

A minimalist room with a bed and a glowing circular light source. The room is empty except for a simple metal bed frame with a white mattress. A bright, circular light source is visible through an arched opening in the wall, casting a soft glow. The walls and ceiling are light-colored, and the floor is a neutral tone. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

**A SORROW  
BEYOND DREAMS**

**PETER HANDKE**

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**INTRODUCTION BY  
JEFFREY EUGENIDES**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

## A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS

PETER HANDKE was born in Griffen, Austria, in 1942. His many works include *The Jukebox and Other Essays on Storytelling* (1994), *Absence* (1990), and *Repetition* (1988).

JEFFREY EUGENIDES grew up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and attended Brown University. He is the author of two novels, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Middlesex*. He lives in Berlin, Germany, with his wife.

**A SORROW  
BEYOND DREAMS**

A LIFE STORY

**PETER HANDKE**

Translated from the German by

**RALPH MANHEIM**

Introduction by

**JEFFREY EUGENIDES**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



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## INTRODUCTION

*A SORROW BEYOND DREAMS* is a short, exacting text, written over two winter months of 1972, about the suicide of a poor, vivacious, thwarted Austrian woman who happened also to be Peter Handke's mother. It is Handke's own account, though to call it autobiographical suggests an emotionalism that Handke's writing resolutely resists. The most striking thing about the book is Handke's disciplined detachment from his subject, a mode of inquiry that offers nothing remedial or heartwarming in the way of a typical account of a parent loved and lost. "The Sunday edition of the *Kärnter Volkszeitung* carried the following item under 'Local News': 'In the village of A. (G. township), a housewife, aged 51, committed suicide on Friday night by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.'" So Handke begins, immediately getting himself out of the story in order to see his mother from a disinterested viewpoint. In the pages that follow he will refer to his mother as "she" or "you," but rarely as "my mother" and never by name. Indeed, though he admits to writing about his mother's suicide for reasons of his own,

Handke wants to "represent this VOLUNTARY DEATH as an exemplary case."

Exemplary of what? Of a woman born into the straitened circumstances of pre-war Austria? Of women in general? Of Austrians in general? Handke doesn't specify. Instead he quickly moves into the case at hand.

"My mother has been dead for almost seven weeks; I had better get to work before the need to write about her . . . dies away and I fall back into the dull speechlessness with which I reacted to the news of her suicide." Despite this self-exhortation, speechlessness constantly threatens Handke's written account. He is suspicious of employing the usual narrative procedures. He refrains from describing his mother in much detail and from presenting his feelings about her. Doing so will make him feel as if he's "writing a story," and this will turn his mother into a "character," which will be to betray her. To avoid that, he decides to write sentences that will be applicable not only to his mother but to "the biography of a woman with my mother's particular life."

Handke wants to stay true to the facts of his mother's life without allowing those facts to stand in for or subsume her. So he subjects his material to a deliberate, and impersonal, compositional method. He begins with the particulars of his mother's life story. Next he puts these into abstract form, what he calls "formulations." After that, he compares the two lists, using only the bits, the details, that remain true on both. The labor is almost

forensic or paleontological, a process of gathering and comparing, of weeding out, of categorizing and grouping.

Handke even makes words provisional. *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is littered with capitalizations that both call attention to and cast doubt on the words employed. "Chambermaid in the Black Forest, flocks of ADMIRERS, kept at a DISTANCE!" We glimpse here Handke's mother's girlish excitement as well as her stereotypical means of expressing it. You might say that *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is written entirely "in quotes." If Handke were sitting across the table, telling the story aloud, he would be forever signaling this with his hands.

Thus the story of Handke's mother's life begins, as in a traditional biography, with the family origins. There is no dramatization. There are no "scenes." We get only specifics: "She had learned her place. 'I'm only waiting for the children to grow up.' A third abortion, this time followed by a severe hemorrhage. Shortly before forty, she became pregnant again. An abortion was no longer possible; the child was born." We also get abundant abstractions of a European variety: "And so an emotional life that never had a chance of achieving bourgeois composure acquired a superficial stability by clumsily imitating the bourgeois system of emotional relations, prevalent especially among women. . . ." It's unclear how sincere Handke is about this kind of analysis. He makes repeated attempts to theorize his mother's life, to put it into a sociopolitical context, but this might be merely

another exhausted strategy. Throughout the book it is clear that Handke is not satisfied with what he is writing.

It's a fact-sheet biography, a resumé life. And yet Handke's sharp eye is always finding a strange beauty amid this colorless world:

In general, these memories are inhabited more by things than by people: a dancing top in a deserted street amid ruins, oat flakes in a sugar spoon, gray mucus in a tin spittoon with a Russian trademark; of people, only separated parts: hair, cheeks, knotted scars on fingers; from her childhood days my mother had a swollen scar on her index finger; I held onto it when I walked beside her.

In the background, of course, history casts its shadow:

Demonstrations, torchlight parades, mass meetings. Buildings decorated with the new national emblem SALUTED; forests and mountain peaks DECKED THEMSELVES OUT; the historic events were represented to the rural population as a drama of nature.

For Handke's mother, National Socialism manifests itself in the most prosaic, quotidian ways: "'We were kind of excited,' my mother told me. For the first time, people did things together. . . . For once, everything that was

strange and incomprehensible in the world took on meaning. . . ." And we are told also this: "Hitler had a nice voice on the radio."

The German title of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is *Wunschloses Unglück*. It's a play on words. The German idiom, *wunschloses Glück*, means roughly "more happiness than you could wish for." Handke changes it to mean "more misfortune than you could wish for." This brutal pun suggests the wretchedness not only of his mother's life but of the period she lived through, and not only the years of Nazism but the "hygienic, but equally miserable, poverty" that preceded and followed the war. It takes in the drunkenness of her husband, referred to by Handke, the illegitimate son of another man, only as "my mother's husband." It includes, too, how Handke's mother's face "in its daily effort to keep up appearances . . . lost its soul."

