Its counterpart, “working through,” is more therapeutic in nature and ultimately should enable one to come to terms with one’s traumatic experiences and to fit them into a coherent whole (Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994], 205).

23. That Oskar discovers a likeness between the renter and his father should come as no surprise, because the man is in fact his long-lost grandfather.


26. Ibid., 199–200. Seemingly trivializing the often horrendous events it describes, the rhetoric of banality seeks to render reality fantastic by means of a calm, matter-of-fact narrative tone (Hegerfeldt, Lies That Tell the Truth, 200–201). Fantastic rhetoric, by contrast, applies a technique akin to the literary fantastic to “recount events that are anything but quotidian” but that are “certainly historically real” (Hegerfeldt, Lies That Tell the Truth, 206).

27. Hegerfeldt, Lies That Tell the Truth, 206.

28. Ibid., 209.

29. Ibid., 202.

30. Whitehead, Trauma Fiction, 94.

31. Ibid., 85–87.

32. The passage is a reference to act 5, scene 1, of Hamlet.


35. Viktor was an irregular in the defense of the Polish Post Office in Danzig, the only one to escape the fusillade. The Green Hats are determined to see “justice” done, because “an order, if you please, is an order, and this one has been hanging fire since 39” (572).

36. The part of the jester was assigned to him on a day he was absent from school (142).


40. That is, a postliminality that is not reached by means of repression or revision.

41. Whitehead, Trauma Fiction, 90.

42. Ibid., 86–87.
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