Three quarters of the way through, an almost novelistic turn of events occurs. "But my mother had not been crushed for good," Handke tell us. She begins to assert herself, to read the books her son is reading at university. "She learned to talk about herself; and with each book she had more ideas on the subject. Little by little, I learned something about her."

It is through books that Handke's mother begins to have an inner life and that he, in turn, begins to glimpse it. "She began to take an interest in politics; she no longer voted like her husband, for his employer's and her

brother's party. Now she voted Socialist. . . ." In a one-sentence section all its own, Handke sums the transformation up: "She was gradually becoming an individual."

This, too, might be a commonplace; it's hard to tell. But at any rate we aren't in for a triumphant story of self-discovery. "Literature didn't teach her to start thinking of herself but showed her it was too late for that." Only a few pages later: "She began having bad headaches." Soon, under constant pain, she announces, "I'm not human any more."

*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* ends where it began, with the mother's suicide. The writer returns home by plane for her funeral:

Reading the paper, drinking beer, looking out the window, I gradually sank into a tired, impersonal sense of well-being. Yes, I thought over and over again, carefully enunciating my thoughts to myself: THAT DOES IT. THAT DOES IT. THAT DOES IT. GOOD. GOOD. GOOD. And throughout the flight I was beside myself with pride that she had committed suicide.

There is something hysterical about this outburst and the giddy moment that follows:

In the house that evening I climbed the stairs. Suddenly I took several steps at one bound, giggling

in an unfamiliar voice, as if I had become a ventriloquist. I ran up the last few steps. Once upstairs I thumped my chest lustily and hugged myself. Then slowly, with a sense of self-importance, as though I were the holder of a unique secret, I went back down the stairs.

Here Handke, after haunting the precincts of the tale he's telling, emerges into clarity, as if he, too, is finally becoming an individual. The moment stands out from the rest of the story like a piece of color in a black-and-white film.

"In stories we often read that something or other is 'unnamable' or 'indescribable,'" Handke writes. "This story, however, is really about the nameless, about speechless moments of terror. It is about moments when the mind boggles with horror. . . ." At his mother's funeral, Handke gazes at the motionless trees around the cemetery and takes measure of universal emptiness. "I looked up at the trees: for the first time it seemed to me that nature was really merciless. So these were the facts!" All along Handke has been trying to balance the "facts" of his mother's life with his "formulations" about these facts. But the facts he finds in the desolate trees are final. He recognizes in them the mercilessness of nature, and it's in this way that his mother's suicide becomes exemplary—as an act of resistance to that mercilessness. Though he is full of pride that his mother has

committed suicide, Handke insists that she didn't die at peace. She died staring horror in the face, and this horror is their mother-child bond, the closest we come to intimacy in the book. As his mother took sleeping pills to subdue the horror, Handke tries to write himself out of it:

It is not true that writing has helped me. . . . Writing has not, as I first supposed, been a remembering of a concluded period in my life, but merely a constant pretense at remembering, in the form of sentences that only lay claim to detachment. Even now I sometimes wake up with a start, as though in response to some inward prodding, and, breathless with horror, feel that I am literally rotting away from second to second.

Interestingly, Handke's grim book came out during the free-for-all of literary postmodernism. In the United States, writers like Barth, Pynchon, and Coover were publishing wild, funny novels full of narrative disjunctions and formal play. The American postmodernists, fatigued with the complacency of realism, were turning narrative on its head. Because they distrusted omniscience, and more importantly because they distrusted the government during those years of the Vietnam War, they sought to undermine the conventions of storytelling and, in so doing, undermine the political au-

thority that perpetuated itself through conservative, national myths.

Handke's postmodernism is quite different. Though full of the standard hesitations and skeptical of omniscience, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* displays no high-low connotations, no outright attack on political authority. There is just a rigorous demonstration of the failure of language to express the horror of existence. The American postmodernists gave up on traditional storytelling out of an essentially playful, optimistic, revolutionary urge. Handke despairs of narrative out of sheer despair.

German literature has a long tradition of dealing with suicide, with Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther" the most obvious example. Melancholy, lovelornness—these lie at the heart of what Carlyle, apropos of "Werther," called "a class of feelings, deeply important to the modern mind, . . . that arise from passions incapable of being converted into action." From this perspective, suicide is far from weakness and represents possibly the only noble way of converting such passions into deeds. In fact, German has two words for self-slaughter: *Selbstmord*, which is roughly equivalent to the English "suicide," and *Freitod*, which means literally "free death," and possesses a certain brave, even heroic, connotation.

The gloomy, void-obsessed German has always been open to caricature. Think of Mike Myers as the angular,

alienated “Dieter” of “Sprockets,” sourly twisting his face behind Bauhaus eyewear to say: “Tell me, in your film, Irritant Number 4, the only two images were a baby’s head and a toilet. Did you mean for me to scream?” There is something funny about nihilism, and about super-depressing art works by German members of the Generation of ’68. But this darkness arises directly out of German and Austrian history, a welter of grief and guilt that is only now, half a century after the Nazi genocide, beginning to lift.

A history like that makes for an irremediable attitude toward the world. It supports a harsh aesthetic. The American postmodernists responded to the death of truth by heaping fiction upon fiction. For them it was an invitation to the carnival of imagination. Handke isn’t willing to give up his search for the truth—even if it requires the death of the imagination—or to play games in the meantime. As he says at the end of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*: “Someday I shall write about all this in greater detail.”

—JEFFREY EUGENIDES